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Illustrator: H. L. Bacon

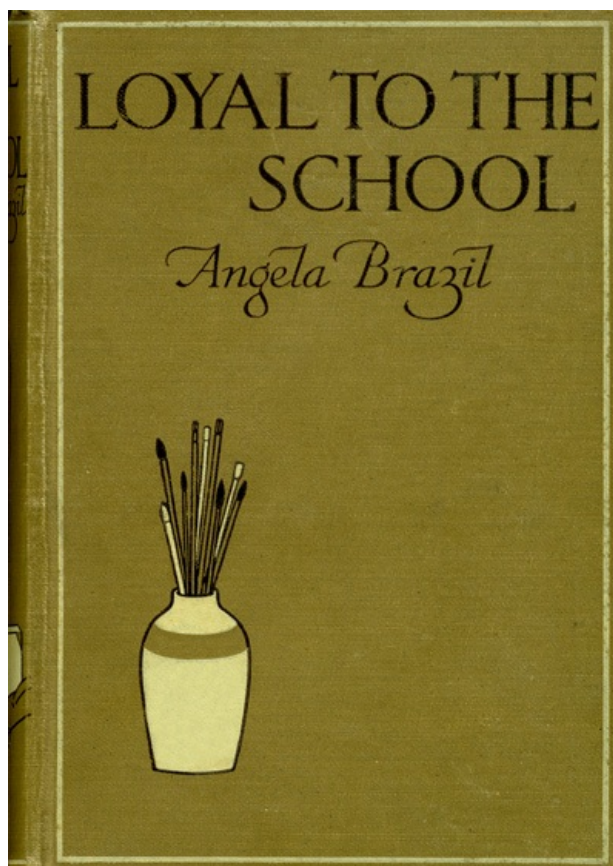
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LOYAL TO THE SCHOOL ***

Loyal to the School



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"IT'S WONDERFULLY GOOD"

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Frontispiece

Loyal to the School

BY

ANGELA BRAZIL

Author of "Monitress Merle"
"A Fortunate Term" "For the School Colours" &c.

Illustrated by H. L. Bacon

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
LONDON AND GLASGOW

By Angela Brazil

My Own Schooldays.

Ruth of St. Ronan's.
Joan's Best Chum.
Captain Peggie.
Schoolgirl Kitty.
The School in the South.
Monitress Merle.
Loyal to the School.
A Fortunate Term.
A Popular Schoolgirl.
The Princess of the School.
A Harum-Scarum Schoolgirl.
The Head Girl at the Gables.
A Patriotic Schoolgirl.
For the School Colours.
The Madcap of the School.
The Luckiest Girl in the School.
The Jolliest Term on Record.
The Girls of St. Cyprian's.
The Youngest Girl in the Fifth.
The New Girl at St. Chad's.
For the Sake of the School.
The School by the Sea.
The Leader of the Lower School.
A Pair of Schoolgirls.
A Fourth Form Friendship.
The Manor House School.
The Nicest Girl in the School.
The Third Form at Miss Kaye's.
The Fortunes of Philippa.

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LOYAL TO THE SCHOOL

CHAPTER I

New Lamps

"The fault I find with the Kingfield High School," proclaimed Kathleen Wilcox, squatting on the top of a boot locker, and putting on a new pair of patent leather house shoes with a deliberate eye to their effect upon her surrounding friends and foes, "the fault I find—yes, I *do* find fault and I *shall*, Lesbia Ferrars, though you *are* the oldest pupil and take the school under your wing! You needn't make round eyes at me like that! I don't care twopence for your glares! Well, as I was saying—and I *won't* be interrupted—the fault I find with the Kingfield High School is that it's not nearly go-ahead enough. If you ask me I think it's dropping behind the times!"

"Dropping behind the times!" echoed Phillis Marsh in open-mouthed amazement.

"How far do you want it to go?" retorted Lesbia Ferrars, metaphorically picking up the glove and accepting combat. "It's as decent as any other school and nicer than most. Some people never know when they're well off! If you went to the King's College now you'd have twice the home work. Perhaps that's what you're hankering after? They're go-ahead in the matter of work, if you like, at King's!"

"No more home work for me thanks," put in Etta Pearson hurriedly. "Kathleen may take my share of it and welcome if her tastes run that way."

[9]

[10]

Kathleen leisurely put down two elegant feet from the locker, reviewed them with a glance of conscious satisfaction, then, grasping mental sword and buckler, condescended to explain herself.

"What a set of lunatics you are!" she said compassionately. "You're not bright, any of you, or you'd have twigged my meaning at once. Of course I don't want any more home work piled on our shoulders. I—of all people—to suggest that! Great Scott! What I *do* mean is that it's just lessons, lessons, lessons, eternally lessons, and not enough outside things. Some schools have all sorts of jolly clubs, and we've hardly a single decent society except the G. G. I. S. And what's that good for?"

"Good for nothing!" snorted Calla Wilkins scornfully.

[11] "Well, it's all there is anyhow, and though some people may like to sit doing crochet while a teacher drones away reading an improving book, it's not in my line. I call it dull."

"Dull as ditch-water!" agreed Etta Pearson, with unction.

"We got through a whole heap of bazaar work at the G. G. I. S. though," objected Lesbia, who, though half sympathizing, felt bound to stick to her guns in the argument.

"I daresay we did! But even *you* can't pretend you enjoyed that rubbishy book Miss Yates used nearly to go to sleep over. I call it an insult to our intellects to read us such absolute 'bread and milk' twaddle!"

"I told Miss Yates we didn't like the book," admitted Lesbia.

"Yes, and she nearly snapped your head off and said you were always grumbling," added Calla. "I remember how she jumped on you."

[12] "Well, to go back to my point," continued Kathleen, "here we are on the first day of a new school year. At any other school there'd have been great times. The 'King's' girls meet in the big lecture hall and have speeches and arrange all the clubs for the winter. That's what *I* call a 'coming back'. We don't come back, we only ooze back. We hang about on the stairs till a teacher says 'Oh, my dear, you're moved into VB', or whatever the form is. There ought to be a proper reading out of the lists in the gym. Then each form would march to its own room and the thing would be done decently and in order. We're utterly and absolutely old-fashioned, and behind the times. That's what's the matter with the Kingfield High School."

"Humph! Something the matter with your own eyes I should say!" sniffed Aldora Dodson, who had just joined the group. "What about that notice stuck up in the hall?"

"What notice?"

"What notice?" mimicked Aldora. "You don't mean to tell me you all walked past it like blind bats, when it was there as large as life, and actually staring you in the face! If you want to know what it's about go and look at it! I can't waste my time telling you things you're too lazy to read for yourselves."

[13] Aldora's advice, though administered in an uncomplimentary fashion, was sound. Without further parley the girls took it. They hurried from the cloakroom and tore into the hall, to discover the truth for themselves. Quite a crowd was collected round the notice board. It took a little while to elbow their way through. When at last they reached vantage spots, where by dint of craning their necks they could see between or over the heads of those in front of them, their eyes encountered a home-made poster, so large and conspicuous that it was certainly very extraordinary that they should have passed it by unnoticed.

The school will assemble
in the
GYMNASIUM
at 2.30
when the new form lists will be
read, and various new
arrangements will be explained.
M. Tatham.

"Hold me up! I'm fainting!" exclaimed Kathleen. "New? Did my eyes deceive me or are we actually going to have something new? Wonders will never cease."

"Good old Tat!ie!" purred Lesbia. "She's turning up trumps to-day."

"Don't congratulate yourself too soon, my child," admonished Calla, "you don't know yet what the new arrangements are."

"Take me to the gym at once," commanded Kathleen tragically. "I must have a front seat and know the best or worst. I'm simply palpitating till I hear. Are we to study Sanscrit or start a Cosy Café to supply refreshments at eleven? Tell me which, I beseech you. I can't wait."

[14] "Come along, you mad thing," laughed Lesbia. "We're none of us any wiser than you are. Miss Tatham has got a surprise packet to spring on all of us, that's evident enough. Trust her to let nothing leak out beforehand. She's an absolute Freemason for secrecy."

"Well, if it's Sanscrit, I leave the school, so I give everybody fair warning," chirruped Kathleen, hanging heavily on to Lesbia's arm in an affectation of flutter.

"And if it's a Cosy Café you'll spend all your pocket money there and make yourself ill into the bargain. I know you! Look here, I'm going to drop you! My arm's breaking. You must weigh ten stone if you weigh a pound."

Though the girls laughed and joked as they walked along the glazed covered passage, they sobered down and straightened their faces as they entered the gymnasium. Benches and chairs were arranged here in rows, and were already partly filled with pupils of all ages, from small children in the preparatory forms to tall students of seventeen. Teachers hovered about, restraining excessive conversation, and a few monitresses were distributing books for the opening hymn. Miss Bates, the music teacher, was beckoning to members of the singing-class to come and sit near the piano and form an impromptu choir. Kathleen, somewhat to her bewilderment, was thus pounced upon and borne off to a seat of honour below the platform, where, separated from her own chums, she sat with a rather martyred expression among stars of the Sixth noted for their qualities of voice production. Her anxiety for change was certainly being amply gratified, though she was still doubtful of the extent of the proposed alterations.

The fact of the whole matter was that Miss Tatham, the head mistress, had taken the opportunity during the holidays of attending an educational conference, where she had come in contact with very modern views and fresh schemes of school government. She had returned to Kingfield bristling with ideas, and anxious to test many various theories which had been aired at the meetings. She was a broad-minded woman, and able to steer successfully between being a crank or faddist on the one hand, or a "stick-in-the-mud" on the other. For some time she had been conscious that the school needed rousing up, and now that she had been shown the way she meant to use her opportunities.

She stepped on to the platform at 2.30 with the satisfactory feeling of an architect who has completed a fresh design and has collected his stores of building material.

A dead hush marked her entrance, and immediately all attention was concentrated on her pale intellectual face and dark shining eyes. She possessed sufficient magnetic personality, apart from her office of principal, to rivet the interest of her three hundred girls. With other mistresses they might fidget or even whisper, but during her speeches or classes the bond between teacher and pupil was absolute.

She began very quietly by welcoming them back to school, spoke a few special words to newcomers, and read out the lists of the various forms, their teachers, and the names of visiting masters and mistresses for extra classes. These preliminaries settled, she "got to business", as Kathleen afterwards expressed it.

"I have been thinking lately," she said, "that we might with advantage try a new plan at school. You come here to be educated. Now, that does not mean simply to be crammed with facts, but to be taught the very best and highest possible way of self development. Certain facts must, of course, be mastered, and to learn them is a good discipline for training the mind, but the main point to be aimed at in education is to teach you a real love of intellectual things. I realize that tastes differ very much, and that what is an absorbing study for one girl may lack all interest for another. Life is not long enough to give time to everything, and it is better to concentrate our attention on certain things that appeal to our particular temperaments than to have a smattering of many 'ologies. I have decided, therefore, to set aside two afternoons in the week for what I may call 'self-expression'. There will be certain activities offered you, and you will each be allowed to choose which you wish to follow. I consider that two sides of our natures which need very careful training are the emotional and the mental. I am going to give an afternoon to each.

"By our emotional nature I mean that side of us which takes delight in art, music, and the drama. It shows itself early in very little children, who will often try to draw, sing, and act almost as soon as they can talk. If properly cultivated it is a most important part of self-expression. On one afternoon I am arranging to organize meetings in various branches of art, music, and acting. These are to be quite different and apart from your ordinary drawing or music lessons. You will work at what you wish, and in your own way, though an expert teacher will be there whom you can consult in any difficulty. I make one stipulation—that you must each choose your own subject for the term, and stick to it. I cannot allow chopping and changing. In the studio you will be given facilities for wood-carving, modelling, stencilling, painting, leatherwork, and other handicrafts. Those who wish to take up this branch must put down their names on the Arts List.

"Some of you, perhaps, may have no particular talent for what is called 'creating in material', that is, making beautiful objects in wood, leather, or clay, or with paints or pastels, but you can create in other ways. Beautiful sounds give as much pleasure as beautiful sights. I want us to revive the school orchestra and learn to play some good music. Those who can sing well are to be given a special opportunity of creation. This summer I went to the Glastonbury Musical Festival and heard one of the wonderful song-dramas which are produced there. A song-drama is a play which is both sung and acted, quite different from grand opera or musical comedy, and with a charm all its own. It corresponds in music to the Elizabethan or the Greek drama, for it is shown with scarcely any scenery, and on the simplest of stages, but its quality appeals to the very highest emotions. My hope is that we can get up a short song-drama for a Christmas performance, and that the orchestra should play the music for it. Those girls who can act, but not sing, will be given a separate opportunity to exercise their talents.

[19] "Now, this is all on the emotional side of our natures, but we want also to cultivate the mental side. On our other 'self-expression afternoon' you will have a choice of various intellectual hobbies. We will have one department for studying nature, another for recording all the old legends and ancient customs of our city, a geographical society to trace our roads and streams, and a literary society for those who wish to try to write. Of course, you can't belong to them all at once, and you must choose what you like the best, but I think in such a wide field of choice every girl will surely find something to suit her, which she can work at as 'a labour of love'. The alternatives will be posted up in your form rooms, and you must put down your names by Friday afternoon, so that we can start next week. Don't choose in too big a hurry, but take time to think it over—for once made you'll have to abide by your choice."

There was a tremendous clapping at the close of Miss Tatham's speech. The idea of "self-expression" appealed to most of the girls, and even the little ones, who did not quite understand what it all meant, saw visions of pleasant afternoons and possible fun in store for them. The coming term seemed to offer prospects such as the school had never held before. As the new members of VA filed upstairs to their form they could not refrain from a few comments. Talking in the passages, though repressed by the mistresses, was not absolutely on the list of forbiddens at Kingfield High School, so the girls made discreet use of the privilege whenever possible.

"Well! What d'you think of it all?" inquired Calla, eagerly questioning the group nearest to her. "I call it ripping."

"Very enterprising of Tatie," conceded Kathleen graciously. "I really shouldn't have thought her capable of it. Where's she been in the holidays to get her ideas so shaken up? We must send her there again if things flag."

"Bags me the orchestra," piped Aldora.

"Oh, the song-drama appeals to me!" squeaked Marjorie Johns.

[20] "'Sh, 'sh! 'Sh, 'sh!" came from the background, as a warning that Miss Pratt, their new form mistress, intended to insist on discipline, and rules or no rules would not countenance a chattering rabble under her very nose if she were obliged to act as escort. Remembering school etiquette the girls restrained their voices in the presence of the teacher, and falling into line marched into VA with due decorum, though once inside the door, with Miss Pratt still outside in the passage, there was a brief and wild scramble for the best desks, and Aldora Dodson had almost pushed Lesbia Ferrars out of a coveted seat when the entrance of authority restored order.

[21] Lesbia, quite upset and panting from the fray, immediately put her books inside the desk as a sign of possession, and scribbling her name on a gummed label pasted it on to the lid rather ostentatiously, with an eye of triumph in the direction of Aldora, who pretended to take no notice. It meant much to Lesbia to secure that particular desk. She had always marked it for her own. As a junior she had often peeped into the room and had made up her mind that if she were ever moved so high up the school as VA she should like to sit in the seat next the window. The Kingfield High School did not adopt the horrible system of coating the glass with white paint, so there was a clear and uninterrupted view over walls, and across gardens, to the winding river and yellowing woods beyond. Lesbia's æsthetic soul felt that that view would compensate for many disagreeable things that would probably happen in the course of the coming year. She was not particularly clever at lessons, and might expect future squalls. To look over such a landscape would be a comfort after Miss Pratt's chidings. Miss Pratt had a reputation in the school for tartness of manner, though she was an excellent teacher. Her voice, sharp-clipped, business-like, and unconciliatory, grated upon Lesbia, who was very sensitive to sounds. Poor Lesbia was at the difficult age when we are sensitive in many respects. The trouble was that most people called her "thin-skinned". There are always two ways of describing the same characteristic. But as Lesbia, with all her faults and virtues, is going to be our heroine she had better have a chapter quite to herself.

[22] CHAPTER II

The Oldest Pupil

Though Lesbia Ferrars might not be gifted with a good memory, or a mathematical brain, or a talent for languages, or even a great capacity for work, or any other special attribute to place her among the stars of her form, in one solitary respect she could always score over the rest of the school. She was the oldest pupil. Not indeed in years—there is an immense shade of difference between oldest and eldest—for she was not yet sixteen, while Rose Stirling and Mabel Andrews in the Sixth were approaching their eighteenth birthdays. She happened to have been longer at the school than anybody else. She had joined as a tiny child, and the contemporaries of her first year

had all left. Even Theodora Johnson, the head girl, who could boast a nine years record, had to yield precedence to Lesbia in a question of "oldest inhabitant". It was a point upon which Lesbia prided herself immensely. Ever since she had been the baby of the kindergarten she had loved the school with a great loyalty, and was prepared to stand up for its merits against all detractors. It had become such a point of honour with her that she was almost stubborn about it, and would have waged its battles as blindly as the traditional cavalier who fought for the crown though it hung in a bush.

[23]

Lesbia, at fifteen and three-quarters on the great clock of life, was a rather picturesque little person, slim and not over-tall, with large dreamy eyes that held shining sparks when she laughed, and brown hair with a curl in it, and teeth that seemed more like a first set than a second, they were so small and even. The outside of her might have belonged indifferently to north, south, east, or west, but the inside of her was Celtic to the core. Both Irish and Highland blood ran in her veins, and unknown ancestors had handed down to her that heritage of laughter and tears, that joyous zest of life and keen intensity of feeling, that fairy glamour which may transfigure the commonest things, or beguile the heart to waste its devotion upon trifles, which is the birthright of those whose forbears, in the dim forgotten twilight of our island's history, kept their courts at Tara and Camelot and left their wealth of legend behind them.

Lesbia lived in a house in Denham Terrace with her stepbrother Paul Hilton. Fate had tossed her about like a tennis ball, though so far always kindly. Her own father had died when she was a baby, and while she was still quite tiny her mother had been married again to Mr. Hilton, a widower with a son of twenty. In his vacations from college Paul had made rather a pet of his little stepsister, and later on his kindness was put to a practical test. An epidemic of virulent influenza swept away in a single week both Mr. and Mrs. Hilton, and Lesbia, at eight years old, found herself an orphan. She had no very near relations, and the third and fourth cousins whom she possessed were not at all anxious to adopt her, so Paul, practical, unimaginative, common-sense Paul, took over the responsibility of her maintenance as a matter of course. Neither he, nor the pretty little bride whom he soon brought home, understood Lesbia in the least, her temperament held unknown qualities which their more direct minds could never grasp, but they were good to her, and accepted her without question as a member of the household, and as much a legacy as the family furniture.

[24]

The memory of her early days had grown rather hazy, and Lesbia was so accustomed to Paul and Minnie and the three small children who had arrived at Denham Terrace that no other life felt particularly possible. She was happy at school, and she rubbed along well at home. There was not surely a girl in her form who could claim more.

This first day of the new term had seemed fortunate to Lesbia. She had been raised to the honour of V_A instead of being relegated with more backward girls to V_B, a contingency she had dreaded but half anticipated, and she had secured the very desk she had coveted for years. She came downstairs therefore at four o'clock with a feeling of much satisfaction. Even Aldora, whose wrath was short lived, had already forgiven the scrimmage and was friendly. Mentally Lesbia was purring.

[25]

"Wait for me for five minutes and I'll walk home with you," volunteered Aldora. "I have to take a letter from Mother to Miss Tatham, and she'll probably want to write an answer and send it by me."

And Lesbia, who loathed waiting for anybody, nevertheless agreed, as a kind of recompense to Aldora for having ousted her out of the best desk. It was a sunny afternoon so she went into the garden. There was a pleasant corner there with an artificial pond, and bushes, and flights of steps and a statue on a pedestal. She sat down under the shade of a red-berried shrub and watched in the water of the pool the reflections of white clouds that scudded overhead. The September wind blew, dropping rose petals into her lap. A robin near by twittered its autumn song. Summer was waning fast, and, though she did not yet know it, the summer of her careless childhood was falling away like the roses. The first disillusionment of mankind was in a garden; some of the greatest tragedies of the world have happened among a setting of trees and flowers.

As Lesbia sat twisting rose petals round her fingers she became aware of voices talking near her. Two girls had strolled to the pond by the lower path, and had settled down on the steps beneath her without noticing her presence. They were evidently discussing the various members of the form, and she caught her own name.

[26]

"Lesbia? Oh, I'm sorry for Lesbia!" (It was Marion Morwood who spoke.) "Why? Well you see she's in such a queer position. Her father died when she was a baby, and her mother married again, and then both her mother and her stepfather died. She lives with her stepbrother, who, of course, isn't the slightest relation to her really. He just keeps her out of charity. Mrs. James was telling mother all about it one day. She says Lesbia's own people didn't leave her a penny, and her relations won't help; so the Hiltons are saddled with her."

"Very decent of them."

"Um, yes, I suppose so; but of course she's tremendously useful with the children. You always see her trailing them out on Saturdays and Sundays, and often even on weekdays after school. She's as good as a nursemaid. I should hate to wheel a perambulator myself."

"Good-night! So should I! The bare idea gives me umpteen fits."

[27] "I should call it the limit, but I suppose she simply *has* to do it. Mrs. James said Lesbia was fearfully slighted. (She lives next door to the Hiltons so she knows all about them.) They go out to the theatre and leave that poor girl to put all the children to bed, and—" But at this point Lesbia jumped up quietly and stole away. She did not want to overhear any more. Indeed she felt she had already heard far too much. A serpent had crept into her paradise. She was angry with that traitor Mrs. James for gossiping, but she began to wonder whether after all what Marion said was not perfectly true. It had never struck her before to view things from that angle. These were indeed new ideas! The remarks about her dependence on her stepbrother slid from her very lightly. As yet Lesbia was an utter baby in money matters. Paul and Minnie did not discuss their affairs in her presence, and her views were little more advanced than those of Steve and Julie, whose creed was that Daddy picked up pennies in the City and kept them in the big safe at his office. What really rankled was that Marion pitied her for taking out the children. She admired Marion immensely. There had been other friends in her school horizon, but her drifting devotion, which inclined for a time towards Phillis Marsh or Calla Wilkins, had lately centred on Marion. She wanted to stand well in her opinion. It had not occurred to her to compare herself with a nursemaid, for she loved the children and enjoyed taking them for walks, but now Marion had done so.

[28] "I won't wheel that perambulator out again—ever!" she decided impulsively. "If I met Marion, and she looked sorry for me, I'd never get over it."

By this time Aldora was hunting for her and calling her name noisily, so she took up her strap of books and walked home, feeling as if her standards had suddenly and unexpectedly been turned upside down.

We have said before that Lesbia had a very sensitive disposition, so ultra-sensitive indeed that it sometimes eclipsed the more sensible portion of her. Instead of being glad that she was a much appreciated member of the Hilton household she began to wonder whether she was being put upon and slighted. All sorts of silly little incidents corroborating such a view came crowding into her memory. If we have a strong bias towards an opinion it is generally easy to prove our own argument by entirely ignoring the other side of the question. Minnie's many kindnesses were for the moment forgotten. Marion's approval seemed the only thing that mattered. It was horrible to think that her chum's friendliness was tinctured with pity. And friendly Marion undoubtedly was. She shared packets of chocolates with Lesbia, gave her snapshot photos which she had taken during the holidays, lent her books, and spent every available moment of recreation in her company. Marion was pretty and popular, so to be known as her chum was a matter for self congratulation. For at least a fortnight the two girls were as inseparable in school hours as a pair of lovers. The form, who had witnessed frantic friendships before, looked on with stolid indifference, tinged with occasional sense of injury. They preferred Marion to distribute her chocolates equally rather than to fill her chum's pockets. A really popular girl is seldom one who concentrates her affection on one object. Human nature is selfish enough to demand substantial reasons for placing a schoolfellow upon a pedestal, and V_A, conscious of being left out in the cold, was beginning to wonder whether after all it had not been making too much fuss of Marion Morwood.

[29] Lesbia, who went at least ten minutes out of her way every day in order to walk back from school with her idol, carefully avoided discussing home topics. She felt there was a sore spot that would hurt if it was touched. She fenced the questions which were sometimes—with evident curiosity—put to her.

One afternoon, as the chums had reached the Morwoods' gate, a heavy shower gave Marion the excuse to ask Lesbia to come in and shelter. They spent a rapturous quarter of an hour inspecting a collection of stamps, then Lesbia, who was late already, glanced through the window at the clearing sky.

"I must go," she groaned. "The rain's almost stopped now. Look at the time! And we have tea at half-past four. Botheration! I *did* want to see the rest of your stamps."

[30] "Can't you possibly stop?"

"No, I must sprint. They won't know where I am."

"Then come back after tea! Mayn't she, Mother? Leo and Kitty will be here, and we'll try over some songs. *Do* come!" Mrs. Morwood very kindly endorsed her daughter's invitation, and pressed Lesbia to spend the evening. Lesbia, longing to come, accepted provisionally.

"I will if I can, but I shall have to ask at home," she confided at the hall door as she put up her umbrella.

Marion's face reddened with indignant sympathy.

"You don't mean to tell me they keep you as tight as that?" she flared.

But her friend was half-way down the steps by that time and did not reply.

Lesbia, bursting into the dining-room at home, where her belated tea was keeping warm under a cosy, found Minnie lying upon the sofa with a handkerchief soaked in eau-de-Cologne laid across her forehead. She jumped nervously at the noise, and listened with closed eyes as her young stepsister-in-law poured forth her request.

"Oh, Lesbia! I can't possibly let you go this evening! It's Nurse's night out, and I've got an overwhelming headache. Who's going to put the children to bed?"

"Can't Mrs. Carter do it?" asked Lesbia, choking back something that rose in her throat.

[31]

"I daren't ask her. When I engaged her she stipulated she was to have nothing to do in the nursery. It's so difficult to get a cook nowadays, that when you've found one you want to keep her."

"Can't Nurse stay in for once?"

"She'd give notice if I suggested it. You know she always goes to the Cinema on Friday nights."

"Suppose I ask her? Or Mrs. Carter?"

But at this point Paul, who had been sitting reading in the armchair, suddenly rose and interfered.

"Nonsense, Lesbia!" he said. "You mustn't go upsetting the household. And after all I'm not sure that I care about your visiting with these Morwoods. We don't know them."

He lighted a cigarette, and strolled into the greenhouse to smoke it, with an air of having settled the matter finally. Lesbia, drinking rather stewed tea and cold buttered toast, kept silence, but black rebellion raged in her heart. It was a Friday evening, and she had no home lessons to prepare. It would have been so delightful to have spent a few hours with the Morwoods. It was still only half-past five, and the children did not begin to go to bed until half-past six. Suppose she ran round to Marion's now, she could come back in time to give them their baths. Even half an hour of fun would be better than nothing. She peeped hurriedly into the nursery, where Julie, Steve, and Bunty were playing with their toys, as good as gold, then, changing at lightning speed into her best dress, she snatched up her waterproof, crammed on her hat, and fled from the house. Marion welcomed her ecstatically. Several friends, who had been rung up by telephone, had arrived, so there was quite an impromptu little party. (Lesbia was immensely glad she had put on her blue velveteen.) Carrie Turner and Cissie Hales represented school, and there were other girls and their brothers, who seemed on familiar terms with the Morwoods. They were already dancing in the drawing-room, while Blanche, Marion's cousin, played the piano for them. It did not take long for Lesbia to be introduced to the jolly company, and she was soon whirling round with a partner. Lesbia loved dancing. To some people it is as much a natural gift as singing or painting. To move to the rhythm of music was perhaps an old Celtic tendency cropping out in her composition. She felt sometimes like Karen in Hans Andersen's story of *The Little Red Shoes*: when she heard a lively tune her feet just danced of themselves. The Morwoods' drawing-room was large, and they had moved tables and chairs back against the wall, so there was plenty of space for enjoyment. Half an hour seemed to fly like ten minutes.

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"Go! What ridiculous rubbish! Why, you've only just come!" remonstrated Marion, when her friend, with many apologies, began to say good-bye. "Lesbia! I simply shan't *let* you! Here's Bobby Craven longing to dance with you. You can't say no. I shall be absolutely offended if you tear away now. Yes, I mean it!"

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Three children and a bath-towel tugged one way, and Bobby Craven's expectant face the other. Marion's threatened wrath tipped up the balance.

"The children will have to go to bed a little later to-night, that's all," thought Lesbia hastily, as the music began again and Bobby offered his arm.

At seven o'clock, however, her conscience smote her. She refused any more offers of partners and was in a panic to get away.

"Why, my dear," said Mrs. Morwood, passing through the hall where Lesbia was hastily changing her shoes. "You're surely not leaving us? We're going to have supper directly."

"She says she can't stay, Mums," explained Marion. "They want her at home. Oh, it's a shame! I never felt so angry in my life. I could just slay those wretched Hilton children—spoiling all Lesbia's fun. Good-bye, dearest! I call you an absolute martyr. I tell you I'm raging."

Lesbia ran all the way home, and let herself in by the side door. She hung her hat on the hat-stand and hurried upstairs. Sounds of splashing issued from the bath-room. She entered, and found Julie and Bunty holding a water carnival inside the bath, while Minnie, in flannel apron, with a flushed, tired face, was soaping Steve's curls.

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"Where have you been?" she exclaimed, as the truant put in an appearance and began to get to business. "Lesbia! You can't lift Bunty from the bath in your best velvet dress! She's splashing you all over. Go and change it at once! Stephen, come here!" (as her son and heir took the opportunity to escape) "Julie, you mustn't duck Bunty! I don't want her hair wetted to-night. There's the first gong. Supper will have to wait. You ought, all of you, to have been in bed half an hour ago."

Paul, good natured easy-going Paul, was seldom cross to his young stepsister, but that night, with supper late, the soufflé spoilt through long waiting, and his wife in the throes of a violent headache, he lost his temper and gave Lesbia a thorough scolding.

"I told you to stay in and help Minnie," he stormed. "It's a queer thing to have three women in the house and nobody to lend a hand to put those youngsters to bed. You're not worth your salt! And I won't have you accepting invitations on your own and just walking off. Understand that once and for all. I'm thoroughly disgusted with you."

Lesbia lay awake in bed for hours that night crying. It was the first time Paul had ever spoken so sharply to her. Several things hurt particularly. He had alluded to "three women in the house".

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Though she would soon be sixteen Lesbia did not care to be called "a woman", and particularly to be classed with Mrs. Carter and Nurse. Moreover he had said she was not worth her salt. Did he expect her to render service to the household? All Marion's insinuations came sweeping into her memory. Yes, undoubtedly she was slighted at home and expected to do things which other girls were not. Paul of course loved Minnie and his own children far better than herself. What had Calla hinted one day about taking a back seat? The girls at school knew her position and were sorry for her.

"It's horrible to be only 'a step'," sobbed Lesbia. "Perhaps Paul and Minnie would be happier without me. I don't really belong to them. Marion said so. Oh dear! I wonder if there's anybody in the wide world who'd like to have me? I don't believe I'm wanted here in this house!"

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CHAPTER III

Lotus Blooms

Paul's bursts of temper were always short-lived and soon repented, and Minnie had a remarkably gentle disposition. After Friday night's storm they were both particularly sweet to Lesbia. They even suggested that she might ask a few of her school chums to tea and included Marion Morwood in the invitation.

"We want you to have plenty of young friends, dear!" said Minnie earnestly.

"Yes, of course. You must have friends of your own age," endorsed Paul.

So half a dozen of the elect of VA were bidden for tea and games, and spent a hilarious Saturday afternoon in the Hiltons' drawing-room. Minnie made a gracious hostess at the tea-table, but had the tact to leave the girls to themselves afterwards. The children, in their prettiest clothes, were duly paraded, but not allowed to stay too long among the visitors. There were chocolates in little bon-bon dishes, and there were two competitions for prizes.

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"I *have* enjoyed myself," said Calla, in the bedroom where the party was putting on hats and coats to go home. "It's been ripping—absolutely top-hole."

"Scrumptious!" agreed Kathleen, hugging a first prize.

"You're a lucker, Lesbia!" proclaimed Phillis.

"Those kids are priceless, and I like Mrs. Hilton awfully," commented Aldora.

"Relations generally play up for parties. I wonder what they're like in private?" whispered Marion to Etta, as the two sat on the floor changing their shoes.

She whispered it very softly, and she really did not intend Lesbia to overhear, but her chum chanced to move forward at that very moment and caught the unpleasant words. It made the only disagreeable note in her party. Marion shook hands warmly with Mrs. Hilton and thanked her for her hospitality as she said good-bye, but Lesbia, standing near, thought her politeness lacked a genuine ring. She could not forget the chance whisper she had overheard in the bedroom.

At the High School matters were going briskly this new term. Miss Tatham's scheme for self-expression found favour with the girls. It was so delightful to be able to choose your own lessons, if only for two afternoons during the week. There were tremendous debates about the various subjects on the list.

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"It's a grizzly nuisance we mayn't do a bit of everything," mourned Marjorie Johns. "I want to paint and sing and act and learn wood-carving as well. Why can't we fit it all in?"

"Because the powers that be say there isn't time, my child. With your voice there's absolutely nothing for it but song-drama. It's Kismet."

"But I want to make my Christmas presents. Carving would be *so* useful."

"You'll have to make them at home. You're booked for song-drama, I tell you. Miss Bates has her eye on you."

"Oh, indeed! What about free choice then?"

"I think I shall go in for song-drama, it sounds ripping," lisped Ernie Hall, a short fat girl, whose speech, in spite of the persistent efforts of the elocution mistress, still clung to the "lal" of her childhood.

"*You!* Are we to have a chorus of corn-crakes?" hinned Cissie Hales, who never spared her comments.

"We can choose what we like I suppose?" flared Ernie.

"No we can't altogether. There's to be a selection for song-drama. Theodora told me so. Miss Bates is to weed out the bad voices and pick a decent caste."

"A good thing too—for those who'll have to listen at Christmas," commented Aldora. "The audience ought to have *some* consideration shown to it."

"It would be hateful to choose song-drama and then be turned down," ventured Bernadine Molyneux.

[39] "Unthinkable," agreed Lesbia. "I know my voice is nothing, and I've not much ear for music (though I love it), so it's no use my playing out of tune in the orchestra. I'm going in hot and strong for Art on Tuesday afternoons. I shall put my name down for it. Here goes!"

"Are you absolutely sure?" warned Cissie, mock-tragically, as Lesbia, pencil in hand, approached the list. "Remember it's like getting married, and you can't change your mind. It's a case of 'say it now or hereafter for ever hold your peace!' When once you're wedded to the Arts class you may find you're 'mated to a clown' as Tennyson puts it. 'Be wise in time, O Lesbia mine!' Don't sacrifice your beautiful youth upon the Altar of Arts. Music woos you round the corner!"

"And would soon throw me overboard," laughed Lesbia. "Be thankful you'll have me as audience at Christmas. You want somebody, I suppose, to come and clap the performance. There now! My name's the first on the 'Altar of Arts' as you call it. Who else is going to have a good time on Tuesday afternoons in the studio?"

Lizzie Logan, Connie Blakeley, Aldora Dodson, and Laura Berkshaw at once followed Lesbia's lead, and Ernie Hall after a lingering look at the music list also signed her name under the heading of Art.

[40] There still remained the choice of the intellectual hobby for Friday afternoons. Here Miss Tatham had allowed two subjects to be linked together, and from among them Lesbia selected 'Nature Study' and 'Antiquities'. She liked old houses and old customs, and the prospect of collecting the City's legends interested her.

Tuesday and Friday afternoons were now held to be the landmarks of the week. The school orchestra, which before had languished and almost winked out, took on a fresh lease of life. Violin cases and even violoncello cases appeared in the cloak-room, and from the sanctuary of V_B, turned into a temporary practice room, came weird sounds, somewhat rasping and scraping at first, but improving in quality as the term wore on. Those outside the locked door, though really rather thrilled, affected to mock at the music, and would ask facetiously if the wolves were howling, or where all the cats came from. The instrumentalists however, proud of their revived Society, took no notice of scoffing remarks and would reply loftily:

"Ah! Just you wait till Christmas and then you'll see."

"And in the meantime we *hear*, worse luck!" retorted their impudent critics. "Pity there isn't a sound-proof room for practising in this school."

[41] Lesbia was immensely happy in the studio, where there were facilities for carrying out all sorts of fads. She had always longed to try stencilling and velvet painting, but could never before get on the right track of the processes. The new art teacher, Miss Joyce, was ready to give any explanations, and though the girls worked away "on their own" they could come to her as often as they liked with their difficulties. Lesbia complacently stencilled everything upon which it was possible to lay a pattern, work-bags, boxes, book-covers, and even a pinafore for Julie, though she knew to her sorrow that the first wash would remove the fruits of her labours, and Julie's pinafores never lasted clean more than a few hours. She longed for more scope, and had visions of covering the nursery walls at Denham Terrace with designs of Noah's Ark animals, insects, and butterflies.

"The children would *love* it," she explained to Minnie, "and if you'd only have a dado colourwashed over the wallpaper, I could stencil a row of creatures along the top, just on a level with the children's eyes. It would look as nice as one of those model nurseries we saw at the exhibition. *Do* let me, won't you?"

To her surprise Minnie hesitated, seemed to think the offer over, and refused it.

"The room was decorated only last spring, and I don't want to have the men in the house again," she declared.

"It doesn't need a man just to colourwash a dado," persisted Lesbia. "Why I believe Nurse could manage it."

[42] "Nurse has plenty to do without colourwashing the nursery. Besides it's not worth while now, when——"

Minnie stopped abruptly, looking rather conscious.

"Not worth while? Not when the children would adore it?"

"I didn't mean that. I daresay they'd like it well enough."

"Then what did you mean?"

"Something I can't tell you. Don't bother, Lesbia, you can't know everything in this house. It's no use your putting a dado here. Perhaps some day, who knows?—your stencils may come in useful on some other walls."

Minnie spoke with a shade of embarrassment. Her young stepsister-in-law was gazing at her critically.

"How you love mysteries," remarked Lesbia. "All I can say is that, if you're thinking of removing, you'll find it a business to get another house unless you buy it, and Paul said this morning that nothing would induce him to buy property at the top tide of the market. The Morwoods have been trying to remove for two years, and can't hear of a house anywhere."

"The Morwoods' affairs have nothing to do with ours," remarked Minnie, closing the conversation firmly.

[43] It was a blow to Lesbia not to be allowed to try her skill at decorating the nursery. She thought it highly unreasonable of Minnie. She stencilled some of the animals on pieces of paper and fastened them with drawing-pins on to the walls in a corner of the room, to show how nice the effect would be, but the children's inquisitive little fingers pulled at the edges of the paper and soon tore them down. In her annoyance she confided the whole of the affair to Marion, who was breezily sympathetic.

"How stupid and unenlightened!" raged her chum. "They ought to have been only too pleased to have the nursery so improved. Your stencil work's lovely. There isn't a girl in the school who can do it half so well. I'll tell you what. I've got an idea! An absolute brain wave. The walls of VA are colourwashed. Why don't you go to Miss Tatham and ask her to let you stencil them? It would be a boon to the form."

"O-o-o-h! I daren't!"

"Why not? She's rubbed in self-expression and here you are wanting to express yourself."

"So I am—in stencil work."

"I'll go with you to the study if you like."

"I wish you would. I'd never have the courage to march in alone. Suppose she thinks it cool cheek and absolutely withers me?"

"Then you'll be a faded flower, a broken butterfly, a crushed worm," laughed Marion. "Come along. Nothing venture nothing win. I'll guarantee Tatle won't eat you."

[44] Miss Tatham, sitting in the sanctum of her study with a pile of exercise books on the desk before her, gasped a little when Lesbia advanced her idea. This was self-expression with a vengeance. Rather a startling proposal certainly, yet it seemed to show such initiative that it was a hopeful sign of progress under the new régime.

"I'll consider it, Lesbia," she said thoughtfully. "I must see some of your stencil work first, and have a talk with Miss Joyce. I'm always glad when girls wish to do anything for the school, but, of course, the quality of the work must be very high before it's worthy of a place in a form room."

"Lesbia's the oldest pupil at the school," ventured Marion rather inconsequently.

"That unfortunately doesn't guarantee proficiency in Art," twinkled Miss Tatham; "if everything went by seniority there would be no prizes."

[45] Feeling half-crushed and half-encouraged Lesbia beat a retreat, expecting to hear nothing more about the matter, and doubting whether she had done herself any good at head-quarters. Miss Tatham, however, examined her work privately, and after a long talk with Miss Joyce summoned Lesbia to the study and announced that she would be allowed to stencil a border in VA under the close superintendence of the Art Mistress. This was indeed a triumph for Lesbia. Her disappointment about the dado for the nursery faded into nothingness now that she might actually decorate her own form room. Fortunately for her peace of mind she had no rivals in her own particular field. The only other girls in VA who took stencilling were Lizzie Logan and Laura Birkshaw, and both were such hopeless amateurs at it that they realized their own lack of skill, and would never have ventured to touch the schoolroom walls. Grace Stirling of the Sixth, however, and Alice Orton in VB, were so fired with enthusiasm that they later asked and received permission to perform the same artistic service for their own forms. Lesbia was the pioneer, however, and won considerable credit for the idea, though she had the honesty to tell everybody that the original suggestion was Marion's.

Of course, the first and most thrilling step was to choose a good design. Both Lesbia and Miss

Joyce decided that it ought to be original, and that they would evolve it between them.

"I have all sorts of sketches at my studio that would be helpful," said Miss Joyce. "Suppose you come back with me one day after school, and we'll look them over."

"Oh, may I?" said Lesbia, delighted. "Thanks immensely."

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So on the following Thursday at four o'clock, instead of walking home to Denham Terrace, she turned into the town instead. Miss Joyce had a studio in Pilgrims' Inn Chambers, a collection of rooms let as offices and flats in a big old house near the river. In pre-Reformation times it had been a hostelry for the use of pilgrims, who came to visit the miraculous shrine at the little chapel on the bridge, and since then it had passed through many vicissitudes and had fallen on evil days, till a public-spirited citizen had taken compassion on its dilapidated condition and had bought it, caused it to be carefully restored, and had let it to various tenants. It was a beautiful example of mediæval architecture, and its quaint gables and timbered walls were built round a courtyard of cobbled stones. Lesbia, passing under a carved doorway and up a black oak staircase, felt as if she stepped into an atmosphere of five or six hundred years ago. Miss Joyce's studio was a large, quaint room with a rafted roof of ancient beams, and had latticed windows at either end, looking out upon the courtyard and upon the river. She held classes here for several kinds of art work, and tables were covered with specimens of her own or her pupils' paintings and handicrafts. Lesbia stared, fascinated by the display, and Miss Joyce left her to look round while she lighted a gas ring, put on a kettle and took some cups and saucers from a cupboard.

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"We must have studio tea before we do anything," she decreed. "I always need tea horribly at this hour of the day, and I'm very cross if I can't get it. Take that comfy chair, Lesbia. We'll go through the designs afterwards."

"What a heavenly room!" said Lesbia, leaning back in a picturesque wicker armchair and holding a pale-yellow teacup in her hand, and a plate with a slice of walnut-cake on her knee. "It's too delightful and quaint for words. Are you here most of the day? Lucky you!"

"I have my classes at the High School, of course, but I give most of my lessons here, and do my own work too. Sometimes when I'm very busy and want to stay late I even sleep here. I have a little bedroom through that doorway."

"Sleep here! All alone! Aren't you frightened?"

"Not a bit."

"I should be scared to death. The whole place feels haunted. At midnight I'm sure it would be full of ghosts."

"I've never seen or heard any of them yet," smiled Miss Joyce. "If they're here they don't disturb me at any rate. I'm a sound sleeper and I never think about them. Now, I'm afraid we must hurry and look over our designs, for I have a class coming at half-past five."

"And I'm wasting your precious time," said Lesbia, springing up.

"Not at all. I should have had tea in any case. I told you I can't get on without it."

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Miss Joyce had studied design, and had a big portfolio of drawings put away in a corner. She lifted it on to a table, and she and Lesbia went through its contents carefully. They were lost in choice between poppyheads, almond blossom, vine leaves, ivy, brier rose and irises, but finally decided to adapt a painting of water-lilies for their purpose.

"Lotus blooms were a great feature of decorative art in ancient Egypt," said Miss Joyce, hunting through a book on "Egyptian ornament" to demonstrate her point. "Look at this delicious little bit! With the long stems and the leaves and the seed vessels we ought to be able to manage something satisfactory. I'll bring the painting and the book to school, then we must evolve a simple design that we can cut in stencil. Done in dull green on the pale green colourwash I flatter ourselves it ought to look rather artistic."

"It'll be simply topping. *How* I shall enjoy dabbing it on! Thanks a million times for helping. Is this a pupil coming?" (as a suggestive tap sounded on the door). "Then I must take my books and scoot off. Good-bye—and again thank you *awfully!*"

[49]

CHAPTER IV

An Upheaval

With a certain amount of help from Miss Joyce Lesbia contrived to make a really very nice

stencil design of water-lilies. It was submitted to Miss Tatham, who gave her approval and permission for it to be transferred to the walls of VA. It was a proud occasion for Lesbia when Tuesday afternoon saw her installed in her own form room with stencil, paints, and brushes, actually beginning the delightful task of decoration. The room was vacant only on that one afternoon in the week, and Miss Tatham would not allow her to stay and work after school hours, so her plan must proceed piecemeal with about a couple of yards painted at a stretch. It gave an added interest to spread out the enjoyment from week to week, though the wall looked horribly unfinished with a half-completed design. She had been a little doubtful as to how the form would receive her handiwork, and whether they would consider it an improvement or an eyesore. Fortunately, they liked it, and told her to hurry up and get along with it as fast as she could. The girls whose desks adjoined the finished portion even crowded over those who sat near bare walls. Miss Pratt—practical, hard-headed, inartistic Miss Pratt—after carefully ascertaining that the work did not trespass upon Lesbia's preparation hours, condescended to approve, though she added grimly that she would like to see an equal amount of care and attention put into the Latin exercises and the Algebra classes. Every rose has its thorn, and Miss Pratt's praises were never without a sting.

Meantime the exponents of song-drama had waxed wildly enthusiastic over the preparation of *The King of Tara*, which they intended to produce before the school at Christmas. They had already held one or two practices with the orchestra, and were much thrilled to hear how well their choruses sounded in conjunction with the instruments.

"We've just been learning the music so far, but we're to begin the acting next week," purred Marion to Lesbia, "and when we get the dresses it will be absolutely tip-top. I wish you were in it."

"So do I," said Lesbia half wistfully, "but Miss Tatham won't let us swop; besides I've got to finish the lotus pattern. It'll take me till very nearly the end of the term. I have to do it so carefully. If I try to hurry I don't get the edges neat. It's my nightmare that some day I'll let the stencil slip and make a smudge on the wall."

"Aren't you getting tired of everlasting waterlilies?"

"No—not the teeniest, weeniest bit!"

Though the girls were perhaps keenest upon what Miss Tatham termed the "emotional" side of her new department of self-expression, they nevertheless found something to attract them on the "mental" side. The Antiquities Section, for which Lesbia had put down her name, held out fascinating attractions. As a part of its activities the girls were to form a "Scheduling party" to visit any interesting old buildings in the city, to write full particulars of them in notebooks, and if possible to add photographs and drawings. Under the escort of Miss Chatham, companies of a dozen at a time made expeditions of inspection, and were as a rule kindly received by curators and caretakers, and were shown over extra rooms and premises that were not generally open to the public. The girls scribbled their notes on the spot, then wrote them out carefully afterwards in exercise books. There was rivalry as to who should produce the best book. Lesbia made an artistic cover for hers, out of dull-green paper, with a pen-and-ink drawing of the picturesque Bolingbroke Arms Inn, and the title "Antiquities of Kingfield" printed in old English characters. She wrote the text neatly, pasted in photos which she had taken, and cut out any pictures she could find in the local papers to supplement them as illustrations. It was whispered in the school that when the books were finished they were to be shown to the Kingfield Archæological Society, who had hinted at giving prizes for the best efforts.

It was amazing when the girls really began to study their city how much information came to light. The very names of the streets revealed ancient history. Long, long ago the ownership of the town had been divided between the Earl of Dudley and the monks of the Abbey, and lord and abbot waged continual war over the boundaries of their respective properties. It was significant to notice in one quarter of the city such names as Earl Street, Castle Gate, Dudley Gate, Tower Lane, Castle Moat, Earl's Barn, The Butts, Falcon Mews, and Bull Ring, telling their tale of mediæval castle, where archery, hawking, and bull-baiting were favourite pursuits, and in the other quarter ecclesiastical names, Abbot's Orchard, Pilgrims' Inn, Greyfriars' Yard, Monks End, Whitefriars Street, and Priory Gardens, all showing that they had formerly been part of the church lands. The girls each bought a street map of Kingfield, and marked with coloured chalks the old boundaries of earl and abbot, and the course of the city wall, large pieces of which were still left standing in spite of Oliver Cromwell's cannon. Carrie Turner covered herself with immortal glory for the ancient wall actually ran through her father's garden, and she invited the members of her scheduling section and Miss Chatham not only to come and inspect it, but actually to have tea upon the top of it. It was nine feet wide, so there was quite room to accommodate a table and some chairs and stools. The girls, in a flutter of delight, mounted by a ladder, and sat aloft drinking tea and eating cakes, with a fine view over neighbouring gables and gardens, and a romantic feeling that they ought to be garbed in coif and wimple, and watching the prowess of their knights who fought in tournament in the lists below.

The antiquarian section really caught "mediæval fever", and visited the Free Reference Library to consult books which would tell them the ancient history of Kingfield. They copied out the most interesting stories into their notebooks, and anybody who could borrow an out-of-print guide-book, and collect any fresh legends to add to the list, scored considerably.

Another valuable and well-nigh inexhaustible source of information was discovered by the girls

in their friends at home. Grandfathers and grandmothers recalled tales of their childhood, and would relate how, as youngsters of ten, they had hurried past Greyfriars Gate in the twilight, because the ghost of a wicked abbot was supposed to haunt the vicinity, and you might see his grey robes gliding among the shadows when the sun set. Some of them remembered when Miller's Pond, now quite a suburban piece of water, was known as Dragon's Pool, and had been a romantic spot half-smothered in willows, with a legend of a dragon who lived there and would come to the castle walls to demand victims.

"Legend hunting is almost like treasure seeking," declared Lesbia. "You never know what you may find."

Lesbia was very happy at school this term, in spite of skirmishes with Miss Pratt over Latin and Algebra, her two worst subjects. She felt she was taking an active part in the school life, and contributing her quota in a very substantial measure to the benefit of VA, whose walls looked already much improved. The hockey season had begun also, and though she had not yet won special distinction in the playing-field, she had occasionally wrung a word or two of encouragement from Rose Stirling, the Games Captain, sufficient to elate her for the moment, and make her keener at next practice. She loved those Wednesday afternoons when she donned her short blue skirt and scarlet blouse and pads, and went with her team to the big field rented by the school. The autumn nip in the air made exercise pleasant, and the love of sport, inherent in everyone of even diluted British blood, brought all her Anglo-Saxon tendencies to the fore.

As the mediæval dwellers in Kingfield must have fought in the lists, and shot arrows at the butts, and wrestled, or cudgelled with quarter-staffs in the meadows, so their descendants enjoyed themselves in the playing-fields, demonstrating the modern theory that girls need physical training as much as boys, and can play a game with equal keenness and observance of rules.

October, with its whirling leaves and bursts of fitful sunshine, had worn itself away and given place to November mists. Hallow-e'en had come and gone, and the half-term holiday was over. Already everybody was beginning to think about Christmas and to make plans for the term-end festivities. Lesbia, sitting at the supper table in Denham Terrace, gave Paul and Minnie a highly-coloured account of the entertainment to which they would be invited.

"You'll love it. It's to be the best thing we've ever given at Kingfield High," she concluded.

For a moment there was an embarrassing silence. Minnie was looking at Paul beseechingly. He cleared his throat.

"Perhaps we'd really better tell her now," he remarked.

"Tell me what?" asked Lesbia.

"Well, the fact of the matter is we shall none of us be here for Christmas. By the time your song-drama—or whatever you call it—comes off, we shall all be many thousands of miles away. We're going out to Canada."

"To Canada!" gasped Lesbia, utterly overwhelmed. "All of us?"

"Yes, the whole family. I've accepted an appointment there, and we start in a fortnight."

"Isn't it—isn't it very sudden?" faltered Lesbia.

"Paul knew some months ago, dear," said Minnie, "and our passages have been booked quite a long time."

"And you never told me!" Lesbia's voice was most reproachful.

"We were afraid it would unsettle you at school if you knew you were leaving. I spoke to Miss Tatham about telling you, and she quite agreed with us."

"But do you mean I'm to leave Kingfield and the High School and everything in a fortnight?" asked Lesbia, her eyes suddenly swimming with tears.

"Come, cheer up!" said Paul. "You'll like Canada well enough when you get there. Girls have rather a good time I believe."

Later on, when Lesbia was alone with Minnie, she heard fuller particulars.

"Paul is very glad to get the appointment. It's so difficult to make any headway in England nowadays. There seems more scope in a new country. It'll be a good thing for the children too, when they begin to grow up. England's overcrowded. They'll have better prospects in Canada."

"What's the place like? Are there great forests and lakes and rivers and Red Indians?" asked Lesbia, calling to mind any stories she had read of the Dominion.

"No, Belleville's not at all romantic. It's quite a new city, and it's on the plains, not near any forests or rivers, I believe."

"O-o-h!" (disappointedly). "Are Nurse and Mrs. Carter going with us?"

"Nurse doesn't want to leave England. She's to be married next year. And Mrs. Carter is too old to emigrate, and has two sons settled in Kingfield. You and I can look after the children on the

voyage, can't we?"

"I suppose so!" gulped Lesbia.

She was appalled at the whole idea. Emigration to Canada sounded about as cheerful as banishment to Siberia. To leave Kingfield, with its quaint buildings and old associations, and the High School where she was so happy, and to be whisked away over the sea to a bare new city and a winter of snow and ice—oh, it was horrible! And only a fortnight in which to get ready. They ought to have told her before. It was too bad to keep her—a girl of nearly sixteen—in the dark, as if she were one of the children. Minnie and Paul had had plenty of time to make their preparations, but for herself everything would be a scurry. She would not even be able to finish the decoration of V_A. She carried the bad news to school next morning. Marion received it with a perfect outburst of indignation.

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"What an atrocious shame! To think of springing it upon you in this sudden fashion. Oh, it's too bad to take you away from the High School! Where are you going to finish your education? Is there a school at this place you're going to?"

"I don't know."

"You probably won't have time for school when you get there. Servants are scarce in Canada and you'll have to turn to and help!"

"We're not taking nurse or anyone with us," volunteered Lesbia.

"Then *you'll* be nursemaid on the voyage?"

"I suppose so."

"I like that!" flamed Marion. "Why can't they leave you behind in Kingfield, to finish at the High?"

"Oh, I wish they would!"

"I wish they'd leave you with *us*," said Marion impulsively. "Mother'd adore to have you—she likes you awfully—and as for me I'd dance a jubilee. I've always wanted a sister, and we get on so well together, don't we? Oh, it *would* be sport!"

"It would indeed!" agreed Lesbia wistfully.

She ventured to mention the great idea to Minnie, who laughed, and then looked suddenly hurt.

"Nonsense, Lesbia child," she said. "We're not going away and leaving you behind. I'm sure the Morwoods don't want you as a legacy."

"Marion *said* they did!"

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"Girls like Marion talk a great deal of rubbish, so don't listen to her. I've put a packing-case in your bedroom, and you may fill it with books and any other things you like to take. It will go in the hold of the vessel. Your clothes must be packed in the tin box and the cabin trunk. We'll buy our fur coats when we get over. They'll be cheaper in Canada than in England."

The Hilton household was naturally deep in preparations for the forthcoming upheaval. Clothes, books, and a few special treasures were to go with them, but they were leaving the furniture to be sold, and would re-furnish when they found a house in Belleville. The children, who now shared the open secret, ran about in much excitement, anxious to start at once on what seemed to them a second summer holiday.

"We shall have an awful time looking after these three scaramouches on board ship," groaned Lesbia, picking Steve out of the packing-case where he had climbed, and rescuing various fragile articles from Julie's and Bunty's prying little fingers.

The more she thought of the prospect the more her heart sank. She did not wish to leave Kingfield at all, but if emigration were a necessity, she would have preferred some beautiful place such as California, or the hot springs district of New Zealand, or certain parts of Australia where the climate was adorable and oranges and peaches hung in your garden.

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There were of course many leave-takings before their departure. Lesbia had to go one afternoon to say good-bye to the Pattersons. They were distant cousins, and her only relations in Kingfield. They lived at the opposite side of the city, and she did not see them very often. They had not been consulted about Lesbia's future, and were ready to find fault with her stepbrother's arrangement for her.

"Well, Lesbia! This will be a great change for you," began Mrs. Patterson. "If I'd been asked I should have said 'leave you to finish off at the High School'. It seems a pity to stop your education just when you're getting on nicely."

"I wish they would leave me behind," said Lesbia. "I don't want to go at all."

"We might easily have taken you in," continued Mrs. Patterson. "All three of the boys are away at present. It would have been far better for you. But our advice has never been asked. Paul Hilton goes his own way. Yet really you're more our relation than his. I hope you'll be happy out in Canada. You must write to us sometimes and tell us how you're getting on. Your cousin, Mrs.

Baynes, will be very surprised to hear the news. Have you written to tell her? Or to your aunt Mrs. Newton? They really ought to know. It hardly seems right you should go away in this sudden fashion and leave all your kith and kin behind you. You must write to-morrow, Lesbia, and tell them."

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Lesbia assented apathetically. She was not very deeply interested in Mrs. Baynes or Mrs. Newton. She had only met the former twice in her life, and Mrs. Newton, her mother's aunt, was not a remarkably attractive old lady. On the few occasions when she saw Lesbia she invariably said she was just going to send her a present and would buy her a book, but she never remembered to keep her promise and the parcel had not yet arrived. Lesbia, who had waited for it since her sixth year, was of the opinion that it never would come.

With school friends and relations bemoaning her departure it was rather hard to take a hopeful view of the future. The only person who encouraged her was Miss Pratt.

"Going to Canada," she commented. "You lucky girl! I wish I could go myself. It's a splendidly go-ahead country. There's some chance for people out there."

"That's what Paul and Minnie say," thought Lesbia, "but of course they have each other and the children. I'm sure Miss Pratt would be welcome to go in my place. I'd much rather stay in dear old England if I was asked."

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CHAPTER V

Lesbia Burns her Boats

There was so much to be done before the Hiltons set sail for Canada that the brief fortnight seemed to slide away like a few days. Lesbia attended school, but her lessons went to the winds, amply justifying Miss Tatham's decision that the news of her impending departure would unsettle her work. Unsettle her? How was it possible to do any work at all when she could count the days and say "This time next week I shall be upon the ocean"? She dreaded the voyage. On the few occasions, during summer holidays, that she had been for a sea trip, she had proved a poor sailor. Though Paul assured her the motion would be far less on a big steamer than on a small yacht, she would not take his word for it.

"I shall wish myself at the bottom before we've passed Queenstown," she declared tragically.

At school some little mystery was apparently going on. The girls would be talking, then would stop suddenly when she approached. She wondered about it vaguely. It was explained on her last day, when, at four o'clock, she was asked by Theodora Johnson to come into the gymnasium. Her own form and quite a number from the Sixth and from VB and IVA were assembled there. To her surprise she seemed to be the centre of attraction. Everybody looked first at her, and then at Theodora, who began to make a speech.

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"We're all very sorry you're leaving the school, Lesbia. You've been here longer than anybody else, and it seems a pity you can't go through the Sixth. We shall miss you very much, and we hope you'll accept this good-bye present from us."

She handed Lesbia a beautiful leather dispatch case, with the initials L. F. stamped upon it in gold.

Lesbia received it with amazement. She had never expected any present, and the magnificence of this almost took her breath away.

"It's too good of you! I really don't know how to thank you all," she stammered.

"We thought it might be useful on the journey," explained Theodora. "It's nice when you're travelling to have a few things always handy."

"I shall value it immensely, for its own sake, and because you all gave it to me," said Lesbia.

Then began the good-byes. The girls crowded round her, and wished her well, and asked her to write, and not to forget her old school.

"I don't know who's to finish the stencilling in VA," said Kathleen Wilcox.

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"I wish you could have heard the song-drama before you went," mourned Aldora Dodson.

"It's the biggest shame in the world that you're going, I shall always say they oughtn't to have taken you," declared Marion, throwing her arm around Lesbia's shoulder as they left the gymnasium.

The last evening in the old home was a forlorn experience even to Paul and Minnie, who had

bright hopes for the future. Lesbia lay awake for hours crying, and woke with a nervous headache. She had packed a few clothes, brush and comb, and some other necessities, in her new dispatch case, for they were to spend the night at a hotel in Liverpool, and go on board the *Roumania* on the following morning. Nurse had stayed till the last, to help with the preparations. She wept as she put her little charges into the taxi.

"God bless you! I almost wish I was going with you," she murmured, mopping her eyes.

The whole family looked solemn as they drove through the city, but the bustle of the railway station restored their spirits. Lesbia had to cling on to Bunty with one hand, and to hold her dispatch case with the other. When they were settled in a compartment and the train had started, she felt that her last link with Kingfield was severed. What would happen in her unknown future she could not tell.

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It was a long journey to Liverpool, and the children were sleepy and cross before they at last reached the busy station and drove through the lighted streets to their hotel. The manageress had made a mistake in booking their order, and had only two small rooms left for them, so Lesbia was obliged to take both Julie and Bunty into her bed. It was a tight fit, and they were restless little people. Poor Lesbia, who had hardly closed her eyes the night before, found it impossible to sleep. If she managed to doze off Bunty would kick or Julie would fling out her arms. The dark hours passed like a nightmare. She welcomed the chambermaid's entrance with the hot water. Feeling utterly unrested, and nervy and disconsolate, she got up and dressed the children, who were in high spirits. Their noise made her head throb. Was every day of the journey going to be like this? There was a slight fog and drizzling rain outside. Not at all the sort of weather to inspire courage and hopefulness.

Lesbia made some pretence of eating breakfast in the Coffee Room, but she felt as if food would choke her. Minnie, with an anxious eye on the clock, though there was plenty of time to spare, pushed away her own breakfast almost untasted.

Emigration has its sad side. Even with husband and children it is a wrench to leave old England.

[66]

Then the hall porter announced their taxi, and once more they drove through Liverpool streets and along miles of docks to the particular dock where lay the *Roumania*. They were on board at last, with bag and baggage and the children all intact. Their big boxes were being lowered into the hold, and their cabin trunks were being marked with chalk by an official. A steward took them to their cabins, Nos. 51 and 59. Lesbia's experience in voyaging was confined to a 10-ton yacht. She had never been on a sea-going vessel before. She gazed round in dismay. Why, this tiny room with its four berths was actually smaller than the bathroom at home! There was scarcely space to turn round in it. It would be cramped enough if she had it all to herself, but she was to share it with the three children. How she would ever undress and dress them, wash them and comb their hair, much less manage her own toilet in such tiny quarters, she could not imagine. The porthole was closed, and the air felt stuffy. There is always an indescribably close oily smell about the atmosphere of any cabins, except deck staterooms, and those are generally booked by millionaires. Stewards were carrying in various bags and packages and tossing them down on the berths. Already the little place was so full she did not see where she, Julie, Steve, and Bunty were going to put themselves. An immense wave of repulsion swept over her. She could not—no she *could* not be boxed up with those children all the way across the Atlantic! It was too bad of Paul and Minnie to have brought her. They ought to have left her behind in England. The prospect before her was intolerable. She would give the whole world to get out of it, and return to Kingfield. *To return to Kingfield!* The idea struck her with a sudden swift temptation. The Morwoods and the Pattersons had both said they would have been glad to have her. Suppose she were to make her escape and go back? There was still time. Friends of the passengers were on the vessel. She could slip away amongst them unobserved. She had two pound notes in her purse (Paul had seen to it that she was not penniless), and that would be sufficient to pay her railway fare from Liverpool to Kingfield. Lesbia was nothing if not impulsive. It seemed a case of "now or never". All the Celtic side in her rushed to the fore. She never stopped to reason, but acted on the emotion of the moment.

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"I'll do it!" she whispered to herself.

Taking her writing-block and a pencil from her dispatch case, she hastily scribbled a note.

"DEAR PAUL AND MINNIE,

"I feel I can't possibly go to Canada after all, so I am going back to Kingfield to the Morwoods and my own relations who never wanted me to go away. I hope you will have a nice voyage and be happy at Belleville.

"With much love,
"LESBIA."

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She put this into an envelope, addressed it to Paul, and stuffed it inside Bunty's little pocket, where she thought it would be sure to be found later on. Then she kissed the children, took up her dispatch case, and fled on deck. The bell was ringing for friends to clear away from the ship. She stepped ashore with the first consignment. A tram-car was passing along the docks and she boarded it. By good luck it took her straight to the station. She booked for Kingfield and inquired the time of the next train.

"Number 5 platform. You'll just catch it if you're quick!" replied the porter.

Lesbia had only a hazy remembrance afterwards of how she tore up the steps and over the iron bridge to platform 5, but she somehow found herself jumping into a third-class carriage just as the porter was banging the doors and the guard was waving his green flag. She sank on to a seat exhausted, and trembling in every limb. The train started, and Liverpool and Canada lay behind her. Had she wished it was too late now to repent. She had indeed "burnt her boats".

To say that the Morwoods were surprised when Lesbia walked into their house that evening hardly describes their petrified astonishment. They stared at her as if they had seen a ghost. Lesbia, who had felt secure of a warm welcome, explained the situation.

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"You've run away! Run away from your brother and sister and come to *us*!" gasped Mrs. Morwood. "But, my dear girl, *we* can't keep you! You must be mad to do such a thing. Have they actually sailed for Canada without you?"

"I didn't want to go!" answered Lesbia, choking with a lump that suddenly rose in her throat.

She had thought they would be so glad to see her, instead of which they were looking absolutely aghast at her appearance. It was the first great disillusionment of her life. In her bitter disappointment she sank on to a chair and burst into a storm of hysterical sobs. She was overstrung and tired out, and the coolness of her reception seemed like a plunge into an icy bath.

At the sight of such a tragic little lump of misery all Mrs. Morwood's natural kindness of heart reasserted itself. She and Marion comforted Lesbia as best they could.

"Drink this hot tea, child, and you'll feel better. It's no use crying your eyes out. You have some other relations in Kingfield? I thought so. Well, we'll keep you here for to-night, but to-morrow morning I shall send you to Mrs. Patterson. She's the proper person to take charge of you. I suppose she'll telegraph to your brother, and ask what's to be done. It's a most unfortunate business altogether. Cheer up! I suppose your relations will settle things somehow for you."

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Lesbia went to bed early in the Morwoods' pretty spare bedroom, hastily got ready for her reception. She had hardly slept during the two previous nights so she was utterly weary, too tired almost to think. Her uppermost feeling as her head nestled on the frilled linen pillow-case was one of intense thankfulness that she was not in cabin 59 on the *Roumania*. Her bed was steady and the room airy. The wind was blowing a gale outside, and she pictured the steamer tossing on the waves, with portholes carefully closed. She wondered how the children were getting on—the children whom she had so suddenly deserted.

"I suppose Minnie'll go and sleep with them," she thought, stifling a voice within her that was beginning to ask certain uncomfortable questions. "I expect Bunty would give my letter to Paul as soon as they missed me. If not they'd find it in her pocket at bedtime. I wonder what they said? No, I don't! I just want to forget all about it and go to sleep."

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Next morning, immediately after breakfast, Mrs. Morwood dispatched her unexpected guest to Mrs. Patterson, who, she considered, ought to take charge of her. The Pattersons lived at Morton Common, a suburb on the opposite side of the city, and Lesbia went there in the tram-car. She had plenty of time for reflection upon the journey. After her experience with the Morwoods she was rather doubtful about her reception. Mrs. Morwood had plainly shown her strong disapproval, and Marion, though she was quite kind, had been frankly embarrassed. Lesbia was beginning to learn there was such a thing as "counting without one's host". She walked very solemnly into the gate of 28 Park Road, and gave a timid ring at the door bell.

Mrs. Patterson's amazement and condemnation were even more sweeping than Mrs. Morwood's. Being a relation she could speak her mind freely.

"How *could* you do such an absolutely idiotic thing, Lesbia? You've forfeited your passage. Dear me! I hardly know what's to be done. Paul and Minnie will be in such a state of mind about it!"

"I didn't want to go to Canada," sobbed Lesbia, whose tears were painfully near the surface this morning; "you said it was a pity for me to go, and you could have taken me in easily, so I came back."

Mrs. Patterson looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"I could have taken you if I had arranged it with Paul Hilton," she replied. "But I never expected you to run away in this mad fashion. Well, I suppose we must send a telegram and see what can be done. You've no clothes except the few things in that case? Of course, they would all be in your cabin trunk. The girls must lend you what they can."

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When Mr. Patterson arrived home at lunch time he discussed the matter with his wife, and dispatched a wireless message to the *Roumania*, telling Mr. Hilton of his stepsister's whereabouts. He received the reply: "Keep Lesbia. Writing." So there was nothing more to be done until a letter could arrive.

Lesbia, as the guest of the Pattersons, began to learn a few facts about life. Up till now she had been singularly childish in regard to money matters, and had never troubled to think of the sources of food and raiment. Paul and Minnie had provided everything, and she had accepted her part and lot with them without question. It came as a surprise when it was explained to her that she was utterly dependent upon her stepbrother.

"Your own father and mother left you absolutely nothing, Lesbia," said Mrs. Patterson. "Paul adopted you, and has brought you up all these years and paid for your education, as if you had been his own sister. I'm afraid he'll be terribly annoyed at your running away from the steamer. It will be such an expense to send you on afterwards if he decides you are to join them."

[73] It was twelve days before a letter arrived with the Canadian postmark, twelve days in which Lesbia, feeling herself a self-invited guest, had ample time to consider the consequences of her rash act. She hardly knew whether she wished Paul to leave her in England or to send for her to Canada. Staying with the Pattersons was not at all exhilarating. The atmosphere of the house was full of disapproval. She looked eagerly at the envelope addressed in Paul's familiar handwriting. It was directed to Mrs. Patterson, who put on her pince-nez and opened it. As she read it a look of consternation swept over her face.

"Well, I wasn't quite prepared for that at any rate," she commented, "and yet it's only what might have been expected. The girl's no kith and kin of his after all." She handed the letter to her husband, whose face also lengthened as he grasped its contents.

"It's an unfortunate business," he said briefly. "Of course I see his point. We shall have to write to Mrs. Newton."

Poor Lesbia, sitting listening, did not dare to ask for an explanation, but later on Mrs. Patterson told her the bad news.

"Paul is deeply hurt at your leaving the steamer. He says, 'I have been both father and brother to Lesbia for the last eight years, and consider it unpardonable of her to desert my wife in such a pinch. As she evidently does not wish to make her home with us, I feel my responsibility for her may justly come to an end, and I may hand her over to her own relations. Had she come with us to Canada I would have treated her as one of my own children, but in the circumstances she has really no further claim upon me. I think I have done my share, and it is now the turn of others to provide for her.'"

"Has he cast me off altogether?" gasped Lesbia.

[74] "I'm afraid so. You've really nobody but yourself to blame. We must write round to your various relations and see who's ready to help you. If only you had been a couple of years older! You're hardly sixteen and so childish for your age. There, don't cry, Lesbia!" (more kindly). "We shall manage something for you amongst us. Your relations certainly won't turn you adrift. But, of course, it's difficult to arrange when we have children of our own to educate. I expect your fees were paid at school until Christmas, so you may just as well go back there until the end of the term. I'll call on Miss Tatham and talk the matter over with her. You were getting on so nicely at the High School, it seems a pity for you to leave, doesn't it?"

"Yes; I should like to go back there," answered Lesbia forlornly.

[75] **CHAPTER VI**

Lesbia's Future

Lesbia having, figuratively speaking, eaten Eve's apple and cast her happy-go-lucky childhood behind her, found her newly acquired knowledge exceedingly bitter fruit. Mrs. Patterson was not disposed to treat her as the Hiltons had done, leaving her in complete ignorance of ways and means. On the contrary she discussed the financial side of her prospects to the last half-penny. She did it quite kindly, but with unsparing plainness.

"You'll have to face the fact that later on you must earn your own living, Lesbia," she said. "We must decide what's the best way to educate you and train you, so as to make you fit for something."

[76] Mrs. Patterson had, as she promised, written to Lesbia's various relations, explaining the situation and asking for help. There were very few of them, and they were only distantly related, so perhaps they did not consider the ties of blood made a strong claim upon their assistance. Two of them never answered at all. One wrote suggesting that Lesbia should be sent out to Canada through an emigration society and handed over to her stepbrother who ought to be responsible for her; another (Mrs. Patterson looked frankly angry at this letter) enclosed particulars of an orphanage to which she subscribed, and wondered if Lesbia was too old for admission. Great aunt Mrs. Newton sent a letter in a sloping, shaky hand with nearly every other word underlined.

"I shall be willing to give her a *home*," it ran, "as I do not forget her *poor mother* was *my niece*. I am at present without *any servants*, and I can only get a *charwoman* to come every *other* day. My companion, Miss Parry, is leaving me after *Christmas*, and so far I have not heard of *another*. I will send Lesbia's railway fares and will gladly teach her to make herself useful in the *house*. In

my opinion all young people ought to learn *housework*. It is far too much *neglected* in these days, and is of more *real importance* than most of what is taught them at *school*."

[77] Lesbia's face, on reading such an offer, was gloom personified. She had shirked going to Canada and helping Minnie to look after Julie, Steve, and Bunty, but with Aunt Newton her position would evidently be ten times worse. It was certainly "out of the frying-pan into the fire". The old lady was fussy and fidgety, and neither companions nor servants ever stayed with her for long. To fill up the gaps in her domestic arrangements seemed an appalling prospect. Fortunately, the letter did not appeal to Mrs. Patterson's sensible, practical mind.

"This won't do at all," she said briefly, knitting her brows. "Untrained domestic work is a blind alley and leads nowhere. Lesbia must be put in the way of making a proper living. Every girl nowadays ought to have her own career. I shall go and speak to Miss Tatham about it."

Miss Tatham, kind, wise, and experienced in counselling many pupils in the choice of their future professions, gave the best advice she could. Mrs. Patterson came home and talked the matter over with her husband, then announced to Lesbia the result of their cogitations.

[78] "We will give you a home with us, but we can't afford to pay for your education as well. Miss Tatham has made a very generous offer. She says the school is understaffed and that the governors have consented to her obtaining some extra assistance. She suggests that after Christmas you should be received as a governess-pupil. You could give a certain amount of help with the juniors, and your teaching should cancel all your school expenses. It's a splendid plan, and the only one possible in the circumstances. Perhaps Mrs. Newton and Mrs. Baynes will help a little with your clothing, and then we shall manage. As I expected, your fees were paid at the High School up to Christmas, so you are to begin again next Monday. There's still a fortnight of the term left, and you may just as well take advantage of it."

Lesbia heaved a sigh of intense relief at these arrangements. She had hardly realized in the old days that such things as fees existed, they had been Paul's affair entirely, but now that the grown-ups had settled these matters to their satisfaction, she could once more return to the High School and try and forget her troubles. It would be delightful to go back there again. Although it was little more than a fortnight since she had left, the time, with its intervening storms, had seemed years.

Marion had given a brief account to V_A of her running away from the vessel, but the news had not circulated outside her own form, so to most of the girls her reappearance in the cloak-room on Monday morning created quite a sensation.

"Lesbia Ferrars! It's never *you*!"

"Where did you spring from?"

"I thought you'd gone to Canada!"

"Why! You said good-bye to everybody!"

"How is it you've come back?"

"Aren't you going to Canada after all?"

"Are you staying on at the High?"

"Did you go and come back again?"

[79] So many questions were hurled at her head that Lesbia did not attempt to answer them in detail. She replied, a little shamefacedly, that her plans had been suddenly changed, and that she was now living with cousins in Kingfield. She realized, from the girls' faces, that her return was considered rather tame. She even wondered whether she ought to keep the good-bye present which they had made her. It was certainly hers by false pretences. Yet it would be hardly possible to give it back.

"There'll be a scrimmage with Laura Birkshaw!" remarked Etta Pearson. "She's been going on with your stencilling. And a nice smudge she's made of it too, in places."

"Aldora Dodson's got your desk by the window," piped Calla Wilkins; "I don't believe she'll turn out for anybody."

"I shan't ask her to," said Lesbia briefly, as she walked upstairs.

[80] Her pride prevented her from satisfying her schoolfellows' freely expressed curiosity, and, after a little teasing, they let her alone. They gathered enough from Marion to understand the main outline of the situation, and simply accepted the fact of her return to school. Between Marion and Lesbia there was a species of embarrassment. Marion could not help knowing that it was largely owing to her well meant but very foolishly expressed sympathy that her friend had performed such a madcap act. She remembered that in an impulsive moment she had even suggested Lesbia living at her home, an offer which her mother had certainly not endorsed. She felt sorry for her friend, but the sense that she had failed in her crucial test made her shy. Lesbia, with a memory of Mrs. Morwood's blank dismay at her arrival, and the relief with which she had turned her over to the Pattersons, realized what a "*faux pas*" she had committed, and burned with shame to have thus trespassed upon her hospitality.

By an unspoken but mutual understanding the two girls simply buried the past and did not refer either to Lesbia's late experiences or to her future prospects. They confined their conversation strictly to school matters.

There was plenty to be said, for it was the most exciting part of the term. The girls were getting ready for their great Christmas entertainment, to which parents and friends would be invited. Every day some of them stayed after school to rehearse. The orchestra, which had advanced from scraping to quite tuneful melody, played in the gymnasium each morning from 8.25 to 8.55, a very creditable record, considering it was voluntary work, and necessitated a start from home at an early hour.

"I have to walk, because there isn't a tram from Felsham between the workmen's cars at six, and the half-past eight car," proclaimed Aldora Dodson, rubbing her blue fingers to restore the circulation. "I call it pretty stiff to tramp two miles to a rehearsal!"

[81] "Poor old sport," sympathized Kathleen. "Why don't you bike it?"

"My bike's smashed. I lent it to my wretched small brother, and he ran into a hand-cart. That's what children do if you're silly enough to lend them things. It's carrying the violin to school that makes my arm ache."

"Why don't you leave it here?"

"Because I want to practise in the evenings, of course."

"Then I can't help you, my child. You'll have to be content with the honour and glory of playing in the school orchestra, and put up with the inconveniences. You can't eat your cake and have it."

"Oh, don't preach. *You'd* growl yourself if you had such a tramp."

"I daresay I should."

Those girls who were taking part in the song-drama were naturally much concerned about costumes. They spoke of nothing else, in season or out of season. Miss Lightwood, the stage manageress, was determined to have everything strictly in keeping and to prevent any anachronisms. It was a difficult matter however to decide exactly what articles were or were not worn in the Celtic Ireland of about 200 B.C., and there were many discussions on debatable points.

[82] "The one thing we're perfectly certain about," said Marjorie Johns, "is that they wore heaps of jewellery. Everybody who was anybody at all seemed to have a necklet and a coronet and an immense brooch made of gold. How are we going to get all these?"

"We can't," sighed Phillis, hunting ruefully through the typed list of a theatrical provider, "the prices for hiring them nowadays are simply wicked. I call it profiteering. Just look here:

	<i>Per night.</i>
Celtic torc or necklace	15s. 0d.
Inset imitation rubies	18s. 0d.
Chaplet, Celtic design	17s. 6d.
Jewelled	21s. 6d.

Why, we should be ruined, absolutely ruined, if we hired for the whole company."

"It can't be done," agreed Marjorie, "and yet" (wistfully) "they'd look so lovely. The show won't be really Celtic and mystical and song-drama-y without them. I could sing twice as well if I wore a torc and a chaplet. Yes, Lesbia Ferrars, you needn't laugh! I *know* I should. It's my artistic temperament cropping out. Some people may be able to sing on a bare platform, without any scenery or fancy costumes, but they sound just about as inspired as gramophones or pianolas. If I'm to imagine myself 'Etaire' I must have her jewels. I couldn't be a Celtic princess without them. If you laugh again, Lesbia, I'll go for you."

[83] "Is that part of your artistic temperament? There, old sport, I'm not laughing. Not *really*. Only in sympathy. I've got a suggestion to make. I was looking through Miss Lightwood's book on *Celtic Art*—the one she took the costumes from—and I suddenly had a brain-wave. There are whole chapters on Celtic jewellery, with lovely illustrations. I'm sure I could copy some of the ornaments in cardboard and gilt paper. Seen from a distance they'd pass muster and be better than nothing."

"You absolute mascot! Do you think you really can manage it?"

"Bring me some gilt paper and some thin cardboard to school to-morrow, and I'll try at any rate. Don't blame me if I fail."

Lesbia was innately artistic, and her slim fingers had that creative faculty which belongs to the born craftswoman. She suspended the stencilling of VA, which Laura Birkshaw had unwillingly yielded back to her, and, borrowing Miss Lightwood's book on *Celtic Art*, retired on Tuesday afternoon to the Studio, and set to work, with gilt paper, cardboard, fine scissors, seccotine, a bottle of 'Stickphast' and a paste-brush. She used her time to such advantage that when Phillis came from rehearsal she was able to astonish her with the following articles:

1. A gilt coronet cut in a floral pattern, with holes in the sides, on the backs of which were pasted pieces of coloured gelatine paper to represent jewels, the whole mounted on cardboard and stiff.

[84]

2. A Celtic necklace cut out of gilt paper, with the top mounted on a band of thin muslin to prevent tearing.

3. A large Celtic brooch, five inches in diameter, studded, like the coronet, with gelatine jewels, and neatly sewn on to a safety-pin.

Phillis was in raptures.

"They're topping!—A 1!—Scrumptious!" she exulted. "Oh, you really are clever. I can't think how you did it. Where's Miss Lightwood? I must show them to her *at once*. Let me put them on. I'll be very careful and not break the necklace."

The result of Lesbia's ingenuity was what she might have expected: everybody who was taking a major or minor part in the song-drama clamoured for Celtic jewellery. Miss Lightwood, as stage manageress, declared it was the one thing, needful for the production of what she called "local atmosphere". She appealed to Miss Tatham, and represented the matter so strongly that the Principal actually excused Lesbia's afternoon lessons for the whole last week of term and set her to work in the studio instead, turning out torcs and chaplets. It was interesting to be the manufacturing goldsmith of the school theatricals, and, though she grew rather tired of the snip of scissors and the scent of gum, she toiled away womanfully until even the veriest page-boy in the performance had a brooch to hold his tunic together.

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The entertainment was to be an evening one, to which parents and friends were invited. It would be a very festive occasion, and of course everybody would come in evening dress. Here was a point that caused Lesbia great heart-burning. Her boxes, which Paul had promised to send back from Canada, had not yet arrived, and unless they made their appearance before the important 19th of December, she would be reduced to the horrible alternative of missing the party altogether or attending it in her school frock. She had hinted at her predicament to Mrs. Patterson, hoping for the loan of one of Joan's evening dresses, but Mrs. Patterson had been aggressively obtuse, and had hinted in her turn that it would do Lesbia no harm to do without her best clothes until she realized the value of them. Every day poor Lesbia looked hopefully on her return from school to see whether her boxes were in the hall, and every day she met with the same disappointment. The matter was growing urgent. On the afternoon of 17th December, she measured herself playfully against Joan Patterson and ventured to remark:

"I'm nearly as tall as you, Jo! I believe I could almost wear one of your frocks."

"Oh no, you couldn't," laughed Joan. "They'd be miles too long for you, child, and would look absurd."

"Even turned up a few inches?"

[86]

"Turned up," echoed Joan in horror. "It spoils a dress for ever to turn it up. The stitching shows a long line when you let it down again."

It was evident, as Lesbia thought sorrowfully, there was "nothing doing in that quarter". If her box did not arrive she must miss the performance, for she could not sit among a silk or *crépe de Chine* clad audience in a serge skirt and a knitted jumper. She entered the cloak-room next morning in the gloomiest of spirits. She found Ermie, Kathleen, Marion, and a few others collected together talking excitedly. From their tragic tones some catastrophe had evidently just occurred.

"What's the matter?" asked Lesbia.

"Matter! Why, here's a note from Phillis to say she's in bed with bronchitis and won't be able to act 'Etaire' to-morrow. Isn't it simply sickening?" explained Marion.

"What *are* we to do?" groused Kathleen.

"Go and break it to Miss Lightwood, I suppose," suggested Cissie.

"Phillis *might* have chosen some other time to have bronchitis," mourned Calla.

Miss Lightwood received the bad news with more equanimity than her pupils. Probably she was accustomed to cope with such "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune".

[87]

"Nonsense! It's not going to spoil the whole play. I'll take good care it doesn't," she remarked briskly. "Let me see, what had Phillis to do? Two songs, three short speeches, and a figure in a dance. We can give her songs to Marjorie, and train somebody else in a hurry to take her part for the dance and the speeches. Now, who'd get it up in one rehearsal? Lesbia's the very girl. She's about Phillis's height, and can wear her costume. We'll soon teach her the dance. Fetch Lesbia at once!"

Lesbia, hastily informed of the honour in store for her, could scarcely believe her good luck. She had yearned all the term to take part in the song-drama, but her voice was not up to the required standard of merit. To hand over the musical portion of the part to Marjorie and to perform the acting and dancing herself seemed a glorious solution. Miss Lightwood was a

veritable Solomon. Not only did it give her a part in the entertainment, but it solved the horrible question of her evening dress. Etaire's flame-coloured robe with its stencilled blue border would be very becoming, and she longed to wear the Celtic ornaments which she had herself manufactured. She learnt the dance and the speeches easily, and by the time the rehearsal was over everybody breathed freely, and felt secure of the success of the performance.

[88] No boxes arrived for Lesbia on the fatal 19th of December, but she could afford to snap her fingers at fate now. Kitty and Joan Patterson went as her guests to the school party, and sat among the audience quite impressed with the excellence of the entertainment. The girls had indeed risen tremendously to the occasion. The orchestra kept in fair time and tune, drowned in any doubtful passages by Miss Bates's energy on the piano; Marjorie Johns as Uathach and Pauline Kingston as King Eochaid were the two leading voices, and sang and declaimed their parts with much dramatic fire; Nina Wakefield made quite a sensation as Ochne, the Druid, her incantation on the darkened stage creating such an atmosphere of the supernatural as to send cold shivers down the spines of the audience. Dainty Eve Orton, the nymph and sorceress of the drama, presented a "posture-measure", reminiscent of the three graces in Botticelli's picture of spring, a piece of futurist dancing, which entirely took the house by storm, and made some of the guests remark that at any rate the High School was up-to-date. Miss Tatham, watching with much approval, caught the whispered words and smiled in secret satisfaction that her visit to the Glastonbury Festival had not been in vain: the reproach of "old-fashioned" could no longer be cast at the school.

[89] Lesbia, in her flame-coloured dress, with gilt chaplet, torc, and brooch, made a truly Celtic maiden, and mercifully did not forget her newly learnt speeches. She caught Joan's eye, as the performers lined up for their final bow, and could not restrain a smile. The school platform meant much to Lesbia. It was the centre of her little world, and to have taken her place upon it to-night was the fulfilment of a long-cherished ambition. Fortune, which lately had frowned upon her, had for once proved a veritable fairy godmother.

[90] **CHAPTER VII**

Those Juniors

[91] Lesbia spent Christmas at the house of her great-aunt Newton. Mrs. Patterson was expecting her sons home, and had invited several visitors, so decided that she could not possibly find room to keep her young cousin during the holidays. Lesbia, therefore, was packed off to Westhampton, and arrived in a thick fog, to be met by Miss Parry, her aunt's companion, and conducted to Sycamore Villa, on the London Road. Lesbia's cup was at present full of new experiences, and this could hardly be called an exhilarating one. Aunt Newton meant to be kind, but she was a fussy and fidgetty old lady, and quite unaccustomed to young people. Everything about the house represented a bygone generation, and seemed out of touch with modern times. Lesbia liked really old places, such as the Pilgrims' Inn Chambers where Miss Joyce had her studio, but Sycamore Villa was mid-Victorian, and its furniture was of the same period, neither antique nor beautiful. Miss Parry, a little, faded, pathetic-faced elderly lady, whose duties seemed overwhelming, was not very lively company for a girl of sixteen. She was generally busy about the house, and when she came to sit down would concentrate her attention on her crochet work, and hardly ever opened her lips. It was certainly unnecessary for her to do so, as Aunt Newton did enough talking for a dozen people. From the depths of her elbow-chair by the fireside she would pour forth a continuous stream of reminiscences to which Lesbia (longing to get on with a book which she was reading) was obliged to lend an attentive ear, and to respond with "yes" or "no" at the right points. The stories, though long-winded, were interesting enough at first telling, but the old lady's memory was failing, and she repeated them so often that they waxed wearisome to a degree. Lesbia, alas, hated domestic duties, but at Sycamore Villa she preferred to dust rooms, wash tea-things, or perform any odd jobs rather than sit and listen to Aunt Newton's interminable tales of fifty years ago. She acted "errand girl" for the establishment, and made many journeys backwards and forwards to the shops to purchase commodities. She welcomed the little expeditions, for it was at least interesting to walk down the streets and gaze in the shop windows.

[92] Lesbia thought she would never have got through that weary month at Westhampton had it not been for a basket of books which she found in the attic. It was a large wicker laundry hamper, and it was filled with unbound volumes of *Temple Bar*, and the *Cornhill Magazine*. They dated from about 1887 to 1892, but their serial stories had been written by authors of repute, and were so excellent as to eclipse more modern work. Lesbia read tale after tale with unflagging interest, and had not exhausted the mine before her visit was over. She was very thankful when the time came for her to return to Kingfield. It happened to be her sixteenth birthday. Mrs. Newton, really striving to be kind, had remembered the present which she had promised for so many years, and astonished her great-niece with quite a nice copy of Longfellow's poems. Miss Parry gave her a thimble in a red plush case. Both old ladies were quite affected at bidding her good-bye.

"It's been nice to see somebody young about the house, my dear. I wish we could have kept you," said Aunt Newton, wiping her spectacles.

"You've been such a help, Lesbia! I don't know how I should have got through Christmas without you," murmured Miss Parry.

[93] Lesbia, whose newly awakened mind was beginning to register and weigh impressions, went off in the train winking back something suspiciously moist. She was fearfully and furiously glad to get away, but the Celtic side of her nature responded to the pathos of all she had left behind. The remembrance of Aunt Newton's feeble trembling hands clinging to her strong young ones, and of Miss Parry's faded wistful face breaking into a smile as she waved a good-bye, haunted her like a strain of sad music. The episode seemed a chapter of late autumn, with withered whirling leaves and frost-stricken flowers. She stored it away in her memory along with many other vivid mental notes, still only half understood, but adding nevertheless to her increasing stock of human experience.

Lesbia half anticipated and half dreaded the coming term. She wondered how she would get on as a governess-pupil. She had never leaned towards teaching, but then she had never seriously thought of any career, or of anything except a rather butterfly existence. She walked with a very grave face into the study, to be instructed by Miss Tatham in her new duties.

"You'll take the First Form for arithmetic, French, and reading," said the Principal, consulting her time-table, "and II_B for dictation, French, and English History. You'll sit in II_A and keep order while the girls write their exercises, and you'll give II_A French dictation. You'll help both Miss Edwards and Miss Harrison to correct exercises, and you'll check the registers on Friday afternoons. Do you think you can manage this? I've crossed various items from your own time-table to allow for it."

"I'll try, Miss Tatham."

[94] Secretly she was appalled at the amount expected from her. All her own easiest and most favourite classes had been knocked off to make time for her teaching, but the difficult lessons which needed most preparation were retained. She was to act as a kind of general assistant in three forms, which were managed by two mistresses, Miss Edwards and Miss Harrison. Her first experience was to be with II_B. She encountered some of its short-skirted members skirmishing round the playground. They rushed up to her hilariously.

"Hello! Lesbia!" they greeted her. "Is it true you're going to be a sort of teacher this term?"

"I believe so," said Lesbia, trying to keep her dignity.

"Oh, what sport!"

"A real stunt!"

"We shan't be a bit frightened of *you*!"

"You're so jolly, you *couldn't* be cross!"

"Couldn't I? Just you wait and see. You'll have to behave yourselves, I can tell you, when *I'm* teaching, or I'll jolly well want to know the reason why!"

The juniors exploded.

"Don't pile it on too thick!" urged Gwennie Rogers. "We know you, Lesbia! You're not very tall and you aren't a scrap grown-up yet. You don't look much like a teacher, I must say!"

[95] "You'll find I *am* one though," retorted Lesbia, dispersing the crowd and stalking into the gymnasium, outwardly serene, but inwardly with a sinking heart.

If this was going to be the attitude of the juniors it boded badly for the future. She groaned at the vista of trouble in front of her. Why, oh why, had capricious fate pitchforked her into a position for which she had no real capability or appreciation? For one wild moment she wished herself out in Canada. Then some secret voice within her seemed to whisper.

"No! Be loyal to the school. You've stuck to it all these years, and if anybody can teach those juniors its best traditions surely *you* can! It's a downright good opportunity."

"Why, so it is!" thought Lesbia. "I hadn't looked at it in that light before. They're a set of imps, but I'll tussle with them for the sake of the old High. I shall have authority at my back, and can call in Miss Harrison if they get past bearing. All the same, I'm not exactly looking forward to my first lesson. I wish it hadn't been dictation."

[96] A very stately and grown-up little Lesbia walked into II_B next morning, with dignity in her eye and iced authority in her voice. Sixteen faces regarded her with decorous gaze, for Miss Edwards was still in the room, and her pupils were quiet as mice in the presence of their Form Mistress. Miss Edwards gave Lesbia a few necessary directions, told the monitress to get out the dictation books, took her copy of *Cæsar's Gallic Wars* from her desk, and departed to give a Latin lesson to IV_B. As soon as the door closed upon her a smile of intelligence passed round the form. It was as if a string which had held together a chain of beads had been suddenly cut. Girls who had sat before in erect attitudes began to loll. Fidgety fingers played with pencils or raised their desk lids. Two or three venturesome spirits were already whispering. There was a subdued giggle

from the back seats.

"Silence!" called Lesbia, rapping on Miss Edwards's desk; "Maisie Martin, give out the dictation books!"

Maisie Martin, monitress for the month, was in no mood to hurry herself. She took up the pile of books so carelessly that the middle ones instantly dropped and distributed themselves over the floor. Pieces of blotting-paper fluttered out in the fall and floated under the desks. There was a general grabbing, accompanied by audible titters. Maisie went down on her hands and knees, collecting the ruin with much unnecessary fuss, and managing in her excursions after stray books to give a surreptitious pinch or two at any pair of ankles that were within range, provoking sharp "O-o-h's" from their owners.

[97] "Come, Maisie! Don't be all day about it!" commanded Lesbia, wondering whether her dignity as a teacher permitted her to help to pick up the pile, and deciding regretfully that it did not. It is always so much easier to do things quickly yourself than to force unwilling people to make haste. The dictation books, when they left Miss Edwards's desk, had been in exact order of the girls' places. Now, however, they were all mixed up anyhow. Maisie had to look leisurely at the label on each, and walk about the room handing them to their owners. She made a great number of journeys in the process, and read the name on each label out aloud in a halting kind of voice as if she were just learning to spell. Lesbia curbed her impatience. She knew Maisie was trying how far she could go. She judged it better, however, not to take too much notice. Maisie was evidently showing off for the benefit of the form, and reproof would probably check her movements still further instead of hastening her.

Each girl as she received her book said "thank you" with quite superfluous unction, all in different tones of voice, some gruff, some squeaky, some mincing, and some affected. At last, however, each was settled with a blank page of exercise paper before her, and there was no further excuse for delay. Lesbia opened the reading-book at a venture and began to dictate:

"GREAT AFRICAN EXPLORERS

[98] "Sir Samuel White Baker, the distinguished African traveller, was born in Worcestershire in 1821. He early showed his love of sport and adventure, and in 1861 projected an expedition to Africa, with the view of meeting Captains Speke and Grant at the sources of the Nile."

Sixteen heads were bent over desks and sixteen hands began laboriously to write.

"Do I put a capital to African?" asked Allie Pearson, pausing at the second word.

"Of course. It's a proper name," vouchsafed Lesbia; "you ought to know that."

"You put capitals for every word of the title, don't you?" inquired Jess Morrison officiously.

"Please is it explor-*ers* or explor-*ors*?" piped Sadie Lorrimer, from the back.

"I can't tell you *that*!"

"Oh, but you might say it over again so that I can hear."

Lesbia fixed a glaring eye on Sadie, and, disregarding her appeal, continued to dictate:

"Sir Samuel White Baker, the distinguished African traveller, was born in Worcestershire in 1821. He early showed his love——"

"Please, I'm only as far as Baker," interrupted an agitated voice. "What comes next to Baker?"

"You must really write more quickly," chided Lesbia.

"But you go on *so* fast!"

"I've written 'he early showed his love'," chirped a smug voice from a front desk. "I'm always quickest of anybody."

[99] "Be quiet, Esmée! Where have most of you got to?" asked Lesbia incautiously, realizing her mistake when an answering chorus shouted:

"African!"

"Worcestershire!"

"Distinguished!"

"Early showed!"

"Traveller!"

She held up her hand to stop the babel, and began to dictate the passage again. With considerable spluttering of pens the girls followed, Lu-Lu Branton and Nan Ward repeating the words after her in loud whispers.

"After preliminary explorations he reached Khartoum and organized his expedition to the Great White Nile," continued Lesbia, in slow and measured tones.

"Please, what does 'pre-pre-limary' mean?" asked Allie Pearson tragically, "I never heard such a word before."

"They're all new words," grumbled Gwennie Rogers.

"We've never had such difficult dictation," whined Jean Hawley.

"Nonsense! Go on," commanded Lesbia.

"You're using the wrong part of the reading-book," squeaked an indignant voice from Row 2. "Miss Edwards always gives us our dictation from the beginning part."

"It doesn't matter!"

[100] "Oh, but it *does* matter!" protested several urgent voices. "The book's graded, and we've not got to such long words yet. We don't know how to spell them!"

"Well, you'll have to try to-day," insisted Lesbia, who did not intend to be corrected by her form. "You must just get along as best you can."

"After pre-lim-in-ary ex-plor-ations he reached Khar-toum and organized his ex-pe-dition to the Great White Nile."

Sixteen sulky girls, feeling they had a real grievance, wrote down the unaccustomed words, with an ostentatious accompaniment of shrugging of shoulders, tapping of foreheads, nibbling of pen-holders, and other signals of mental distress.

"If we all get bad marks for dictation it won't be *our* faults," remarked Edie Browne in injured tones.

"You'll get a mark for bad conduct if you speak again!" snapped Lesbia.

For a moment or two there was silence, only broken by the sound of scratching pens. Then again came a piping voice.

"Do blots count? My ink's so thick it's made three smudges."

"Be as careful as you can," temporized Lesbia.

[101] Dorothy sighed gustily, took her ink-pot out of its well, inspected it, stirred it up with her pen, and placed it on the top of her desk. At the very next dip she upset it, and its contents spread in a black stream over her exercise-book.

"*Dor-othy!*"

Lesbia's voice rose to crescendo at the spectacle of the delinquent, her sleeves soaked in ink, trying to dab up the mess with a morsel of blotting-paper and a pink-edged pocket handkerchief. She hastily came to the rescue with the duster from the blackboard, which dispersed a shower of chalk over the already injured costume of her maladroit pupil.

"Go and wash your hands at once!" she ordered, replacing the now empty ink-pot in its well, and putting the exercise-book to dry by the fire. "I'm astonished at such carelessness!"

Dorothy obeyed with something very like a surreptitious wink at her comrades. The form regarded her with an expression almost approaching admiration. One would judge the unspoken thought of each to be: "Why did not *I* think of such a lovely thing as to upset the ink and get sent to wash my hands instead of doing horrid dictation?"

After disposing of this interruption, Lesbia continued with the adventures of Sir Samuel Baker, despite the long words, refusing even to give the spelling of proper names, such as Nyanza and Gondokoro, declaring that all had an equal chance of getting them right.

"Or wrong!" growled Gwennie, under her breath.

[102] "It's a quarter to eleven; and we always begin to correct them," volunteered the officious Jess Morrison.

Lesbia glared in her direction, but accepted the hint. It would need due time to correct the crop of mistakes which might certainly be expected.

"Change books!" she commanded, and, when the transfer had been effected, proceeded to go through the paragraphs, spelling the words, in the midst of which process arrived Dorothy (still with ink-stained sleeves though with cleaner fingers), who promptly asked her to begin again at the beginning as she had lost half.

There are limits to patience, and Lesbia's was at an end.

"You'll sit down and take 'missed' for your dictation, Dorothy Holding! Do you think I'm going to delay the form on your account? If I've any more trouble with you you'll go to Miss Tatham. Do you understand?"

Dorothy evidently did, for she subsided quietly into her desk, and the other girls took warning and behaved themselves. For five minutes a blessed peace reigned in II.B. Nobody was more absolutely thankful when the eleven o'clock bell rang than Lesbia. The ordeal of her first lesson was over, and, though things had not gone altogether smoothly, she had managed the form by

herself, and had not been obliged to call in the assistance of any other teacher to read the riot act.

[103] "They're imps! Sixteen cheeky, mischievous imps!" she decided, as she walked round the gymnasium eating her biscuit lunch. "But I believe I can tackle them. I dare say I shall have a row or two now and then, and I don't mean to stand any nonsense from either Madam Dorothy Holding or Jess Morrison. All the same, Lesbia Ferrars, you didn't think you could do it, and you *have* done it. That's something to sing 'O, Jubilate' about at any rate. You'll lick those kids into shape before you've done with them. Help! What a life! It's going to be a facer of a term."

[104]

CHAPTER VIII

Before the Curtain

When Lesbia looked back upon the events of the last few months, and compared the beginning of the September term with the present January one, she decided that she felt quite a hundred years older. Whether such a swift and sudden growing-up was unalloyed bliss was a matter for debate, but at any rate it gave her a certain feeling of self-reliance that was rather gratifying. In the Patterson household she was in a different world from that of the Hiltons. Paul and Minnie had been very, very kind, but they treated her entirely as a child, and had never even discussed her future in her presence. Paul, chivalrous towards women, but old-fashioned in his ideas of their sphere, liked girls to be brought up in cotton-wool, and thought the home provided quite a wide enough field for their energies. He considered "careers" unfeminine, and admired the mid-Victorian days, when the daughters of the house dusted the drawing-room and arranged the flowers, paid calls, played tennis, and helped at bazaars, but left college life and the professions to their brothers.

[105]

Mrs. Patterson took just the opposite view of things. She was intensely modern, and considered that every girl ought to be trained for some special career as much as every boy. Her own daughters were studying hard, Kitty for medicine, and Joan for secretarial work. She looked forward to their future prospects with as much interest as to those of her sons, Derrick, Stuart, and Godfrey. Having accepted Lesbia as an inmate of the household, she tried to train her in her own particular school of ideas. She was kind in her way, but not at all tender. Even to her own children she would only bestow the merest peck of a kiss. She was quite uncompromising with her young cousin, kept her remorselessly to home preparation or piano practice, and demanded high standards in respect of punctuality, exactitude of expression, and general alertness.

Though it kept her brains continually on the stretch, Lesbia found the mental atmosphere bracing. She began to enjoy the intellectual conversation round the breakfast- or supper-table. At first she was quite at sea regarding the topics discussed, but after a while she grew to understand and even sometimes to offer an opinion of her own. She had never in her life before imagined that so many societies and committees existed as those to which Mr. and Mrs. Patterson devoted a large part of their energies.

[106]

This difference in the brain-stimulating activity of her new home could not fail to express itself in Lesbia's school work. She was not clever in the sense of having a retentive memory, but she now showed more brightness in answering questions and her essays were more original. Miss Pratt, ruthless towards "slackers" or "dullards", slowly relaxed a tithe of her irony.

"I really believe, Lesbia Ferrars, you're beginning at last to realize that a human head holds something called a brain," she remarked pointedly one day. "Many girls seem to think learning is like receiving a phonographic impression. They reel it off again at exams, with as little intelligence as a gramophone. We don't want the barrel-piano style of work in this form. We want cultivated brains that can reason as well as state facts, not bunglers who haven't the sense to think."

Her pince-nez, which for a wonder had fallen quite approvingly on Lesbia, glared in the direction of Lizzie Logan.

Poor Lizzie was the champion blunderer of the form, and only the previous day, in the ambulance lesson, when asked how she would apply artificial respiration to a part-drowned patient who had broken both his arms, gasped in utter consternation, and had nervously fluttered forth: "I should work his legs about," an answer which drew forth an absolute deluge of scorn from her indignant teacher.

[107]

It was Miss Pratt, always anxious to work in the direction of intellectual uplift, who suggested to Miss Tatham that the school might get up some private theatricals for the end of the term. She constituted herself stage-manager, and was licensed to pick her stars from any form she pleased.

"I don't mind whether I choose seniors or juniors," she announced. "I want girls who can *act*,

not wooden dummies. I shall have test rehearsals, and reject all those who haven't the proper dramatic fire about them. Any candidate will have to play up or leave the boards."

The honour of a place in Miss Pratt's "Company" was sufficiently great to attract many would-be performers, but her standards were strict, and the elimination process a severe one. Lesbia, mindful of the many squashings she had received in class, and seeing even Marion Morwood turned down for incompetence, did not dare to present herself for the ordeal.

"Miss Pratt would probably only laugh at me and say, 'You! Well really, who next?'" she confided to Marion.

And Marion, who was suffering from the disappointment of rejection, agreed with her.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, and there ought to have been a hockey practice, but the rain had commenced in such dead earnest that it was hopeless to set out to the playing-field. As hockey was off, the girls might do what they pleased with the afternoon. Some went home immediately, others retired to VA to do their preparation, and others hung disconsolately about the gymnasium.

[108] "Let's have a little fun on our own," suggested Marion, looking at the platform from which, alack! she was to be exiled. "Miss Pratt's out of the way, and nobody very carping and criticizing is about, so I vote we make up a play, just anything that comes into our heads, and act it."

"Right-o!" agreed Lesbia. "It would be rather sporting. Who'll help? Cissie, are you game? And Aldora?"

"Four are quite enough!" interrupted Marion hastily, as eager girls began to crowd round clamouring to be included in the cast. "No I *can't* have everybody in it—I wouldn't have *you*, Betty Wroe, at any price, so don't bother! You can act audience if you want. We shall be ten minutes or so getting ready. Have a concert among yourselves if you want to kill time. I see Ernie has a book of songs."

"It's all very fine for you four to monopolize the stage and keep us out of it!" grumbled several disappointed voices.

"Well, *we* thought of it first. It was *our* idea entirely."

"It's not nearly as much fun to watch as to act!"

"Go home then, if you don't want to stay. Or go and do prep!"

"No, thanks!"

[109] Leaving their audience to settle itself or not as it wished, the four self-elected performers hurriedly retired into the green-room behind the stage to plan out their entertainment.

"What *shall* we act?" asked Marion, rather blank when brought face to face with the emergency of instantaneous dramatic composition.

"Give me a few minutes to think," replied Lesbia, sitting down with her head in her hands.

Lesbia's imagination was the brightest part of her mental equipment. She could often invent things in a flash. Indeed all her best work was a species of inspiration. The idea either came to her instantly, like a slave of the lamp, or stopped away altogether. This afternoon the Ariel who supplied her happiest successes was apparently close at hand. After clutching her forehead for a short, but to judge from her expression an agonizing, period, she suddenly jumped up.

"I've got it!" she triumphed. "And quite a jinky one too—name and all!"

Three cogitating girls left off fidgeting and drumming on the table and faced her expectantly.

"Well!"

"'Dr. Pillbox's Patient.' That's the title. Squat here and I'll tell you the rugged outline. We must fill in details as we go along."

[110] Lesbia's plot was quite sufficient to content her comrades; they hurriedly arranged their parts, and flew to the cloakroom for anything they could commandeer in the way of costumes. They shamelessly purloined a felt hat of Nina Wakefield's, Pauline Kingston's waterproof, and Ada Wood's thick coat, which, together with the duster from the gymnasium blackboard, a piece of charcoal from Grace Stirling's pencil-box, Mabel Andrews' water-colour paint-box, that was lying about on the mantelpiece, and a few chairs which were already on the platform, made the extent of their hastily-scrambled-together wardrobe and scenery.

"It's 'your theatre while you wait!'" giggled Aldora.

"We've not made them wait long. I flatter ourselves we'd do for lightning actresses," grunted Lesbia, helping Cissie with her hasty toilet.

"Do I look the least scrap like a real medical man?" demanded Marion tragically.

"Put on a professional air and you'll do," advised Lesbia. "You want a piece of paper for a white collar. That's fine! Oh, you do look grand!"

Furious sounds of stamping and clapping and shouts of "Get a move on there!" from the gymnasium showed signs of impatience among the expectant girls below, so the performers, fearful that their audience might desert them altogether and go away, if they were not quick, made a few final titivations, and told Betty Wroe, who had volunteered as "odd job woman", to raise the curtain.

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The scene disclosed Lesbia, as Miss Lovelace, lounging upon a sofa, improvised from four chairs with Ada Wood's coat thrown over them. After much yawning, interspersed with heavy sighs, she revealed, in the short soliloquy usual among stage heroines, the utter boredom of her life as a mistress at the Muddlehead High School. She debated how it was possible to obtain a brief respite from the eternal round of teaching, and confided to the audience that a holiday would be particularly acceptable, as George, her fiancé, was coming to spend to-morrow with his aunt, and would take her a trip upon the river if she could get the day off.

"We teachers have hearts as well as other people," proclaimed Lesbia eloquently, "and often we long to fling Minerva to the winds and worship only Cupid! What are chemistry and mathematics compared to whispered words and tender glances? No! The thralldom of education shall never stay the course of true love!"

Miss Lovelace's heroics, though they mightily impressed the audience, apparently did not solve the problem of how she was to take her holiday without losing her post at school. Her fertile brain, however, supplied the key to the situation.

"I must get an attack of measles," she declared. "Then I shall be infectious and quite unable to teach my form."

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Springing from the sofa, she seized Mabel Andrews' paint-box, and with the aid of a glass of water and a sable brush dabbed spots of crimson over her face, neck, and chest. Then, falling back on to the sofa in a semi-prostrate attitude, she called loudly for Mrs. Jones.

Cissie, as the landlady, with a school towel pinned on for an apron, came bustling in, and held up hands of horror at the sight of the violent eruption on the face of her lodger. She rapidly catalogued the various complaints, from smallpox to scarlatina, which included a rash among their symptoms, and readily agreed to hurry forth and fetch the doctor.

Apparently she found him just round the corner, for he was ushered in immediately. Marion, with the scanty materials at her command, had made a very gallant attempt at masculine attire. She wore Pauline Kingston's waterproof, and a white collar made from a sheet of exercise paper. On her head was Nina Wakefield's soft black felt hat (the audience waived the point of a physician wearing his hat in his patient's parlour), and a black moustache was charcoaled on her upper lip. He examined Miss Lovelace in orthodox medical fashion, felt her pulse, examined her tongue, took her temperature (with a stilo-pen for thermometer), and asked numerous questions, to which, lying on the sofa with half-closed eyes, she groaned the answers in apparent agony. He shook his head over the case and declared he must at once send a hospital nurse to her assistance.

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Miss Lovelace protested vigorously at this suggestion, but Dr. Pillbox was adamant, and departed saying that Nurse Harding would arrive directly with full instructions as to the treatment of the complaint. Aldora had had a little more time than the others to complete her costume and she was proud of it. She had borrowed Betty Wroe's pocket handkerchief, and with that and the blackboard duster constructed an apron with a bib. Her own handkerchief formed a Red Cross cap, and pieces of exercise paper made the collar and cuffs of her uniform. She took the patient in hand with the air of one who is going to stand no nonsense, and proclaimed her immediate intention of washing her.

Miss Lovelace, who had been languishing and half fainting upon the couch, repudiated the necessity of such extreme measures, declaring that water would only irritate the rash. Nurse insisted that such were the doctor's orders and she must obey them. A violent struggle ensued between herself and her patient, with the result that she completely wiped off the eruption and revealed the shameless fraud practised by the artful governess. At this interesting crisis Dr. Pillbox (evidently a most attentive practitioner) arrived to pay a second visit. Miss Lovelace, bursting into tears, begged the favour of an interview with him alone. Nurse Harding reluctantly retired, and the youthful teacher, falling on one knee in a picturesque cinema attitude of supplication, threw herself on the doctor's mercy and revealed not only her ingenious deception but the reason why she wanted a holiday. Dr. Pillbox was kindness itself. He assured her he had at once detected the imposture but promised to condone it. He pulled a notebook from his pocket and wrote a medical certificate to the effect that she was incapable through illness of performing her duties as teacher upon the following day, and recommended a trip upon the river as the quickest cure for re-establishing her health. It was received by his patient with an exuberance of gratitude.

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Then Nurse Harding and Mrs. Jones, who were hovering in the background anxious to butt in, were called upon the platform, and all four performers stood in a line and made bows of more or less graceful quality.

As Lesbia, whose acknowledgement to the applause had been low and sweeping, rose to her usual level her eyes encountered the amused and interested gaze of no less a person than Miss Pratt. She started and conveyed her unwelcome discovery to her fellow actresses. They retired hastily in much embarrassment.

"I'd no idea *she* was there!" fluttered Marion.

"When did she come?" asked Aldora.

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"Why, she's been there the whole time," volunteered Betty Wroe, who was helping as wardrobe woman; "didn't you see her sitting at the back?"

"I never dared to look at the audience," gasped Lesbia. "Oh! To think of all the *awful* things I said about teachers and Cupid, and all the rest of it, with Miss Pratt actually sitting and listening. It gives me spasms. And I went on so about 'dear George'."

"And there was I with my corked moustache acting a regular old bean of a doctor."

"And I dropped all my h's as Mrs. Jones!"

"If we'd only known!"

"It's a good thing you didn't," remarked Betty with a delighted chuckle. "You played up no end, and of course with Miss Pratt in the room the girls were absolutely in fits. Calla's hysterical still. They thought you were doing it on purpose."

"Oh, we wouldn't have *dared!* I expect Miss Pratt thinks it the most fearful cheek. I wonder if she'll be down on us for it?"

"Oh, Jemima! We're always getting into hot water somehow."

Nell Dawson arrived at that moment with a message that if the performers had changed their costumes Miss Pratt would like a word with them.

"You see!" said Lesbia dolefully, bracing her nerves for the rebuke which, as chief offender, would probably descend most heavily upon her own head.

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They were quite mistaken, however, about Miss Pratt's attitude. She highly commended the little performance.

"As an impromptu business it was really very good," she conceded. "It's shown me what you're capable of, and I'm certainly going to put all four of you in my 'Company'."

"We—we didn't know you were listening," faltered Lesbia apologetically.

"So I supposed" (a flicker of a smile crossed her face); "it's always best to live your part and forget your audience. Come to me to-morrow before nine and I'll give you your books. I hadn't fixed up the cast of *The Duchess's Dilemma*."

Four delighted girls scuttled off to the cloakroom, almost overwhelmed by the suddenness of their good fortune.

"She should!" exclaimed Aldora.

"It's too topping for words," yodelled Cissie.

"Shouldn't have thought Miss Pratt capable of being so sporting," rejoiced Marion.

"She's a griffin sometimes but she's a mascot to-day, bless her," murmured Lesbia. "I wonder, if after all, she rather *liked* the idea of school mistresses having hearts? If she ever stays away from school with a bad cold or any other excuse I shall think she's taken the tip."

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CHAPTER IX

Girls of VA

The Easter term wended its way along with many ups and downs for Lesbia. Her struggles with the unruly juniors constituted a genuine trial, but there were compensations in what Marion called "the by-products of the school", by which she meant the Dramatic Society and the various activities on the afternoons devoted to "self-expression". Lesbia had finished the decoration of VA. Her lotus pattern really looked extremely nice round the walls and gave the room an appearance of quite superior culture. She had taken up chip-carving, and under the superintendence of Miss Joyce, who held a weekly class in the studio, was carving a frame to hold an old print of Kingfield Main Street as it appeared before the High School established its quarters there. There was great rivalry between the various forms in the decoration of their rooms. The Sixth had several beautiful pictures, and moreover sported a silver cup on their mantelpiece, a trophy which had been won six years ago, in an open tennis tournament, by Gladys Hellier and Joan Mayfield, the then champions of the High School. On the possession of this cup the Sixth were considered quite unduly to give themselves airs.

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"It isn't as if any of them had actually won it with their own rackets," objected Calla. "Yet they go cock-a-doodling about that wretched cup as if each of them separately had been champion."

"A very reflected kind of glory *I* call it," agreed Bernadine.

"It's six years since the school won anything publicly," croaked Phillis, wrinkling her eyebrows.

"Humph! Yes! Time it bucked up and did something," endorsed Ermie smartly.

"We beat Moreton College in the hockey match," put in Lesbia, always anxious for the credit of her own school.

"Yes, that's all right, but you don't get prizes for hockey matches. We want something we can stick on our mantelpiece, and crow over the Sixth. I should like to take down their pride."

Just at present there did not seem any immediate prospect of winning a trophy and thereby humbling the upper form. It is one thing to be wildly anxious to compete, but quite another to crystallize your efforts into a definite shape.

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"There ought to be Olympic Games in Kingfield every year for all the schools in the town, and the Corporation ought to give the prizes," decided Lesbia. "It could be paid for out of the rates and taxes."

"It will be when schoolgirls get votes," nodded Marjorie emphatically.

Meantime the Corporation did not see its opportunities, and the over-taxed rate-payers of Kingfield would probably have gone on strike at the suggestion of an increase for the purpose of supplying prizes for Olympic Games for school children. Ermie Hall, whose father was a city councillor, did indeed broach the subject at the family breakfast-table, but was squashed flat by her amazed and indignant parent.

"Olympic nonsense," he grunted. "We don't want an extra halfpenny on the rates. I don't know what the present generation is coming to. In my young days we played on the meadows by the river and never bothered our heads about trophies. The Education Committee gives a prize or two for book learning, and quite right too, but the City Council would see the children at Jericho before it offered them rewards for playing. Stick to your lessons, child; they're quite enough to keep you busy, I'm sure. Your last report wasn't up to much, so far as I remember."

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"Of course Dad's rather out-of-date," commented Ermie, reporting the interview to an elect circle in VA. "I told him Miss Tatham said 'the physical side of education is as necessary as the mental', but I couldn't get him to see it. He was quite raggy, and jammed the lid on the bacon dish, and told me to get on with my breakfast and not talk any more rubbish. So there you are. What can you do, even if your father *is* on the City Council?"

"It's hopeless," agreed Calla, with a gusty sigh.

"Put not your trust in corporations," grunted Kathleen gloomily. "I do think the town might do something for us schoolgirls."

It was on the third day after this rebuff that Lizzie Logan covered herself with glory. Lizzie Logan, of all people in the world, the shyest girl in the form, an absolute retiring young she-hermit, who always blushed crimson when she had to answer a question, and generally scuttled out of the dressing-room in a hurry as if she did not want to walk home with anybody else, and looked scared to death if she was asked to join a game in the gymnasium. She came into school one morning carrying a local newspaper, and, after reddening up to the very roots of her hair and down to the margin of her V-shaped blouse, she handed it to Marjorie, murmuring something utterly unintelligible.

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"Hello, old sport! What's this for?" demanded Marjorie, opening it at a large advertisement of face powder. "Nothing doing here, thanks! I haven't gone in for titivating my complexion yet. You'll have to be content with me as nature made me. *What* do you say? An advertisement? Why can't you speak up? Show it to me, then! Oh, *I say!* Girls, just look here! What do you think of this?"

A circle at once crowded round Marjorie, peeping over her shoulder. Others, on the outer limit, denied a sight of the paper, demanded explanation.

So Marjorie read the advertisement aloud:

"KINGFIELD ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

"The Committee offers first, second, and third prizes to school pupils who shall submit the best essays on the ancient history and associations of the city. Full particulars can be obtained from the Hon. Secretary, Mr. E. Johnson, St. Gilbert's, Thorwald Street."

"Hi cockalorum! What an absolutely jinky idea!" rejoiced Calla.

"Ancient history of the city, too! That's quite in our line," purred Lesbia.

"*Ra*-ther! It might have been specially made for us," triumphed Kathleen.

"It was," fluttered Lizzie Logan's meek little voice.

"What d'you mean, child?" demanded Marjorie. "Here, speak up! We're not going to eat you!"

[122] Lizzie's complexion turned from carnation to damask rose, and deepened into shades of pæony or even beetroot.

"Well, you see," she explained, "my uncle is on the Committee of the Archæological Society, and I was telling him what we do at school on Fridays, and I said I wished there was a prize we could try for, and he said it was worth thinking about, and he'd ask the President, and last night he sent me this paper; so I brought it to show you."

Lizzie finished with a kind of gasp. It was quite a long speech for her to make. Marjorie patted her encouragingly on the back.

"Lizzie Logan, you're coming on. You'll be a credit to VA before we've done with you. Now I call this really public spirited. We must set to work hot and strong and see what can be done."

"Lesbia, you ought to be a champion at this business."

"We must all 'champ'," agreed Lesbia. "Is it a one-man-show or may we club together?"

"I don't know. We'd better some of us go round to Mr. Johnson's for particulars."

[123] There were, so it seemed, several classes in the competition, some for elementary, and others for secondary schools. Among the latter a prize was offered for the best joint scrap album—the work of any one form—recording the history of the city in writing, photographs, old prints, drawings, newspaper cuttings, or other methods. The idea appealed immensely to VA. They had never before agreed on a joint effort.

"It will be ever so much nicer to do it all together," opined Marjorie, "than each to have our own scrap-book, and go sneaking off to get photos of places you hope nobody else has found out."

"Yes, when they're all put together it will make so much better a book," agreed Marion.

"What about the prize?" ventured Aldora.

"Why, of course, they'll give a trophy to the whole form."

"Ripping!"

"We haven't got it yet, though."

"The Sixth will have an innings!"

"And we're not the only school in the town, either."

"Never mind, we can but try."

"And we'll have a jolly good try, too!"

"You bet we will."

[124] With such a goal to work for it became a point of honour with each individual member of VA to make some adequate contribution to the scrap album. In order that its contents should not be indiscriminately miscellaneous they appointed a committee of selection, and only admitted what was considered entirely worthy. It really gave them a great deal of interest and amusement. Armed with cameras they went out in little parties and took photographs of numerous old buildings, mediæval carvings, or antique objects, such as the town stocks or the ancient pillory. On the whole, owners of property were indulgent, and though a few jibbed at first at admitting a crew of lively schoolgirls into private premises, they relented when the object of the visit was explained to them. Some born collectors in VA turned over the contents of the stalls in the Kingfield Market to find old prints of the city, grandfathers and grandmothers were appealed to and asked to ransack their memories for forgotten legends, and their drawers for sketches or newspaper cuttings. The amount of material forthcoming was really quite considerable. The most unlikely girls would often produce quite choice specimens.

It was decided—in committee—that the album should be made of large sheets of brown paper, and that its back should be of dull-green cardboard, painted with a floral design, and the words "Scrap Album, VA, Kingfield High School" in artistic lettering. By general vote the construction of the cover fell to Lesbia. She was the only one in the form who had much initiative in art matters. Nobody else in fact dared to venture upon it. She accepted the honour, inwardly jubilant, but with an outer display of due diffidence.

"Oh, I don't think I can!" she objected.

"Rubbish! Don't be affected," snapped Calla.

[125] "It's got to be done, so you'd best fire away and get a move on with it."

"Anybody who could do the lotus pattern on the wall could do a book-back!" declared Carrie.

"Be sporting, Lesbia," urged Kathleen.

"It's all very well for you to talk, but you forget the *time* it will take me. I've my prep to do, the same as the rest of you, and you know what Miss Pratt is. She's about as much consideration as a slave-driver. 'Your tasks, your daily tasks' are what she's out for and we have to 'make bricks

without straw', that's to say, learn things without the time to do it in. How'm I going to manage?"

"We've all got to make sacrifices for the school," said Calla briskly, "and yours must be doing this book-back. If it takes your prep time and you get into rows with Miss Pratt, well that can't be helped. You'll be suffering in a good cause."

"That's all very well, but it's *I* who'll get the scoldings, and they'll be the limit."

"Cheerio, chunky. We'll all slack a little and bring down the standard, so that you won't seem so conspicuous. *You* won't mind a bad mark or two, will you, Marjorie?"

"Not at all," beamed that damsel shamelessly. "It's not the first time by any means."

[126] "We'd better have a rota to slack prep" (Carrie's voice was eager), "three of us can do it every day in turns, then Miss Pratt won't be too down on any special one. Bags me to-morrow. I want to go out to tea anyway."

"Right you are. See how we're backing you up, Lesbia. Isn't it noble of us? I think we're absolute mascots if you ask me."

[127] **CHAPTER X**

Pilgrims' Inn Chambers

Rather overwhelmed by the honour thrust on her unaccustomed shoulders, but buoyed up by the importance of it, Lesbia set to work to consider the question of a book-back worthy of the form scrap album. She received no inspiration or even particular encouragement from the Pattersons. As a family they were intellectual but not in the least artistic. Mrs. Patterson frowned slightly when her young cousin, bubbling over with elation, mentioned the matter at the dinner-table.

"Well now, Lesbia," she began, in her deep common-sense tone of voice, "it's all very well to take up these fads, but what about your lessons? I think Miss Tatham's making a mistake to let so much time be wasted over these outside things. Girls have to stick close to their books if they want to pass exams. Now when Kitty was reading for her matric, she never went out anywhere, even to a concert or a lecture. Did you, Kitty?"

[128] Kitty, sprinkling sugar over her roasted apples, shook her head emphatically.

"It was just jolly well grind, grind from breakfast till bedtime," she admitted, "I think they're slacking off at Kingfield High nowadays."

"Oh, but it's much more interesting than ever it used to be," urged Lesbia, anxious for the credit of her school, "and of course even Miss Pratt knows we're trying for the scrap-book prize. Oh, well, yes—of course she's a little sniffy over it, but she can't say we mustn't."

"As long as Lesbia does her prep all right I don't see why anybody need scream," put in Joan, taking up the cudgels for her cousin.

"Scream indeed! Really, Joan!" said her mother indignantly. "The slang you girls talk is simply outrageous. We shall hardly know the English language soon. As I said before, Lesbia must do her home work properly, and I don't expect to see any drawing brought out before her preparation and her practising are both finished, every day. You quite understand, Lesbia?"

Lesbia, to avoid replying, passed the butter dish and the biscuits with unnecessary officiousness, and turned the subject neatly on to Joan's headache. She meant to produce the scrap-book cover at all costs, though she could not fling down the challenge and proclaim her rebellious intentions in the midst of the assembled Patterson family.



KINDLY INTEREST

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[129] "I'd better go and ask Miss Joyce about it," she decided.

Miss Joyce still took the Arts and Crafts classes at the High School, but she was always so busy that she had no time for private conversations with individual pupils. For several months her remarks to Lesbia had been confined to professional criticisms. The invitation to come and see her at her rooms still held open, however, and Lesbia determined to avail herself of it. She knew Miss Joyce worked in her studio on Thursdays, and would therefore be at home to a chance visitor.

[130] So on Thursday afternoon, when school was over, she deliberately missed the Morton Common tram-car, banished the Pattersons temporarily from her mind, and walked down the town to Pilgrims' Inn Chambers. She was in a bubble of excitement. The unorthodox little outing seemed a stupendous treat, and an immense relief from the ordinary routine of her well-regulated life. The orderly and methodical régime of her cousins' household was immensely good for her, but often a keen trial to her Celtic temperament. When she was bursting to impart some piece of information, and had run home, and begun eagerly to pour it out, Mrs. Patterson would utterly ignore her news, and interrupt her by reminding her that she had not changed her boots. Her moments of excited elation were discouraged, Joan and Kitty, indeed, thought them bad form, and the family laughed at the violent enthusiasm which she could put into the merest trifles.

"You're such a child over everything, Lesbia," Joan would remark patronizingly.

Miss Joyce at any rate did not call her "a child" for any display of enthusiasm. She "enthused" herself upon art matters, and her mental atmosphere was sympathetic. Lesbia's footsteps quickened as she turned down Mill Street and went into the cobbled courtyard of the old Pilgrims' Inn. With a delighted thrill of anticipation she skipped up the black oak staircase to the door of Miss Joyce's studio. Here her enthusiasm was checked, for the little tin board nailed below the knocker bore the unwelcome notice "Out".

Out—when she had come all that way on purpose. It was too aggravating.

"Yet it's my own silly fault for not asking her on Tuesday whether she'd be in to-day. I might have known I'd have no luck," groused Lesbia. "Well, I suppose there's nothing for it but to trot back again. It really *is* the limit. Hello! I believe somebody's in there after all. Unless it's ghosts."

[131] Faint explosions of mirth proceeding from the other side of the thick door sounded more human than ghostly, despite the haunted character of the house. Lesbia seized the knocker and gave a loud rap-tap. There was a grating of chairs, and presently appeared the grinning face of one of the art-metalwork pupils.

"Miss Joyce has only gone to the post. She won't be more than a few minutes. Would you like to wait?"

Lesbia accepted the offered chair with alacrity. She sat watching the two students as they returned to their work. They were quite young girls, hardly older than herself. How glorious it must be for them, she thought, to spend their time in this delightful studio, at a little table under a window, melting their materials in a gas jet and turning out such pretty things. The creative instinct, always very strongly developed in Lesbia, rose rebelliously. Life would be far more worth while spent in making beautiful artistic objects than in learning certain school lessons that were apparently not much good to herself or anyone else. She sighed as she watched the twisting of the ornament for the edge of a brooch, and contrasted it with her morning's struggle over certain geometrical problems and a piece of stiff Latin translation.

"People may say what they like about brain culture, but let me use my hands!" she burst out impulsively.

The elder pupil looked at her in astonishment.

"It takes brains too for this kind of work, I can tell you," she remarked. "You have to have all your wits about you, or you make silly mistakes and spoil things."

"I only wish I'd the chance to try," said Lesbia.

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But at that moment Miss Joyce returned. She came bustling in, with a little paper bag in her hand, surprised to see Lesbia, but very kind about it.

"You must stay and have tea," she declared hospitably. "I've just been out for some buns. Sybil, is the kettle boiling? We always make ourselves tea about this time."

The kettle on the gas-ring was almost boiling over. The pupils put down their tools and helped to set out the pale-yellow tea-service. There was a pot of striped purple crocuses on the tea-table, and a big jar of fallow "palm" and hazel catkins standing upon the floor. The March sunshine, flooding through a diamond-paned window, lighted up a blue vase full of Lent lilies. Lesbia, sinking into a basket-chair—the room had so many comfortable chairs—enjoyed her tasteful surroundings with the art-hunger of one whose æsthetic cravings have been systematically starved.

Miss Joyce was very sympathetic about the scrap album. She rocked gently to and fro, balancing her tea-cup in her hand.

"I can see your cover," she said, staring so fixedly at the ceiling that Lesbia instinctively looked there too. "It doesn't want realistic roses painted on it, but a decorative pattern. Don't put too much of it either. A design should never be overdone. My advice is, adapt your lotus pattern to it. It's far and away the best thing you've produced yet, and you may just as well use it. Put a piece at the top and a piece at the bottom, then in the middle paint a misty and rather impressionistic sketch of those old houses at the bottom of Mill Street—you can copy them from a photo—then bring your lettering right across your sketch. It ought to be very effective."

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"Why, so it would. I can almost see it," agreed Lesbia, with her eye on the carved boss that ornamented one of the beams of the studio roof. "I'll make a rough drawing of it to-night, on a piece of paper. May I bring it to school to show you before I begin to do it on the proper cardboard?"

"Of course. I'll criticize it with pleasure. Now about this scrap album, is it entirely confined to antiquarian things? Why don't you put in a list of wild flowers found in the neighbourhood? And any nature notes you can?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"They're always included in local guide-books, so I should imagine they might very well go in. Mr. Broughten would help you there."

"Who's Mr. Broughten?"

"A very clever botanist who lives in the set of chambers opposite. I'll take you to see him if you've finished your tea. Have you? Then come along. I know he's in, because we both came up the stairs together. Oh, don't look so scared, he won't gobble you up. He's an absolute old dear."

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It was getting late, but Lesbia put the thought of time resolutely away, for Miss Joyce would not listen to her faint expostulations, and hurried her, protesting indeed but a very willing victim, along the passage which led to Mr. Broughten's set of chambers. He was at home, and they were ushered into his study. Like the rest of the Pilgrims' Inn it was a quaint old room, with black oak beams and diamond-paned windows. The whole of the walls were lined with shelves, upon which were stored a vast collection of pressed flowers and ferns, a work which had occupied Mr. Broughten for most of his life. He was an old man now, and the hand that held his pen shook as he wrote. He rose with difficulty to receive his visitors, peering at them through his spectacles. Lesbia was afraid he did not seem very pleased at being interrupted, but, their errand once explained, he suddenly became extremely kind and interested. He hunted out several reports of the proceedings of a local Natural History Society, in which were given lists of the flora and fauna of the neighbourhood, and, after a moment's palpable hesitation, even offered to lend the pamphlets.

"If you will promise *faithfully* to bring them back. I lose so many books because people forget to *return* them," he said emphatically.

Lesbia gave the required pledge, and Miss Joyce also promised for her with the earnestness of a godmother registering a baptismal vow.

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"You shall have my pot of crocuses as a hostage," she assured him, laughing. "I'll bring them across and leave them with you until Lesbia returns the books."

"I never refuse flowers," answered Mr. Broughten brightly. "Crocuses are special pets of mine too. I hope they're purple ones? Good! Then we're making a very profitable exchange on both sides. If there's any more help I can give you another time, come and ask me."

Horribly late, but with her mind an absolute storehouse of new and artistic ideas, Lesbia hurried home to 28 Park Road. It was nearly seven when she arrived, and she had not touched her practising or her preparation. For once Mrs. Patterson was really angry. She took Lesbia into the drawing-room alone, and began to talk in the strained voice of one who is putting a curb on her strong indignation.

"You don't seem to realize things," she said, during the course of what was, after all, a scolding which Lesbia had brought on her own head. "Here you are nearly sixteen and a half, and as childish as if you were six. If you won't work and don't pass your exams what's going to happen to you? I suppose you know you'll have to earn your own living? You can't be anything of a teacher unless you get some proper qualifications."

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"*Must* I be a teacher?" asked Lesbia desperately. "Couldn't I take up Art instead?"

"Art!" (Mrs. Patterson's voice expressed a volume of scorn.) "Art! That's the last thing in the world to depend upon. It's a most precarious livelihood nowadays. Why it would probably be years before you could sell a picture. Now don't be silly, Lesbia. Miss Tatham has been very kind in helping you, and you owe it to her and to the school to work your hardest. What's the use of beginning to cry? Do wipe your eyes and be sensible."

But being sensible was just the last thing possible to Lesbia. She rushed upstairs to her bedroom and went on crying. She did not go down when the gong sounded, and Kitty, coming in search of her presently, found her with one shoe on and one off, and her dress still unchanged. She answered all her cousin's arguments by torrents of tears, till Kitty lost patience and went away.

"Leave her to herself," decided Mrs. Patterson, sending up Lesbia's supper, and her home lesson books, upon a tray; "it's half temper, and she's better alone."

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Joan looked rather sympathetically in the direction of the stairs—she had a warm corner for Lesbia—but the two sisters were starting for a concert and could not wait to comfort anybody. They did not take the matter seriously. To Lesbia it was desperate trouble. From the flutter of joy of the inspiring afternoon she had dropped into a chaos of despair. For the first time she began to look ahead, and she seemed to see her life stretching an endless bleak vista of perpetual teaching.

"I *hate* teaching," she sobbed, clenching her fists.

She had not known before that she disliked the prospect so much. The grind of it appalled her. She almost began to wish she had gone to Canada with Paul and Minnie—Minnie who had been so sweet and forgiving, and had written her such a nice letter from Belleville to say that by-gones must be by-gones, and that at all costs they must keep friends and correspond with one another. An extra lump rose in Lesbia's throat when she thought of Minnie and the children. Well, she had cut herself adrift from them at any rate. She had anchored herself fast to the Kingfield High School, and, according to Mrs. Patterson, she might consider herself extremely lucky to have the chance of continuing there at all. She must make the best of it. That was the only thing to be done. She washed her face, ate her supper, and, seeing her pile of books on the tray, made a really creditable effort to prepare some of her lessons, but her head ached, and the letters danced about on the pages.

Kitty, coming upstairs at 10.45 after the concert, peeped into the bedroom, and found Lesbia lying asleep, fully dressed, and clasping a Latin dictionary.

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"This won't do at all," muttered Kitty, shaking her head.

She was not a demonstrative girl, and despised what she called "sentimentality" in Lesbia, but she could be kind in her sensible way. She woke her cousin, made her undress, and promising to call her early next morning, turned out the gas, then went to her own room and set her alarm clock for six o'clock. It was a sacrifice on Kitty's part, for she detested early rising; she did it, however, without any fuss, just as part of the day's work. She hauled Lesbia out of bed by gas-light, and went over the whole of her home lessons with her before breakfast, sending her off to school better prepared than she had been for many weeks. After that a family understanding was arranged. Mrs. Patterson had at first been inclined to veto entirely any work at the Scrap Album Competition, but Kitty compromised by stipulating it should only be done in absolutely spare time. Lesbia borrowed the alarm clock and often got up early and did her preparation in her bedroom, so that she might have leisure for her drawing after school hours. The cover began to make substantial progress. Miss Joyce approved the design, and lent her a book on "illuminating"

to help her with the lettering of the title.

[139] When the album was at last complete, VA regarded their joint effort with satisfaction. It was quite a fat substantial book, written in their best and clearest script, and illustrated with photographs, sketches, and prints. They had recorded the city's history, and its various ancient customs and old legends; there was a chapter of nature notes, mentioning how an otter had been seen in the lake of the public park, and a hare had actually been caught running in the High Street. The list of flowers, taken from Mr. Broughten's reports, was carefully copied.

"We've done our best over it," said Aldora, "and we can't do more. If the judges don't give it a prize I'll never forgive them. No, not though one of them is your own uncle, Lizzie Logan. I'll—I'll lie in wait for him on his way home and *shoot* him. There!"

"Pull yourself together, Aldora, my child," murmured Calla. "It mayn't turn out as bad as that."

"Well I *do not* want the Sixth to score this time."

"I saw their book and they won't," chuckled Kathleen.

"There are other schools going in for the competition though," added Carrie dolefully.

"But three prizes are offered."

[140] The scrap album was packed up at last in a big parcel, and left at the house of one of the judges. Three weeks passed by, and VA languished for news. They began to be afraid that they should not know the result before the holidays. One day, however, Lizzie Logan came to school with a look of most unwonted excitement on her usually stolid face. Her voice, which was generally a scared whisper, was actually audible over half the cloakroom as she announced:

"My uncle told me last night that we've won the first prize."

Such a chorus of jubilee instantly arose that Lizzie's utterances were drowned. Those in her immediate vicinity dragged forth details of information and proclaimed them for the benefit of the others.

"A committee of six, including the Lady Mayoress, sat on the books."

"*Sat* on them! Oh, horrors!"

"And the Lady Mayoress is so fat!"

"Don't be utter idiots. Committees always sit on things. No! No! *Can't* you get it into your stupid heads? Not really *sit*. It's just an expression."

"Hold me up. I thought our champion book was squashed as flat as a pancake."

"Well, it isn't. It's first-prize winner, and the second and third prizes have been won by 'Redlands' and 'The College'."

"And where do the Sixth come in?"

"They're out altogether."

"Oh! What a spiffing score for VA."

The prize awarded for the successful scrap album was a pretty little clock, with an inscription recording the event and the date. It was placed upon the mantel-piece in the form room, and regarded with great pride and satisfaction by its owners.

[141] "So nice to have a clock in the room," rejoiced Carrie. "It helps you on if you can keep looking at it during lessons."

"We might even set it to go a little fast," suggested Ernie hopefully.

"No use, old sport! Miss Pratt wouldn't stop prating till the bell rang, however fast the clock was."

"I suppose not. However, perhaps she'll see it, and notice the time, and not think it worth while beginning anything fresh at about five minutes to."

"Ernie Hall, you're a bright enough girl, but if you think Miss Pratt will *ever* remit one jot or tittle of our work you've read her character wrong, and that's the fact. Nails aren't in it for hardness. Crow as loud as you like about the clock, but don't congratulate yourself it's going to help lame dogs over stiles, because it won't. Do you take that in?"

"Bow-wow! All right, Grannie! I'm drinking at the fount of your wisdom."

"As for Lesbia," put in Calla, "I think she was a regular mascot about that cover. No one knows how she swatted over it. I'm sure it turned the scale."

"Oh, don't mench! I enjoyed it."

"Look here!" asked Marion, suddenly and anxiously. "Does the clock belong to *us* or to our form? If we go up into the Sixth next year can we take it with us?"

"Oh, I never thought of that!"

[142] "We'll want a Solomon to settle such a question," said Calla. "Meanwhile the clock's ours for the whole of next term, and that's quite far enough ahead to look forward in my opinion. It may have broken its mainspring before we're in the Sixth, and then we shouldn't want it. Sufficient unto the day is the tick thereof."

"Right you are, O Queen of Wisdom!"

[143] **CHAPTER XI**

A Holiday Governess

When Easter drew near, Lesbia began to be very anxious as to where she was to spend her holidays. From various hints thrown out by the Pattersons, she gathered that they wanted to use her bedroom, and were making arrangements for her to go away. She sincerely hoped it would not be to Mrs. Newton's. The remembrance of Christmas was hardly enlivening. Another three weeks in that elderly mid-Victorian atmosphere was certainly not a tempting prospect to a girl of sixteen. At last, only a few days before the vacation began, Mrs. Patterson, putting on her pince-nez and, taking a letter from her bag, announced to Lesbia that she had some news for her.

[144] "You're to go as holiday governess to a little boy," she began; then, noticing her young cousin's look of utter consternation, "now, don't be absurd, Lesbia! It's the very thing for you. Mr. and Mrs. Stockton are friends of ours. They live in the country—quite a pretty place. A change of air will do you good, especially to be out-of-doors the whole day with Terry after stuffing in school all the term. You'll look after him while his own governess has her holiday, but he won't need any lessons except music, so it will be a holiday for you too. As I was saying, it's pretty country, and I dare say Joan would lend you her bicycle to take with you. You'll be interested in Mr. Stockton's pictures. He's really quite a good artist."

An artist! Lesbia pricked up her ears at this piece of information. The desolate prospect suddenly seemed to blossom. Moreover, she was very fond of the country. A change from town would be a great relief.

"Perhaps I'd like a boy better than girls," she ventured, thinking of the juniors, who had been particularly outrageous of late. "It won't be so bad if I haven't to teach him."

"I've no doubt you'll get along very well, so it's quite decided," decreed Mrs. Patterson promptly. "I shall write to Mrs. Stockton to-day and say you'll arrive next Tuesday."

Feeling rather a pawn in the hands of Fate, but somewhat consoled by the loan of Joan's bicycle, Lesbia was duly seen off from the station by Kitty, who popped a packet of chocolates in her pocket as she bid her good-bye and added:

"Take a firm stand with Terry from the first. Don't let him think he's going to have it all his own way or——"

[145] "What do you mean?" asked Lesbia agitatedly, but the porter was already slamming the door and waving back non-passengers from the edge of the platform, and the train started before Kitty could complete her sentence.

Such a disquieting hint did not present her future pupil in a favourable light. Lesbia ate her chocolates to try and banish the uneasy forebodings.

"After all, I don't suppose he *can* be worse than Allie Pearson and Edie Browne," she thought, as she flung the empty case out of the window. "They're the absolute limit in the way of fidgets."

Mr. Stockton met her at Tunbury Station, and drove her home in a little trap drawn by a fat lazy pony. It was already dark, so she only had glimpses of fleeting hedgerows as they jogged along the muddy country road. The air felt fresh though, with a bracing exhilarating quality that made her think of soda-water. There was a faint scent of flowers, fragrant after rain. A thin crescent moon shone in the sky, close to a bright planet.

"It's going to be a fine Easter, we hope," volunteered Mr. Stockton, grasping at the well-worn topic of the weather to assist him in the difficult task of making conversation with a shy girl of sixteen, evidently unused to small talk.

[146] Terry was in bed when Lesbia arrived, but not asleep. His room led out of hers, and she was taken in by candle-light to be introduced to him. She got an impression of a pair of round blue eyes, that stared at her as if taking her all in, and a crop of short chestnut curls. He could not be induced to speak a single word.

"He'll talk quite enough to-morrow," volunteered his mother, settling him down again on his pillow. "Now, Terry, remember you're *not* to wake too early. We don't want to hear anything of

you till the hot water comes."

Lesbia, tired after her journey and the excitement of her exodus from Kingfield, was too weary to sleep. The bed, though comfortable enough, felt strange, and she tossed about uneasily for hours, with brain racing in a whirl of galloping thoughts. A clock on the landing, chiming the quarters, roused her every time she dozed, and it had struck half-past three before she finally lost consciousness. She slept lightly, with confused dreams. Suddenly—in the midst of a heated argument with Miss Pratt—she woke with a start to find something cold on her face. The dawn was just glinting through the Venetian blinds, and a small red-headed figure was dancing like an imp beside her bed, brandishing a wet sponge.

"Done you!" he triumphed. "Done you brown! I told Miss Gordon I'd give you cold pig. She said I daren't, but I dare! I'm not a bit afraid of you. You're only sixteen! I heard Mummie say so. No, I *won't* go back! I tell you I *won't*!"

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For Lesbia had bounced out of bed, wrenched away the sponge, and was bundling the young man in the direction of his own room. She stopped, turned him to face her, and glared at him solemnly.

"You'll do what you're told, so I warn you at the beginning. If ever you come into my room again without asking you'll get more than you bargain for. I'm not going to stand any disrespect. Now fly! And don't let me hear another sound, or I'll have to go and fetch your mother. Do you understand?"

Apparently Terry did, for his bare legs beat a retreat. Once back in his own quarters, though, he did not keep the rule of silence imposed upon him. He began to sing in a rather ostentatious voice, and to rattle something about that made a noise. Lesbia shut the door between the two rooms and took no further notice; but sleep was banished, for though Terry did not intrude again, he continued at intervals to treat her to selections of whistling, comic songs, and even verses of hymns, all of which were extremely disturbing.

"Little wretch!" she soliloquized. "I'm afraid I'm in for a bad time with him. He's pretty; but he's evidently most outrageously spoilt."

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Lesbia's anticipations with regard to Terry were partly fulfilled, but not altogether. He seemed an equal mixture of angel and elf. In his celestial moods he could be really sweet, and most affectionate. She was fond of him when he sat on her knee begging for stories, or when he asked sudden, old-fashioned questions on astounding subjects, but she groaned when she noticed the gleam in his eye which always betokened the quest for mischief. He was a stubborn, unruly little boy, indulged by adoring parents till their patience failed, then his mother would confiscate his chocolates, and his father would operate with a bedroom slipper.

Lesbia's duties were to superintend his toilet, take him for walks, and give him a short daily lesson on the piano.

"You see he's just begun music with Miss Gordon," explained Mrs. Stockton, "and it would be such a pity if he were to forget all he's learnt."

Though Lesbia had instructed the juniors at Kingfield High School in the elements of arithmetic, history, and other subjects, she had never in her life before taught music. She felt decidedly nervous as she led Terry, with newly-washed hands, to the piano.

"He'll tell you what he has to do," volunteered Mrs. Stockton, vanishing gladly from the room.

Terry, whose fingers were still rather damp, opened the instruction book in the middle, and twisted the music-stool round and round with quite unnecessary zeal.

"That's enough. It won't go any higher," commanded Lesbia. "Have you got as far as this duet? All in half a term? I suppose you play the treble part? And Miss Gordon takes the bass?"

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Terry nodded. He was staring hard at Lesbia as if evolving an idea. Suddenly he burst out:

"When you talk you keep your nose still, and when Miss Gordon talks hers wobbles about just like my rabbit's when it wants a lettuce."

"Sh, 'sh! That's nothing to do with music," suppressed Lesbia. "Now we're going to try this duet. I'll play the bass. Are you ready? I shall count a whole bar first. One—two—three—four."

They began, Lesbia playing what was before her, but Terry improvising out of his head. He did it so cleverly that his teacher, a little nervous at reading her own part, did not notice for a bar or two that the thumpings in the treble had nothing to do with the instruction book. She stopped him reproachfully. His blue eyes looked as innocent as a child-cherub's.

"I'm very fond of music," he bragged. "I like to play it my own way."

"I don't believe you've ever got as far as the middle of this book," declared Lesbia. "I shall begin at the beginning and see how much you really know."

Master Terence Stockton either knew nothing of the elements of the piano or he was not going to give away his information. He did not seem yet to have grasped the value of the various notes. Lesbia set to work to try and explain the functions of a minim, a crotchet, and a quaver. It was so long since she had learnt such details in her own childhood that she was a little at a loss how to

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express adequately in words what had become a matter almost of instinct.

"This big note with a hole in it is a semibreve and it counts four of these black notes, which are called crotchets. Now suppose we're counting four crotchets to a bar, one—two—three—four; how long is this semibreve?"

"How long? An inch! An inch and a half! Two inches!" exclaimed Terry excitedly, as if he were playing a game at guessing. "There's a foot-rule in my new joinering box if you'll let me go and fetch it!"

Lesbia nearly collapsed, for her own explanations were so clearly at fault. She began again, and tried to make them a little more lucid. It was uphill work, however; for though Terry would gaze at her, apparently drinking in everything she said, he would suddenly come out with a remark which showed that his mind was wandering elsewhere. Poor Lesbia at the end of the half-hour felt they had made little progress. She resolved privately to study the instruction book before to-morrow's lesson, and to prepare some very plain and adequate plan of imprinting musical notation on the grey pulp of Terry's unwilling brain.

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Despite the fact that her pupil was decidedly a handful, the time at Tunbury was nevertheless a holiday. They went beautiful walks in the fields to pick primroses and dog violets, there was a wood where she played robbers with Terry, and where one day they had a picnic tea and boiled a kettle on a camp fire, there were occasional drives in the pony trap, and a few bicycle rides, with Terry on the luggage-carrier because she could not leave him at home. She felt rather like "Sindbad the Sailor" laden with his "Old Man of the Sea" as she rode along with a pair of small arms clutched tightly round her waist, but she found the treat an excellent bribe for good behaviour and certainly a means of keeping her frisky youth out of mischief. There was one delight in her visit which compensated for many drawbacks. Mr. Stockton was painting a picture of his little son, and every morning Terry had a sitting in the studio. Lesbia came also, and the good-natured artist lent her a canvas, tubes, palette, and brushes, and let her try her 'prentice hand at portraiture in oils. To sit close to Mr. Stockton and watch him paint was a revelation. Lesbia took to the work like a duck to water, and produced something really so very like Terry that her effort won words of warm approval.

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"It's wonderfully good," declared Mr. Stockton. "You've evidently got some notion of drawing in you. You ought to go and study at a school of art. How old are you? Only sixteen? What you want is to join a life class. You'd soon get on. It isn't everybody who can catch a likeness. The colour of that background is not at all bad for a beginner. My advice is 'Go ahead!'"

It was kind advice, and made Lesbia blush with pleasure, but, as she thought privately, it was all very well to say "go ahead" when she had absolutely no prospect of joining a life class. She did not possess an oil paint-box, and even had she one there would be no time among her multitudinous lessons for the practice of portraiture. If her future was to consist of studying, passing exams, and afterwards teaching, Art would have little chance to develop.

"It's a pity," sighed Lesbia. "Because people work so much better at things they really and truly like. I hold with the Montessori system in that. If Miss Tatham gave me my choice I'd never look at Latin or Maths again. No! I'd just paint, paint, paint, from morning till night, and be absolutely happy. That's my ideal of life. But I shall never get it—never! So I suppose it's no use grousing. Marion's got an oil paint-box by the by. I wonder if she'd swop it for my camera? That's rather a brain-wave. I'll ask her when I get back. If Joan would sit for me on Saturdays I'd try and paint her. She has a pretty side face and her fluffy hair would look nice against a blue background. Perhaps Mrs. Patterson wouldn't scold if it was Joan's portrait I was doing. Oh dear! How I wish Kingfield High School was a school of art."

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Lesbia returned to 28 Park Road at the end of the three weeks with relief and regret about equally balanced. She treasured the remembrance of a quite tearful good-bye hug from Terry, but rejoiced that she had no longer to put him to bed, to comb his curls, or to keep his mischievous fingers from doing damage. She did not covet Miss Gordon's post, and decided that if she had to teach it should be at a day school, where she could be free from the small fry from 4 p.m. till 9 o'clock on the next morning.

"The fact is," she confessed to herself, "I adore children to look at or to romp with. It's that abominable keeping order I hate so. I'm not what Miss Tatham calls 'a good disciplinarian'. The young scamps know it, and they take advantage of me. I suppose I'm a round peg in a square hole, or a square peg in a round hole, whichever it is; I don't seem quite to fit somehow. Well, it can't be helped anyway, and I shall just have to worry along as best I can to the end of the chapter."

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The Blessed Damozel

It was not until after Easter that Regina Webster came to school. She appeared in VA on the first morning of the new term, and because the form was really "full up" she had to be accommodated with a chair and a small table at which to write. Miss Pratt, having settled the new-comer with a seat, suggested that somebody should afford hospitality to her books, which certainly could not be left lying about the room. For a minute there was dead silence. Everybody's desk seemed already overflowing, and nobody felt at all anxious to share its limited space with a stranger.

"Won't *anyone* offer?" asked Miss Pratt with a tinge of surprised tartness in her voice.

Regina was staring out of the window trying to look utterly disinterested.

Then Lesbia's conscience gave her a hard tweak and whispered: "Don't be mean". She often ignored her inner monitor, but this time she listened.

"I will, Miss Pratt," she said, turning a little red, as the gaze of the form instantly focused upon her.

[155] "Thank you, Lesbia!"

So that was how it began. Fate, at their first meeting, seemed to fling Regina into her very lap. You cannot share a desk with anybody without contracting a certain amount of intimacy, the mere fact of bending your heads together to store your books and pencils in the same receptacle promotes confidence. By the end of the third day Lesbia knew the number of Regina's brothers and sisters and what colour her new costume was going to be, and Regina had heard the whole story of how Lesbia nearly went to Canada and didn't. There was not very much reserve about Lesbia. If she took a fancy to anybody her heart blossomed like a mango in an Indian conjurer's trick, and she was ready to impart any number of secrets. To certain impulsive temperaments a new friendship is a great opportunity. It means a totally fresh start with somebody who will not be influenced by old impressions, but will take you at your present valuation, someone to whom you can pour out your own version of your biography unbiased by other people's opinions, somebody to whom all your old stories and jokes will be new, and to whom even your last year's hat will appear quite fresh and worthy of admiration.

[156] Regina was no ordinary girl. That was apparent the moment she had walked into VA. Her face was too strongly cut for mere prettiness, but her great grey eyes seemed to hold whole past lifetimes of thought in them. In manner she was very abrupt. She snapped out her remarks in short jerks, as if she were firing them from a gun. She moved with the self-consciousness often noticed in girls of sixteen. The whole of her atmosphere was intensely "mental". Astrologers would have placed Mercury and Jupiter for her birth signs. Her brains were so big that she almost seemed intellectual against her will. She did not want to pose as clever, and curiously enough seemed to covet most all the specially feminine characteristics which she rather conspicuously lacked. She admired Lesbia, much as a boy would, for her pretty hair, her dainty movements, and the general Celtic glamour that hung about her; she behaved, indeed, more like a youth in love than an ordinary schoolgirl chum. Her large soulful eyes would gaze at her idol during classes as if she were composing sonnets, and she haunted her round the school till the girls christened her "Lesbia's shadow".

"She's queer, of course, but in a way she's rather a sport," declared Kathleen, discussing the new-comer in the cloakroom.

"Yes, she's certainly queer. She never does anything in the least like anybody else," agreed Ermie Hall. "She makes me quite nervous when she stares at me with those big eyes. I feel as if she were trying to hypnotize me? Do you believe in hypnotism? It's rather creepy."

[157] "If she'd mesmerize me to know my prep I'd be grateful to her. Don't be an idiot, Ermie."

"She makes *me* think of 'The Blessed Damozel'," piped Carrie obtrusively.

"The Blessed *who*?"

"Oh, you evidently don't know your Dante Gabriel Rossetti!"

"I don't know my Dante anybody. Who was she, or he, whichever it is?"

"It's a piece of poetry, of course."

"There's no 'of course' about it."

"Well it is at any rate."

"Go on, Carrie, and spout. You're dying to give it to us, I can see," urged Marjorie.

Carrie, who was in the elocution class and loved reciting, did not wait to be asked twice. Secure of an even moderately willing audience she began:

THE BLESSED DAMOZEL

The blessed damozel leaned out

From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the
depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were
seven.

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to
hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn.

[158] "Now it *is* like her, isn't it?" she inquired at the end of the second stanza. "Shall I say you any more?"

"No, thanks" (some of the girls were moving hastily away). "That's quite enough. Yes, perhaps it is like Regina, if you look quite at the romantic side of her. Her hair is 'yellow like ripe corn', and her eyes, of course, are the main part about her. All the same, she's too substantial somehow for me to imagine her leaning out over any gold bar of Heaven. I'd be afraid she'd break it. She must weigh more than I do, and I'm eight stone—nearly! I was weighed at the station yesterday on the automatic machine."

"Well, if you're going to reckon attraction by lack of weight, I suppose you'd admire a living skeleton."

"Not at all, but I can't quite reconcile gold bars of Heaven with twenty-six inches round the waist."

"Some people haven't the soul to appreciate poetry properly."

[159] "That's true," chirped Ernie unabashed. "I dare say the Miss Miltons voted 'that poem of Dad's' awful slow. It was certainly 'Paradise Lost' to them to have to sit and write at his dictation when they probably wanted to be out picking blackberries or feeding the hens. I've always felt sorry for those three girls. I hope they all found decent husbands, poor dears! The literature book doesn't tell us any more about them, and they're far more interesting to me than their stern old father. When I write a literature book, I shall put things in their proper focus. 'Celebrities from a Girl's Point of View' I mean to call it. Yes, I'm in earnest! Don't snigger, all of you! I'll publish it some day and then you'll just see. Oh yes, glorify Regina into 'the Blessed Damozel' if you like. I don't mind what names you call her. 'Blessed Damson' would do for me. Ta-ta!"

Though the girls joked about Regina, and even teased her, there was a certain amount of liking mixed with their chaff. They all agreed that she was 'rather a sport'. Her amazing cleverness absolutely took their breath away. They would almost have resented it if Regina herself had set any store by it. She would finish her mathematical problems in a few minutes, while her schoolmates were still staring at them, and would sit with arms folded and answers ready when the rest of the form were helplessly beating their brains. She saw at once that it gave offence, and apologized in her abrupt manner.

"I can't help it. I just see the answers somehow and write them down."

[160] "Couldn't you fiddle about with your pencil and look as if you were still working?" urged Calla's injured voice. "It makes Miss Pratt on the warpath to see you sitting up so soon. She said, 'Aren't you finished *yet*, girls?' this morning, very acidly. I think you might try to spin things out for *our* sakes."

In the matter of memorizing, also, Regina's nimble brains utterly outdistanced those of her companions. She took home the history book and read up all the portions which V_A had taken during the two previous terms, proving a far better acquaintance with it at revision classes than the rest of the form, and bringing out dates with enviable accuracy.

"I can't help it," was still her protest. "It's as easy to remember a right date as a wrong one. They stick in my head somehow. If I see them once I know them."

"You're a genius, I suppose," sighed Kathleen. "There ought to be a special form for geniuses. It's not right to wedge them in amongst ordinary girls."

[161] Yet all the time it was the ordinary girls whom Regina admired. Her own movements were awkward and jerky, but she would watch fascinated while dainty Alice Orton, the dunce, even of V_B, performed a scarf dance, and she came to school one day in such a palpable though indifferently made copy of Agnes Clifford's fashionable dress of Saxe blue gabardine, that some of the girls openly giggled in the cloakroom, an offence for which she never really forgave them. After three weeks of worshipping at Lesbia's shrine Regina one morning blurted out an invitation. In her characteristic fashion she gave it without any preamble. She simply said abruptly:

"Can you come to tea on Saturday?"

And Lesbia, suppressing a gasp of surprise, replied:

"Oh, thanks very much! I shall have to ask my cousin, Mrs. Patterson, first."

Lesbia was very keen upon tennis at present. To go with Kitty and Joan to play at their club was her weekly treat. She did not know whether she wanted to waste a whole precious Saturday afternoon upon Regina, whom she saw every day at school. I am afraid tennis would have overbalanced friendship in the scales had she not remembered that on Saturday next was a tournament, and she would certainly have no opportunity of playing.

"It's just possible that the Websters may have a court," she ruminated. "I'll chance it, anyway."

She therefore asked and obtained permission for the outing from Mrs. Patterson, who was quite gracious and pleasant about it. She had been far more genial with Lesbia lately. The storm over her visit to Pilgrims' Inn Chambers seemed to have cleared the air.

[162] "So you're going to tea with the Blessed Damozel," giggled Ermie, for the news leaked out somehow in Va. "Well, I suppose you'll have a sort of royal reception—flags put up in your honour, family band playing, an illuminated address presented, and all the rest of it. The younger brothers—if there *are* any younger brothers and sisters—will be practising court curtsies and hand kissing. Hope you'll rise to the occasion and receive it with proper dignity. Give us a specimen of your best regal manners, O Queen! Just to show us how it's done."

"Don't mock. I believe you're jealous."

"Oh yes, of course we're all jealous, aren't we, Marjorie? We want to be worshipped too, and have somebody 'Less than the Dust' grovelling at our feet. We'd get up a turn or two among ourselves, only we can't decide who's to grovel. Everyone wants to be the goddess and not the devotee. That's where we don't hit it. Is it Saturday afternoon that the royal reception is to take place? How touching! Some press representatives ought to be there for the sake of the school magazine."

"Oh, go on! Rag me as much as you like. I don't care a scrap, so there!"

[163] After eleven years at Kingfield High School, Lesbia was thoroughly well accustomed to teasing. She let the girls say what they liked about her new friendship with Regina. She certainly did not mean to be chaffed out of it. On Saturday afternoon she donned her white tennis costume, put on a new shady white hat, and went on the top of the tram-car to Heathersedge, the suburb where the Websters lived. The guard put her down at the right corner, and after a few minutes walking she found herself at her destination, a square house covered with early June roses, and with ornamental vases filled with geraniums on each side of the porch. Though her reception was not quite on the lines which Ermie had picturesquely prophesied, it was nevertheless apparent that Regina had very much rubbed in glorified accounts of her personality. The family, who all owned the same soulful eyes, gazed at her with a fascinated intensity which made Lesbia devoutly hope she was not disappointing them.

"So *you* are Regina's idol! She talks about nobody else," said Mrs Webster, in the abrupt manner of her daughter, shaking hands very warmly and kindly, however, with her young guest.

[164] Regina blushed and looked uncomfortable, as girls generally do when parents are guilty of indiscreet remarks. She made a conspicuous effort to hustle her friend away, but was balked by the rest of the family, whose attitude plainly demanded introductions. She catalogued them briefly, and would have dismissed them, but they declined to be so easily disposed of, and accompanied the visitor in a body to the garden. Lesbia, who was not very keen on spending a whole afternoon *tête-à-tête* with Regina, gave them palpable encouragement. She decidedly liked them. First there was Derrick, known in his private circle as "the stripling", a very tall boy of fourteen, who evidently enjoyed female society and was immensely pleased if he were treated as grown up. His manners were more suave than Regina's, and he had reached the stage when he delighted to open doors, pick up handkerchiefs, or perform any other small services for attractive members of the fair sex, preferably older than himself. He attached himself at once to Lesbia, ignoring indignant glances from his sister that seemed to say "Hands off! This is *my* special property."

Magsie and Una, two little girls with cropped flaxen hair and short-cut skirts, hovered about putting in any remarks that anybody would listen to. They each had an eye to taking Lesbia's disengaged left arm, but Regina, who had appropriated the other, frowned them fiercely away. Piers and Winston, the four-year-old twins, were exhibited proudly, somewhat in the fashion of domestic pets, and, when they had performed what Derrick called "their parlour tricks", were dismissed to play in a separate portion of the garden, and bribed with chocolates not to return.

There was a tennis lawn, a very nice one too, full-sized, and level, and thoroughly well rolled and free from daisies or dandelion roots. Lesbia looked at it so longingly that Regina, still anxious for an afternoon of private confidences, had perforce to offer a game, though her face grew a little glum when her guest promptly accepted.

[165] "You'd better fetch John Curzon," she nodded to Derrick.

Derrick, without a word, and somewhat to Lesbia's amazement, departed over the wall, but he returned shortly accompanied by a boy friend who bore a tennis-racket.

There was a brief scrimmage about sides, Regina wanting Lesbia for a partner, and Derrick indignantly protesting against two girls playing together. He carried his point, and conducted the visitor to what he considered the more advantageous quarter of the court, leaving John and his sister to have the sun in their eyes. Magsie and Una constituted themselves umpires, and called out the score with keen satisfaction. The Websters were fairly good players, and Lesbia enjoyed herself, especially as she and Derrick were winning all along the line. In the middle of the second game she began to be aware of spectators. There was a paling between the side of the garden and a lane, and over the top of these wooden boards faces that seemed somehow familiar would peep for a moment and then vanish. It was only after several of these sudden bobbing appearances that her eyes recognized the well-known features of Ermie, Cissie, and Aldora. At the first convenient opportunity she pointed them out to her hostess.

"Hello, you girls! Show yourselves properly," yodelled Regina, running to the palings.

[166] Audible giggles came from the lane, then sounds of hoisting, finally three smiling faces peered across the fence.

"You'd better come over and have tea. It's almost ready," invited Regina hospitably.

"No, thanks," (Ermie was spokeswoman). "We're going to tea at Cissie's. We only looked in to see how you were getting on. We thought you'd be turtle-doving."

"We're playing tennis."

"So I see. We don't want to butt in. Just came to find the flags flying that's all." (With a grimace at Lesbia.) "We *do* apologize. Sorry to be on the earth. Or rather on the palings. Can't hold up any longer. Ta-ta!"

Ermie disappeared with a sudden drop, followed by Cissie and Aldora. To judge from the sound of footsteps they ran hurriedly away down the lane. Lesbia looked relieved. She did not want Regina to realize what fun the girls made of her infatuation. She was so deadly in earnest about everything that it seemed a shame to tease her.

[167] "Besides which she might think I had been cackling to them and put them up to coming," thought Lesbia, turning hot at the notion. "I'll spifflicate those three on Monday, when I catch them. It was beastly cheek to track me here just to try and rag. They ought to know better manners, and I shall tell them so. Won't I pitch into them just! I'll make them absolutely shrivel!"

But aloud she simply said very calmly:

"It's your serve, Regina. We were thirty—forty. *Do* let us try and finish this set before tea if we can."

[168] **CHAPTER XIII**

In Luck's Way

Ever since the Easter holidays at Tunbury, and her apprenticeship to Art in Mr. Stockton's studio, Lesbia had been hankering for an oil paint-box. She wanted it desperately, as any craftsman, with creative instinct, longs for the tools of his trade. She thought about it in bed at nights, when she lay awake, and in imagination squeezed the delightful tubes on to her palette and mixed subtle combinations of soft shades. There seemed, to her particular bent, so many more possibilities in oils than in water-colour. To be sure, her cheap little student's box had never given the latter medium a fair trial, but she considered the possession of even Winsor and Newton's best equipment of half-pans and sables could not compete with the satisfaction of dabbing solid masses of paint on a canvas with stiff hog-hair brushes.

[169] "I don't like finicking work," she decided. "Give me something strong and broad, that I can dash away at and go ahead with. I'd rather be an Impressionist than a Pre-Raphaelite any day. Scene-painting's more in my line than miniatures. Oh dear! I wish all the powers in earth and air would show me how to get a decent paint-box."

She had approached Marion with a view to an exchange, but her friend shook a regretful head.

"I'm fearfully sorry, Lesbia," she apologized. "I'd have let you have my box with pleasure, only you see Dad gave it to me as a Christmas present, and I don't think he'd like me to swop it. He wants me to take some lessons in flower-painting. And I have a camera already. I don't mean my own—that was broken six months ago—but Uncle Fred has lent me his, and it's a perfect beauty. I've got his developing-machine too."

"Nothing doing then, I suppose," said Lesbia, turning ruefully away, and wishing she had never asked the favour.

The Patterson household was well stocked with books, but had no art effects. A glue brush and a pot of white enamel were the utmost they could muster in the matter of painting paraphernalia. Even a Raphael's genius would have been hampered by such elementary stock-in-trade. Lesbia came to the sorrowful conclusion that life for the present must be lived without an oil paint-box. But the lack of this means of "self-expression" did not curtail the strong artistic instincts that were stirring in her. She found herself always looking for the pictorial aspect of things, and thinking how she could transfer them to canvas. When she was teaching the juniors she would watch Maisie Martin's head bent over her dictation book, and think how beautifully the outline of that pink cheek and the ruddy hair might be rendered against a silver-grey background. She would sometimes surreptitiously sketch the children's attitudes in her notebook, rejoicing over the graceful turn of an arm, or the subtle curve of a white neck, while its owner, conscious of her gaze, wondered what black score was being entered on the time-sheet. Even in the midst of scolding her tiresome flock the artistic side would crop out, and she would register mental impressions of the dancing light in naughty Esmée's dark eyes, the beautiful shape of Sylvia's little hand that was holding the pen all wrong, and the silky sheen on Gwennie's flaxen hair, as that irrepressible damsel fidgeted at her desk. If her small pupils could only have been artist's models, the hours spent with them would have been a pleasure instead of a daily dread.

In her own form, too, Lesbia was allowing herself to drift into a dreamy habit of art observation instead of mental concentration. She sketched on the borders of her textbooks and on her blotting-paper, and was even guilty of purloining bits of coloured chalk from the blackboard box, and smudging impressionistic portraits of her comrades on spare pages of essay paper. Worse than this, her imagination was apt to absolutely run away with her. Miss Pratt one day, lecturing on English Literature, gave a critical survey of Keats's poems. "Isabella and the Pot of Basil" fascinated Lesbia instantly, and her brain danced off to create a picture of the scene. She visualized the exact drooping pose of Isabella, the hang of her dark hair, the drapery of her rich dress, the reflection of sunlight on the brass pot, the peep of mediæval landscape seen between curtains in the background, the tear that must glitter on Isabella's long lashes, her look of hopeless despair, and the rich scheme of colour that must run through the whole picture.

"Quote the terms in which the *Edinburgh Review* summed up its criticism of 'Endymion'?" asked Miss Pratt.

Lesbia started. She had been so busy fixing details of her proposed picture of Isabella that all further particulars of the lecture had passed unheard. She had not the ghost of a notion what the *Edinburgh Review* had said about "Endymion", except a shadowy impression that they had slated it.

"They—they—didn't like it," she stammered lamely.

The form giggled faintly. Miss Pratt cleared her throat in the ominous manner that always preluded trouble.

"I never thought you conspicuously bright, Lesbia Ferrars," she remarked scathingly; "but you're really outdoing yourself to-day. The criticism of the *Edinburgh Review* on Keats's poem would equally well describe your attitude of mind. Yes, Carrie, you may give it," nodding to another quarter of the room.

"Calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling idiocy," quoted Carrie.

At which the faint giggle swelled again, but subsided at a glance from the teacher.

Lesbia sat up straight, banishing Isabella and all possible shapes of basil pots from her brain, and pinched her finger to try and keep concentration on the lesson, though the portrait of Keats himself, with his poetic blue eyes and ruddy chestnut curls, danced sometimes before her like an æsthetic will o' the wisp to lead her astray.

"I'm an artistic peg in a scholastic hole," she said to herself, rather pleased with her own simile.

Miss Pratt, however, took no notice of the shapes of pegs or of holes. She was there for the purpose of giving a literature lesson, out of which she meant her girls to get the utmost possible profit. She had no patience with what she considered "slacking", and she kept a keen eye on Lesbia for the rest of the hour, asking her questions whenever she perceived any signs of straying attention.

Lesbia sketched her picture during geometry on the back page of her exercise book, but it was a scratchy performance and quite unworthy of her high ideals. She covered it hastily lest the mistress should see it.

"If they'd only let us choose our own work at the High School I'd vote for a life-class," she sighed, taking up her compasses and trying to focus her wandering mind on circles and angles and letters of the alphabet, instead of the outlines of the human form divine.

It was on the very next Saturday that Kitty, craving for the country, and finding for once she had no particularly pressing engagement in town, suggested a cycling excursion. She wanted her sister to go with her, but Kingfield held superior attractions for Joan, who suggested Lesbia as a substitute and promised to lend her her bicycle. It was all arranged at the breakfast-table, and the two girls then and there cut sandwiches, fetched the machines, oiled them, pumped tyres, strapped on cycle-baskets, and started forth before ten o'clock. They rode first through the suburbs, where foliage was yet unspoilt with dust from motors, and the gardens were making a

brave show of lilac, laburnum, and pink hawthorn. Then by degrees the houses grew fewer, the kerbstones disappeared, and the footpaths gave way to grassy borders; there were unclipped hedges instead of ornamental railings, and fields, and woods, and streams on the other side of them. Bird-life was at its zenith; larks, so high as to be almost invisible, poured out torrents of rapture; every apple tree seemed to have a blackbird soloist on a topmost bough; wrens, linnets, and hedge-warblers fluttered and twittered among low bushes, and flocks of jackdaws and rooks rose from the fields in whirling flights. With one accord the girls rode fast. There was an exaltation in free-wheeling down the hills, flying through the air like birds. It almost gave them the sensation of wings. The spell of spring was upon them, that curious thrill that comes to us as we escape out of the circles of civilization and visit Mother Nature at her busiest season, when every inch of her domain is a-throb with life. It was pretty country in the neighbourhood of Kingfield, an undulating landscape with large trees and lush meadows, and a slow river with banks of reeds and iris. The villages had timbered cottages with thatched roofs and flowery gardens, old grey church towers showed among groups of leafy elms, and picturesque farm buildings and straw-stacks stood back from the road at the ends of by-lanes.

Kitty and Lesbia ate their sandwiches very early, sitting in a wood blue with hyacinths, more than doubtful indeed that they were trespassing, but hoping no indignant farmer would spy them and turn them out. They rested here for half an hour, dozing in a patch of sunshine and blissfully happy, till a colony of ants discovered them and began to employ forcible measures of ejection.

"Wow! The ants are stinging my ankles," wailed Kitty.

"Ants and ankles or aunts and uncles did you say?" twittered Lesbia, trying to slay a mosquito, which was making a ferocious onslaught at her hatless forehead. "This place is rather too much alive for my taste. I vote we get a move on."

"Right-o! I'm ready if you are. I never saw such a bloodthirsty crew of insects. I wonder what they live on when there are no human beings to bite?"

"I don't know. But I don't see the fun of acting dinner for them at any rate. Here are our bikes. How hot they are! We oughtn't to have left them in the sun. What's the name of the next village? Let me look at the map. Why, we must be just here, close to Rawsthorne. We can join the Glenbridge Road and go home by Hanburnham."

On the outskirts of the village our cyclists were obliged to dismount sharply, owing to a sudden block in the road. A car turning out of a carriage drive very nearly collided with an old-fashioned gig, and brought a phaeton behind it to a standstill. To add to the difficulty, there were several conveyances drawn up under the hedge, two empty cars, a landau, and a pony trap. Looking for some explanation of this unwonted traffic in a country village, Kitty noticed an auctioneer's bill pasted on a board beside the open gate, setting forth particulars of a sale of household furniture and other effects, which was apparently taking place on that identical day. Gazing up the drive she could see a crowd of people assembled upon the lawn.

"A sale! Oh, what sport to go to it!" she exclaimed eagerly. "I wonder how they let you in? May anybody just walk up to the house?"

"People all seem to have catalogues," ventured Lesbia, peeping wistfully round the gate-post into the attractive grounds.

She made this remark at a most opportune moment, for a lady, who was about to enter, paused, looked at the girls, and said gently:

"I can take you in with me if you want to go. My catalogue will admit three."

Kitty and Lesbia accepted with alacrity. Neither had witnessed a sale before, so it would be a novel experience to both. Their unknown friend piloted them to the front door, where they were duly passed by the policeman in charge, then, meeting some friends, she nodded good-bye and went away. There was still a quarter of an hour before the auctioneer was due to begin, and people were walking about the house viewing the various articles which would presently be put up. In great curiosity the girls joined the throng, and wandered round the rooms. It was the third day of the sale, so most of the important pieces of furniture had already been removed. What was left was that vast accumulation of household rubbish which—like the traditional lost pocket-book—is often of little value to anybody except its owner. The dismantled house had a forlorn look, the sun glared through curtainless windows on to bedsteads piled up with bedding, stacks of well-used books, antiquated hats in round band-boxes, tasteless ornaments, faded cushions, tarnished gilt frames, and a medley of miscellaneous objects. There was something infinitely sad about it all. The old nursery, where surely children had not played for forty years, held old-fashioned pictures of Red Riding Hood, Cherry Ripe, and other Victorian supplements; there was a high chair and a swinging cot, and even a dolls' house, with dusty furniture and broken dolls. Various articles were spread forth upon a large deal table. Lesbia, a little oppressed with the mental atmosphere of the place, looked over them lightly, then gave a sudden gasp and clutched Kitty's arm. In the very middle there was an oil paint-box, palette, and bundle of brushes.

"Look! The very things I want!" whispered Lesbia excitedly. "Oh, do you think they'll go cheap? Could I possibly bid for them? What do you think they'll fetch?"

"I've no idea," replied Kitty. "Sometimes you get these things for an old song, I believe, and sometimes people run them up. What money have you brought with you?"

"I've only four shillings in the world, but it's here in my purse, thank goodness!"

"I have five shillings with me, but we shall want to get some tea. I might lend you half a crown, but not more."

"Oh, *do* let us see what we can do!"

Lesbia was as thrilled as if she were trying a gamble upon the Stock Exchange. She asked the auctioneer's man when the contents of the nursery would be put up, and he told her it was second on the list for that day's sale.

"Better go and get a place outside if you want to bid," he advised.

So Lesbia dragged Kitty, who wanted to look at a hundred things by the way, downstairs and on to the lawn, where a long table and the auctioneer's desk were arranged. The girls waited eagerly for the fun to begin. They were much entertained at the company in which they found themselves, farmers and villagers from the neighbourhood, dealers from local towns, and an odd assortment of queer-looking people such as are never seen except at sales, some obviously out for amusement, and others bent on bargain-hunting. There were one or two keen faces of professional buyers which strangely repelled them, but on the whole the crowd was jovial and good-humoured.

At two o'clock the auctioneer took his place, and his men began to carry out the first "lots" and place them upon the table. He rapidly described their merits and knocked down bundles of curtains or blankets to the highest bidders. Bedroom 4, which was being sold, contained a variety of articles. When the linen was disposed of, a number of books were next plumped upon the table.

"Lot 205," announced a stentorian voice.

Now the bidding was an utterly unintelligible process to the unaccustomed girls. It seemed to them as if the auctioneer glanced round the crowd and repeated glibly "Two shillings—two and six—three shillings—three and six", and so on until he suddenly rapped his hammer and consigned the "lot" to somebody who wanted it. He was a talkative red-faced man, who grew very warm with his efforts, and waved his arms dramatically like an actor declaiming a part. Lesbia stared at him quite fascinated. By the merest accident, in the midst of running up "lot 205", he chanced to glance her way, and, meeting her eye, promptly knocked it down to her. Before she knew what had happened she found herself the possessor of a pile of second-hand books for which a rusty individual, armed with pencil and memorandum list, was writing down her name and the sum of five and six.

"But I don't *want* these books. I want a *paint-box*!" she protested in agonized tones.

"You bid for this lot, miss. Sorry, but it can't be helped now if you made a mistake. The paint-box comes later on."

"And I've no money left to get it with," whispered Lesbia to Kitty. "Isn't this the limit? Why did he knock the books down to *me* of all people?"

"I don't know. I suppose you looked at him and he thought you were bidding for it. Watch the people now. They all catch his eye when they want to bid."

"That man over there winks. I certainly never winked."

"Well, it's done now and there's no getting out of it. How much must I lend you. Eighteen pence? Here you are. We can put the books in our bicycle baskets. Do you care to stay any longer or shall we go?"

"We'd better scoot before I buy any more things by mistake. I don't want to be saddled with a five-guinea mirror or a hanging-lamp. I never felt so cross in all my life before. It's too disgusting for words. I grudge this five and six." And Lesbia pulled out her cherished pocket-money, paid the auctioneer's clerk, clutched her pile of books, and went to reclaim her bicycle. The specimens of literature which they stowed away in their baskets did not look of a very exhilarating character. They were faded, old-fashioned volumes with illustrations of people in antiquated costumes. Lesbia, in her disgust at missing the paint-box, was ready to leave them behind in the garden, but Kitty's common sense prevailed.

"They're better than nothing. You don't want to throw your money absolutely away, you silly girl!" she counselled. "If *you* won't take them *I* shall. We'll each carry half. They're not very heavy after all. Cheerio! You look as if you'd lost a fortune."

"I've lost a paint-box, and that's worse," snapped Lesbia, refusing all comfort.

She rode back in very mournful spirits, mentally cataloguing the various useful or pleasurable articles she might have bought with the wasted five and sixpence, ignoring the obvious fact that she could not possibly have purchased them all. When the girls arrived home, Kitty told the story of the bargain as a supreme joke to the family circle. The Pattersons, though not artistic, were fond of books. They demanded to see lot 205. Nine shabby volumes were produced from the bicycle baskets and handed round for inspection. Mr. Patterson, rather a bibliographer in his way, rejected eight of them, but looked at the last with interest. He took a lens from his pocket and inspected the little wood cuts with which it was illustrated.

[182] "If I'm not mistaken these are by Bewick," he chuckled. "Lesbia, I believe you've got a bargain after all. I'm going up to London on Tuesday, and I'll take the book with me, and ask Petteridges about it. They're sure to know. Don't look too excited. It won't realize a fortune I assure you, and it may be worth nothing at all."

"Oh, thanks! It's worth trying," gasped Lesbia gratefully.

So on Tuesday Mr. Patterson slipped the small calf-bound volume into his coat pocket, and made a special call at a famous second-hand bookseller's in the Strand. He returned with good news for Lesbia.

"Petteridge agreed that the illustrations are genuine Bewicks, rather rare ones too, in his earlier period. He said the book was worth £2, 10s., and offered me that much for it. I thought you'd want to sell it, so I said 'Done', and brought you home the notes. Here they are; lot 205 has been a profitable little 'deal' on your part."

"O-o-o-h! And I *very* nearly left it behind in the garden," exclaimed Lesbia, hardly able to believe her luck.

With such a noble sum of money at her disposal she was able to set herself up with an oil paint-box, palette, brushes, some canvases, and a small sketching-easel and camp-stool, an artistic outfit such as she had coveted long, and hardly expected ever to acquire.

"A *new* box is ever so much nicer than the one I saw at the sale," she exulted. "I dare say half the tubes would have been hard as bricks, and the palette was cracked too. That auctioneer did me a good turn if he only knew it."

[183] "I wonder no wily dealer snapped up the lot," said Kitty. "How savage they'd be if they knew what they'd missed."

"I expect they never saw it amongst all that rubbish, or perhaps old books were not in their line. It takes special knowledge to collect them. I flatter myself it isn't everyone who recognizes an illustration by Bewick," commented Mr. Patterson, who was as pleased as anybody over the matter.

"Well, it was a simply gorgeous find, and I think I'm an out-and-out lucker," rejoiced Lesbia, folding up her precious parcel of art materials, and carrying them away to gloat over them in the private sanctuary of her own bedroom.

[184] CHAPTER XIV

A Country Cottage

Given a new paint-box, palette, brushes, and canvasses, together with a burning enthusiasm but no time, the answer does not always spell High Art. Lesbia's first instinct was to fling everything to the winds and to devote herself in season and out of season to her absorbing hobby. But the examinations were coming on, and Mrs. Patterson, who thought much of school honours, reminded her that Miss Tatham would expect a high percentage of marks, and extracted a promise that the sketching-materials should not be touched until the holidays.

"You're not so well up in your work that you can afford to waste a moment," she warned. "You ought to be doing more preparation instead of less. And after all those hours bending over books you must get out of doors for a brisk walk or play tennis. I'm not going to have you sitting still painting. You'd soon be complaining of headaches. *I* know how to manage girls."

[185] Lesbia submitted, but groaned in private. She sometimes wished Mrs. Patterson were not *quite* so sensible. The whole family was urging her on to work. Kitty coached her daily in mathematics, and Joan helped her with her Latin, the two subjects in which she was weakest. Having taken the responsibility of their young cousin, they were determined (as they expressed it) "to see her through", and to pitchfork her willy-nilly into the scholastic profession as the readiest path to independence. At present Lesbia felt the road to knowledge was much beset with thorns and briars. She envied Regina's accurate memory and wonderful clearness in grasping all arithmetical problems.

"You're a sort of calculating genius," she assured her friend. "I wish I'd your recipe. I'm afraid I'll be a muddle-head to the end of my days."

"So shall I," agreed Ermie, with unction. "Miss Pratt says airily: 'Do an extra half-hour of prep', but I find the longer I work the stupider I am. *VA* isn't going to get much credit out of *me* in the exams. I always forget things when I see the questions and remember them afterwards when it's too late and they're no use."

"Don't say 'no use'," preached Carrie.

"Yes, I *do* say 'no use', Carrie Turner, so don't be sanctimonious. Geometry and Latin may be all right in an exam-room, but what good are they going to be to me when I'm middle-aged and married?"

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"Perhaps you'll never be either!"

"Oh come! Don't consign me to an early grave or perpetual spinsterhood. *I* think exams are a relic of the barbarous ages, and they ought to be banished, with thumb-screws, and the rack, and all other instruments of torture. I'd like to write to the newspapers about it."

The grousing of certain unwilling victims in VA made no difference at all to the examinations, which approached as relentlessly as the car of Juggernaut, and as unfailingly as the seasons. A few favoured brains in the form enjoyed them, but the majority, including Lesbia, heaved sighs of relieved emancipation when the inky ordeal was at last over.

Immensely to her own amazement, Lesbia had scraped through in everything. It was the first time in her school career that she had passed without a single failure. In all honesty she gave the credit to Kitty's and Joan's blazing coaching, but she nevertheless was surprised at her achievement.

"I never thought I could have done it," she acknowledged.

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"It only shows what you *can* do if you try," crowed the complacent Pattersons, immensely gratified that their wobbling protégée was proving a success in the race for laurels. For Lesbia had come out sixth in the form—actually sixth, a position which astounded Miss Pratt as much as anybody. She had not made a big score over any one exam, but the aggregate of her marks had mounted up, so that, though she was long behind such brilliant records as those of Regina, Carrie, or Kathleen, she was above Marjorie and Aldora, who had failed in certain subjects.

"I'm very pleased with your results," said Miss Tatham, meeting Lesbia in the passage; "it shows me you've really been working. You must go on now and keep up the standard."

At which Lesbia, quite overwhelmed with such sudden praise from the head mistress, gurgled something indistinguishable and fled from the interview the instant she felt herself duly dismissed.

A question that had been troubling Lesbia considerably was the matter of the summer holidays. She wondered what the Pattersons were going to do with her. She had ventured several hints on the subject, but they had ignored them and had not condescended to enlighten her in the least. She most devoutly hoped that they were not arranging for her to take another temporary post as nursery governess. She was tired out after her term's work, and not at all disposed to cope with children. She felt that her holiday ought to be a real rest. She mentioned some of her troublous anticipations to Regina.

"You'd better come and stay with us," the latter blurted out immediately. "We're going to our cottage in Wales."

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"Oh, but perhaps your mother won't want me."

"*Anybody* would want you. The thing is who's going to be lucky enough to get you?"

Lesbia knew enough of life to discount most of Regina's ecstatic remarks, and to understand that her friend's anxiety for her company did not by any means involve an invitation from Mrs. Webster, who probably had other plans.

"If she's *very* good-natured she may possibly ask me for a week," ruminated Lesbia. "I only wish she would. I've never been in Wales."

Regina apparently knew how to wheedle her mother, for next day she brought a note to school.

"Will you give this to Mrs. Patterson?" she said; "we want you to come to Dolmadoc with us, for all the holidays."

All of them? Lesbia was staggered with the magnificence of the invitation. Certainly Regina never did things by halves. She presented the letter with much anxiety. Evidently it solved a difficulty, for Mrs. Patterson at once gave permission for the visit. It was such an utterly unexpected pleasure that Lesbia could hardly believe it was really true until she saw her box brought down from the attic to be packed.

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The Websters wasted no time, and started for Wales directly the holidays commenced. They were the fortunate owners of a country cottage at Dolmadoc, a little village amongst the mountains. Mr. Webster had bought it some years ago, after Regina and Derrick had caught scarlet fever in seaside lodgings, and had registered a vow he would never again expose young children to the risk of taking infection at crowded pleasure resorts. Here they spent Easter and August vacations, and sometimes even Christmas as well. It was a second home, and, though on a far simpler scale than their house in Kingfield, it was in many ways much dearer to them. The house was built high up on a hill-side, and had a most magnificent view over miles of valley, with a river winding at the bottom and great mountain peaks rising in the distance. There was a terraced garden, and an enclosed patch of field called by courtesy a tennis-lawn. At the back was a common with gorse bushes and bracken. On fine days the family lived almost entirely out of

doors. They took their meals in a veranda, and when they were not out walking, they sat in deck-chairs in the garden, reading or sewing. It was a delightfully free and unconventional life, almost like camping or caravanning. The younger children ran about without shoes and stockings, nobody wore hats, and gloves were not necessary even on Sundays.

[190] To Lesbia her new surroundings were an absolute Paradise. She had, of course, brought her cherished painting materials, and she set to work with wild enthusiasm to try her hand at sketching from nature. In so beautiful a place subjects were not difficult to choose. There were whitewashed cottages with moss-covered roofs, picturesque barns and haystacks, patches of gorse against a blazing blue sky, marshy meadows in a red sunset, or mountain tops tipped with mist. Her efforts might not have appeared very great to an Academy critic, but the Websters thought them wonderful. They had no facility for drawing, so their guest's talent impressed them considerably. Regina would take a book and sit by quite happily while Lesbia dabbed on her effects, and even consented to act model, a back-breaking occupation that is generally judged a trying test of friendship. Lesbia would have sketched all day long if she had been allowed, but the Websters dragged her away from her painting and took her for walks. There was a stream, about half a mile from the cottage, where Regina and Derrick were fond of fishing and occasionally caught small trout. The younger members of the family loved to paddle here, and climbed about on the rocks like goats, their bare feet giving them a grip on the slippery moss. Lesbia, who was not so accustomed to country life as they were, attempted to follow them, and slid with a splash into the water, not a dangerous matter, for it was very shallow, but destructive to her clean white skirt. She used more caution after this experience, and made the discovery that tennis-shoes afforded a much firmer foothold than ordinary leather.

[191] The delightful do-as-you-like days were a real rest to everybody. Even wet weather had its enjoyments. The family would don mackintoshes, oilskin caps, and rubber boots, and go for rambles in the rain, plunging among wet bracken and herbage, fording small streams, and generally behaving like ducks or other aquatic creatures; then would return to the joy of tea round a log fire, into which they could throw the pine-cones that they had gathered on dry days in the woods.

One of Regina's great interests at Dolmadoc was the keeping of hens and ducks. While she was at Kingfield they were looked after by the gardener and his wife, who acted as caretakers of the cottage, but when she was in residence she always attended to them herself. She was very proud of her quacking, clucking, feathered family, several of whom boasted descent from prize strains. She studied books about poultry and could talk quite learnedly on such subjects as trap-nests, incubators, brooders, and egg-testing lamps. She was anxious to exhibit some of her special favourites at the Horticultural Show, which, taking the neighbouring villages by turns, was this August to be held at Dolmadoc. After much discussion the choice fell on three young Wyandotte pullets and a pair of white Aylesbury ducks, all of which were duly entered for exhibition.

[192] "I want Snowy and Daddles to look their best," she remarked, the evening before, "and the tiresome beasties have been wallowing about in the mud and don't look a scrap as they ought. Isn't it aggravating?"

"Couldn't you wash them?" suggested Lesbia.

"Wash them! What a brilliant idea! I never thought of that. Will you get up early to-morrow morning and help me?"

"Rather! It will be sport."

"We'll give them a regular shampoo," exulted Regina, much taken with the notion.

Next day the two girls were astir at six o'clock. They hauled a tin bath outside and shut themselves into a disused pigsty with a pail of warm water and a packet of Lux, a sponge, the biggest watering-can, and their victims the ducks. Snowy and Daddles were tame and affectionate creatures, who would follow their mistress anywhere for a bribe of Indian corn.

They waddled willingly into the pigsty, and stood at attention, quacking. They were very dismayed and indignant, however, at the treatment to which they were subjected. Regina and Lesbia were as gentle as possible, but a duck is a slippery object to bath, and the cleansing process was accomplished only with much flapping and splashing. Each bird in turn was placed in the bath and sponged with the soapy shampoo, then it received a shower from the watering-can to rinse its plumage. The girls were as wet as the ducks before they had finished, but they were satisfied with the results of their labours.

[193] "Don't they look *beau-ti-ful*?" rejoiced Regina, comforting her protesting pets with further supplies of Indian corn. "I shall leave them shut up here till it's time to take them to the show, then they won't get into any mischief. Poor darlings! Did you think you were being killed?"

All exhibits were bound to be delivered before ten o'clock, so at half-past nine the Websters prepared to set forth. There was tremendous discussion as to the best means of conveyance. Regina possessed no poultry hampers, and considered, moreover, that jolting in baskets was bad for the plumage of her favourites. Taking into account their extreme tameness, she decided it would be best to carry them. She consigned a pullet apiece to Derrick, Magsie, and Una, while she and Lesbia undertook the ducks. The show was to be held in a field not very far away. To reach it would mean a considerable walk along the road, but there was a short cut across the meadows. They marched along in a little procession, each carefully carrying an "entry", and had

arrived successfully almost at the very end of their journey. To get into the show field they must cross a plank-bridge over a brook and climb a stile. This feat the Websters performed with ease, but Lesbia, who was not so accustomed to country life, found it a very difficult matter to manœuvre with a fat white Aylesbury clasped in her arms. The others never suspected she was in trouble and hopped over the stile without offering her any assistance. She made a gallant effort to follow them, but her foot tripped on the second bar; to save a fall she clutched the post, Daddles seized the golden opportunity, and with a loud quack of joy careered flapping down the field. It was a terrible chase to catch their escaped pet, because Regina, Derrick, Magsie, and Una had to hold tight to their own burdens as well as assist Lesbia to recapture hers, but after much active exercise Daddles was at last surrounded and cornered, and carried off to Cage 49 in the poultry section.

Having seen their exhibits duly settled, the young people were obliged to retire from the grounds while the judging took place. They returned, however, at noon, and were some of the very first to enter the show when it opened. It was quite a gay scene. A tent in the centre of the field held stalls with specimens of cut flowers, plants in pots, and prize vegetables. There were mammoth marrows, enormous pea-pods, giant potatoes, huge apples, and black currants of tempting size and ripeness, grown (according to their label) under the protection of netting to preserve them from birds. Big pots of fuchsias and geraniums made a brave splash of colour, and asters, zinnias, pansies, and other florists' favourites displayed their beauties on little paper frills. Bouquets of garden, greenhouse, and wild flowers formed a special section on a table of their own, banked by a collection of ferns. In lieu of a local band a gramophone was giving a performance with rather scratchy records and a vast amount of burring. The Websters only peeped into the tent, then set off almost at a run for the poultry section, which was to them the chief centre of attraction. A large blue ticket hung outside the ducks' cage, and on it were printed the magic words "Second Prize".

"You darlings! You dear, clean, clever, quacking creatures! You deserve an eel apiece or something equally delicious for this," purred their mistress, with immense satisfaction. "Don't they look spotless, bless their hearts!"

"I'm glad we washed them," agreed Lesbia. "It probably turned the scale in their favour to have their feathers so spanky."

"The pullets have got 'Highly Commended!'" squealed Magsie, rushing back from a further inspection down the line of cages.

"Good! It was worth bringing them. Next spring I'll buy some eggs from Lord Lightman's and try and have a champion hatch. You'll see me winning a first prize before I've finished. But you've not managed badly to wangle a 'second', have you, Snowy and Daddles? Your auntie's proud of you to-day."

CHAPTER XV

The Stripling

Lesbia's holiday at Dolmadoc was not without its trials. Before she had stayed there for a week she began to have a shrewd suspicion that she had been invited mainly to act buffer between Regina and the Stripling. The two unfortunately did not "get on". Regina was blazingly clever, interesting, and very nice with those to whom she happened to take a fancy. In the bosom of her own family she was what is sometimes aptly described as "a little madam". She had scarcely any patience or tolerance for Derrick, she sat upon him continually, snapping at his most innocent remarks. The Stripling certainly needed some slight forbearance, for he was in the awkward stage of a young cockerel learning to crow, but the treatment meted out to him by his sister was drastic. Lesbia was placed in a very awkward position. She was constantly required to act as referee in the frequent squabbles. If, in the cause of justice, she took Derrick's part, Regina would sulk for hours, and if, on the other hand, she supported her friend, the Stripling would declare that girls always sided together and would hint gloomily that he had finished with the fair sex for ever.

Secretly Lesbia sympathized with him, though for the sake of peace she could not openly announce herself his ally. It was much the same with the younger children. Regina had a soft spot in her heart for Una, but with Magsie she was constantly bickering.

Magsie had her own views about life, and fiercely resented criticism. She used to go out of her way sometimes to show her independence, and would do most silly things out of sheer bravado. The two little boys were alternately spoilt or swept aside as nuisances, according to the mood in which Regina happened to find herself.

So long as the weather was fine, and the Websters could spread themselves out in the garden,

matters jogged along merrily enough, but a spell of rain sent the family barometer down with a run. Wales, like all mountainous districts, can do its wicked worst in the way of wet Augusts. For three days the view of the valley was totally obscured by mist, and the monotonous pat-pat of drops on the roof never ceased. The cottage, quite comfortable and commodious in ordinary circumstances, seemed suddenly to contract its walls. Lesbia, coming down one afternoon from the retreat of her bedroom, where she had retired to write a letter, found matters below somewhat strained. Mr. and Mrs. Webster had returned to Kingfield for a few days, leaving Pendry, the old nurse, in charge of the housekeeping and the children. It was the last item which made the difficulty. Nobody could agree about it. Pendry understood the term to refer to the whole family; Regina and Derrick declared it only meant the small fry, but included Magsie; while Magsie most indignantly repudiated being classed with Una, Piers, and Winston, and insisted that she was as grown-up as anybody. They were in the thick of the fray when Lesbia descended. Regina was having a sharp skirmish with Piers, whose painting-book, chinks, and other impedimenta occupied the one table at the sitting-room window.

"I've told you children before to keep to the nursery!" she commanded. "I won't have you bringing all your things in here, so you may just take them off."

"But Pendry *said* I might come here!" protested Piers, keeping a jealous hand on his possessions, which Regina was ruthlessly sweeping away.

"It's not Pendry's business. *I* tell you to go!"

"Indeed it *is* my business, Miss Regina," interrupted the old nurse, zealous for her authority. "They've got Meccano all over the nursery table, and there isn't a corner left for Piers. He was perfectly good and quiet until you came meddling with him. Why can't you let him alone?"

"You've got my book, Regina," whined Una's injured voice. "You *knew* I was reading *Little Women*."

"Oh, you children! You children!" protested Regina. "There isn't a corner of the house free from you. I wish I was in a convent or on a desert island. I'd get some peace and quiet there at any rate. Take your wretched book!" (flinging *Little Women* at Una). "How was *I* to know who was reading it? Why can't Magsie be quiet. I can hear that hinnying laugh of hers all over the house."

At that moment Regina did not at all resemble "The Blessed Damozel". She seemed very far away indeed from "the gold bar of Heaven". Lesbia seized her friend by the arm and whispered something into her ear. The storm-clouds cleared from Regina's face.

"Go a walk? Just by ourselves?" she replied, in the same undertone. "I'd adore it if *you* would. I vote we do. Only don't let all this tribe find out. Mum's the word."

"We'll wangle ourselves off quietly," agreed Lesbia.

It was a desperately bad afternoon for outdoor exercise. There was a strong cold wind, and the rain was absolutely pelting down. For the sake of change, however, the girls would have braved a blizzard. There is a certain stage of wet-weather ennui which becomes absolutely insupportable. They put on mackintoshes, old hats, and tall rubber boots, then sneaked out by the back door to avoid being seen by the rest of the family. They had only gone a few hundred yards when there was a sound of racing footsteps behind them, and they were caught up by the Stripling, also attired ready to face the elements.

"Derrick! Who told *you* to come?" inquired his sister inhospitably.

The boy grinned.

"Pendry gave me a hint, so I thought I'd clear out too, and leave the kids to fight over their Meccano. It's a ripping idea of yours. Where are you going?"

"Just a walk *by ourselves!*" declared Regina, taking her friend's arm.

"Oh, *do* let him come with us," pleaded Lesbia. "Why shouldn't we all three go together and look at the waterfall? It will be grand on a day like this."

"Two is company and three is none."

"The more the merrier, say I."

"Don't be a bluebottle, Regina. I tell you I'm coming, so that's the long and the short of it," decided Derrick, taking Lesbia's other arm, and beginning to tow the girls up hill. "We're the three graces, or the three fates, or the three anything else you like. It's a lucky number."

"When shall we three meet again, In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" quoted Regina, giving in for once.



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"Some rain certainly," agreed the Stripling cheerfully.

It was impossible to imagine a wetter day. The road was almost a rivulet, and the ditches were overflowing. Every leaf and blade of grass dripped tears. Even the birds seemed to have betaken themselves to shelter. The very cattle were huddled under the hedges. A drenched dog leaped through the bars of a gate and scurried past them. Yet the air was fresh and reviving, and there was something rather exhilarating in walking through the wet. It felt almost like sea-bathing. When a sudden squall of wind blew the rain in their faces they could fancy they were breasting a wave. Lesbia in the middle was particularly cheerful. She insisted upon what she called a three-part stunt. Each in turn improvised a line of verse, bringing it out as rapidly as possible.

Regina. The rain it raineth every day.

Lesbia. But in the house we will not stay.

Derrick. The kids we gladly leave behind.

Regina. And go a waterfall to find.

Lesbia. We few, we few, we happy three!

Derrick. I wish it were but you and me.

Regina. And I'd be gladly quit of *you*.

Lesbia. Now, now. No quarrelling you two.

Derrick. Like ducks we waddle fast along,

Regina. Quite jolly, though, and going strong.

Lesbia. My rhymes are done, I end the song.

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"We're getting silly," continued Lesbia. "I don't think somehow any one of us will ever win the Laureateship."

"More likely qualifying for another volume of Mother Goose's verses," grunted the Stripling.

"You're the goose, fast enough," snapped Regina.

"Oh no, madam, that literary honour belongs to you."

"Now don't spar," interrupted Lesbia. "Listen! I can hear the waterfall. We must be getting

quite near."

They had been climbing uphill along a rough, narrow road, and they now turned through a gate and walked across a field, and then plunged down into a wood to reach the stream. Path there was none, though a rough track among the trees showed them the direction they must take. It was beautiful in the gorge, but incredibly wet. The wind sent shower baths from the dripping trees on to their heads, the long bracken was soaking. The clumps of harebells were weighted down with raindrops, the blackberry blossoms lay battered. Vivid green moss and scarlet toadstools alone among the vegetation seemed to appreciate the excess moisture. Below them the waterfall thundered. They could see white gleams of it here and there among the trees. After a considerable scramble they at last reached a point of rock from which they had an uninterrupted view into the valley. The stream, a mild affair in fine weather, was swollen into a mighty volume of water that swirled along high above its usual banks, and dropped with a roar over the fall. It was a splendid sight, well worth the walk and the wet. They stayed watching it for some time, till Regina suddenly shivered with cold.

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"The wind's bitter here. I vote we get a move on," she suggested. "Let us go down the bank and take that lower path. It will lead out into the road by the old mill. It's nicer to go home another way."

The lower path was boggy, but a little extra wet made no difference to the already soaked party. They tramped steadily on, enjoying the woods and the view of the water. At one point the Stripling made a discovery. Stopping and peering down the bank he announced briefly:

"Great Judkins! Wild raspberries as large as life. Come on, you girls!"

There was indeed quite a feast waiting below. Owing to the bad weather few people had passed that way lately, and the fruit had had time to ripen. Derrick, Regina, and Lesbia descended upon it like three blackbirds, and spent a scratchy but blissful ten minutes gathering and eating all they could reach. Tangles of raspberry canes tear worse than almost anything in the world, and mackintoshes and fingers suffered badly. Regina, reaching over for a particularly large and ripe specimen, lost her hat. It fell a long way down the bank on to the rocks by the stream and disappeared.

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"O bother!" she cried. "Now my hat's gone. And however am I going to get it back? Derrick, just fetch it for me, will you?"

Derrick plucked the raspberry which Regina, in her agitation had missed, and shook his head.

"The snail he said too far, too far'," he quoted. "That hat's done for. You'll never see it again. It's probably dancing down-stream."

"It's probably nothing of the sort. I expect it's lying on the rocks if you'd only go and look for it. What a slacker you are."

"Thanks awfully! So pleased to hear your opinion of me. I'm ever so flattered, I assure you."

"Lesbia! Don't you think he ought to go and fetch my hat?"

"Lesbia doesn't think anything of the sort. I can see it in her eye. Do you, Lesbia?"

Thus appealed to, Lesbia was in a tight corner. Privately she thought Derrick would probably have fetched the hat if Regina had only asked him nicely. She tried to hedge.

"Shall I drop mine too?" she said jokingly, taking off her own hat and twirling it on her finger for fun. "Perhaps you'll fetch them both."

In a twinkling Derrick snatched it from her, threw it below on to the rocks, and went scrambling after it. Next moment a corner of the bank hid him from their view. The girls laughed.

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"Temper!" said Regina. "That's Derrick all over."

"I hope he won't be long. My hair's getting very wet," declared Lesbia.

They waited some time, but no Derrick returned with the hats.

"I suppose we shall have to go and see what he's doing," grumbled Regina, preparing for a downward scramble.

They had almost to slide among the bushes to reach the rocks. They arrived at the bottom scratched and mudstained. There was not a trace of Derrick anywhere. Neither were the hats to be seen. The brown water swirled past carrying sticks and branches on its foaming surface. Regina looked at its hurrying course, and at the slippery bank.

"I do hope——" she began, then stopped. She had no need to finish, for the same fear was in Lesbia's eyes. Where had Derrick vanished? There was no exit from the platform where they were standing except by the way they had come.

"We—we oughtn't to have let him go," faltered Lesbia.

"Could he have climbed up there?"

"We'll go and see."

In a horrible scare the girls retraced their steps, and ran along the top of the cliff, calling "Derrick" with all the force of their lungs. There was no reply. The only sound to be heard was the roar of the water. Regina, thoroughly terrified, burst into tears.

"It's my fault if he's drowned!" she sobbed. "Oh, what *are* we to do?"

The girls hunted about and called for some time, then finally went home in a frantic state to raise the alarm. The first person they saw as they entered the front door was Derrick, dressed in dry clothes and munching a green apple. He bowed politely.

"Your hats are drying by the fire," he said in a nonchalant tone.

"How *did* you get home?" gasped the two girls. "We've been looking for you everywhere?"

"Why, I climbed up the rocks and went on."

"You wretched boy! You gave us such a fright!" panted Regina.

"Mother Hubbard's dog isn't in it with you," declared Lesbia.

Derrick shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't help it if you chose to chase after me. I think I was a trump to take your hats home for you. You look uncommonly wet. Best change."

As little rivers were running from their garments down on to the hall floor, the girls took his advice and hurried into dry clothes.

"He was a mean wretch to play such a rag on us," fumed Regina, rubbing her damp hair with a towel.

"I thought nothing but a monkey could climb up those rocks. Boys have nine lives. I shan't be scared another time, whatever mad tricks he plays," declared Lesbia, buttoning her blouse in a hurry at the sound of the welcome tea-bell. "All the same," she added to herself, "Regina's far fonder of that Stripling than she'll admit, though they *do* spar. She had umpteen dozen fits when she thought he was drowned. If she really has such a warm corner for him, why, in the name of all common sense, can't she show it and be decent to him? I don't believe in people making a palaver about you when you're dead. If they've anything nice to say they'd better say it while you're alive and will enjoy hearing it. That's my opinion."

CHAPTER XVI

Friction

Lesbia returned to Kingfield High School to find herself a member of the Sixth Form, and a prefect, as well as an assistant teacher to the juniors. She had expected it, but the honours were none the less satisfactory. She had longed to be a prefect ever since her first year in the kindergarten, and had kept this goal for her ambition all the way up the school. It had always seemed a far more enviable position than that of head mistress. The girls who had annually held prefectships had been heroines in her eyes. It was something to feel she had worked her way from the baby of the school to rank as one of its principal officers. There was not a single other girl with such a long record as hers. The "Head" of the Sixth this year was Carrie Turner. By strict precedence of examinations Regina was really top, but she was such a newcomer that Miss Tatham considered she would not have enough experience in the ways of the school, and had given the preference to Carrie, whose marks were second best, and who was a naturally better leader. The other prefects were Marion, Calla, and Aldora, altogether making a set of six. It was considered a particularly enviable post at Kingfield High School, because, as well as conferring authority, it carried several privileges. Prefects, and prefects only, had a right to use the gate room. Kingfield was a mixture of ancient and modern, and, though the High School was an unromantic, commodious nineteenth-century building, a corner of it adjoined one of the old mediæval town gates. This gate, which now only arched a side street, had originally been one of the main entrances into the city. In shape it was a small tower with battlements, and contained a little room over the archway. Somehow, through a lucky stroke on the part of the governors, the High School had obtained possession of this tower room. A door led into it from the end of the passage near the studio. It was a tiny little den, and rather dark and musty, used mostly for storing odd things which did not happen to be wanted, but, because nobody else except themselves was allowed to enter, the prefects set great store by it. They held committee meetings here, and, although it was unwarmed, would prefer to sit and shiver rather than have their private confabulations in the comfort of their own classroom.

There was, of course, much to be arranged for the coming term. Each was apportioned a special department and agreed to look after its particular interests. Aldora undertook to be

responsible for the orchestra, which had languished during the tennis season but seemed capable of revival, Calla took hockey under her wing, Marion adopted the drama, Lesbia the arts and crafts, Regina the debating society, and Carrie herself became editress of the *School Magazine*. All the various activities promised to be most exciting, and the only trouble was lack of time to carry them on.

By virtue of their position the six prefects constituted a small set of their own. They had all been friends more or less before, but the new circumstances flung them closely together. Lesbia found this brought her a fresh difficulty. Marion Morwood had hitherto been considered her special chum. There had been a hitch in their friendship when Lesbia ran away from Paul and Minnie, and turned up unexpectedly at the Morwoods' house, but that episode—for which Lesbia always blushed—had been forgotten. She had often been invited to tea at the Morwoods, and had received many kindnesses from them. Marion, though rather injudicious, was well-meaning and affectionate. She had stuck loyally to her chum through several tight places. The pair had jogged along very amicably until Easter. Then Regina had appeared and had absolutely appropriated Lesbia, who was only half willing to become so completely her property. With Marion rather cool and offended, and Regina in a state of perpetual jealousy, Lesbia sometimes grew so exasperated that she left the pair of them to sulk and walked away with Calla or Aldora. Yet she was sorry, for she liked Marion, liked her better than Regina really, though the breach between them seemed slowly widening. All sorts of silly things helped to push them apart. For Marion's birthday Lesbia worked a little silk bag. It was the sort of fancy article which was fashionable in the school at the moment, to hold knitting-wool and any other trifles. Lesbia had put her prettiest design and her best embroidery into it, and Marion had professed herself utterly delighted.

"It's almost too nice to use," she declared ecstatically. "I shall keep it in a drawer at home, wrapped up in tissue paper, and only bring it out on high-days and holidays."

"Oh, nonsense! It was made for use," demurred Lesbia, pleased all the same at the high value set upon her handiwork.

It is sometimes very unfortunate when people take us at our own word. Lesbia, going into the cloakroom at eleven, about a fortnight after the birthday, was horrified to find her beautiful bag lying on the floor near the boot rack. It had evidently contained lunch, for it was smeared with butter, and showed plum stains at the bottom. It was indeed just the wreck of her pretty present. She picked it up, and the hot colour rushed into her face. It takes a St. Francis of Assisi to be "sweetly angered and patiently disquieted". Lesbia's anger was anything but saintly. It savoured, indeed, more of the sinner. She rushed across to where Marion was standing eating red Victoria plums, and held the unfortunate bag up by its scarlet cord.

"So this is the care you take of things people make for you," she exploded.

Marion looked conscious, but at once excused herself.

"Well, you told me to use it," she retorted.

"I never thought you'd get it into such a filthy mess as this. It's only fit for the laundry, and washing will utterly spoil it."

"I'm sorry——"

"Oh, don't apologize," snapped Lesbia sarcastically. "I know my poor little efforts weren't worth taking care of. I didn't put in any time over that bag. Oh, dear no!"

She turned away, feeling sore and uncomfortable, and at bottom ashamed of her outburst. She knew how untidy and careless Marion was, seizing up anything that came to hand, and that the ruin of the bag was certainly by accident and not design. By some strange freak of memory an axiom of Minnie's—kind, easy-going Minnie—flashed into her mind:

"It's best to take people just as they are, and then you get along with them."

Marion would always be shiftless, and impulsive, and tactless; still she had her good points.

"I'll forgive her—to-morrow!" thought Lesbia, cooling down a little.

But to-morrow, alack! came a fresh cause of offence. The Sixth were getting up a photographic exhibition, mainly of pictures which they had taken during the holidays. Marion was the lucky possessor of an enlarging apparatus, and she very kindly offered to enlarge a photo for each of her fellow-prefects if they would bring her the films.

Now, Lesbia's camera was a rather old-fashioned one and contained plates. She had taken a portrait of the Webster family having tea by the stream on a brilliant sunny day, and the negative was beautifully sharp and clear. She brought it to school packed in a flat box. Several other girls were clustering round Marion showing her their pet films.

"This is at Dawlish, on the sands."

"Mine's a view of Windermere."

"This is a snap of our fox-terrier, Barry. It's got him absolutely perfectly."

"Oh, you'll like mine! It's my baby niece, yawning in her perambulator. We think it's great."

"Here's mine, old sport," said Lesbia, unpacking her treasure.

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She handed it to her chum, who, to do her credit, perhaps did not realize it was a plate and not a film. Marion seized it so carelessly that it slid from her hand, fell upon the floor, and smashed in three pieces. For an instant there was a ghastly silence.

"Oh! Hard luck!" sympathized Calla.

Marion was stooping to pick up the fragments.

"I'm *awfully* sorry!" she apologized. "It can be pieced together though I'm sure. I'll take it to the Kodak shop and see what they can do with it. They'll probably stipple it up so that it doesn't show in the least."

In certain circumstances there is nothing more aggravating than too great optimism. To have your trials made light of, and to be told a thing will turn out all right when you are absolutely sure that such a happy ending is quite outside the bounds of all possibility, irritates rather than soothes.

"All right a hundred years hence perhaps, but all wrong now!" flared Lesbia. "It *can't* be mended, so don't talk humbug. You've smashed it, and it's done for. I wish to goodness I'd left it safely at home and never trusted it to you. Of all butter-fingered Handy Andies you're the biggest!"

"Might as well let her try and get it mended," urged Calla.

"No thanks. I'd rather take it home."

And Lesbia, still with red spots in her cheeks, put the poor fragments tenderly back in their box, and turned away to place them inside her locker.

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Marion, penitent, but annoyed at being called a butter-fingered Handy Andy, let the matter slide for the moment. Marion could never keep up any quarrel, however, for longer than a morning, and before afternoon school she had made her peace, and was walking in the gymnasium with her arm round her chum's waist, very much to the indignation of Regina, who considered Lesbia her own special property.

It was the last week in October that the Franklin Shakespearean Company came to Kingfield. Their advent had been well advertised by placards on the hoardings, and by handbills which were left at people's houses or sent by post. They were a famous company and were always sure of a welcome in whichever town they arrived on tour. Lesbia, going from school to catch her tram-car, saw the large notice of their performances being posted by a bill-sticker, and stopped to look. *Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, Much Ado About Nothing, The Tempest, Macbeth*. What would she not give to see a single one of them? Lesbia had never been to a Shakespeare play in her life. She had studied *Julius Cæsar* and *The Merchant of Venice* carefully with the notes at school, and had read many of the other plays as part of her preparation for the literature class. To see all the familiar characters actually on the stage would be bliss indeed. But there did not seem the slightest chance that such an ambition would be gratified. Lesbia had very little pocket-money. The Pattersons did not grumble at keeping her, but they seldom expended anything extra on her behalf. She never liked to ask for such indulgences as entertainments. She mentioned, indeed, that the Franklin Shakespeare Company was coming to Kingfield, and how splendid it would be to see them, but nobody took the hint. Kitty and Joan were going that week to a concert and to a performance of *Trilby*, and had no other evenings disengaged, even if they had offered to escort Lesbia. Mrs. Patterson considered that schoolgirls should stick to their lessons during term-time, and keep all such dissipation as theatres for the holidays.

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"It's no use," thought Lesbia dismally. "I know heaps of other girls will be going, but it won't be my luck. I wasn't born lucky. I may wear as many mascots as I like, but the fact remains."

Lesbia was not quite as ill-used by fate as she made out, for she received and accepted an invitation to have tea with Marion on Saturday afternoon.

"I've asked my two cousins," said her chum, "that will just make four of us, and we'll play that new game of cards I learnt at the Graingers'. It's absolutely priceless. We screamed over it. I never had such fun in my life. You'll be *sure* to come? Don't go and get a cold or a toothache or anything stupid."

"Rather not! You'll see me turning up on Saturday whatever happens."

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Lesbia was really looking forward to the visit. It seemed some slight compensation for missing the theatre. Moreover, she always enjoyed herself at the Morwoods' house. On Wednesday Calla greeted her in the cloakroom and drew her aside.

"Doing anything on Saturday afternoon, old sport?" she asked confidentially.

"Yes, I'm going out to tea."

"Oh, what a pity! Can't you put it off?"

"I'm afraid not. Why?"

"Well, we've got a ticket to spare for the *matinée*, and I was going to ask you to come with us."

"*The Merchant of Venice?*" gasped Lesbia.

Calla nodded.

"Can't you wangle it?" she urged.

"I'd give everything I possess. But I promised *faithfully* to go to tea. I shall give frightful offence if I scoot off to the theatre instead. In fact, it can't be done."

"N-n-o, I suppose not," admitted Calla regretfully. "I'm sorry though."

"You can't be sorrier than I am," sighed Lesbia, going upstairs to her form room.

At eleven o'clock, as she was eating her lunch in the gymnasium Marion rushed up to her.

"Oh, Lesbia," she said excitedly, "should you mind very much coming to tea the week after instead of next Saturday? Would it make any difference to you?"

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"Not a scrap," answered Lesbia, clutching at the opportunity. "It would suit me quite as well if it suits you. Shall we arrange it that way, then?"

"Yes, please, if you really don't mind. Thanks ever so much!"

And Marion fled away without further explanation.

Lesbia congratulated herself upon having got out of her engagement so easily. She would be able now to accept Calla's invitation and go to *The Merchant of Venice*. The thought of it almost set her dancing. She went in search of Calla at once, but could not find her before the bell rang for botany class. As soon as school was over she took her aside and broached the delightful subject. Calla's face fell.

"Oh, Lesbia, I'm so sorry!" she explained. "You said you couldn't come, and I've asked Marion now."

"Marion?"

"Yes!"

"Why, it was Marion who'd asked me to tea on Saturday!"

"Oh, was it? You never told me that. How was I to know?"

Lesbia sat down on her boot-locker and relieved her feelings by giving a very plain and unflattering opinion of her chum's conduct.

"I stuck to *my* part of the bargain," she wound up wrathfully.

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"But you didn't. You told her another week would do quite as well."

"Because I thought I was going to the theatre. You'd asked me."

"Well, Marion didn't know that. It's all a mix up. What am I to do? Tell her about it?"

"No, if she's accepted she'd better go."

"I'm most dreadfully sorry, Lesbia! I wish we'd another ticket."

"Oh, it can't be helped now!" and Lesbia rather ungraciously wrenched her arm from Calla's apologetic grasp, banged on her hat anyhow, and fled from the cloakroom, feeling about therossest girl in Kingfield.

"It's like my luck," she said to herself bitterly.

To try and take some of the sting out of her disappointment she asked leave to go after school to Pilgrims' Inn Chambers, to return a book which Miss Joyce had lent her. She found her friend looking quite *en fête*, in a most artistic dress, with fresh flowers in the studio, and elaborate cakes set forth on the tea table.

"I won't come in," said Lesbia, catching a vision of these splendours through the open door, and concluding visitors were expected. "I've only brought back your book, that's all."

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"But you are coming in," insisted Miss Joyce. "Don't be silly! Who do you think is coming to tea to-day? I'd give you a hundred guesses! Miss Vivian L'Estrange, who plays a principal part in the Franklin Company. She's old Mr. Broughten's niece, and she's staying with him while she's in Kingfield. I promised I wouldn't ask a crowd to meet her, because she's tired and wants to be quiet in the afternoons, but I'm sure she won't mind a schoolgirl like you. Here they are!"

What followed was like a dream to Lesbia. Mr. Broughten remembered her, asked about the antiquarian scrap-book, and introduced her to his niece, a charming lady who seemed a mixture of Portia and Rosalind and Miranda all rolled into one in private life. It was a friendly little tea-gathering, and the end of it all was that Miss Vivian L'Estrange offered the whole party seats in the stage box for Friday evening.

"Uncle Will wants to see me in *The Tempest*, and he hates to sit alone, don't you, Uncle?" she said laughingly.

"Ask your aunt to let you go, dear, and I'll guarantee to take you, and to see you safe home after the performance," said Miss Joyce to Lesbia. "You'd like it, wouldn't you?"

"Like it? I'd be the envy of the whole school! It's the biggest piece of luck in my life!" cried Lesbia, with shining eyes.

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CHAPTER XVII

A Hard Term

Late autumn brought the anniversary of Lesbia's upheaval from Denham Terrace. She was now nearly "sweet seventeen", and in some respects at any rate felt rather grown-up. It seemed immeasurably more than a year since she had settled down at 28 Park Road. She was beginning to look back upon her life with the Hiltons as a remote period of childhood. Some episodes in it were very sweet, and were changing their aspect now they were viewed from a distance. Paul's hand on her shoulder when he called her "little sister", the children's arms round her neck as they hugged her good night, the kiss that Minnie always came to give her in bed, these were memories that increased in value as she grew more capable of appreciating their true worth. Lesbia was very slowly learning a great many things, some pleasant and some unpleasant, and among those that hurt was the realization of her conduct in deserting Minnie at such an awkward pinch, and leaving her to struggle with the children on that Atlantic voyage. Well! She had made a sudden choice, and had thrown in her lot with Kingfield High School. She would at least do her best in the line which she had elected for herself. To Lesbia this "best" meant working hard at her prep, which she still detested, and taking an active part as leader in all the various games and societies, a rôle which she enjoyed very much. A wider opportunity was opening for her, however, and one in which she had a far more difficult task to fulfil.

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The Christmas term-end festivities tired Miss Tatham out. For a long time she had not been strong, and had been struggling to keep up with the hundred and one duties expected from the principal of a big school. During the holidays she collapsed, and her doctor insisted upon several months' entire rest. The governors of the school, called in committee to face the sudden emergency, appointed a locum tenens to rule in her stead for a term.

Miss Ormerod, who thus came in a hurry to fill up the gap, was a B.A., and had had high school experience—too much so, the girls decided after a few days of her acquaintance. She was one of those people who are clever, but tactless. She had passed any number of examinations with flying colours, but had no knowledge of human souls. From the very first she set everybody's bristles rising. The teachers, accustomed to Miss Tatham's personal magnetism, were put out by abrupt criticisms and lack of consideration, while the girls declared that a gorgon had been sent to reign over them. Miss Ormerod, to do her strict justice, was hardworking and conscientious. She never spared herself. It was a difficult post, and she filled it according to her own lights. If she found what she judged slackness she was doing her duty to correct it. But between a "wise administrator" and a "jack-in-office" there is all the difference in the world. Some women love power, and exercise it unmercifully. Woe betide the lesser planets that are forced to circle in their orbits.

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The school, accustomed to discipline, obeyed, but grumbled under its breath.

"Miss Tatham never made any silly rules about not talking in the hall," declared Kathleen indignantly, coming into the Sixth Form room smarting from a sharp rebuke and confiding her woes to a sympathetic circle.

"No! It's perfectly ridiculous. We must talk somewhere, I suppose."

"We shall be having 'Silence' in the cloakroom next."

"Or in the playground."

"I wish darling Tatie was back."

"You didn't call her 'darling' when she was here."

"Well, I do now."

"Miss Ormerod's as hard as nails."

"I want to call her 'ramrod' myself."

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"Oh, don't be clever, please."

"She blinks and winks through those spectacles."

"Don't you *hate* spectacles?"

"And there's a little sort of grate in her voice, and then she clears her throat, and you know she's going to say something unpleasant."

"I meant to like her," declared Ernie thoughtfully. "I came to school on her first day prepared to adore her. I think it was because I once knew a Miss Ormerod who was very pretty. Well, I tell you, directly I saw her I got a shock. I thought I had never seen anyone so horrid in my life. I felt we were opposite poles. I don't know when I took such an intense dislike to anybody. It's what you call an 'antipathy'."

"Not 'love at first sight' exactly!"

"Hardly!"

"I do not love you, Dr. Fell, The reason why I cannot tell!" quoted Calla.

"But I *can* tell the reason. She's cross, and a martinet, and she never makes any jolly jokes like Tatie used to do—bless her heart!"

"You're altogether gone on Tatie nowadays."

"Of course I am. I wrote her a letter last Saturday, and she sent me a picture post card of the place she's staying at."

"O-o-h! *Do* give me the address. I'll write to her too. I never thought of it."

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"Let's write her a round-robin and say we wish she was back and we detest Miss Ormerod," suggested Marion impulsively.

"No! No! That would spoil her holiday. The doctor said she wasn't to have any worry."

If the Sixth Form resented the attitude of the new principal the juniors were even more prejudiced. They discussed her among themselves and set her down as "a brute". Edie Browne, who, out of sheer opposition, ventured a word in her favour, was promptly squashed.

"It's not *fashionable* to like her," declared Maisie Martin, and Maisie led the opinions of the lower school.

Lesbia had at first reserved her judgment, but soon she had very good cause to rue the advent of Miss Ormerod. As junior assistant governess she still taught in Forms I and II. Teaching was not Lesbia's natural walk in life, and though she struggled on with it she really did not do it very well. Miss Tatham, having made the arrangement so as to cancel her fees and allow her to remain at the High School, had been rather lenient with her, and had overlooked many palpable deficiencies. Not so Miss Ormerod. She had an immensely high ideal of a teacher's standard, and she was carefully testing the capacities of her staff. One Wednesday proved a black day for Lesbia. Directly she walked into II_B she became aware of a spirit of general unrest. The girls were "out of hand". She had been through similar crises before and knew the symptoms. Fanny Holden was lolling on her desk instead of sitting upright, Rose Davis and Marjory Birkshaw had their heads bent together. Ella Wilkinson was fidgeting with her pencil box, Gladys Dorman kept casting meaning glances at Chrissie Taylor, and Mary Avens, in defiance of all schoolroom tradition, had pulled off her ribbon and was re-plaiting her wisp of a pigtail. The blackboard, which ought to have been cleaned, still bore sums in vulgar fractions. The map had not yet been put out. Lesbia rapped on the desk and called the form to order.

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"What's the monitress been doing?" she demanded sharply. "Marjory, come here at once and clean the board. Can you make a little *more* noise about it?" (as Marjory clumped her way to the front). "Where's the duster? Now be careful. You'll have the whole thing over. There! I told you."

For Marjory's vigorous and ungentle scrubbing had overbalanced the easel, and away crashed the blackboard on to the floor, breaking the pegs, and only just missing the window by a merciful inch. The form giggled, and Lesbia scolded as she helped to pick up the wreckage. The pegs were smashed and she had to sharpen them with a penknife before they would fit into their holes in the easel, and once more support the board. All this took considerable time and delayed the lesson. The girls watched as if it had been a specially provided entertainment. Marjory's face was not at all contrite; she unrolled the map so roughly that Lesbia took it from her and hung it up herself.

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"Go to your seat," she commanded, catching a smile exchanged between Marjory and Ella, "and if I've any more trouble I shall report you."

The monitress shuffled back noisily between the rows of desks, giving a pinch to Gladys as she passed, an episode which Lesbia, anxious to get on with the lesson, judged it expedient to overlook. She had opened her book, ready to begin, when suddenly an unexpected thing happened. Through the open window sailed a queen wasp, and headed straight for the desks. It was, of course, very early in the year for wasps, but the queens fly abroad as soon as the spring stirs, and this one no doubt was intent on nest-building.

Instantly the form was in panic. The girls squealed, and dodged about, and ducked their heads.

"O-o-h! Look at it!"

"It's coming at me!"

"It's a hornet!"

"Mind, Ella!"

"I don't want to get stung!"

"It's going for Chrissie!"

"Don't let it get into your hair, Rose!"

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Some of the more timorous crouched under their desks, Gladys bolted in the direction of the door. Lesbia did not like wasps herself, but she made a supreme exertion of courage, seized the blackboard duster, pursued the enemy, knocked it down on to the floor, and slew it with a ruler. She picked up the corpse gingerly and placed it upon a piece of blotting-paper.

"Perhaps it will do for the museum; it's not very much squashed," she commented. "I'll give it to Miss Chatham. Now, girls, be quiet and sit still. How silly you are! It might have been a lion instead of only a wasp."

But to settle down after such an excitement was impossible to the form. They had started badly, and they went on in disorder. They talked and giggled and generally "ragged" until Lesbia in desperation called out:

"Silence! I shall report you all! If you can't behave yourselves I shall have to fetch Miss Ormerod."

There is an old fable of a mother who threatened to throw her baby to the wolves if it cried again, and of an intelligent wolf who, hearing further squalls and running up eager for the feast, was much disgusted at being beaten away with a broom. It is seldom we like to be taken quite at our word. As a matter of fact, Lesbia looked as blank as her pupils when, at that exact moment, the door opened to admit the principal.

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"There's a great deal of noise in here," remarked Miss Ormerod, which was hardly a correct statement, for her entrance had produced an instant and ghastly silence.

Lesbia, blushing and confused, explained the cause of the disturbance, showing the remains of the queen wasp as proof.

"I'm astonished at your making such an absurd fuss," frowned Miss Ormerod at the form. "Now, let me see how quietly you can get along with your work. Please go on," nodding to Lesbia.

To see Miss Ormerod sitting down on the teacher's chair, evidently intending to stop and listen, gave poor Lesbia what she afterwards described as "umpteens spasms". To deliver a lesson under the eye of the Principal was an ordeal for any junior assistant mistress even if she were well prepared. And, alas! Lesbia was not prepared at all. She had been busy with her own Latin and botany the night before, and had trusted to luck to get through the geography class with IIB. She was supposed to be teaching them the natural features of France, so she hurriedly drew an outline of that country upon the blackboard, and commenced to mark in the principal mountains and rivers, aided by stealthy glances at the map. She knew their general direction, but in her embarrassment she could not remember their names, and the book—on which she had pinned her trust—was in Miss Ormerod's hand.

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Now it was a canon of the school that mistresses should have their own subjects at their fingertips, and teach their lessons in the form of lectures, without constant reference to notes. By all good rights Lesbia ought to have been able to reel off the physical features of France as easily as she could repeat the multiplication table, but her wretched memory was an absolute blank. The sight of Miss Ormerod sitting there and directing what seemed the full telescopic power of her spectacles upon the blackboard, wiped away any fragments of knowledge which lingered in her agitated brain. She flushed and faltered, and tried to look at the map, and was in such a palpable quandary that, to save the situation, the Principal interfered.

"If you don't feel well," she remarked sternly, "you had better sit down, and I'll take the lesson."

With trembling knees and racing pulse Lesbia sank on to the chair, and listened in deep humiliation while Miss Ormerod, without any assistance from the book, gave an excellent geography lesson. The girls were models of attention and intelligence, and everything which they ought to have been, but never were, under their junior teacher. Lesbia hardly knew them for the same form.

"I shall hear about this from Miss Ormerod," she ruminated. "I don't suppose for a moment this is the end of it."

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It certainly was not. She had a most unpleasant interview in the Principal's study that afternoon, and received scathing criticism on her incapacity and lack of discipline. Miss Ormerod instituted a thorough supervision over her teaching, proposing to be present herself during the geography lessons, and warning her of surprise visits any time during her other classes.

"If you undertake to teach in this school you will do it properly or not at all," finished the head mistress grimly. "I consider so far you've utterly failed and you're worse than useless as a help to the staff."

Lesbia went home overwhelmed with shame. Miss Ormerod was very hard, but there had been

justice in her remarks. A girl who was giving tuition in return for her fees ought to have seen to it that her services were of real value to the school. It was a wrong balance of duty to concentrate on her own homework and neglect to prepare for her classes. She could appreciate that point now, though it had not struck her before. It would be a horrible ordeal to teach in Miss Ormerod's presence, but there would be one compensation at any rate; the children would behave themselves, and she would be treated to no more of the "ragging" which had often made the lessons unendurable.

"If they know she may pop in any moment I believe they'll keep quiet even during dictation. Young wretches! I shall have a sword to dangle over their heads now," she thought, cheering up a little.

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There is no doubt that Miss Ormerod, like many new brooms, "swept clean", but the girls considered that she made too clean a sweep altogether of the past traditions of the school. She had many theories of her own regarding girls, and she was anxious to put them into practice.

She particularly waged war against what she termed "sentiment". She objected to seeing girls walking about the playground with their arms round each other's waists, or to the display of any affection. She called such behaviour "early Victorian", and spoke of it with contempt. During the war she had taken the place of a junior master at a boys' grammar school, and her ideal was that girls should exhibit their feelings as little as their brothers. She made a new rule that recreation time must be spent in definite games, and that nobody was to be allowed to lounge about the playground or gymnasium and chat. This met with fierce opposition among the seniors and juniors alike. They talked about it fifty to the dozen in their cloakrooms.

"I never heard such nonsense in all my life."

"Mayn't take each other's arms, indeed."

"What would happen if I kissed anybody?"

"Oh, you'd get reported!"

"Kissing's called 'unhealthy', if you please."

"Oh, indeed, is it? I thought 'Any time was kissing time'."

"Don't tell Miss Ormerod so, that's all."

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"*Why* shouldn't we walk round the gym and talk?"

"We're supposed to be learning to gossip."

"What *is* gossip?"

"Ask me a harder."

"Miss Tatham never said we weren't to have chums."

"Oh, but *she* was sensible!"

"Miss Ormerod's just a crank."

"It's too bad her coming and upsetting all our ways."

"I vote we don't play any wretched old games."

"We can't be *made* to play when we don't want to."

The prefects in particular thought it a great undermining of their dignity to be expected to tear about during recreation-time like any juniors. They were determined to resist the new rule. When a mistress, under orders from the principal, came into the playground, broke up groups of girls, and insisted upon all joining in a common game of rounders, the seniors hit the ball feebly, walked instead of running, and plainly showed that they did not mean to be coerced against their will. Their example spread downwards. It was at once fashionable to be a "slacker" or "shirker", and the unfortunate mistress who was told off to superintend the playground during eleven o'clock "break" had a bad time of it. With the knowledge that Miss Ormerod was peeping from her study window she made valiant efforts to set games going, but forced play is very different from the real article, and her attempts generally ended in dismal failure. Whether Miss Tatham, resting in the sunshine of Torquay, received a hint of the situation is uncertain. Lesbia, however, who had sent her a picture post card, one day received a letter in return. It gave a pleasant description of her holiday, but it ended with the following passage:

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"I hope to come back after Easter, but meantime I trust you prefects to do all you can to make matters run smoothly. You in particular, Lesbia, as the oldest pupil, I ask to be 'loyal to the school', and to use your influence with the others. If I can feel that things are going on all right in my absence I shall get well twice as fast. Please tell that to the rest. I have not time to write to them all."

Lesbia, who had been one of the principal shirkers at the hated game of rounders, pulled wry faces over the letter, but patted it in her pocket nevertheless.

"I'd do anything to please Miss Tatham," she decided. "Yes, I guess I've got to be 'loyal to the

school'. I know what she means. Those juniors have been leading everybody a dance since they saw us prefects giving them the cue. Even Marion called them little pigs yesterday. It can't go on. I'll ask Carrie to call a prefects' meeting, and we'll talk it over."

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The confabulation in the little room over the archway, being in the nature of a committee, was not banned by Miss Ormerod, and the six girls who met there used their tongues freely. They thoroughly aired their grievances, but came to the sage conclusion that for the sake of school discipline they must uphold any mandate, however unpopular, from the temporary "Head".

"A little extra exercise won't do you any harm, Aldora, you're getting far too fat, you old Jumbo!" urged Carrie, putting down the last objector and proposing the resolution from the "chair".

"It's only till Easter anyway," seconded Lesbia "and then I hope to goodness Miss Tatham will be back again."

"And may Miss Ormerod transfer her talents to a boys' preparatory," minced Calla.

Having decided grimly to stand by law and order, the prefects next day surprised the school at eleven o'clock break by leading the games with the greatest unction. They tore about the playground in a state of such enthusiasm that the astounded juniors followed their lead, and found themselves whirled into action by a kind of magnetic influence. Fickle fashion veered round, and it was at once popular to enjoy the games, indeed for a few weeks they had quite a vogue.

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Miss Ormerod, peeping through her study window, looked on with approval, and congratulated herself on the wisdom of her new rule, and the great improvement which she was making during her reign. She knew nothing of Miss Tatham's letter to Lesbia, nor suspected it was the latter's influence which had worked the miracle. Loyalty might indeed be very helpful to the school, but on this occasion virtue had to be its own reward, and did not meet with any acknowledgment from head-quarters.

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CHAPTER XVIII

An Adventure

Please do not think, because the girls of Kingfield High School resented being obliged to play rounders during eleven o'clock break, that they therefore were not enthusiastic on the subject of games. They were keen on hockey, and their team had won three matches during the season. Unfortunately they had no field near the school, and they were obliged to go two miles by tram to a pitch which they rented in the suburbs. The journey, however, made a pleasant Wednesday afternoon's excursion, and really added to the excitement of the practice. Miss Ormerod often went herself to watch, and on one occasion played in a match "School versus Mistresses", and astonished everybody by her agility. She made a great point of the due training of second and third teams, a matter which had been rather neglected.

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"You have to educate your best players," she told the Games Committee, "I always say the strength of a school lies in its reserve teams. Every girl in the first team ought to have an understudy, then there'll be no panic if she has suddenly to drop out for any reason. I've known matches ruined because schools hadn't the sense to train their reserves properly."

But the most zealous advocate of hockey cannot fight with the British climate, and Wednesday after Wednesday during the latter part of the Easter term were hopelessly wet. The girls drilled in the gymnasium instead, grousing at the disappointment of missing their fixtures, and resigning themselves to a lower record than they had at first ventured to hope. Miss Ormerod, who thought games of paramount importance in a school, at last in desperation commandeered Friday afternoon, hitherto devoted to the various outlets of "Self Expression", and turned it into an extra hockey practice.

Before this change there had been a succession of fine Fridays, then the weather seemed to take a spite against the school, and instead of keeping up its good character treated them on alternate weeks to a deluge.

It was on one of these wet Fridays that Miss Chatham suggested taking the Sixth Form to see the City Museum. This was a new development in Kingfield and had lately been opened. It occupied a large room in the old Guild Hall, and was only about five minutes walk from the school. Nothing could be nearer on such a wet day.

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The Sixth joyfully snatched the opportunity offered to them, put away books, tools, and other impediments, and went to the cloakroom to change their shoes. Ten minutes later a jolly-looking party, with mackintoshes and umbrellas, followed Miss Chatham down the High Street to the

Guild Hall. They went under the ancient archway, and across the courtyard, and through the old doorway, and up the oak stairs, and along the tapestried corridor into the great central hall, hung with the armour and weapons of bygone Kingfield citizens. From this hall led many thick oak doors, and one under the minstrels' gallery gave access to the new museum. It was a fairly large room, built like the rest of the Guild Hall in mediæval fashion, with sandstone walls, a carved roof, and latticed windows. It held a number of show-cases containing various exhibits.

The girls stacked their umbrellas in a corner and prepared to enjoy themselves. There were certainly many interesting things on view, a beautiful collection of stuffed British birds, arranged in most natural fashion with their nests and eggs, a case full of objects from Ancient Egypt, a number of bronze implements, stone hammers, flint arrows, and other prehistoric weapons, lovely shells and corals, a cabinet of butterflies, and some fine illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. A lady was acting curator for the afternoon, and Marion enthusiastically claimed her acquaintance and introduced Lesbia. The two girls presently found themselves inspecting the show-cases, with Miss Renton at their elbow explaining the exhibits to them.

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Naturally the rest of the form came hurrying up and clustered round to listen, so an impromptu museum lecture resulted.

"I'd love to look at some of the other pictures in those old books," said Marion quietly to her friend. "I'm learning illuminating at school, and those manuscripts are simply gorgeous."

"I can't take the books out when so many people are about," whispered Miss Renton, "but if you can wait after the other girls go, I'll unlock the case."

"Oh, thanks immensely. May Lesbia stay too? She's keen on painting."

"Certainly if she likes; but no more please. Two are quite enough."

"Right-o! I won't breathe a word to the others."

Accordingly, when Miss Chatham told her party to collect their umbrellas and go, Marion asked and received permission for herself and Lesbia to remain for ten minutes longer with Miss Renton. The rest of the girls had seen all they wanted and were anxious to hurry off home. Even Regina did not hint for an invitation to join the favoured pair. Their footsteps echoed through the big hall as they walked away. Miss Renton looked after them, then closed the door of the museum.

"I don't want any more of the public coming in to-day," she declared. "If I open the show-cases we must have the place to ourselves."



[241] Then followed a very pleasant ten minutes which lengthened into half an hour. The girls were allowed to inspect and even to handle many of the beautiful curios. It was delightfully flattering to have cases unlocked specially for their benefit, and much more interesting than seeing the exhibits among a crowd.

"I've a box in here that I haven't had time to unpack yet," said Miss Renton, leading the way into a small stone ante-chamber which opened out of the museum. "This little room was once an oratory. It's only lighted by a lancet window. I use it as a store cupboard, because it's too dark to hold a show-case."

Kneeling on the floor in the ante-room the girls watched Miss Renton unpack some further treasures, then held up the lids of the show-cases while she bestowed them in their due places.

"It's quite nice to have two assistant museum-keepers," she laughed. "These great glass lids are so heavy I never dare to lift them without someone to help me. If one dropped back there would be a smash."

At last everything was arranged, the cases were locked, and the keys returned to Miss Renton's bag. She put on her waterproof, took her umbrella, and prepared to leave the museum. But when she tried to open the old oak door it was fast shut. She turned the ancient handle and tugged and pulled, but all in vain. Then the horrible truth burst upon her.

[242] "We're locked in!" she gasped.

There was no possibility of doubt about it. It was quite easy also to see how it had happened. When the museum was on view the door was propped open to admit the public, the curator always shut it before she left, and as she walked across the courtyard of the Guildhall would ring the caretaker's bell, as a signal that the place might be closed.

To-day the bell had been broken, and the caretaker, noticing the High School girls go away, must have come upstairs afterwards, and seeing the museum door shut had locked it, thinking Miss Renton had gone with the others. The three unfortunate prisoners were aghast. It seemed almost too bad to be true. They all tried the door in turns, they knocked, they thumped, and they called. There was no response except a dull echo.

"Why couldn't the caretaker look inside to make sure we were gone before he locked up?" asked Marion, half-crying.

"Perhaps he did, and we were inside the little oratory. It's my own stupid fault for shutting the door. I ought to have thought about it. It never struck me he might come upstairs and think we were gone."

"Will he be coming up again?"

"It's not at all likely. He's probably gone home."

"Won't anybody else hear us if we knock and call?"

"I'm dreadfully afraid not, but we'll try again."

[243] So once more they thumped and shouted and the old hall echoed, but nobody came to release them. The situation was serious. If the caretaker had gone home they were very much locked in, for not only was the door of the museum secured, but also the door of the big hall, and the door leading to the courtyard. Until to-morrow morning they were as good as prisoners.

There still, however, remained the window. Miss Renton climbed on a chair and peered through the small leaded panes. Unfortunately, instead of opening on to the street, it only overlooked a kind of sunk well among the buildings, so it would be impossible to attract the attention of anybody outside.

Marion's eyes were filling with tears.

"Mother'll be *so* anxious when I don't turn up," she gulped. "She'll never think of coming to the museum to look for me."

"Nobody will," said Lesbia with a suspicious quaver in her voice.

"It'll be simply ghastly to stay here all night."

"And so cold."

"I'd give worlds for some tea."

"We have each other's company at any rate," consoled Miss Renton. "Be glad you weren't locked in alone."

"Alone! Oh, I'd go mad!"

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"So should I. I'd be afraid of the dark, and of spooks, and of rats, and of all sorts of horrible things. Yes, I'd be absolutely raving in less than ten minutes."

"And yet, in the Middle Ages, girls were sometimes shut up alone in prisons far more dismal than this room, and kept there for years. Think of the prisoners in the Bastille. Or those who were taken by the 'Inquisition'."

"How horribly cruel. I wonder they lived through it, poor things."

"It's all very well to talk about the Middle Ages, but that doesn't get us out of this place," said Marion, rather crossly. "Are we going to stay the night here? Or is there any way of getting out?"

Miss Renton looked at the small portion of the window which opened, and shook her head.

"Even if we could squeeze through there we couldn't drop to the yard, and we should be no better off if we did."

"I shall hate the sight of these show-cases for evermore. I believe that stuffed badger is blinking at me."

"Don't be silly!"

"I know I'm silly, but it's beginning to get d-d-d-dark in here, and I'm scared to stay all n-n-n-night."

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Marion was dabbing her eyes openly. She made no pretence at heroism. Adventures might be romantic enough in the Middle Ages, but they were decidedly unpleasant in the twentieth century. She would rather read about them than experience them.

Leaving her chum to be consoled by Miss Renton, Lesbia mounted the chair and looked through the window. About three feet below her there was a fairly broad ledge, which adjoined a roof to the right. After all, the opening was not so very small.

"I believe I could squeeze through here," she volunteered. "If you'd guarantee to hold me tight, I could step on that ledge down there, and get on to the roof, then I'd scramble along till I came in sight of the street and could shout for help."

"Oh, Lesbia! Do you really dare?" gasped Marion, running to the window.

It seemed their only possible plan of escape, and as Lesbia declared she was not nervous, Miss Renton offered to help her. She fastened her own leather belt as a rope to the belt of Lesbia's coat, to make a firm support by which to hold her, and dragged a table under the window for them both to stand upon.

Luckily Lesbia was slim, so she squeezed through the frame without much difficulty, and lowered her feet on to the ledge. Miss Renton steadying her by the belt, she walked about a yard, then was able to grasp a piece of gutter and to step on to the roof.

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"Let go. I'm all right now!" she shouted. She clambered up the slates on her hands and knees till she reached the ridge. Even then she was not within view of the street, and had to scale more angles of roofs before she caught the welcome glimpse of a passing tram-car. Once in a position where she could be seen she called loudly for help. A little street arab spied her first, and stood gaping and pointing. In about half a minute a crowd collected. Somebody ran for a policeman, others shouted to Lesbia to stay where she was. In a short time a window-cleaner arrived with a long ladder. He mounted and came to the rescue. Lesbia climbed down into the street feeling exceedingly foolish, and ashamed of having made such a commotion in the city. The policeman was kind, and the crowd sympathetic, but it was hardly nice to be the centre of so very much attention. People were standing up on the tops of tram-cars to watch, carts and vans stopped to ask what was the matter, and those on the outside of the ring were even beginning to call for a doctor and an ambulance, imagining that she was injured. For a minute or two all traffic was suspended.

Fortunately the policeman knew where the caretaker of the Guild Hall lived, and sent a boy to fetch him. He arrived with his keys, unlocked the big door, and went with Lesbia to release the other prisoners, who were waiting and wondering what had been happening.

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"I never felt so glad in my life as when I heard the key grating in the lock," said Marion, with a sigh of relief, as they walked downstairs. "No more museum for me, thanks. I shall be terrified ever to go inside the place again."

"Why, it wouldn't be likely to happen twice," laughed Lesbia.

"You never know. The door might bang suddenly and get jammed. I wouldn't risk it. If you knew the agonies I suffered in there. I wonder my hair didn't go white, like the Prisoner of Chillon's. I tell you I heard a rat. *I did really!* It was gnawing away somewhere. I'd rather face a tiger than a rat. No. You may call it shell-shock, or mental kink, or lunacy, or anything you like, but nothing in this wide world will induce me to go into the Guild Hall again—not even to my own wedding if it was the only place where I could be married. *That's* how I feel about it."

CHAPTER XIX

Alack!

Of course, as bad luck would have it, Miss Ormerod had been on the edge of the crowd outside the Guild Hall, had recognized Lesbia Ferrars descending the ladder, had been very much scandalized at the occurrence, and after making full inquiries seemed to arrive at the rather unreasonable conclusion that it was all Lesbia's fault.

"You ought to have left the museum with the other girls and Miss Chatham," she decided, fixing a stern eye on the delinquent at the close of the court martial, "then this very unseemly exhibition would not have taken place. Such a thing brings the school into disrepute. I wonder how many times I have to impress upon you girls the need for quiet and lady-like behaviour in the streets. You disgrace your badge when you make yourself conspicuous. It's one of the most annoying matters I have to enter in my report."

"I'm very sorry, Miss Ormerod," said Lesbia dutifully.

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In the cloakroom she was hardly so meek. She was dismayed at the hint that her escapade would be reported to Miss Tatham, and raged at the injustice of being scolded for what she could not help.

"I believe Miss Ormerod would have *much* rather we'd stayed in that museum all night," she flared. "She'd have let us starve, or catch pneumonia or rheumatism with sleeping on the stone floor, and wouldn't have cared a button so long as we didn't attract a crowd. Do you think I *liked* climbing over that wretched roof? I hated it. I never felt so silly in my life as when I came down that ladder and saw everybody staring as if I were a peep-show."

"Some people thought you were doing a turn for a cinema," chirped Kathleen.

"You'll probably find an account of it in the evening paper," grinned Ermie.

"Help! It'll be the last straw with Miss Ormerod if it gets into the *Kingfield Despatch*. She never liked me before, but I'm the black sheep of the school at present."

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Truly Lesbia was in no favour at head-quarters. She found it most difficult to combine teaching with her work in the Sixth Form, and to do both well. If she spent a long time getting up the geography lesson which she must give to II B, her own preparation suffered. It was hard to be counted a slacker, and she longed to justify herself. Twelve years' experience at school had taught her, however, that the one unpardonable sin is to "answer back" when scolded, so she curbed her tongue, and listened with lowered eyelids while Miss Ormerod talked to her on the poor standard of her weekly exercises and essays, and the necessity of making greater efforts at self-improvement.

I have mentioned that the prefects at the High School had the special privilege of using the quaint little room built over the archway which spanned the road. Lesbia in particular regarded it as a harbour of refuge. She was now a daily boarder, and when one o'clock dinner was over she would often retire to this sanctum to read or do preparation before afternoon classes. At that hour she generally had it alone, and it seemed almost as good as a private study. One day, late in March, she walked briskly upstairs with her water-colour box. She wanted to illuminate a book back for Ermie's birthday, she could not venture to paint it in the studio, because her chum might come in and see it, and there was practically no time available after she went home in the afternoons. The gate room, though rather dark, would be absolutely secluded, with no fear of Ermie suddenly peeping over her shoulder and asking: "What are you doing, old sport?"

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Lesbia hurried along the upper corridor, her mind full of the design which she meant to paint, so preoccupied, indeed, that she never saw a suspicious movement of the book-cupboard door as she passed, or heard suppressed giggles inside. She just walked on, utterly oblivious, went into the gate room, and, for better security, bolted herself in. The latticed window overlooking the street was open, and she noticed vaguely that the floor underneath it was wet, as though with rain.

"Funny, when it's been fine for three days," she commented; but it was an unimportant trifle, so she placed the table over the damp patch, settled herself in the best light, and began her painting. She spent a happy and profitable half-hour copying a delightful bit of "Fra Angelico" illumination from a Florentine post card, and would have gone on longer only her watch, propped up as monitor, reminded her that time was on the wing. She stood up, took her painting mug, and abstractedly turned to the window with the idea of flinging the water away. She was leaning out, mug in hand, when she suddenly realized that she was over a public roadway, and that not only were people walking underneath, but that Miss Ormerod herself was returning to the side door, and was gazing upwards at her anticipated act with horror writ large on every feature. Lesbia stopped just in time, aghast at her own folly.

"Well! I *am* a stupid idiot," she soliloquized. "I was actually going to give passers-by a shower-

bath. Nice thing for a prefect to do. It's just like me. I had a notion I was throwing it into the garden, like I do from the studio window. Suppose I had soused Miss Ormerod? It would have been the end of all things. There goes the bell. Oh goody! I must hurry or I shall be late for gym."

All afternoon Lesbia felt nervous lest Miss Ormerod should meet her somewhere in the school and allude to the scene at the window. She was very much relieved to go home at four o'clock having successfully avoided such a catastrophe. She congratulated herself too soon, however. On the following day, after morning classes, she received a summons to the Principal's study.

"Miss Ormerod wants you, and you'd better be jolly quick, because the barometer's at Stormy," burbled Aldora, who brought the message.

Lesbia heaved what is commonly known as a gusty sigh.

"I'm always in hot water. What is it now?"

"How should I know, child! Brace up and sprint. The longer you are in going, the worse wiggling you'll get."

"I'll wait for you outside the door if you like with a clean handkerchief," chirruped Ermie.

"Thumb-screws and the rack for one," piped Cissie.

But Lesbia was already on her way towards the Inquisitorial Chamber.

When she entered she realized, apart from their schoolgirl jokes, that the Principal was really angry.

"Lesbia," she began grimly. "I've had too much trouble with you lately, and you'll either have to behave yourself here or leave. I won't have the High School disgraced. Your conduct yesterday was simply abominable."

Lesbia's jaw dropped in astonishment at this outburst. She did not think her carelessness quite justified so severe a rebuke. Miss Ormerod was looking "worked up", her hands trembled, and her eyes flashed through her glasses as she continued:

"Three separate people have been in to complain that you dropped water upon them as they passed under the gatehouse. One lady told me that her velvet hat was practically ruined. I want to know what you mean by it? Such shameless behaviour is unworthy of any pupil of this school—much less a prefect."

"But, Miss Ormerod, I—I—I—didn't throw water on people's heads," stammered Lesbia. "I only ___"

"Don't tell me any lies," interrupted the Principal shortly; "I saw you myself. You were on the very point of throwing water from the window when you caught my eye and drew back. There can be no mistake about the matter."

"But I didn't—I didn't."

"Be quiet," blazed Miss Ormerod. "What's the use of denying what I *know* to be true? *You*, Lesbia, who owe so much to the school, to bring it into such disrepute. I'm thoroughly disappointed and disgusted with you. You're a girl who ought to know better. To show you that I don't intend to allow such things I've struck your name off the list of prefects, and have put Kathleen in your place. Now you may go."

Lesbia walked out of the study utterly bewildered. It all seemed a kind of bad dream. She had certainly never thrown water from the gate-room window on to the heads of passers-by. Had anyone else been into the room and played such a shabby practical joke? Only prefects were allowed in the sanctum. Still it was, of course, possible that some daring spirit might have ventured to intrude. That she, Lesbia Ferrars, who had always been so loyal to the school and had striven to uphold its reputation, should be accused of this piece of vulgar horseplay seemed incredible. She bitterly regretted the stupidity which had given Miss Ormerod the supposed proof of her guilt. To be deposed from her post of prefect. Oh, it was too horrible! Such an extreme measure had never been taken at the school before within her remembrance. She felt it was unjust to give her no opportunity of explaining herself. Miss Ormerod always carried everything with such a high hand. Miss Tatham would surely have listened to her, and not have condemned her unheard.

Her fellow-prefects were extremely indignant when they heard her bad news. All the form, indeed, bristled with sympathy. Kathleen, sent for to the study to be promoted in her place, tried to plead for her, but only received a sharp snubbing for her pains. The girls shook their heads over the matter dismally.

"I expect some of those juniors are responsible," said Carrie. "I've been into their form rooms, and put them on their honour to tell anything they know about it, but nobody breathed a word. Mean little pigs. If I could catch the one who did it I'd spifflicate her."

"Hanging would be too good for such a girl," agreed Ermie bloodthirstily.

"Well, there's one thing, we none of us believe it in the school."

"V_B pretend they do," groaned Lesbia.

"Vb are the scum of the school. Don't pay any attention to them. I'll have a talk with them and settle them. If they say a word more about it they'll have to reckon with me."

"I wish we could set it straight with Miss Ormerod."

"None so deaf as those who won't see'," misquoted Ermie. "The 'Orm' is one of those pig-headed people who get a notion into their precious noddles and need a surgical operation to get it out again. I'm afraid you'll have to live through the rest of the term as a blighted blossom. Cheerio! Miss Tatham will be back after Easter."

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"Yes, and find I'm not a prefect. A nice tale she'll be told about it all, I expect. I'd write to her, but she hasn't answered my two last letters."

"Well, you see, the doctor said she wasn't to be worried about any school matters, and it would get rather stiff answering letters if everybody wrote to her, wouldn't it?"

"Right you are, O Queen! I stand rebuked."

Though her friends in the Sixth, and indeed most of the girls, might thoroughly sympathize with Lesbia, her deposition from the prefectship had an unfortunate effect upon those forms to which she acted as assistant mistress. Discipline had always been her weak point, and the children seemed to wax more unruly than ever. Whether they believed her guilty or innocent of the crime laid to her charge they realized she was degraded from office, and therefore considered she might be defied with impunity. Many were the weary tussles she had in her classes. She dared not appeal to Miss Ormerod, and was obliged to struggle along as best she could, fighting against the continual "ragging" to which she was subjected, and sometimes wishing all juniors were at the bottom of the sea.

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She began to dread the hours when she must take command in IIIb. The girls there were a particularly turbulent crew, and experts in heckling their inexperienced young teacher. They particularly loved to "prove her with hard questions", and as she was not a modern Solomon she could rarely find satisfactory answers for these youthful "Queens of Sheba". It made her terribly nervous to be asked to settle startling by-problems of the lesson, especially when she guessed they were put on purpose to puzzle her. She would try desperately to evade them.

"That's nothing to do with what we're learning," she would say airily.

"But Miss Ormerod likes us to think things out," some determined conscientious objector would reply, "and, of course, we want to know exactly."

"Miss Ormerod says it's part of the lesson to ask questions," would pipe another child.

Then the whole form would gaze at poor Lesbia till she writhed under the combined stare, horribly conscious of her own ignorance and her poor qualifications for her task as teacher, and wondering how to hide her lack of general knowledge from her fifteen persecutors.

First and foremost among the rebels was Maisie Martin. She was quick of brain, agile in invention, and easily led the rest. During the last weeks of term she became the cross and stumbling-block of Lesbia's life. She was passing through a restless phase, and enjoyed giving trouble; Miss Campbell, her own form-mistress, could not easily be defied, so she broke out all the more under a junior teacher.

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School had grown so intolerable lately that Lesbia welcomed week-ends as a prisoner does a reprieve. She felt sometimes as if she wanted to shake the dust of Kingfield off her feet for ever. One Saturday, simply to get away for a mental change, she borrowed Joan's bicycle and rode out into the country. Flowers were opening in the hedgerows and woods, thrushes and blackbirds were singing their spring songs, and in spite of occasional showers the afternoon was fresh and pleasant. Some of the peace and quiet of nature seemed to steal into her tired soul. She began to feel that life was not all High School, and to listen to those soothing voices that whisper in the rustle of leaves and the murmur of streams. She spent more than an hour simply resting in a wood, and started to go home very much refreshed and consoled.

As she rode along, fully seven miles out of Kingfield, she passed a girl who was walking and wheeling a bicycle. The general set of the figure was familiar, and, turning her head, Lesbia recognized Maisie Martin. Her first feeling was to ignore her, and pedal along in front as fast as possible, to get away from such an incarnation of all her school worries. But the leaves and the brook had been rustling and rippling a different gospel, and her mental tone was in tune with them. She got off her machine instead and turned back.

"Hello, Maisie! What's the matter with you?" she inquired.

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She might well ask, for Maisie's usually clean and cheerful face was streaked with smudges of dirt, her skirt held a big rent, and she hobbled rather than walked. She was indeed a most forlorn-looking object, visibly depressed.

At sight of someone she knew she made an eager spurt forward.

"Oh, I've had such a spill," she explained. "I don't know how I did it, but I pitched right over the handles, and I've smashed my bike. It's not fit to ride. Look! I've scraped my leg too, and grazed my hands."

"Hard luck! Be glad you're not worse hurt though. How are you going to get back to Kingfield?"

"I don't know. Walk, I suppose," Maisie's voice shook. She looked on the verge of tears.

"Could you leave your bike at that cottage and ride on my luggage-carrier?"

"Oh! Would you take me?"

"I'd try. If I upset both of us you mustn't blame me. I'm not a very steady rider."

"I'll risk it."

"Come along then, and we'll ask if anybody will look after the bike till you can send for it."

Having found a friendly and sympathetic old woman, who consented to take charge of the machine, Lesbia rode off with Maisie perched on her luggage-carrier, and succeeded in balancing her burden and conveying her safely into Kingfield.

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"Now hurry home, and put cold cream on that leg," she advised, as she set her down at the corner of her own road, a stiff and sore specimen of girlhood, but an absolute lump of gratitude. "Oh, never mind about saying thank you. You'd have done the same for me I've no doubt."

"I shan't forget it, if I live to be a hundred and nine," called Maisie, as Lesbia remounted and rode away.

And she did not. She might be a troublesome girl, but she was staunch if she took a fancy to anybody. For the future Lesbia was her heroine instead of the butt of her powers of ragging. The difference which this changed attitude made in III_B was enormous. The girls were like sheep, and followed where Maisie led. They ceased catechizing their teacher, and behaved with some approach to decent order. One day Maisie, whose new infatuation was almost embarrassing, and who followed Lesbia about the school to the great annoyance of Marion and Regina, insisted upon whispering a secret.

"I've found out about that water-throwing business," she confided. "It was Jess and Gwennie who did it. They sneaked into the gate room, and shot at people from the window with squirts. They said you nearly caught them in the corridor as they were coming back, but they dodged inside the book cupboard. I always guessed it was those two, because they'd been showing us their squirts and 'baptizing' us, as they called it, in the gym till we all scooted off. I had a quarrel with them both this morning and I said I should tell you."

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This was news indeed. Lesbia carried it immediately to the prefects.

"Of course you'll go straight to Miss Ormerod," urged Carrie. "The thing ought to be set right at once."

"I don't know," Lesbia was wrinkling her brows. "I'm so out of favour with Miss Ormerod that I really don't think it will make much difference. And, anyway, she's leaving, and I shall probably never see her again. It would get Jess and Gwennie into a terrific scrape, and it seems no use stirring up more trouble. I'd rather leave things as they are, now."

"But, girl alive! don't you want to be a prefect again?"

"Kathleen makes a far better one than I did. She'd best stick to it. As long as the school knows the facts I don't care."

"But Miss Tatham? What will she say when she comes back and finds you aren't prefect?"

"I shall explain it all to Miss Tatham without mentioning the names of the girls. I'm sure she'll understand."

"Well, you *are* a saint!"

"Not a bit of it. I'm putting my work on to Kathleen."

"Oh, I dare say!"

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"Well, please let it stand at this."

"Right you are. *We* shan't go telling Miss Ormerod. Don't you fear."

The true state of affairs, of course, spread round the whole school in half an hour, and public opinion dubbed Lesbia a trump. Among the juniors especially her decision raised her to the height of popularity. Jess and Gwennie were ready to grovel at her feet.

"You'll find us all positive *angels* next term," they assured her.

"Well, hardly that, I expect," laughed Lesbia. "Still, I dare say we'll understand each other rather better, and you'll try to behave in class without making me turn absolute gorgon to keep you in order, won't you?"

"Gorgon indeed! You're a *dear!*" gushed Gwennie.

"An absolute sport!" agreed Jess, linking her arm affectionately in that of her new-found idol.

The Highway Woman

Easter came as a blessed pause in the rush and turmoil of school life. The round of work at Kingfield High had seemed even more arduous to Lesbia in the Sixth than it had been in VA. The form was supposed to be grinding for the Matric, and though only its brightest specimens, Regina, Carrie, and Kathleen, and two wobbly candidates, Aldora and Cissie, were to be offered up as victims to the educational sacrifice, it meant that everybody, clever, mediocre, or dull, had to toil through the same textbooks and write identical exercises. Miss Pratt, who had gone up with the Sixth from VA, considerably to Lesbia's sorrow, constituted herself a kind of intellectual razor to sharpen the wits of the form, and had scant mercy on those who fell short of her standard. Lesbia sometimes, squashed flat by a sarcasm, felt she was metaphorically placed on a stool with a dunce's cap on her head. She tried to keep pace with the matriculation candidates, but her swimming brains often got confused, and, as she was a venturesome guesser, she was occasionally guilty of coming out with "howlers".

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Everybody seemed to welcome this particular Easter, even "the blessed Damozel", who, despite her poetic appearance, was the form's champion worker. The hard grind had perhaps accentuated her resemblance to Rossetti's heroine, for a slight paleness etherealized her, the intellectual concentration made her great grey eyes shine as the chief feature in her face, and her hair, which fortunately never seemed to darken, was still "yellow like ripe corn". Regina was really growing very pretty, and though she had not yet dropped her jerky angular manner, she was much less gauche than she had been a year ago, and promised to develop into an interesting personality.

"She's the sort of girl who may possibly do *anything* after she leaves school," commented Calla one day, when the girls were discussing absent members.

"Yes. With those brains it's just what she takes it into her head to concentrate on," agreed Laura. "She *might* make a hit on the stage."

"No, no! Not with those queer manners."

"But don't you see she's always posing? It's the very effort to be something outside herself that makes her so odd and peculiar. She's feeling after an ideal, and if she ever strikes it she'll be a huge success."

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"If in the meantime she doesn't marry a curate," put in Kathleen.

"A curate, child?"

"Yes; Regina's exactly the sort of girl who would!"

"I prophesy she'll go to college, take a tremendous good degree—wrangler or double first or something of that sort—and be head of a high school."

"No, she won't. I know it seems her ordinary course, but she's not an ordinary girl. She'll wangle something different and unusual. She ought to marry a member of Parliament, not a curate—though I believe if she did she'd soon make him a bishop—I could just imagine her, very handsomely dressed, at a Mansion House ball, dancing with a foreign ambassador. Cave! Here she comes—with the air of a princess. Who's she copying at present I wonder?"

The little group dispersed, giggling, as Regina entered the room and seeking out Lesbia drew her chum away. She was fond of private and confidential chats, but this one had a special point to it. The Websters were going to spend Easter at their country cottage, and invited Lesbia to go with them.

"You were such a sport at Dolmadoc last summer. We all say we want you to come again," insisted Regina.

Lesbia, with a dutiful demur about deferring to Mrs. Patterson, jumped—nay clutched—at such a gorgeous chance. She had been in much alarm lest she should be sent to Tunbury again to take charge of Terry for the Easter holidays, or packed off to spend them with Aunt Newton, who wrote periodical letters suggesting that her great-niece might leave school and take the place of the depressed companion who had at last plucked up courage and gone to a more congenial post. Dolmadoc, with its fresh mountain breezes and glorious views, seemed the very spot to blow away school cobwebs and to lay up a store of fresh energy for the coming term. Every corner of it would be like an old friend.

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So the Wednesday before Good Friday found Lesbia with the Webster family in a crowded train bound for North Wales, jammed tightly between two tourists, with her feet on a portmanteau and Una seated on her knee, but smiling through all discomforts as she caught the first glimpse of the grey hills from the carriage window.

Dolmadoc, in the early spring, was a different landscape from what it had been in its summer

[267] dress, and she had to make its acquaintance afresh. Very little foliage was yet out, but the bare woods held lovely tints of amber and purple and gold in their naked branches, and the moss carpet was greener than ever. Here and there primroses spangled the banks, and bushes of blackthorn—perhaps the most delicate and beautiful of all blossom—raised white stars against the flecked blue of the sky. The higher mountains were covered with snow, and the wind was keen and fresh. It was not possible to sit about in the garden, as they had done in August, but walks through the brisk air were a joy. They could tramp twice as far without fatigue. It was delightful to ramble round to all their old haunts, to revisit the waterfall, to climb to the top of Pentrevis, to scramble through the thick fir wood on the hill, or—in rubber boots—to go into the marshy meadows near the river. They had a special errand here, for the little wild daffodils grew in quantities on the low-lying fields and were greatly in request for Easter decorations. The whole of the Webster family, armed with baskets, went on an expedition to gather them. They passed, by permission, through a farmer's yard, then made a bee-line across several meadows, climbing fences and hurdles, till they reached a particular stretch where the stream flowed into the river. This favoured triangle was yellow with the daffodils, and although busy hands could pick and pick it seemed to make little difference to the wealth of bloom spread around. Lesbia loved the Lent lilies with their short trumpets and faint delicious fragrance, so redolent of the country. She revelled in all the spring flowers at dear Dolmadoc, the great crown imperial lilies, with the tears inside their dropping heads, the blue primroses in the cottage garden, the white violets under the wall, the purple aubretia coming out on the rockery, and the clumps of yellow cowslips that [268] bordered the pathway. They seemed so much cleaner and fresher than the flowers in town gardens or parks, she liked to lay them against her cheek, and would sometimes go down on her knees just to be near them where they grew. Old half-forgotten fairy tales would come flooding back in the company of the flowers, and all her most pronounced Celtic instincts seemed to crowd to the top.

Lesbia had a chance of exercising her artistic faculties on Easter Saturday. The Websters always helped to decorate the church, and this year the vicar's daughter was away, so they had been asked to undertake pulpit, font, and lectern. They appointed their visitor chief authority, and worked under her directions. With so much beautiful material in the way of flowers, Lesbia thoroughly enjoyed herself, and evolved a pretty scheme of decoration. She outlined the pulpit with ivy and bunches of wild daffodils, tying large branches of blackthorn and catkin-covered hazel to the candle-brackets; the lectern had a background of green and a great sheaf of crown imperial lilies, while the base of the font was a garden of green moss, with primroses peeping through in little clumps.

[269] Other members of the congregation had been busy putting flowers along the window ledges and twisting garlands of ivy round some of the pillars, till the church looked a fragrant mass of lovely blossom, dressed fitly for its great festival of Easter day.

"I'll come and make a sketch of it next week," thought Lesbia; "that little bit with the font and the open door and the view down the valley would be simply a picture, especially if I put Una sitting on the step with her lap full of primroses. I can feel just how it ought to look, if I can only paint it. The light and shade is exactly right in the afternoon. Oh dear! I wish I could spend my days in painting. I'd rather dab away at a canvas than do anything else in the world!"

The Websters were long-suffering towards Lesbia in allowing her leisure to sketch, and even in sitting as her models, but they rebelled against the devotion of more than a due portion of her time to painting. They were in the mood for walking, and nearly every day wanted to start off with picnic baskets and to eat their lunch somewhere on the hills. It was certainly better for Lesbia to take exercise than to sit sketching in such weather. She grouched, but submitted to the inevitable, and enjoyed herself very much when once she had made the plunge and started forth. The Stripling, who was taller than ever, still favoured practical jokes, and was wont to wax argumentative if anybody disagreed with him. He had many wordy tussles with Regina, and even did a little brain-fencing with Lesbia. He liked to air some rather outrageous opinion and stick to it, as if he were conducting the opposition in a debating society. On one occasion Lesbia, halting by a cross-roads sign-post upon the moors, remarked casually what a mercy it was there were no highwaymen nowadays to pounce like hawks on unwary travellers. Derrick instantly bristled to the defensive.

[270] "I don't know," he began aggressively. "I think there's a great deal to be said for highwaymen. It was a sporting way of getting a living. And it made travelling far more interesting than it is now. There was some fun in riding with your pistol cocked. Besides, it brought out people's courage. We're a soft lot nowadays when it isn't wartime. A man was a man in the eighteenth century. He knew how to take care of himself. I think some of those famous highwaymen were very fine fellows. They'd the spirit of the age in them. People's blood is as dull as ditch-water in the twentieth century."

"Oh, indeed. I wonder how you'd like a highwayman darting suddenly down upon you, Mr. Derrick, and saying 'Hands up'?"

"I'd be equal to him if he did, no fear," replied the Stripling grimly.

[271] Lesbia did not trouble to pursue the argument, for the very good reason that she was suddenly possessed with an idea, such an excellent and brilliant idea that she chuckled softly to herself over it. She kept it dark from Derrick, but confided it to Regina at the first opportunity. Her chum's explosions made the Stripling prick up his ears.

"What are you two after?" he asked, with suspicion.

"Oh, nothing for small boys," choked Regina.

"You've always got some silly joke."

"Well, we're going to keep this one to ourselves at any rate."

"Little things please little minds!" scoffed the Stripling.

"Right-o! You won't get it out of us that way."

What Lesbia proposed was that she should dress up in a landgirl's costume which she had seen in a cupboard at the cottage, take one of the old pistols that hung in the hall, go into the lane that evening, and lie in wait for Derrick, who would be cycling back from Cefn station where he always went to buy an evening paper at the bookstall. The plan seemed most feasible. The lane was narrow, it would be almost dark, and she hoped to be able to pull him off his bicycle before he discovered the joke.

[272] They watched him start as usual for Cefn, then rushed upstairs to begin the toilet. The land costume fitted Lesbia very well. She had always longed to try it on, and danced about in it now to her own admiration and Regina's. She put on an old cap of Derrick's, corked a moustache, and borrowed the pistol. It was a "flint-lock", a most suitable weapon for a highwayman, and made a beautiful spark when the trigger was pulled. They calculated the time which Derrick generally took in going to and from the station, then went into the lane and hid behind some bushes. It was twilight, the sun had set, and stars were coming out in the sky. Presently they heard the familiar sound of approaching cycle wheels. A red lamp came glimmering towards them.

"Now," whispered Regina, pushing her chum forward.

Lesbia sprang from the bush, presented her pistol, snapped the trigger with the best spark it had yet made, and seizing the machine by the handles tipped its owner neatly off on to the grass.

"Hello! What's all this about?" cried an unfamiliar voice, in much deeper tones than those of the Stripling. The pistol dropped from Lesbia's outstretched hand. Oh horrors! It was not Derrick after all whom she had assaulted, but a stranger. The unknown object of her violence picked himself up before she had time to run away, and, grasping his bicycle, peered through the darkness into the faces of the two girls, for Regina had joined her chum.

"I've come to see Mr. Webster. Is he at home?"

[273] A pair of very ashamed and crestfallen maidens apologized, and explained their "rag". Lesbia scooted away to wash off her moustache and change her attire while Regina led the visitor into the cottage. Much to their dismay, he was invited to supper. He was trustworthy, however, and did not betray them, though his eyes twinkled when Mrs. Webster performed the introduction "Mr. Ford—Miss Ferrars". He sat next to Lesbia at the supper table. He made no reference at all to highwaywomen, but looked amused and friendly.

"I wonder if by any chance you happen to be a daughter of a Mr. Charles Ferrars whom I used to know long ago?" he asked presently.

"Charles was my father's name," answered Lesbia in astonishment.

"Then it must be the same, for you're so like him. Used he to live at Hanbury? So did I. We were partners together for a short while. Dear me! That's ages ago now!"

"It's sixteen years since he died," said Lesbia gravely.

"So much as that. Time flies indeed. You must have been too young to remember him I suppose. A handsome man, and a great favourite with everybody! It makes me feel quite middle-aged to see his daughter almost grown-up."

[274] Lesbia had heard so little about her own father that it was interesting to meet someone who had known and remembered him. She treasured the brief incident on that account. It seemed a link with the dim far-away past, when she too had had father and mother of her own to love her and treasure her, instead of being an orphan with no home but the house of a distant cousin, and nothing to look forward to in the future but earning her own living in a way which she would probably find quite uncongenial.

[275] **CHAPTER XXI**

Lesbia Decides

Lesbia returned to the High School with a feeling of intense relief at finding Miss Tatham once more at the helm. A term's rest had set up the Principal's health, and she seemed her old self again. Her strong, calm personality made an enormous difference in the school; many wheels, which had creaked and jarred, now turned smoothly, and teachers and pupils took on a more united tone. Lesbia went to her and explained the circumstances which had led to her loss of the prefectship. Miss Tatham listened quietly, but made little comment. She was, of course, bound to support Miss Ormerod's régime, recognizing that her *locum tenens* had done her best during a difficult term.

"You've been kind in screening the juniors, Lesbia," she said. "I think, on the whole, as Kathleen has been made a prefect, it will be wiser to have no further changes. You have quite enough to do as it is. Don't you agree with me?"

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"Yes, indeed! Please don't think I wanted the prefectship back. I only wanted to explain."

"I'm very glad you told me, because now I quite understand."

Miss Tatham never gushed, or showed favouritism towards any special girl, but Lesbia always realized her kindly attitude and felt that the head mistress was her friend. She had indeed been her good genius for the last eighteen months. But for her helping hand it would have been impossible to continue at the High School. She had borne patiently with a most imperfect assistant mistress, for whose defects she had often had to make up.

Lesbia owed her more than she could ever hope to repay. It was a great thing to finish her course in the school where she had started as the youngest pupil. At the end of the summer term she would have completed nearly thirteen years at Kingfield High, a record which no other girl had ever equalled. What was to happen to her afterwards? That was a question which troubled her continually. The Pattersons were straining every resource to keep two sons at college and a third at Rugby. It was unfair to be a burden to them any longer. She must think seriously of how she was to begin and earn an independence, and make her own way in the world.

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"I'm afraid there's nothing for it but teaching," she said to herself ruefully. "Everything else I'd like to do needs an expensive training. So does teaching really, to do it properly. I ought to go to college and take a degree if I ever want to get a head-mistressship. I might go as governess to a child like Terry, or perhaps Miss Tatham would keep me on to help with the juniors, but either would be a blind alley and lead to nothing better, if I'm not trained and certificated and all the rest of it. And, oh dear! I don't think I'm cut out for a teacher. Miss Ormerod was right when she said I'd no sense of discipline. I could never make a 'head' like Miss Tatham, so calm and even and unmoved. I'm all nerves and jumps. It isn't my line in the least. Oh, if only I could paint all day long! That's the life! You do, yourself, a thing that you like, instead of forcing unwilling children to do what they don't want. I love the children, and I'd sit painting them for hours and hours, and call them 'sweet little angels', but when I begin to try to teach them they turn into imps. I'm in the wrong box, but there's no help for it, and I suppose I shall just have to worry on doing my incompetent best till the end of the chapter. It's Kismet!"

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Meantime, though Lesbia might worry about her future, the summer term went on as usual. There were cricket matches, and tennis tournaments, and an occasional nature ramble to break the monotony of the ordinary grind of work, as well as such side activities as the Photographic Society, and a newly-formed Sketching Club. Lesbia found one advantage in having resigned the prefectship to Kathleen, it gave her Tuesday afternoons free. Formerly she had been obliged to superintend a juniors' cricket practice, but now she could spend the time at her beloved painting in the studio. As it was a "Self Expression" afternoon she was under no tuition, but might carry out any artistic scheme she wished. By special leave she borrowed Gwennie Rogers, who had strained her knee and might not play cricket, and, posing the child as model, began to paint a study of her head in oils. Gwennie was very pretty, with an apple-blossom complexion and fluffy fair hair, and the episode of the gate room had switched her adoration of Lesbia to a point which made her sit still for half an hour at a stretch without moving, a quality in a model which is absolutely invaluable.

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Lesbia, whose art victims generally fidgeted and twisted their heads and never kept the same position for more than two minutes together, painted away with the utmost satisfaction. The studio was quiet, and she seemed able to give her whole attention to her subject. She mixed a very delicate grey for the shades on Gwennie's face, and put a dull blue background behind her fair hair. She recalled all the hints Mr. Stockton had given her when she had attempted Terry's portrait, and tried to reproduce some of the artistic effects which she had watched his clever fingers perform. The doing of it was sheer joy. She worked away in a sort of happy dream, almost oblivious of her surroundings. She hardly noticed when the door opened and someone entered the studio. She was startled at last by hearing Miss Tatham's voice behind her. Instantly the spell broke. She laid down her palette and brushes, and Gwennie moved her pose.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Lesbia," said Miss Tatham. "I've brought a gentleman—a great artist—to see our studio. This is one of our elder pupils, Mr. Moxon. She's painting this afternoon quite on her own account. We have no life class here, so she's just trying her 'prentice hand at a sketch of one of her schoolfellows. It's all good practice."

Mr. Moxon, from a height of six feet two, looked down at the canvas on Lesbia's easel.

"It's a very nice study," he remarked. "She evidently has the gift of catching a likeness. It really is a most happy little portrait. The chin is charmingly modelled, and she has captured just the

roguish expression of the original. Don't touch it again" (speaking to Lesbia). "It's exactly right as it is. You'll probably spoil it if you try to do any more to it. I hope you're going on with art?"

"I'm afraid not." Lesbia's voice was sad.

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"What a thousand pities! You ought to go and study in Paris, at Mesurier's studio. He's the coming man! Tell your people to send you. You'd get on very well there. Tell them I say so."

Mr. Moxon moved on, following Miss Tatham, to inspect other details in the school. He left Lesbia in a ferment. That an artist—and a great artist too—should have condescended to praise her work, and encourage her to go on, raised her to the clouds. Oh, if only she could take this kind advice and go to Paris to study! But, alas! those things were for fortunate girls who had friends who could afford to send them abroad, not for luckless people like herself, who were fated to toil away at humdrum occupations. It was no use mourning over what could not be helped, a course at a Paris studio was as impossible as a tour round the world, and there was not the slightest prospect of it ever coming within her reach. She almost wished he had never mentioned the dazzling idea, it was too tantalizing to be obliged to turn her back upon it.

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Though Lesbia might have to forgo many beautiful art dreams, she made the best at any rate of the opportunities which Kingfield High School offered to her. Miss Joyce had instituted a sketching class for the summer term, and took about half a dozen of the girls out with her on Friday afternoons. At first they went by train into the country, but she found the journey wasted so much time, going and returning, that she looked about for some pretty bit near at hand, which would be within their powers, and finally fixed on Pilgrims' Inn yard. It was a picturesque old court, and had the advantage of being quiet. As it was private ground, no tiresome urchins from the street might stray in and molest them, and no passers-by would stop to stand and watch their work, a species of persecution from which they had suffered considerably in country villages. The old black-and-white house, with its gables and mullioned windows, its nail-studded doors, its gallery, and the benches alongside the entrance, made several excellent subjects, and afforded points of view for all her students. They settled themselves on their camp-stools, unfolded their sketching-easels, and were soon busy with pencil or charcoal, blocking in the main outlines of their prospective pictures.

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Lesbia had secured a particularly pretty little corner, with a peep through the archway into the street, and a cluster of pots of geraniums—a fine splash of colour—which had been placed upon one of the benches. She drew it rapidly (she was improving so much in accurate drawing) and had begun to lay on her sky while the others were still in the process of rubbing out wrong lines. She mixed cerulean blue and flake white on her palette, and worked in yellow ochre and rose madder on her canvas, to give warmth and sunshine to the effect. She was gazing at her subject, weighing its colour-values and scheme of light and shade, when somebody came out of one of the offices which occupied the ground floor of the Pilgrims' Inn Chambers, a somebody who walked briskly towards the archway, threw a passing glance at the sketching-easel, halted, and looked back in evident hesitation. For a moment he seemed an utter stranger to Lesbia, then there surged into her mind the remembrance of the lane at Dolmadoc and the visitor who had received the "rag" intended for Derrick. The recognition appeared to be mutual. Mr. Ford lifted his hat and came back to speak to her.

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"Surely it's Miss Ferrars? Well, this is really a coincidence! I've been thinking about you all day, and was going to ring up the Websters to ask for your address. I've a matter of business to settle with you. Your teacher won't mind my talking to you for a few minutes? That's all right! Well, perhaps you remember my mentioning that years ago your father and I were once in partnership? We had invented rather a good thing and had meant to patent it, but when he died it was put on the shelf. Lately I looked it up and patented it myself. It was really speculation on my part. Well, this morning fortune smiled, and I had quite a decent offer for it from a big engineering firm. I won't sell it without your signature to represent your father's share in the invention. Of course you don't understand these business affairs. Can I see your guardian any time?"

"I don't think I have a 'guardian', but you could talk to Mr. Patterson. I live with the Pattersons, 28 Park Road, Morton Common."

Mr. Ford wrote down the name and address in his notebook.

"I'll call round this evening," he volunteered. "I want to get the matter fixed up at once. It will be a stroke of luck for us both. I never thought that invention would turn up trumps after all these years. Good-bye! I have an appointment to keep and must hurry off."

He was gone, but left a very fluttered Lesbia behind him. The news was overwhelming. She knew that when her own father died there had been no provision for his wife and baby, that fact had often been cast in her teeth by Mrs. Patterson and other relations. It was her stepfather, Mr. Hilton, and her stepbrother, Paul, who had provided for her during her childhood and educated her. She had had nothing whatever of her own. Was that humiliation at last to be lifted from her? However small this luck of which Mr. Ford spoke it would seem riches to a girl possessed of no income at all.

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"If it's enough to take me to Paris for even one year's paintings I'd nearly stand on my head with joy," she thought. "I don't know how I'm going to live till this evening. Suppose the patent doesn't sell after all? It would be like my luck! How funny that I should meet Mr. Ford here this afternoon. It really was a coincidence, just when he had had the offer. What a horrible disappointment if the whole thing falls through. I've a feeling it will never really come off!"

But it did come off. The Goddess of Fortune, who had hitherto meted out rather Spartan treatment to Lesbia, turned her wheel and scattered favours for once. Mr. Patterson managed all the business transactions, and before the end of the summer term Lesbia found herself, if not exactly an heiress, in a position of comparative independence. There was amply enough for an art education, and that was her main concern. Instead of being obliged to carry on an uncongenial occupation she could take Mr. Moxon's advice and go to study in Paris. Miss Joyce had a cousin who was working at Mesurier's studio, and who promised to find room for Lesbia in her flat, and to initiate her into the art-student life of the place when the autumn term should commence. The blazing prospect seemed the very summit of human desire. No girl could possibly have a happier time in store for her.

Then one day there arrived for Mrs. Patterson a letter with a Canadian postmark. She opened it, read it, and handed it to Kitty, with the explanation:

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"It's from Mabel Johnson. She says she's been to see the Hiltons. Minnie seems in a bad way, poor thing."

"Minnie! What's the matter with Minnie?" cried Lesbia, suddenly interested. "Is she ill? What is it?"

Kitty was reading the letter half aloud and half to herself, in that particularly aggravating fashion which gives a few leading words and skips the important points.

"Certainly—um—um—to go—um—um—um—complete rest—um—never be well—"

"I wish you'd tell me what's the matter?" urged Lesbia, dancing with impatience.

Kitty finished the first sheet and handed it on to her. The Canadian friend, Mrs. Johnson, had paid a visit to the Hiltons and sent grave accounts of Minnie's health.

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"Mrs. Hilton certainly ought to go away to a nursing home for several months' complete rest," so the letter ran, "she'll never be well until she does. She says, however, it's out of the question, she can't leave her husband and the children to the tender mercies of a mulatto 'help' and a Chinese 'boy', both of whom may elect to leave at any moment without notice, if the whim seizes them. You know what servants are out here. It seems a pity she has no relations who could come and take charge for a while, and give her the chance of getting well. She really looks hardly fit to be going about. She tells me her husband advertised for a housekeeper, but such queer creatures turned up to offer themselves for the post it was impossible to engage one. These are some of the trials of our life out here."

Lesbia handed the letter back to Mrs. Patterson without a word. She could not trust herself to speak. She ran upstairs to her bedroom so that she might be alone. A wild struggle was going on in her heart. Minnie ill, and no one to help her! How much she owed to Paul and Minnie! Debts so great as that ought surely to be repaid. There were better things in the world even than cultivating your own talents, kind, unselfish things that counted far more in the long run. Lesbia was quick at making decisions. As eighteen months ago she had burnt her boats and run away from the *Roumania* on the spur of a moment, so now she equally impulsively changed her plans. She ran downstairs all excitement to announce her intentions.

"If Minnie's ill and needs me, I must go to her! Paris can wait. Six months in Canada won't spoil my career. I'll start the painting when I come back. Minnie will trust *me* to look after Paul and the children, when she wouldn't leave them with anybody else. I shall just *make* her pack off to a nursing home."

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"I believe you're right," said Mrs. Patterson slowly. "In the circumstances you're about the only person who can persuade her. Yes, Lesbia, I think you ought to go."

So it was all arranged, a letter was sent off to the Hiltons, they cabled back "Come!", and Lesbia's passage was booked for the end of July. The matter seemed almost as big a hurry as her exodus of a year and a half ago, but with the vast difference that this time she went of her own free will, and, moreover, was an infinitely stronger and more helpful personality than the old dreamy Lesbia had been.

She was glad that she need not start until after breaking-up day; she wanted to see the very last of Kingfield High before she left it. The good-byes of all her friends seemed more sincere than those of a former occasion, though there was less fuss, and no parting present. Marion in particular squeezed her hand.

"Mother always said it was *my* fault you ran away from the Hiltons. I'm glad you're going to set things straight there," she whispered. "You're a real trump. Don't forget me over in Canada."

And Miss Tatham, taking final leave of her oldest pupil, added her word:

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"You've been nearly thirteen years here, Lesbia, and have beaten the record for attendance. I must say you've improved very much all round lately. Be as loyal to the best things in life as you've been loyal to the school. I wish you every success, either in the New World or the Old, and if you ever come back, and I'm still here, be sure to call and see me, and you'll always find a welcome waiting for you at Kingfield High."

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