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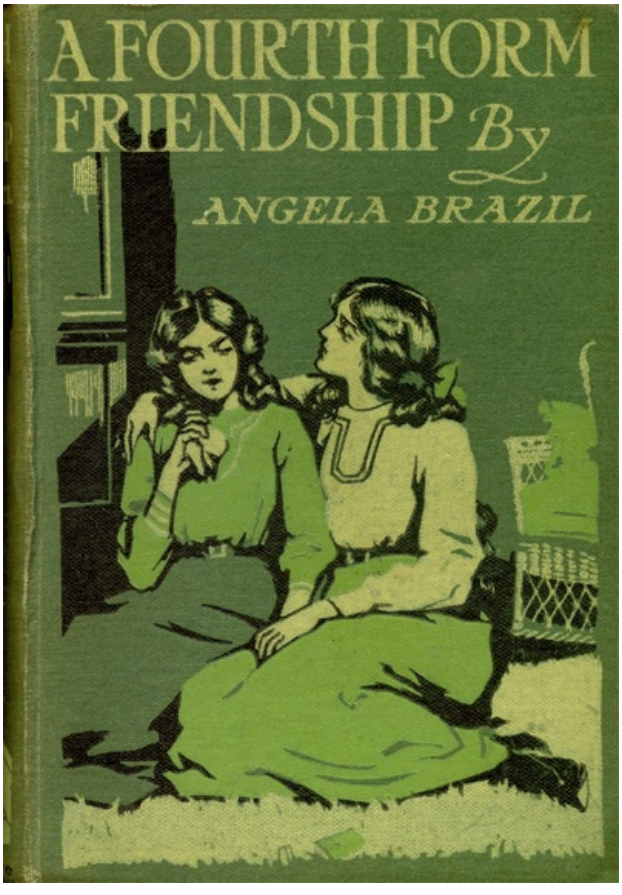
A Fourth Form Friendship



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AN ALARMING DISCOVERY

A Fourth Form Friendship

A School Story

BY

ANGELA BRAZIL

Author of "The New Girl at St. Chad's" "The Manor House School"
"The Nicest Girl in the School" &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK E. WILES

BLACKIE AND SON LIMITED
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A FOURTH FORM FRIENDSHIP

CHAPTER I

Aldred's Sketch

"Two pencils, an india-rubber, a penknife, camp stool, easel, paint-box, a tube of Chinese white, a piece of sponge, paint rag, and water tin," said Aldred Laurence, checking each item off on her fingers. "Let me see! Can I possibly want anything else? It's so extremely aggravating to get to a place and find you've left at home what you most particularly need. My block, of course! How could I be so stupid as to forget it? It's no good taking pencils and paints if I've nothing to draw upon!"

"Hello, Aldred! What a spread!" exclaimed Keith, rousing himself from the luxuries of a comfortable chair and an absorbing book to notice that his sister had put on her hat, that her

gloves lay on a chair, and that she was already beginning to pack some of the articles in question inside a home-made portfolio of dark-green American cloth. "The table looks like an art
[10] repository!" he continued. "Have you suddenly turned into a Rubens, or a Raphael? Where are you going with all those traps?"

Aldred paused to count her paint brushes, fitted the spare tube of Chinese white into a vacant corner of her paint-box, and slipped the penknife into her pocket.

"I want to make a sketch of old Mrs. Barker's cottage," she replied. "The clematis is out over the porch, and it looks lovely. I heard Mr. Bowden say yesterday that it was a splendid subject. Don't you remember, he made a picture of it last year?"

"So he did, and a jolly good one too. Yours won't be anything like up to that, Sis!"

"I dare say not, but you needn't discourage me from trying, at any rate."

"Oh, I'm not discouraging you. Go by all means, and good luck to your efforts! You can show me the masterpiece when you come back;" and the boy, flinging his legs over one arm of the chair, settled himself in an even more inelegant and reposeful attitude than before, and plunged again into the fascinating adventures of Captain Kettle.

That, however, did not at all content his sister.

"I thought you were coming with me," she said reproachfully. "I was counting upon you to hold my water tin while I painted."

Keith detached his mind from tropical Africa with an effort.

"Then you counted without your host, my dear girl!" he responded. "I'm extremely comfortable here, and I assure you I haven't the smallest intention of pounding half a mile down the dusty road, on a baking afternoon, to look at a picturesque cottage and act water-carrier when I get there!"

[11] "The tin upsets when I hold it on my paint-box," said Aldred, in a rather aggrieved voice, "and if I put it on the ground I have to stoop every time I want to dip my brush."

"Then make a hole in each side, tie a piece of string across, and hang it on the peg of your easel. I'll fix it up for you in half a second, if you'll find me the hammer and a nail. Girls have no invention! The thing's as simple as possible. I wonder you couldn't think of it for yourself. Where's a piece of string? Now, isn't this A1? Put it inside your case. There! Off you go!"

Aldred could not but acknowledge the improvement in her painting tin, but she seemed, nevertheless, in no hurry to start. She re-arranged her paints, took off her hat and put it on again, and loitered about in so marked a manner that her brother could not fail to notice her hesitation.

"What's the matter now?" he enquired.

"You might come with me, Keith!"

"Oh, bother!"

"You know quite well I can't go alone."

"Why not?"

"Because Father said I mustn't sit sketching by myself."

"That's a horse of another colour. In that case, why did Aunt Bertha let you get ready?"

"She didn't. She's out, so I couldn't ask her."

"Taking French leave?" chuckled Keith.

"I thought it would be all right if you went too."

Keith groaned in reply.

"We need only walk for five minutes along the road, and then turn into the path through the
[12] wood," suggested Aldred. "There's a field of cut corn in front of the cottage; you could sit on the corn and read if you like."

"Not half so cool as here."

"Oh, Keith, you might be nice when it's holidays!" pleaded Aldred. "It's the only time I ever have anybody to go about with. I'm sure I do heaps of things for you; I was playing cricket with you all morning, wasn't I?"

"Yes, and a precious butterfingers you were, too. There, then, you needn't look so blue! I'll go, but on the one condition that you let me read in peace and quiet, and don't bother."

"I won't say a single word, if you don't want to talk. I'll be absolutely dumb and mum!"

"Well, I hardly believe you'll be able to hold your tongue to that extent. I'll allow you an occasional remark, but you mustn't keep up a continual flow of conversation. Where's my straw

hat?—it's too hot for a cap. I think I'm an absolute saint to turn out on such a blazing afternoon!"

Having gained her point, Aldred ran readily enough to fetch her brother's hat, and set off with him down the drive in a state of beaming satisfaction.

Dingfield, the place where they lived, though only an hour's distance from London, was sufficiently in the country to afford a pleasant prospect of trees, meadows, and winding reaches of river. The hedgerows were thick with twining bryony and feathery traveller's joy; here and there the hips were reddening, and a ripe blackberry or two tempted them to linger upon the way. It was cooler than Keith had anticipated, for a fresh breeze was blowing from the Surrey
[13] Hills, sending white clouds in long streamers across the blue of the sky, and shaking down a few windfalls from the apple trees that overhung Farmer Walton's gate.

The two soon left the high road, and, after strolling leisurely through the welcome shade of the wood, climbed over a stile into a pasture, and after another five minutes' walking found themselves in a stubble field, within sight of the river. Here was the subject upon which Aldred had determined to try her brush. It was a picturesque old cottage, with red-tiled roof, lattice windows, a porch wreathed in purple clematis, and a garden gay with dahlias, looking attractive enough in the September sunshine to make even an amateur wish to commit its beauties to paper.

Aldred chose her point of view with great deliberation, and considerable taste for a girl of only fourteen. She fixed her easel where a couple of elders would make a background for the red roof, and where she could catch a pleasant angle of the gable window and a peep of the distance beyond. Having unpacked her portfolio, she settled herself on her camp stool and began to put in her sketch with rapid lines, working, indeed, more quickly than correctly, but nevertheless obtaining rather a good effect. Keith, finding a pile of corn stooks conveniently near, flung himself down in the shade, and, with a fern leaf to flip away flies, lay with half-closed eyes watching his sister's energetic pencil.

"How you go at it!" he remarked. "It makes me hot just to look at you!"

"Then don't look! I thought you wanted to read? You made me promise not to open my lips, and I haven't spoken a word since we came."

"Most heroic self-denial on your part, I'm sure! I believe I'm too lazy even to read. I like to
[14] lounge in the holidays, especially when it's getting so near the end."

"Only a week now to the fourteenth," said Aldred.

"Yes, worse luck! I wish it were a month!"

"And I am counting the days. I want the time to come so much!"

"It's a case of 'where ignorance is bliss', my dear girl. You've never been to school before; I have! You won't find yourself in such an anxious hurry to start off by next September, if I'm anything of a true prophet."

"I expect I shall. All the stories I've read about school sound delightful—the girls have such fun. I'm looking forward to going most immensely. It will be far nicer than having a governess at home. It's so fearfully slow while you're away at Stavebury. Aunt Bertha grows more prim and particular every day, and I never seem able to do a single thing right; it's scold and lecture, lecture and scold, from morning till night! As for Miss Perkins, I was sick of the very sight of her! You can't imagine how glad I was when she took her final departure. I said good-bye as nicely as I could, for decency's sake, and then rushed into the empty schoolroom and danced a jig and clapped my hands for joy, to think I need never do lessons with her there again."

Keith laughed. "I don't suppose she's crying her eyes out over you either," he observed.

"I'm sure she isn't. I've no doubt she's almost as delighted as I am. She's going to The Thorns, to teach Blanche and Minna Lawson. They're absolutely pattern girls, warranted never to do anything they shouldn't, so I hope she'll be happy at last. I find them insufferably dull."

[15] "You may get a far worse mistress at school than Miss Perkins."

"I don't think so. You know, Mary Kennedy has been at The Grange, and she says Miss Drummond is a perfect dear. They have all kinds of games there too. It will be lovely to learn hockey and lacrosse; I've never played either before."

"School isn't all games, I can tell you," said Keith, pulling a straw from the stook and chewing it meditatively. "There's a jolly lot of grind to be gone through. You'll find you'll have to set that young head of yours to work in good earnest."

"I can easily do that," declared Aldred, tossing back her dark curls, "I've no fear at all of not managing my lessons. Why, when I cared to take the trouble, I could simply astonish Miss Perkins. I could work sums far quicker than she did, and I used to reel off French verbs so fast that sometimes she could hardly follow me, even with the book in her hand."

"All very well with a private governess, Madam Conceit! You've had no competition. Wait till you work with a class. At The Grange you'll probably find several other girls who can reel things off a little quicker."

"Then I shall go quicker still. I tell you, I mean to be top of my class, and head of the examinations too."

"Don't boast too much beforehand, or pride may bring a fall!" said Keith, speaking with the superior authority of his sixteen years. "You'll have to find your own level, Sis. The other girls may have ambitions as well as you, and will be ready to dispute for the head place."

[16] "Then they won't get it! It's booked already for Aldred Laurence, and so is the tennis championship, and anything that's first and foremost in the way of hockey and lacrosse."

"Great Scott! What more?" exclaimed Keith, looking at his sister with quizzical amusement. "Are there no bounds to your ambition?"

"Well, I've often heard you say yourself that if one is to get on at school one must do well at games."

"No one tolerates slackers, certainly I'll allow that."

"I mean to be a general favourite," continued Aldred. "I want the girls to be tremendously fond of me, and ready to do anything for me."

"They won't jump into your arms all at once, I assure you."

"I'll make them like me! Just you wait and see! I can always make people care about me when I try hard enough."

"How about Miss Perkins?" suggested Keith dryly.

"Miss Perkins? Oh, well, I didn't even try! I disliked her so much, I wanted to get rid of her. But it will be a very different matter indeed when I go to The Grange. I don't mind undertaking that by the time I've been there a year I shall be the most popular girl, not only in my class, but in the whole school."

"Whew! That's a large order! Popularity isn't so easy to come by, Sis. It depends on a dozen things—sometimes, indeed, it seems almost an accident. If you work too hard for it, you may overstep the line, and find yourself sent to Coventry instead. I've known two or three fellows served that way."

[17] "You always want to discourage me," declared Aldred, with a flush on her cheeks.

"No, I don't. But I think you've far too good an opinion of yourself. You need taking down considerably, and fortunately school will soon do that for you. You'll talk very differently from this at the end of your first term, or I'm much mistaken."

Aldred shrugged her shoulders. She was confident of her own success, and regarded Keith's warnings simply in the light of brotherly teasing. She said no more for the present, but gave her whole attention to her sketch, which had now arrived at the painting stage. She dabbed on the colours with the greatest assurance; there was no hesitation in the bold, rather clever strokes, and the picture, though somewhat "slap-dash" in style, was already beginning to bear a very fair resemblance to the scene before her.

"You're not the only one out working to-day," remarked Keith, after an interval of silence. "Here's Mr. Bowden himself sauntering down the field in search of a subject."

Aldred looked round and waved her hand to a tall, grey-haired gentleman, who, armed with a sketchbook, appeared to be jotting down the outlines of some of the corn stooks. On seeing her smiling face he came at once in her direction, and stopped critically behind her easel.

Mr. Bowden was an artist of considerable repute; he was a friend of their father's, and always had a pleasant word for Aldred when he visited at the house. Therefore she awaited his verdict with some anxiety.

[18] "Very good, Aldred! I had heard you were fond of drawing, though I did not know you could do so well as this. But, my dear child, it's full of faults, all the same. The perspective of the front of the house is completely wrong."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about perspective," pleaded Aldred. "I just drew it as I thought it looked. The cottage is so pretty, I felt I simply must paint it."

"That is the right spirit. Go on and try, even if you don't always succeed. I am glad to see you make an effort to sketch out-of-doors. There is no teacher like Mother Nature, and the attempt to reproduce a living tree, or a house, on paper will do you more good than a hundred copies. Why did you make the lines of your windows run up, when they so clearly ought to run down?"

"I don't quite understand," said Aldred, looking puzzled.

"Give me your pencil a moment, and I will show you."

"Oh, thank you!" cried Aldred, jumping up with alacrity. "Please take my camp stool, and then you will have exactly the same view as I have. It looks so different when one is sitting down."

Mr. Bowden good-naturedly installed himself in Aldred's place, and, taking her paint-box and brushes, began to give her a practical lesson in sketching from nature.

"The composition is not bad," he remarked, "but if you had brought in that far tree, which is considerably taller than the cottage, it would have raised the subject on the left-hand side of the picture, and given a pleasanter result. Shall I put in a touch to show you what I mean?"

[19] "Oh, please!—as many as you like. It would be such a help to watch you!" replied Aldred.

"Very well, then. In the first place, I make the lines of your perspective slope down to their right vanishing point. Is not that better? Now, a dab of brighter blue in the sky, with a raw edge to give the effect of that white cloud. The trees need massing together, with a greater depth of shade to give roundness to them, and a branch just indicated here and there among the foliage. The stubble field needs a tone of richer and warmer yellow, while a few stooks here in the foreground would be the utmost improvement. Look how I am blocking them in, with strong light and shadow, and two or three ears marked definitely at the top, to show against the dark of the hedge beyond. There! Go on working yourself at the field and the distance. Paint moistly, and don't spare your cobalt blue."

"It's like magic!" said Aldred, reviewing the improvement in her sketch with immense satisfaction. "I hardly know how to thank you. I'm afraid I've been wasting your time dreadfully."

"No matter, if it has helped you," said Mr. Bowden, picking up his sketch-book. "I must go now, though, for I want to catch the effect of the late afternoon light on those marshy pools beyond the cottage. Don't forget the hints I have given you," and with a friendly nod to Keith he walked rapidly away, and was soon out of sight.

For some little time after Mr. Bowden had left, Aldred painted away industriously at her foreground. Keith, in the shelter of the stooks close by, was deep in his book; and there was no [20] sound except the chirping of birds, or the lowing of cattle, to disturb her. How pleasant it was! She keenly enjoyed each touch of her brush, and tried hard to follow the directions which her kind old friend had given.

Fully half an hour had passed away, and her stubble field had made considerable progress, when voices in the pathway behind her caused her to look round.

It was Mr. and Mrs. Silvester, the vicar and his wife, who, bearing a basket, were walking in the direction of the cottage, no doubt with the intention of paying a visit to old Mrs. Barker.

Recognizing the little figure at the easel, they came at once to see what she was working at so briskly.

"Aldred, my dear! have you turned artist? This is an extremely good sketch. How long has it taken you?" asked Mrs. Silvester.

"I only began it this afternoon," answered Aldred. "We came here about three o'clock—didn't we, Keith?"

"It is really excellent!" exclaimed the Vicar. "I myself have had a little experience in painting, so I am able to judge. The composition of the picture is most artistic; I admire the way the tree has been arranged to just overtop the chimney, and the large corn stook to bring the eye down to the foreground. The perspective is correct, the light and shade have been handled in quite a masterly fashion, and the sky with the patch of cloud is particularly happy. I hope you are going to have drawing lessons at school. I am sure you have unusual talent, which ought certainly to be cultivated."

Keith, who had risen from his seat among the corn to greet the visitors, gave a peculiar, rather [21] suggestive cough, but did not volunteer any remark. Aldred's eyes were very bright, and her cheeks pink, as she replied:

"I'm certainly fond of painting. I don't think I can do any more to the distance. I was just finishing the foreground when you came."

"Don't put another touch to it," said the vicar. "It is excellent just as it is. I beg that you will shut your paint-box, and leave it; it would be a mistake to work at it any more."

"I am most interested to have seen it," declared Mrs. Silvester; "it is delightful to find anyone with such a decided gift for art. You must make it your special study, and we shall look for great things from you when you have finished school."

She passed on with her husband, and as they walked towards the cottage the words "marvellous talent" and "astonishing cleverness" were wafted back by the summer breeze.

Aldred closed her paint-box as the Vicar had suggested. Somehow she did not feel inclined to continue her work; all the pleasure had suddenly faded away from it.

Keith had subsided once more into his former lazy attitude, and sat idly picking ears of corn, preserving an ominous silence. He waited until Mr. and Mrs. Silvester were safely inside old Mrs. Barker's garden, then burst forth.

"Well, of all the sneaks you're the biggest! Call that your work? Why, it's Mr. Bowden's!—all the best parts, at any rate, that they were praising so much. And you calmly took the credit for the whole! I wasn't going to speak and give you away, but I'll let you know what I think of you now."

[22] "Oh, Keith! What could I do?" stammered Aldred, the tears welling up in her eyes and splashing

down upon the paint-box. "Don't scold me so! I can't bear you to be cross with me."

"But you deserve it! Why didn't you say it wasn't really your own painting?"

"They never asked me if I had been helped," answered Aldred; "and, after all, it's my sketch, not Mr. Bowden's."

"Yes, your sketch, but improved absolutely beyond recognition. Look here! if you play these tricks at school you'll pretty soon find yourself the reverse of popular. Boys wouldn't stand it, and I don't suppose girls will either."

"It didn't strike me to say anything," sobbed Aldred. "Oh, Keith, don't look at me like that! Shall I run after them and tell them? I will, if you want. I'll go at once, if you'll only be friends with me again."

"No, they're inside the cottage, condoling with Mrs. Barker over her rheumatism. You'd only make yourself ridiculous if you followed them, and came out with a dramatic confession in the middle of the kitchen. I hate scenes. Do turn off the water-works, there's a good girl! Be a little straighter in future if you want to keep chums with me, though. Here, I'll help you to pack up your traps, and we'll go home to tea. Your sketch is still wet; if you carry that I'll bring on the rest."

Very crestfallen and miserable, Aldred took up her unfortunate painting, and began to walk away down the path towards the wood, leaving her brother to follow. In her brown holland dress
[23] and red poppy hat she made such a sweet picture against the yellow of the corn stooks that, in spite of his disapproval, Keith could not help looking after her with a certain amount of admiration. No one who met Aldred Laurence could have failed to be struck by her personality. She was very neatly and trimly made, and had a way of holding herself erect and looking alert that gave her a distinguished appearance, and seemed to raise her above the level of the average girl. Her lovely dark eyes, long, curling brown hair, and warm, rich colouring had a gipsy effect that was particularly picturesque. Her eyes were so bright and soft and expressive, her cheeks had two such bewitching dimples, and she smiled so readily and winningly in response to the smallest advance, that she generally made friends easily, and had won notice from strangers since the days of her babyhood.

To sober, downright, matter-of-fact Keith his sister was often a sore puzzle. Her eager, impetuous, excitable disposition, and many impulsive acts, were as foreign to him as an unknown language.

"Why need you work yourself up so tremendously over every trifle? What's the use of taking life so stormily?" he once remonstrated.

"I don't know," replied Aldred. "I seem to care so much more about everything than you do. I can't help it; I suppose it was born in me."

"Then it's high time you got it out of you!" remarked Keith, whose ideal was a state of unruffled calm on all occasions.

In spite of the difference in their temperaments the two were really attached to each other, and
[24] though Keith might not be demonstrative, he tolerated Aldred's devotion when they were strictly alone, though he would not allow her, as he expressed it, to "make an exhibition of him before other fellows".

Poor Aldred! She had a very warm and loving heart, and a perpetual hunger for affection that, so far, had failed to be entirely satisfied. Since the day, seven years before, when her mother had started on that long journey from which none return, nobody had seemed to understand her quite, or to know how to manage her aright. Her father, a clever barrister who went daily from Dingfield into London, was too absorbed in his profession to give much time or sympathy to his children. Having sent his son to school, and provided a daily governess for his daughter, he felt that he had done all that was required of him. The masters at Stavebury were responsible for Keith, and as for Aldred, if anything more was needful for her upbringing than Miss Perkins could give, surely his sister, who managed his house so admirably, could look after his motherless girl?

Unfortunately, though Aunt Bertha had great experience and excellent skill in the making of jams and the care of linen, she had no aptitude for the handling of human souls. She was a stout, bustling, unimaginative, prosaic person, without an atom of romance or sentiment in her composition. A nature such as Aldred's was beyond her comprehension. She tried to do her best for the child, but it was such an unsympathetic best that it had the unhappy effect of setting a barrier between herself and her niece which neither seemed able to pass. Long and lucidly would Aunt Bertha reason and expound, and enjoin habits of neatness, order, and punctuality. All to no
[25] purpose! Arguments never appealed to Aldred. She would listen with an air of don't-care indifference, and do just the same next time. Yet if her aunt could have given her one warm kiss, the battle would have been won. It was a sad pity, for the girl had in reality a very sweet disposition, though at present it was like a neglected garden, where a few choice blossoms might be found, struggling with ugly weeds that threatened sometimes almost to strangle the flowers.

The precise governess carefully chosen by Aunt Bertha had not helped matters. She found her pupil bright indeed, but only ready to work by fits and starts, and quite unmoved by fear of punishment, or promise of reward. So strong at last had the friction grown that Miss Perkins had herself resigned her post, and recommended that Aldred should be packed off to school.

"I have done my utmost," she said to Miss Laurence, "but I feel that I am a complete failure. I have no influence over Aldred, and she is not making the slightest progress. In the circumstances I cannot honestly continue to teach her. In my opinion a little strict discipline is what she requires, and the sooner she experiences it the better."

The decision to send her away (long held over her head as a threat), instead of daunting Aldred, had delighted her. Aunt Bertha was much relieved. She had dreaded a storm when the question was raised, and though she considered it a bad characteristic in a girl to be glad to leave home, she felt it removed a difficulty when her niece accepted the situation so readily.

[26] To Aldred the idea of forming herself on the prim pattern of her aunt was intolerable. She was ready to copy anybody whom she loved and admired, but to be obliged to repress her enthusiasms, and reduce her ideals to the level of the commonplace, seemed like being forced into a box too small to contain her.

"Aunt Bertha never understands," she thought. "She says I must try to grow up now, and be sensible. If growing up means getting cold and calm and stupid, and taking everything as a matter of course, I'd rather not. I'll just stop a child always, however hard they may try to make me different!"

Such was Aldred at the time our story begins,—a mass of contradictions, so wayward and yet so winning, a mixture of good impulses and weak points, equally ready to join a crusade or to follow the multitude to do evil; waiting, like a gaily painted but rudderless vessel, to be launched on to the stormy ocean of school life.

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[27]

CHAPTER II

Mabel Farrington

Birkwood Grange was a rambling, roomy stone house, built at the edge of a breezy common, within sight and sound of the sea. It was a pleasant spot for a school; beyond stretched the broad downs, covered with short, fine grass, through which the dazzling white road wound like a ribbon to the distant horizon. There was a sense of air and space as one looked over the green upland, where for miles the view was interrupted only by the sails of a windmill, or an occasional storm-swept tree, the slanting branches of which showed the direction of the prevailing gale. In front, the chalky cliffs descended sharply to the beach; and beyond them, now blue as turquoise, now gleaming silver, now inky black, as calm as a lake, or lashing into foaming spray, always changing, yet ever beautiful, lay the wide waters of the English Channel. On one side of the house was a walled kitchen-garden, and on the other a field for hockey; while in front a large lawn provided ample space for several tennis courts.

On the afternoon of September 14th The Grange presented an extremely lively and animated scene. Girls were everywhere—tall girls, short girls, fat girls, slim girls; some fair, some dark,
[28] some pretty and some plain; and all in a state of excitement, and chattering as fast as their tongues would wag. No anthill, or hive of bees about to swarm, could have seemed in a greater ferment; there was a constant hum of conversation, a continual patter of feet, and a succession of young people, always moving in and out, searching for friends, claiming old acquaintances, exchanging greetings, and passing on items of news. It was the first day of the autumn term; a fresh school year had begun, and the party of thirty-nine girls who constituted Miss Drummond's little community were once more assembled for a season of work and play. Several changes had taken place; most of the rooms had been re-papered and painted, and there were alterations in the time-table, a revised practising list, and an entirely modified arrangement of some of the classes.

Small wonder, therefore, that a babel of talk prevailed in every corner of the house, and that various groups of hair ribbons kept collecting and dispersing with the bewildering effect of a kaleidoscope, while such a general atmosphere of bustle and commotion pervaded the establishment as to turn the head of any onlooker in a complete whirl. Aldred, ensconced in an angle of a bow window, surveyed the whole spectacle, as yet, from the standpoint of an outsider. It is true, she had received a cordial welcome from Miss Drummond; she had been duly entered as a member of the Fourth Form; she had been allotted a desk in a classroom, a locker in the recreation-room, and a cubicle in a big, airy bedroom; and was already possessed of a pile of new books, a chest expander, and a hockey stick: yet, in spite of this initiation she was feeling
[29] decidedly like a fish out of water. She was not usually afflicted with shyness, but to find herself in the midst of a medley of strangers, all too occupied with their own affairs even to realize her existence, was a little disconcerting to even her easy self-confidence. She was beginning to wonder how long she would remain unnoticed, and was trying to screw up her courage to venture a remark to one of her nearest neighbours, when a plain girl in spectacles broke the ice.

"What's your name, and where do you come from?"

Aldred started at the abruptness of the question and turned to face the speaker, who continued with a smile: "We always put new-comers through a catechism. I want to know your age, and what class and dormitory you're in, and which teacher you're to learn music from, and whether you're going to take dancing and wood-carving. Oh! so you're in the Fourth—that's my form, as it happens. My name's Ursula Bramley, and I'm fourteen and a half. We have a very decent time at Birkwood. There's any amount of fun going on, as you'll soon find out. Wait till we start the Debating Society and the Cooking Class! Have you been measured yet for a gymnasium costume? Of course, there has not been an opportunity, but Miss Drummond is sure to see about it to-morrow—and a cooking apron too, if you haven't already got one."

Aldred replied as briefly as possible to these various interrogations, but Ursula seemed quite satisfied with "Yes" and "No" for an answer, and rattled on: "I'm rather sorry for you, being put in No. 2 dormitory, because you'll be with Fifth Form girls, and you can't expect them to be
[30] particularly chummy with you. If there had only been room, now, in No. 5! But we're full up, all six beds; there isn't even a corner for a shakedown. We have such jokes in the mornings, when we're getting up! It's a pity you'll be out of it. I'd like you to see Dora Maxwell acting a peacock; you'd simply scream! Of course, we daren't make too much noise, or we should have a monitress pouncing down upon us; but it's ever such fun, all the same. They're a very prim set in No. 2. They never lost a single order mark last term! Well, if you can't be in our dormitory you'll be with us in class, at any rate, and it isn't dull there by any means, I can tell you."

"How many girls are there in the Fourth Form?" asked Aldred.

"There were seven before, but you'll make eight. Why, most of them are in the room now, or on the lawn just outside, so I can point them out to you. That's Phœbe Stanhope standing by the fireplace,—the one with the long light pigtail and the blue blouse; she's talking to Lorna Hallam, and Agnes Maxwell is showing her camera to them both. Now, if you'll look through the window you'll see two girls walking arm in arm round the sundial; the fair one is Dora Maxwell, and the dark one is Myfanwy James. Dora is tremendously jolly; she and Myfanwy think of the most outlandish things to do. Why, one night they went to bed right underneath their bottom sheets, and put their pillows over their faces, and when Freda Martin (that's our prefect) came to turn out the lights she thought they weren't there at all, and was just going to make a tremendous fuss, when Myfanwy couldn't stand it any longer, and exploded! We six are in the same
[31] dormitory, and we're the greatest chums. We call ourselves 'The Clan', and each is pledged to back the others up through thick and thin, whatever happens."

"Who's the seventh girl in the class?"

"Mabel Farrington."

"And doesn't she belong to 'The Clan'?"

"Oh, no! Mabel wouldn't dream of such a thing."

"Why not?"

"Oh! because—well, she's rather particular. She's not very great friends with anybody."

"Don't you like her?"

"Like her? Yes; everybody likes Mabel. That's not the reason at all. Somehow she's a little different from other people. You see, her grandfather is Bishop of Holcombe, and her uncle is Lord Ribchester."

"You mean, she gives herself airs?"

"Not in the least; she's not at all conceited. But she never cares about playing tricks, and having all kinds of jokes, like the rest of us."

"Then she's a prig!"

"No, she isn't. Wait till you've seen her; she's extremely nice. As I said before, she always seems different—just a trifle above everyone else, perhaps."

"Which dormitory is she in?"

"She's allowed a bedroom to herself, and she's the only girl in the school who has one—even the monitresses have to sleep in cubicles."

"Why is she so specially privileged?"

"Her mother, Lady Muriel Farrington, is a friend of Miss Drummond's. I believe Mabel was sent here rather as a favour, because Miss Drummond was so anxious to have her at The Grange."

"Then you all make a fuss over her?"

[32] "No, not particularly; but we certainly like her."

"I'm sure I shan't."

"You can't help it, when you know her. By the way, here she is now, coming in at the door. I

must tell her who you are."

Aldred turned, and saw a girl of her own age, so remarkably pretty and attractive that, in spite of her preconceived prejudice against the aristocrat of the school, she could not repress a certain amount of admiration.

Mabel had a very fair complexion, with cheeks pink as apple blossom, a pair of frank, thoughtful blue eyes, straight features, and a quantity of beautiful red-gold hair that hung almost to her waist. Her expression was particularly pleasant and winning, and as she crossed the room in response to Ursula's call, and smiled a welcome to the new-comer, Aldred began already to reverse her unfavourable opinion.

"I'm glad we shall be eight in class now," said Mabel. "It's a much nicer number than seven. Don't you remember, last term Miss Drummond said she hoped we should get a new girl? Of course, we were Third Form then, but it has not made any difference to be moved up to the Fourth, except that we are going to have Miss Bardsley for a teacher, instead of Miss Chambers—we're just the same set altogether."

"I like our new classroom far better than the old one," remarked Ursula. "The desks are more comfortable, and there's a nicer view out of the window. From my place I can catch a little glimpse of the sea, if I screw my neck."

[33] "Miss Bardsley won't let you crane your neck in school, I'm sure," said Phœbe Stanhope, who had joined the group. "She has the reputation of being much stricter than Miss Chambers."

"Ugh! Then I wish I could go back to the Third," declared Ursula.

"We'd a fairly easy time with Miss Chambers," said Lorna Hallam. "One could always give a headache as an excuse, if one didn't know one's lessons."

"I don't care for a slack teacher like poor Miss Chambers," put in Agnes Maxwell. "She has no more idea of keeping order than a jellyfish; I could teach as well myself."

"Go and tell Miss Drummond so, and propose that you should take the Third," laughed Ursula. "I should like to see her face when you suggest it!"

"There's the dressing-bell! Aldred, you must go and get tidy for tea, which will be ready in exactly ten minutes."

There was no doubt that Mabel Farrington was a particularly nice girl; the more Aldred saw of her, the more she liked her. Her popularity at The Grange was thoroughly well deserved, for it rested more on her character than on her social standing. She was extremely high-principled and conscientious, a plodding worker, and always anxious to uphold the general tone and credit of the school. If she had a fault, it was her exclusiveness. So far, though she was pleased with everyone, she had made no bosom friend, and, as Ursula had said, kept slightly aloof from the other girls in the form.

Aldred also found herself rather left out; "the clan" of six were so thoroughly absorbed in their
[34] own interests, so taken up with various amusements, secrets, and private jokes that could not be shared by anyone who did not sleep in their dormitory, that it was impossible for them to include her in their fun.

They were not unkind to her, but they simply took no notice of her; and as the Fifth Form girls in No. 2 dormitory were equally stand-off, Aldred's first week at The Grange was a very lonely one.

It was an unpleasant and unwelcome experience for her; she had come to school full of confidence that she would win immediate favour, and it was humiliating to find herself not appreciated as she had expected.

After her first catechism by Ursula no one had exhibited further curiosity about her home or her family; and any information which she volunteered was received without enthusiasm. It was plain that "The Clan" thought her of small consequence, and did not trouble to cultivate her acquaintance.

Aldred was not used to being overlooked; she felt both indignant and offended at this neglect. She almost wished she had never left home, or, at any rate, that she had been sent to some other school than The Grange.

"If I can't make them like me, I shall never be happy here," she said to herself. "They're a stupid set! Well, if I don't get along any better than this, I shall ask Father to take me away, and send me to Oakdene with the Ropers. They always admire me; Doris writes two letters to my one, and Sibyl fights with Daisy to sit next to me at tea!"

[35] It is generally the unexpected that happens. Aldred had nearly made up her mind that she would never be popular with the Fourth Form, and would be obliged to remain a permanent outsider, when quite suddenly the whole aspect of affairs was altered.

The change arose from a most unanticipated quarter. One day Mabel Farrington came up to Aldred with an unusual warmth of manner, and an evidently newly awakened interest.

"By the by, Aldred, do you happen to live at Watersham?" she began.

"At Dingfield. It's really a part of Watersham, only the river runs between," replied Aldred, rather astonished at the question, for no one had seemed to care to hear about her home before.

"And were you staying at Seaforth in June?"

"Yes; we had rooms on the Promenade."

"I thought you must be the same girl! I've just had a letter from a cousin. I don't expect you've met her, but at any rate she has heard all about you, and she wrote to tell me. I'm so glad you have come to The Grange! I hope we shall be great friends. Will you sit next to me in class?"

Aldred's amazement was extreme. That Mabel Farrington, so exclusive and particular, should have singled her out, and actually wished to sit near her, was an honour which had been bestowed upon no one else in the school. It was evidently no empty compliment, but a genuine offer of friendship, for Mabel went promptly to Miss Bardsley and arranged for an exchange of desks, with the result that she and Aldred were placed side by side. At lunch-time she took
[36] Aldred's arm as they walked down the passage, she chose her for a partner at tennis during the afternoon, and sat talking to her during evening recreation.

She even made a more astonishing proposal.

"It's horrid for you to be obliged to sleep in No. 2, with Fifth Form girls," she said. "There's plenty of room in my bedroom for another bed. Would you care to join me? I should be delighted to have you, if you will."

The sudden fancy which Mabel had taken for Aldred could not fail to attract the notice of the other members of the Fourth Form. It was so unlike her to seek to be on such intimate terms with a classmate that at first they could scarcely believe the evidence of their own eyes. When they saw, however, that she appeared to have formed, not only an affection, but also an intense admiration for Aldred, they began to yield the latter a higher place in their estimation. As an ordinary new-comer, she had seemed of little importance; but as the chosen friend and elect companion of Mabel Farrington, she was at once raised to a very superior and important position. Girls who had hardly noticed her before, now made much of her; and her opinions were consulted, her remarks listened to, and her suggestions well received. It was an understood thing that to offend her would be to offend Mabel also, and to please the one was the best way of pleasing the other.

Aldred found this new state of things extremely gratifying. It was exactly what she had hoped for; success had come with a bound, and granted her the popularity for which she had craved. Added to this, she liked Mabel immensely, and keenly enjoyed her society. Once Mabel had
[37] unbent and thrown off her usual cloak of reserve, she proved a most delightful and winning comrade, and it gave a special zest to her confidences to feel they were shared by no one else. Aldred knew well that she was regarded as supremely lucky by the rest of the class, each one of whom would have jumped at the chance of being Mabel's room-mate, and envied her good fortune. She held her head a little high in consequence, and was ready almost to patronize those who, while they had had a much longer acquaintance with the school favourite, had not been considered worthy of her particular esteem.

It was about a fortnight after the establishment of this friendship, when the two girls had already grown very fond of each other, that Aldred happened one day to be standing inside the book cupboard in the classroom. It was quite a large cupboard, almost like a separate little room; and it had shelves all round, where spare exercise-books, bottles of ink, and boxes of chalk for the blackboard were kept. No one but the monitress was supposed to enter, and that only by the mistress's orders; so Aldred had no business there, and had gone in out of curiosity to see what it contained. She was examining the new pens, paper fasteners, bundles of pencils, and other articles which she found, when she heard voices in the classroom. Mabel Farrington and one or two other girls had evidently come in, and, to judge from their conversation, were discussing no less a person than herself. Aldred pricked up her ears. What were they saying about her? Strict honour urged her to step out of the cupboard at once, before she heard any more; but prudence advised her to stay where she was, and not to let her companions know that she had been prying
[38] in a place where she was not allowed to go: and it was the latter counsel that prevailed.

"Yes, I think she's pretty," said Phœbe Stanhope, "and she's very clever, and can make herself pleasant; but (if you'll excuse my saying so, Mabel) I can't quite see why you admire her so blindly as you do."

"Because she deserves it!" exclaimed Mabel, with enthusiasm. "She did such an absolutely splendid thing that I feel proud to know her."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. I didn't say a word about it before because I wanted to see if Aldred would mention it herself; but she's never hinted at the matter, and that's raised her higher still in my opinion. There are few girls who would not have made some reference to it."

"But what did she do?" asked Dora Maxwell.

"She was staying at Seaforth last June, and while she was there a terrible fire broke out in the middle of the night at the house where she was lodging. The people got safely on to the Promenade, and had sent for the fire engines, when suddenly it was discovered that the

landlady's youngest little boy had been left asleep in the attic. The flames were blazing out at the windows, and the hall was filled with horrible, dense smoke. Nobody dared to go inside, and everybody said: 'Wait for the Brigade, and the proper fire-escape. One of the men will fetch him.' But Aldred knew that every moment wasted might mean the loss of the child's life. She ran and dipped her pocket-handkerchief in the sea, and tied it over her mouth; then, without consulting
[39] anyone, she dashed into the house, and crept on her hands and knees up the stairs. She could just manage to breathe, but she reached the bedroom, and groped her way to the crib where the little boy lay whimpering with fright. He was only two years old, and luckily not very heavy, so she took him in her arms and crawled down the stairs in the same way as she had gone up, so as to get the purer air close to the floor. The people nearly went wild with excitement as they saw her stumble out at the door carrying the baby; and its mother was ready to worship her. The Brigade was such a long time in arriving that the flames had gained a complete hold before it came, and the attics were flaring like a bonfire. If Aldred had not seized the opportunity, and gone the very moment she did, the child would have been burnt to death! I believe it made a stir in Seaforth at the time. The newspapers wanted to print her portrait, but her father wouldn't allow it. He said 'his daughter had no wish for notoriety, and did not desire any public recognition of an act she had only been too happy to perform. She would be grateful if people would kindly take no further notice of it.' Now, you see why I think so well of Aldred! She's as brave as anyone in the *Book of Golden Deeds*, and yet so modest about what she has done that she's content to let it be quite forgotten."

"How did you hear, then?"

"I happened to mention in a letter to a cousin that we had a new girl at The Grange, called Aldred Laurence; and Cousin Marion wrote back, sending me a newspaper cutting that she had kept describing the fire, and saying she was sure that was the name of the 'little heroine' whom
[40] everybody at Seaforth had been talking about when she stayed there in June. She knew her home was at Watersham, and could tell me that she was dark and pretty, for she had sat next to her at a concert, one afternoon, on the pier. To make quite sure, I asked Aldred if she lived at Watersham, and if she had been at Seaforth in June; so when she answered 'Yes' to both questions, I was certain that Cousin Marion must be right."

"Aldred was brave!"

"Yes, and she showed such particularly nice, delicate feeling afterwards. It's a privilege to have such a girl at the school! Although she mayn't want us to say anything about it, she can't help our honouring her for it. I shall always feel quite different towards her for the sake of this."

In the shelter of the book cupboard Aldred had overheard every word. Mabel's account almost took her breath away. It was all a mistake. She had certainly never been in a fire, or risen to any such pitch of heroism. She remembered the circumstances, which had occurred just before her visit to Seaforth, and she had been struck at the time with the fact that the author of the deed bore the same surname as herself. The latter's name was, however, spelt with a W instead of a U, and the two families were not related, nor even acquainted. Aldred had not, indeed, been aware that the Lawrences lived at Watersham.

ALDRED OVERHEARS A SURPRISING STORY

[41] So this was the explanation of Mabel's violent attachment! She had been attracted, not by Aldred's real personality, but by qualities which she believed her to possess. What would she think, when she learnt that Aldred was not the girl she imagined? Suppose she were to drop the friendship as suddenly as she had taken it up? She might possibly prefer to have her bedroom to herself once more, and would feel no further interest in one who had not done anything particularly worthy of admiration. Aldred turned quite cold at the idea. If such a catastrophe occurred, all her popularity in the school would be lost. She was shrewd enough to realize that it depended entirely upon Mabel's goodwill, and that her position really resembled that of a Court favourite. It would be worse, far worse, to have to fall again into comparative obscurity than if she had never been thus made much of. Her pride could not tolerate the thought of being once more a nonentity in her class. To be held in high repute by her companions was the salt of life to her.

She knew perfectly well that she ought to walk out of the cupboard, confess to Mabel and the others that she had been listening to their talk, and explain the exact state of the case. It was the only straightforward course to take, and would prevent any further misconceptions. And yet, she hesitated. A swift and strong temptation had assailed her. After all, why need she tell? No one was aware that she had overheard this conversation, and nobody had so far made the slightest reference to her fictitious deed. She would act as if she were quite unconscious that they credited her with it, and it would be time enough to disclaim it when it was alluded to in unmistakable terms. The longer she could keep Mabel's friendship the stronger it would be likely to prove; and if the rest of the class had grown accustomed to treating her opinions with deference, they would
[42] probably continue to accord her a certain amount of consideration, from sheer force of habit.

She could not deliberately give up all that she had gained; it was too great a sacrifice to be expected from anybody! On some future occasion, when she had had sufficient opportunity to win their approbation on her own merits, she could casually enlighten the girls, and set the mistake right. She was confident that when they knew her better they could not fail to value her for herself alone, and this exploit would sink into insignificance. Besides, it was surely Mabel's fault, for jumping at once to a conclusion without making adequate enquiries. She could not help all the absurd things people might set down to her account, and it was not her business to go about the world correcting them.

The girls had left the classroom and run downstairs. She could now emerge from the cupboard quite unobserved, and no one but herself would be any the wiser for what had happened. For the present, at any rate, she would temporize; she would let matters remain as they were, and be guided by future contingencies. There was really no deception about it, because she fully intended to tell some time, when it was more convenient.

Thus Aldred drugged her conscience, and allowed herself deliberately to take the first step in a course which she knew in her heart was dishonourable and unworthy, and which she was afterwards most bitterly to regret.

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CHAPTER III

The Model Cottage

In her supposed character of a modest and retiring heroine, Aldred rapidly secured the favour she wanted in the school. Since the afternoon when Mabel had confided to Phœbe and Dora the story of the rescue, the whole class had waxed enthusiastic. Though nobody openly mentioned the subject, she could feel a marked difference in the general attitude towards her; she was no longer only Mabel's friend, but somebody on her own account. That this new esteem was not truly her due caused her an occasional pang, but she would put the thought hurriedly away, consoling herself by reflecting that the girls were beginning to discover her good qualities, and to appreciate her as she deserved.

Her intimacy with Mabel increased daily. The latter seemed hardly able to make enough of her. The two were always together, and Mabel, who possessed many luxuries that do not usually fall to the lot of the average schoolgirl, was ready to share everything with her room-mate. Aldred found it decidedly pleasant to be, not only encouraged, but actually begged to help herself to an unlimited quantity of the most delicious scent, to use dainty notepaper, or a delicate pair of
[44] scissors; to be lent a most superior tennis racket, and allowed to borrow any of the delightful volumes that filled the bookcase in the bedroom. To do her justice, she was really grateful for all this kindness, and absolutely adored Mabel. Had she loved her less, she might, perhaps, have been more willing to hazard the loss of her affection; but the thought of the blank which such a calamity would entail made her keep silence, in spite of the reproachful accusations of her better self.

"It's such a delight to me to have found a real friend!" said Mabel one day. "I've told Mother about you, and she wrote that she was so glad. I think I must read you a little scrap of her letter. She says: 'Your description of Aldred Laurence pleased me very much—she seems just the kind of high-minded girl with whom I should wish you to be associated; and though I stipulated for you to have a bedroom to yourself, I do not object to your sharing it with her, if you like. Our friends naturally exercise a great influence over our characters, so I am glad you have made such a good choice. I am sure that, knowing our home standards, I can rely upon your judgment, and that you would not allow yourself to be intimate with anyone who is not thoroughly worthy of your confidence.' You needn't turn so red!" continued Mabel, who misunderstood the cause of Aldred's blushes. "Of course, Mother is extremely particular, but she seems quite satisfied. I hope she'll see you some day, and then she'll love you on her own account."

"Suppose she didn't?" hazarded Aldred.

"She couldn't help it. Mother and I have just the same tastes; we admire courage and spirit,
[45] and people who do things in the world. Nearly all Mother's friends are interesting in some way. Mr. Joyce is an explorer, and Mr. Hall has done grand temperance work; Miss Abercombie is an artist, and Miss Verney is helping to run a settlement in the slums. Mother says it does her good to know them, and spurs her on to try to do more herself."

"What does she do?"

"Oh, heaps! No one could live a busier life than Mother. She's president of ever so many societies and guilds! She looks after poor girls, and finds employment for them, and sends them to the country when they need holidays. Then, in our own village there are the Orphanage and the Cottage Hospital to visit, and the district nurse and the deaconess to help, and clothing clubs and local charities to manage. She opens bazaars, and gives the prizes at schools, and acts as judge at flower shows. When Father was in Parliament it was really dreadful; Mother could hardly get through her enormously long list. But he lost his seat at the last election, and she has had a little easier time since then."

"But need she do it, if she doesn't like it?" objected Aldred.

There was a puzzled look on Mabel's face as she answered: "You, of all people, to ask such a question! Of course, she feels bound to give what help she can. She says her social influence is her one talent, and she must use it wherever a good cause needs a champion. She would be terribly missed, if she stopped supporting those various societies. It's what I'm to take up myself when I leave school. You, I expect, will go in for some splendid work, like Florence Nightingale,
[46] or Sister Dora. I have a presentiment that your name will be handed down to fame."

The idea of devoting her life to such self-sacrifice absolutely staggered Aldred. She did not

attempt, however, to shatter Mabel's dreams for her future, but only gave an ambiguous reply. When her friend was in this exalted mood, she evidently did not like to be checked, and the least hint that her high ideals were not shared would make a little rift within the lute, and destroy her confidence.

Now that she had secured what she considered her rightful place at Birkwood, Aldred was thoroughly happy in her new life. The Grange was a very up-to-date school, and Miss Drummond was an exceedingly enterprising and go-ahead principal, who kept in touch with all the latest educational methods, and was ever ready to give some fresh system a trial. This term she was devoting herself to an experiment which found great favour among her pupils. It was one of her pet theories that every woman, whether rich or poor, ought to have a thoroughly practical acquaintance with all the details of housekeeping, and she was determined to put this into operation. She had had a small cottage built in one corner of the grounds, and classes were held there regularly for cookery and still-room lore. The girls were taught to mix puddings, bake bread, make light pastry, and concoct many old-world salves and cordials. Miss Drummond would wax both enthusiastic and didactic when she aired her views on the subject.

"We can very well emulate our great grandmothers in this respect," she would say, "and thus make a happy combination of ancient and modern. Because you are studying French and algebra
[47] is no reason at all why you should not also know how to fry an omelette or boil a potato. A cultivated brain ought surely to be able to grasp domestic economy better than an untrained one, and an educated woman who is really helpful is worth more than an ignorant one. Even if you are never called upon to do things yourselves at home, you ought at least to know how they should be done, so that you need not set your maids unreasonable tasks, and expect impossibilities in the way of service. I think, also, that a great future for many of our English girls lies in the Colonies, where domestic help is often at a premium, and the most delicately nurtured lady must sometimes set to work, and be her own cook and laundress. If you profit by the classes you attend at the cottage, you will have an invaluable accomplishment, and one which may in some emergency prove more useful than anything else you have learnt."

Miss Drummond believed in putting all knowledge to the test of practice, so she instituted the plan of sending the girls in relays of three to the cottage every Saturday, and letting them undertake the entire work of the little establishment. Everything must be done by their own hands: the stove lighted—after the flues had first been intelligently cleaned—the rooms swept, dusted, and tidied; the midday dinner prepared, dished up, and cleared away; the crockery washed, and the kitchen left in apple-pie order. Miss Drummond herself and one of the other teachers were permanent guests at dinner; and the three housekeepers were each allowed to ask one friend to afternoon tea, so that there should be visitors to appreciate the various viands prepared.

The girls welcomed the experiment with the utmost enthusiasm. The cottage was to them a
[48] veritable doll's house, and they were supremely delighted at the prospect of directing the internal arrangements. As three were told off weekly for "domestic duty" there was just time during the term for each of the thirty-nine to have one trial, and "Cottage Saturday" became an event to which they looked forward with the greatest eagerness.

Instead of giving the upper forms the entire precedence, Miss Drummond sandwiched elder and younger girls in alternate weeks, so that several members of the Fourth Form secured an early chance. Aldred's turn happened to come the first week in October. To her great satisfaction, Mabel was bracketed with her for the same day, and Dora Maxwell completed the trio.

"It will be such fun!" declared Mabel. "We shall have to get our own breakfast. I hope we shan't make any idiotic mistakes."

"Grind the bacon, and fry the coffee?" laughed Aldred.

"Well, hardly so bad as that. But we shan't have anybody to ask. Miss Drummond says we're to be absolutely and entirely by ourselves."

"I wish we could do something rather out of the common," said Aldred; "something that nobody else has thought of yet! It would be such fun to surprise Miss Drummond!"

"Suppose we were to make some jam?" suggested Dora. "There are heaps of blackberries growing round the playing-field and the paddock. We could pick them this afternoon, and hide the basket."

"How about the sugar? There wouldn't be enough in the stores that are given out."

[49] "We shall have to let Miss Reade into the secret, and ask her to buy it for us. We can pay for it out of our pocket-money."

"All right. I know there's a preserving-pan and plenty of jam pots at the cottage. It would be such a triumph, when Miss Drummond came to look round in the evening, if we could show her a row of jars neatly labelled 'Blackberry'."

"We'll do it, then. Let us get the basket and go to the paddock now."

There was no lack of fruit on the brambles, and the hedgerows yielded such a prolific harvest that in an hour the girls had picked all they required. They concealed their spoils carefully in a cupboard under the stairs, where hockey sticks, tennis rackets, and other possessions were

generally kept. Miss Reade was sympathetic when they took her into their confidence, and promised readily to get them the sugar.

"Cook will bring it across and smuggle it into the scullery," she said. "I think Miss Drummond will be quite pleased to find you have tried something on your own initiative. By the by, I suppose you know how to make jam?"

"I do," replied Aldred. "I've often watched my aunt make it at home, and helped her, too. I remember exactly."

"Would you like a recipe?"

"I really don't think we need it, thanks."

"Well, I wish you all success," said Miss Reade "It is not my turn to have a meal at the cottage to-morrow, but perhaps the blackberry jam will appear at The Grange afterwards, and we shall taste it sometime at tea."

[50] By half-past seven next morning the three housewives were ready, and attired in the regulation costume for the day's work. Each wore a holland overall with sleeves, and had her hair tightly plaited, to keep it out of the way.

Miss Drummond presented them solemnly with the key of the cottage.

"You will find most of the stores ready, either in the cupboard or in the larder," she said; "but the meat will be delivered at ten o'clock. It is a loin of mutton, and you may cook it in any one of the ways that Miss Reade has taught you. You can get what vegetables you want from the garden, and I leave both the pudding and the cakes for afternoon tea to your choice. Mademoiselle and I will come to dinner punctually at one o'clock, and I have no doubt you will have everything ready and hot and very nice."

"We'll do our best," replied the trio.

They rushed across to the cottage in great excitement, eager to commence operations. The place was a tiny bungalow, containing a sitting-room, a kitchen, a scullery, a larder, and a coal-shed. Most of its adornments were of amateur origin. Miss Drummond had wished it to be the special toy of the school; so while it was in progress of construction, she had encouraged the girls to prepare everything for it that they could possibly make themselves, even allowing them to help with the decorations. Handicrafts were much in vogue at Birkwood, and it was really astonishing what a number of charming articles had been contrived, all at a very small cost. The walls of the sitting-room were colour-washed a pale, duck-egg green, and the Sixth Form had painted round
[51] them a frieze, consisting of long, trailing sprays of wild roses, quite simply and broadly done, but giving a most artistic effect. The curtains of cream-coloured casement cloth were embroidered in pale-green *appliqué* by the Fifth Form; the Fourth had undertaken the cushions; and the Third had worked an elaborate and dainty table-cover. The pictures were mostly chalk and pastel drawings done by the best students of the art class; while the wood-carving class had contributed the frames. Carpentry lessons had produced the bookcase, the cosy corner, the two arm-chairs, and also many neat little contrivances, in the way of shelves and handy brackets. Every item spent on the furnishing had been carefully entered and added up by the girls, so that each should have an adequate idea of the cost of the wee establishment, and what it was possible to do at trifling expense.

Though the sitting-room was more æsthetic than the kitchen, the latter was regarded as the most important feature of the house. The walls were a pale terra-cotta, and were hung with a few brown bromide photographs; but there art ended and utility began. All the rest was strictly business-like. There was a small "settler's stove", with oven and boiler; and a complete stock of requisites for simple cookery—pots, pans, dishes, pastry-board and roller, lemon squeezer, egg whisk, and even a coffee grinder, a knife cleaner, and a mincing machine.

The three girls felt quite important as they took possession of their little kingdom for the day. It was almost like "playing at house", but there was a "grown-up" sensation of responsibility which differed from mere amusement. With two guests for dinner and three for tea, they certainly could
[52] not afford to waste their time, if they wished to make a worthy effort at hospitality.

"We'll get the stove going first," said Mabel, "and have our breakfast; then, as soon as we've cleared away and washed up, we can begin at once to think about dinner."

She set the example by seizing the flue brush and beginning to clear the soot from under the oven, while Aldred fetched sticks, and Dora ran with a bucket to the shed to break coals, hammering away at the largest lumps she could find with keen satisfaction. The fire was soon blazing and the kettle filled, and with so many hands to help breakfast was not long in preparation. The energetic Dora turned the handle of the coffee grinder, Mabel cut dainty slices of bacon and presided over the frying-pan, and Aldred laid the table and made the toast. They all agreed that their first meal was delicious, although Mabel had forgotten to warm the plates for the bacon, and the coffee was just a trifle muddy.

"It oughtn't to be," said poor Dora anxiously. "I'm sure I made it exactly the same way as Miss Reade showed us. I must manage better if we intend to serve any after dinner to Miss Drummond and Mademoiselle."

"And I must remember hot plates!" said Mabel. "I should be ashamed to face Miss Drummond if we left out such an important item as that. By the by, Aldred, did you fill the kettle again, so that we can have plenty of hot water for washing up? It takes a long time to heat the boiler."

Aldred jumped up rather guiltily. As a matter of fact, she had drained the kettle, and
[53] thoughtlessly placed it empty upon the stove. By good luck it had not been there long enough to crack, but the vision of what might have happened made her pensive.

"There seem so many little things to think about!" she declared. "While you're doing one, you just forget another. I can quite believe the story of King Alfred burning the cakes, though Miss Bardsley always says it's 'not based on sound historical evidence'."

"It's most natural, and has the ring of truth," agreed Mabel, "especially the woman saying he would be ready enough to eat them afterwards. I should have told him so myself, I'm sure."

"What are we going to give Miss Drummond for dinner?" enquired Dora. "Let us arrange that before we begin to clear away. The kettle can't boil for quite five minutes, so we may as well hold our council of war now."

After considerable discussion they decided to cut the loin of mutton into chops, and stew it with carrots and turnips; to have kidney beans for the second vegetable, and a plum tart and a corn-flour blancmange for the pudding.

"Couldn't we have some soup?" suggested Aldred.

"There's nothing to make it with. We've no stock or bones."

"You don't need any. It can be *bouillon maigre*, instead of *bouillon gras*—just water and vegetables, without any meat. A lady who lives in France was staying with us this summer, and she said they always have it like that on Fridays. They put all kinds of things from the garden into
[54] it—things we never think of using. It will be a compliment to Mademoiselle to give her a French dish."

"Hadn't we better stick to what Miss Reade has taught us?" returned Dora doubtfully.

"We're to have 'soups and broths' at the next lesson," said Mabel.

"We can't wait for the next lesson!" urged Aldred. "I'll undertake the soup, and you can do the stew. I might make some bread sauce as well."

"But no one ever takes bread sauce with stewed mutton!"

"Why shouldn't they? It will be a novelty. I believe they have it in Germany. It will make an extra dish on the table, at any rate. We want to give Miss Drummond a good spread."

Mabel and Dora demurred, but Aldred was so insistent that in the end they agreed to let her include both the soup and the bread sauce.

"But you'll have to be answerable for them," maintained Dora, "because we haven't learnt to make either, and we wanted to practise what we really know to-day, not to try too many fresh experiments."

"Oh, I'll take the responsibility!" declared Aldred lightly. "We shall have a splendid dinner now. We'll pick a few apples, and those big yellow plums, for dessert."

"We'd better write a menu, if we've so many courses," said Mabel.

"A good idea! We'll put it in French; it will just delight Mademoiselle. What a pity we didn't think of it sooner, and we'd have painted a lovely card on purpose! I suppose there wouldn't be time now, if I ran and fetched my paint-box?"

[55] "Aldred! With all this cooking still to be done! We haven't even put away the breakfast things yet!"

"Well, the kettle's just singing; we'll wait till it boils. Have you a pencil, Dora, and a scrap of paper?"

The list of dishes looked quite imposing and elegant, when written in a foreign language. Aldred regarded it with pride, and copied it in her best handwriting:

MENU.

Potage aux Herbes.
Côtelettes de Mouton aux Légumes.
Sauce Anglaise.
Pommes de Terre au Naturel.
Haricots Verts.
Blancmange.
Pâté de Prunes.
Fromage.
Dessert.
Café.

"But why have you called the bread sauce *Sauce Anglaise*?" asked Mabel.

"I didn't know what to put. *Sauce de pain* doesn't sound quite right, somehow; and don't you remember some old Frenchman—was it Voltaire?—said the English were a nation of forty religions, and only one sauce? It's always supposed to be bread sauce, so I think *Sauce Anglaise* is a very good name for it."

[56] The kettle by this time had boiled over, which necessitated a careful wiping of the fender and fire-irons. After the washing-up had been successfully accomplished, and the stove stoked, and the damper turned to heat the oven, the girls sallied forth with baskets to the kitchen-garden, to pick fruit and vegetables. Aldred, who was determined to concoct what she imagined to be a really French soup, made a selection of almost every herb she could find—sage, sweet marjoram, thyme, fennel, chervil, sorrel, and parsley, as well as lettuces, leeks, and a few artichokes.

"It shall be exactly like what Madame Pontier described to Aunt Bertha," she thought; "and I won't forget the *soupçon* of vinegar and olive oil, which she said was so indispensable. Miss Drummond will be quite amazed when she hears I've evolved it myself. I suppose some people have a natural talent for cooking, the same as they have for painting. Who first thought of all the recipes in the cookery books, I wonder? It's far more interesting to try something original than to make the same stew as we had last week with Miss Reade."

Mabel and Dora had hurried back with their baskets, and when Aldred, having secured her miscellaneous collection, followed them leisurely to the cottage, she found them already hard at work, disjointing chops, cutting up carrots and turnips, slicing beans, and peeling potatoes.

"We want to get the meat on in good time, and let it cook gently," announced Mabel; "then we can turn our attention to the sweets. Would you rather make the blancmange or the pastry?"

"I don't care much about either, if you and Dora want to make them," said Aldred. "I shall have quite enough with the soup and the bread sauce. I might look after the vegetables, if you like."

[57] As the others agreed to this division of labour, Aldred retired to the scullery, and started operations. There was a small oil cooker here, which she thought she had better use, as there would not be room for everything on the kitchen stove. She chopped up all her various herbs, put them into a pan with some water, and then began to consider the question of seasonings.

"Even Aunt Bertha admitted that French people are cleverer than English at flavourings," she thought. "Madame Pontier said there ought to be a dash of so many things. I'll try a combination of all sorts of spices, not just plain pepper and salt." So in went a stick of cinnamon, a blade of mace, a few cloves, a teaspoonful of ginger, some grated nutmeg, and some caraway seeds. Aldred had not the least notion of how much or how little constituted a "dash", so she put a liberal interpretation on the term and added a teacupful of vinegar, and half a bottle of salad oil.

"There! That ought to be worthy of a *cordon bleu*," she said to herself. "Now I must let it simmer away, and it will be delicious."

She set her pan on the oil cooker, and ran out to the garden, to pick some flowers for the table. This was a part of the day's work that appealed to her more than the cookery, so she lingered for some time making an artistic combination of poppies, grasses, and sweet scabious. When she arrived back at the cottage, she was greeted by both Mabel and Dora with rueful faces.

"Your lamp has been flaring up in the scullery, and has made such a mess!" began Dora. "It's [58] sent black smuts over everything! They came right through into the kitchen, and fell into the blancmange. I had hard work to fish them out."

"And the scullery looks as if it wants spring cleaning," added Mabel. "I'm afraid we shall have to put clean paper on the shelves."

Aldred rushed to ascertain the fate of her pan. Mabel had taken it off and turned the lamp out, but there was still a very nasty, oily smell in the air. Dora, who was the most practical of the three, examined the cooker and re-trimmed the wick.

"You won't have to turn it too high," she said. "These lamps always smoke very easily. We used to use a paraffin heater in our greenhouse at home, and it wasn't at all satisfactory. I should leave it only half on, like this, if I were you."

"It won't cook very fast!" objected Aldred.

"Well, you don't want soup to boil, only to simmer. We must have the back door open, to get rid of this smell. It's perfectly sickening! I'll help you to clean up, while Mabel finishes the pastry."

The catastrophe with the lamp was most annoying. The smuts had settled so persistently that nearly everything had to be taken down and wiped, or dusted.

"Miss Drummond may very likely peep into the scullery," said Dora. "It would never do for her to find it covered with blacks; she'd think we were dreadfully bad housekeepers. All the things in the cottage are so beautifully new and clean, it's a shame to have a speck anywhere. Isn't it time to put on the beans and the potatoes?"

[59] The morning had certainly crept along very fast, and if the dinner was to be punctual to the moment, it was not any too soon to think of the vegetables. As Aldred had undertaken these for her province, she rushed into the kitchen and began to see about them at once, in such a flurry

that she quite forgot the instructions she had received at the cookery class. Fortunately, the other girls were looking on, and brought her to book.

"You mustn't put the beans into cold water," shrieked Dora; "I've the kettle boiling on purpose. And where's the pinch of carbonate of soda, to keep the colour?"

"And the potatoes need salt," interposed Mabel. "They're old now, and quite floury. You shouldn't do them with a sprig of mint; that was for new ones."

"Finish the vegetables yourselves, then!" retorted Aldred, a little out of temper. "I haven't made the bread sauce yet."

"Don't mind about it!"

"Yes, I shall; it's down on the menu."

"That doesn't matter."

"It matters very much. I shall have quite time, if you two will lay the table. Only, don't disturb my arrangement of the flowers, because I've put them just right; and be sure you tilt the menu card exactly opposite Miss Drummond's place."

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[60]

CHAPTER IV

Domestic Economy

At exactly two minutes to one o'clock Miss Drummond and Mademoiselle arrived at the cottage, and were ushered by three rather nervous and anxious housewives into the sitting-room, where the table, at any rate, looked inviting, with its nice clean cloth and elaborately-folded serviettes. The girls had arranged among themselves that Aldred was to bring in and remove the soup and the cheese, Mabel the meat course and the dessert, and Dora the sweets and the coffee. While the others, therefore, were taking their seats, Aldred, with a good many misgivings, poured her *potage* into the little tureen which formed part of the dinner service. She had never tasted French vegetable soup, and doubted whether her compound bore the slightest resemblance to the wonderful *bouillon maigre* of which Madame Pontier had boasted; it seemed of such a particularly weak and washy consistency, the herbs were not half-cooked, and the salad oil was floating on the top, and refused to mix up properly, though she stirred it vigorously with a spoon.

"I'm afraid it hasn't boiled enough on this wretched paraffin cooker," she thought. "Well, it will have to do now; I can't keep them waiting. I'm glad Dora remembered the toast."

[61]

"A six-course dinner!" exclaimed Miss Drummond, picking up the menu with great approval. "This is more than Mademoiselle and I had dreamed of! We certainly never expected to find soup—it is quite a surprise! Where did you get the stock?"

"There wasn't any stock; it's made from vegetables," replied Aldred. "I heard a French lady tell my aunt how to do it, so I thought I'd try."

"*Potage aux herbes!*" ejaculated Mademoiselle, looking at the tureen with an interest half-gastronomical, half-sentimental; "ah, but that bring to me other days! I have not tasted *bouillon maigre* since I live with my *grand'mère* at Avignon."

"You must imagine you are back in Provence, then, Mademoiselle," said Miss Drummond, as she helped to hand the plates.

"It was a sweet thought to make it—*une idée tout à fait gentille*! The scenes of one's youth, ah, what it is to recall them to the memory! *Ma foi!* but I am again in the old white *château*: the green shutters are closed to keep out the warm sun; Jules, the *concierge*, carries in the dishes, treading softly on the polished floor; outside is the cooing of doves, and the tinkling of goat bells. *Grand'mère*, so stately, so erect, so gay in spite of her years, she sit at the table's head, and serve to all the portion. It is to me as if I were there!"

Steeped in these reminiscences of her childhood, Mademoiselle, with pleased anticipation, raised her spoon to her lips. Then, alas! alas! she spluttered, made a horrible grimace, and buried her face in her serviette.

"*Ah! mais c'est dégoûtant!*" she murmured faintly.

[62]

Aldred hurriedly tasted her own plateful. Mademoiselle had not exaggerated matters; a more unpleasant brew could not be imagined. The various vegetables and herbs were still half-raw, and had not imparted their flavour, so the soup seemed mainly a mixture of spices and salad oil, and had, besides, a suggestion of paraffin, owing no doubt to the flaring-up of the lamp.

Poor Aldred blushed hotly. She was covered with confusion at such a dead failure. The others had all politely sampled the soup, and then laid down their spoons; it was quite impossible for anybody to take it.

"Never mind, my dear!" said Miss Drummond kindly. "You tried to give us a surprise, and we are as sorry as you that it should have turned out so unfortunately. Even the best cook has to profit by experience, and the value of this little cottage is that it gives you the opportunity of learning from practice. You will be wiser another time. Perhaps your aunt's French friend will send you a written recipe, with exact quantities and instructions. It needs a very old housekeeper to make a dish from hearsay. Suppose you take out the tureen, and we will go on with the next course."

Mabel's and Dora's stew, made exactly as Miss Reade had shown them in the cookery class, was quite satisfactory. They had put in the right seasonings, and had remembered to brown and thicken the gravy. The potatoes and beans were also up to standard, which cheered Aldred a little. She was partly responsible for them, and had helped to prepare them, though it was Dora who had shaken the potato pan, and put the dab of butter among the beans. Miss Drummond
[63] looked mildly surprised at the addition of bread sauce, but she helped herself without comment, feeling pledged to taste all her pupils' efforts. Aldred had been obliged to draw upon her inventive powers for this also, as she had no recipe, and the result, though not so disagreeable as the soup, was far from palatable. She had made it exactly like bread and milk, without onion, butter, or cloves; and had even added a little sugar to it. She wished sincerely that she had not included it in the menu, or, at any rate, that she had not allowed it to be brought to table. She looked so conscious and distressed that Miss Drummond readily divined who was the author of the attempt, and charitably forbore to remark upon it, though she left her portion unfinished on her plate.

The rest of the dinner was really very creditable. Dora's blancmange was smooth, and Mabel's pastry light. Aldred had arranged the cheese and biscuits daintily on paper d'oyleys; and the coffee, a combined effort of the trio, was a great improvement upon that of the morning.

The three girls heaved a vast sigh of relief when Miss Drummond, after a tour of inspection into the kitchen and scullery, departed, expressing satisfaction both with the dinner and with the general neatness and order of the establishment. Mademoiselle had excused herself the moment coffee was finished. She had been very silent after the episode of the soup, perhaps her thoughts were in Provence, or perhaps she considered it a hardship that her duties should include being obliged to endure such amateur cookery.

[64] "Hurrah! The worst part of the day is over," said Mabel. "I felt I couldn't breathe freely until dinner was done with, and Miss Drummond out of the house!"

"I'm quite exhausted with all our efforts," declared Dora, sinking into a basket-chair and tucking a cushion behind her head.

"Your efforts were successful," said Aldred ruefully. "I don't think Mademoiselle will ever forget my wretched *bouillon maigre*. I'm afraid she won't accept an invitation to dine at the cottage again."

"Well, she won't have us for cooks in any case, for we shan't get another day here now until next term. I wish our turns could come oftener!"

"Yes, we could do with a whole row of cottages."

"I'm afraid Miss Drummond won't build them."

"No, I suppose they cost too much."

The girls felt they had earned a rest after their labours, so they sat chatting for a while in the sitting-room before they began to clear away the remains of the feast.

"The others are looking forward tremendously to coming to tea," said Mabel. "It was nice of Miss Drummond to let us ask the whole Form."

"Well, we were allowed three visitors, and it would have been so hard to choose which. The two who were left out would have been so offended; and it really would have been hard on them, when they thought of the fun the rest were having."

"Look here!" cried Dora, starting up, "do you know it's a quarter-past two? If we're expecting five girls to tea at half-past four, we shall have to bestir ourselves and make some cakes."

"And there's the jam! We mustn't forget our precious blackberries," added Aldred.

"WITH A SHRIEK SHE DREW SWIFTLY BACK"

[65] An unpleasant surprise awaited them in the kitchen. They had forgotten the very existence of the stove while they were talking, and the fire was out. Until it was rekindled there did not seem much prospect of either cakes or jam. Dora and Aldred hastened to the rescue, while Mabel cleared the table, swept up crumbs, and generally tidied the sitting-room.

"We must manage to make it burn up quickly, or we shan't have the oven hot in time," said Aldred; and going into the scullery, she fetched the paraffin can, and poured a liberal amount over the pyramid of sticks and coal in the grate.

"Miss Reade said we were never to use paraffin!" objected Dora.

"Well, I suppose it's wrong in theory," answered Aldred, "but it's good in practice. I've seen the housemaid use it at home, when Aunt Bertha was out of the way. There's nothing like it for making a blaze. There! I've put on the lid, so if you will set a light to it, you'll see it will catch at once."

Dora knelt down in front of the stove, struck a match, and applied it to the paper. Then, instantly, a horrible thing happened. The paraffin flared up, and the strong down-draught from the stove pipe sent the flame suddenly straight out through the bars of the grate into her face. With a shriek she drew swiftly back; for the moment she thought she was blinded. Mabel came running in much consternation from the sitting-room, to see what had happened, and found Dora crouching on the floor with her hands over her eyes, and Aldred standing by, as white as a ghost.

"What's the matter? Are you hurt?" cried Mabel.

"Oh, I can see, after all!" shuddered Dora, cautiously peeping through her hands. "I never [66] expected the stove to play me such a horrid trick! Is my face burnt?"

"No; but oh dear, your eyebrows and eyelashes are singed! They look so queer!"

Dora got up, and ran to view herself in the small mirror that hung over the dresser.

"I've certainly spoilt my beauty—what there was of it! And I've had a most dreadful fright, too!" she remarked.

"It was my fault!" quavered Aldred, who was horror-stricken at the accident. "I'd no idea the flame would rush out in front. You might have lost your sight!"

"Well, it can't be helped now," said Dora, with good-tempered philosophy. "We'd better keep this little episode as quiet as we can. I only hope Miss Drummond won't notice my eyebrows, and ask what I've been doing to them. We'll never try such a silly thing again, though it was very efficacious—the fire's blazing away hard. What about the jam? Can you look after it, Aldred? You said you knew how. Mabel and I will make some potato cakes, and some scones."

After the failure of the soup and the bread sauce, Aldred's supreme confidence in her powers was rather shaken; but she would not confess as much to her companions, and readily undertook to superintend the preserving. The blackberries were waiting in the basket, and the pounds of sugar had been smuggled in that morning by the cook, and were concealed under towels in a drawer.

[67] Aldred wished now that she had not refused Miss Reade's recipe. There was no printed cookery book at the cottage, as the girls were not supposed to try experiments, but to carry out what they had learned in class, the instructions being written down in their notebooks.

"Still, jam really isn't difficult," she reflected. "There are no horrid seasonings and flavourings, only the fruit and the sugar. I don't see how I can go wrong over this; I've seen Aunt Bertha make it dozens of times!"

She set to work very providently and systematically. First she found the jam pots, wiped them, and placed them in readiness, then got the big brass pan and rubbed it carefully with butter, to make sure that not the slightest particle of verdigris could be left in it. She felt quite proud of herself for thus remembering her aunt's methodical ways. Next she measured the blackberries with a pint mug, and found that there were nearly five quarts, therefore four pounds of sugar would be just enough.

"I'll put the sugar in first," she thought, "and then, when it's boiling, drop in the fruit, like Aunt Bertha does. It keeps the blackberries whole, instead of letting them go squashy."

So on went the pan, and Aldred, armed with a big wooden spoon, stirred vigorously, wondering why the sugar did not begin to turn into a soft syrup, such as she had seen at home.

"There's a queer smell from somewhere!" exclaimed Mabel, who was at the table concocting potato cakes. "Is anything burning?"

"It's surely not my precious scones!" shrieked Dora, flying to the oven in hot haste, to ascertain the fate of the delicacies in question.

"Why, you only put them in a moment ago!"

[68] "No, it's not the scones; they've hardly begun to cook yet," said Dora, much relieved. "Aldred, I believe it's your sugar. Why don't you stir it?"

"I am stirring," returned Aldred, who, indeed, was wielding the spoon with frantic zeal.

"What's wrong then? Let me try."

Aldred resigned her weapon, and Dora took her place at the stove; but she was already too late, for the sugar was rapidly turning into a black, solid mass.

"Lift off the pan!" cried Mabel. "Can't you see it's burning horribly? Oh, what a nasty, disgusting, sticky mess!"

"I don't know why it should have burnt," complained Aldred; "I was watching it the whole time."

"Did you put enough water into it?"

"Water! I didn't put in any at all," faltered Aldred.

"You unmitigated goose!" exclaimed Dora. "Why, even I know that sugar will burn by itself, though I don't pretend to make jam. You really are a bungler to-day! How many more silly things are you going to do?"

"Everyone's liable to make mistakes," said Mabel, coming to her friend's defence. "It was you who suggested the jam, Dora, and neither you nor I knew exactly the proper way."

"Evidently Aldred didn't either. Why couldn't she get a recipe from Miss Reade?"

"I thought I could remember," apologized Aldred, who was feeling decidedly crestfallen.

"Well, you've spoilt all the sugar, at any rate! And the blackberries are no use now, either. It's really too bad!"

[69] "Oh, Dora, don't be cross, there's a dear!" entreated Mabel. "Aldred's fearfully sorry! I suppose we shouldn't have been so ambitious. I expect your scones will be lovely, and that will quite make up for the jam. Hadn't you better look at them again?"

Dora allowed herself to be pacified, though she felt she had more than one grievance against Aldred that day. She had refrained from any reproaches when her eyebrows were singed, but she was annoyed at her disfigurement, and thought that the various misadventures might have been avoided. She was considerably consoled, however, when she opened the oven door and caught sight of her scones. They had risen beautifully, and were done to a turn, just brown enough on the top, and nicely baked through.

"I believe they'll taste all right, when they're split in halves and buttered," she murmured, as she took them out of the tin.

"Help me with the potato cakes, Aldred," suggested Mabel, who was anxious to make up for Dora's snubbing. "You can stamp them out, and I'll do the rolling. And somebody fill the kettle! It

is a quarter to four, and the girls are sure to be so punctual!"

"She'd better clean out the preserving pan!" grunted Dora. "It can't be left in this state. Miss Drummond will be round again at six, to inspect before we go. Those who make a mess must tidy up."

Aldred saw the force of the argument. She did not want to shirk the disagreeable task, nor put it off on to anybody else. Though she held rather too good an opinion of herself, it was not one of her failings to try to avoid her fair share of any work on hand. She began at once to clean the
[70] pan, and toiled away without asking any help from the others, though it was a lengthy and troublesome performance. She was obliged to scrape the burnt sugar off with a knife, and then scrub away with sand and brick dust and soap. It took her fully half an hour, and made her hands quite sore.

She had just finished, and put the humiliating row of jam pots back on to the scullery shelf, when a loud rap-tap sounded on the door.

"They're here—ten minutes too soon!" cried Mabel. "Go and let them in, Aldred. I'm taking out the potato cakes, and Dora's laying the table."

The five visitors arrived in the very highest of spirits, and with the best of appetites. They overstepped the bounds of politeness by sniffing the air appreciatively as they entered, and announcing themselves ready to eat anything and everything.

"I feel like a ragged-school child going to a treat!" announced Ursula. "As for Lorna, she's been banting in preparation; she hardly took any dinner."

"It's a libel!" protested Lorna. "I had quite as much as Ursie. What have you made? We're dying to know!"

"Where are your manners? Please to remember you're visitors. You're not to ask; you must wait until we bring the things on to the table."

Three hostesses and five guests seemed to completely fill the tiny sitting-room.

"It's so delightfully minute!" declared Phœbe Stanhope. "When I was a little girl, I always longed to make myself small, like Alice in Wonderland, and have tea in my own dolls' house. Now I feel as if I were really doing it at last!"

"There isn't room for us all at the table," said Mabel. "Dora, you had better let down that side leaf."

[71] "It's an afternoon calling tea, not a sit-down schoolroom tea," explained Aldred.

"Three of you must sit in the cosy corner," commanded Dora, "and the other two may have the arm-chairs."

"But mayn't we help to bring in the things?"

"No, you mayn't! Agnes, I wish you'd sit down! If you were paying a real call, you wouldn't bounce up and try to peep into the kitchen."

"You came too early," said Mabel reproachfully. "We were going to have everything exactly ready for half-past four."

"Well, you might at least tell us how you've been getting on. Has it been fun spending the day here?"

"Simply scrumptious!" replied the trio.

"I'd like to do it again next week!" added Dora.

"It's the Fifth Form next Saturday, and after that it's my turn, with Phœbe and Myfanwy. When's this wonderful tea coming in? We're all waiting!"

"We'll make it now," said Mabel. "Aldred, will you put out the spoons?"

Dora had laid the best embroidered linen cloth on the table, set cups and saucers, and brought in the milk and a plateful of bread and butter. It only needed the teapot and the scones and cakes, therefore, to complete the feast.

"I hope you've made enough to go round twice!" said Ursula.

"Beautiful cakes, so rich and brown,
Oh, how quickly you'll go down!
Who for such dainties does not ache?
Cake of the evening, beautiful, beautiful
cake!"

sang Phœbe, trying to out-Alice *Alice*.

[72] "How disgustingly greedy you are! I call it quite indecent. You don't deserve anything, except plain bread and scrape."

Mabel crossed the passage laughing; but as she opened the kitchen door her mirth was changed to mourning. There, with his fore-paws upon the table, stood Raggles, the shaggy yard dog, devouring scones as fast as he could gulp them down his capacious throat. Mabel uttered a cry of dismay, and, catching up the rolling pin, which was the nearest thing at hand, flung it at the intruder, who snatched a last mouthful, and bolted hastily through the back door.

"Oh, Dora! Aldred! Come and see what's happened!" cried poor Mabel, bursting into the sitting-room, oblivious of the fact that a model hostess ought not to air such domestic catastrophes in public. The visitors did not stand on ceremony, however, but seized the opportunity to make a dash for the kitchen, into which they had been longing to peep.

"I never dreamt of Raggles coming in! I thought he was tied up!" wailed Dora.

"We oughtn't to have left the back door open," said Aldred.

"It was so hot; one can't have the place all stuffy! Oh, the wretch! I wish they'd choked him!"

"Has he taken every one?" asked the disconsolate guests.

"All except three, and as he seemed to be licking the whole plateful, I don't suppose anybody would care to try what he's left!" replied Mabel.

"My lovely scones! And I had split them and buttered them!" moaned Dora, almost in tears.

[73] "Well, we have the potato cakes, at any rate. Luckily, I put them on the top of the stove, to keep hot, and Raggles didn't find them out."

"We'd better eat them quick, before any more accidents happen," advised Aldred, hastily pouring the water on the tea, and heading the procession back into the sitting-room.

The potato cakes were a huge success. That was the universal verdict. They were light, and hot, and buttery, and the only fault to be found was that there were not nearly sufficient of them. Mabel handed the plate round with impartial justice, and there were only two apiece.

"Just enough to make one want more!" sighed Ursula, consuming the last delicious crumb.

"There's plenty of bread and butter, if you're hungry."

"But I'm not bread-and-butter hungry!"

"I'm sorry we've no jam!" apologized Dora.

"Oh, don't!" begged Aldred, who still felt humiliated at the fate of the blackberries.

"She didn't mean it!" interposed Mabel the peacemaker. "I vote we have some buttered toast, and anybody can hold it who likes to volunteer."

When Miss Drummond arrived at six o'clock she found the visitors gone, the tea-things washed, and the whole of the wee establishment in apple-pie order; while three flushed, rather tired little maids-of-all-work stood at attention, ready for her tour of inspection.

"Housekeeping isn't quite so easy and simple as it appears on the surface, is it?" she remarked. "In its own way, it has as many difficulties as Latin or mathematics, and needs as much learning.
[74] It's a very useful art, however, and worthy of cultivation. You'll have gained a little experience even in this one brief experiment, and your mistakes will teach you what to avoid next time. You have done very nicely, though, and I shall give you each a good report. Have you enjoyed your day at the cottage?"

And all three girls answered: "Immensely!"

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[75]

CHAPTER V

Out of Bounds

Aldred had never been to school before, but she was so happy at the Grange that she was sure no other place in the United Kingdom could be half so nice. Miss Drummond was certainly a delightful head mistress, and the model cottage was only one of her many original ideas. Following her theory of training her pupils in useful home arts, she allowed them to do many little things in the house that do not always come within the province of schoolgirls. Each classroom was provided with vases, and it was the monitresses' duty to keep these replenished, using leaves and berries when the garden supply failed. The prefects always arranged the flowers for the dinner-table, and the top girl in each Form had the privilege of attending to those in the drawing-room and in Miss Drummond's study. Those girls who gained ninety per cent in the monthly examinations were invited to the Principal's Wednesday afternoon "At Home", and

helped to pass cups and entertain visitors, the one with the highest score being asked to pour out tea.

Miss Drummond encouraged the girls to talk to her, and tried to make the whole atmosphere as homelike as possible, allowing a tolerable amount of liberty, so long as it did not degenerate into
[76] licence. She would discuss topics of the day, books, music, art, or any other subject with her pupils, trying to make them talk easily and naturally, and take an intelligent interest in what was going on in the world.

"Conversation is like a game of ball," she would sometimes say; "it must be thrown backwards and forwards from both sides. There is nothing so aggravating as to be obliged to talk to a person who will persist in only answering with a negative or an affirmative. I have racked my brains sometimes to think of fresh topics, when all my leading remarks have been received with a 'Yes' or a 'No'. That is what I call dropping the ball. When you see people are making an effort to entertain you, it is only fair to play your part as well. I know you plead shyness, but shyness can be conquered if we try to forget ourselves, and think only how we can give pleasure to others. It is really a form of self-consciousness, and ought to be fought against as well as any other fault."

Games were not compulsory at The Grange, though Miss Drummond liked all to take part in the weekly matches. But she considered it was inadvisable to train girls to care for nothing but cricket and hockey, and wished them to take up a number of small interests, such as they could carry on afterwards at home. During recreation time she allowed specially chosen recruits to help her in superintending the garden and greenhouse, the poultry yard, and the bee-hives that were her particular hobby. These country occupations proved very popular, and to be one of Miss Drummond's "outdoor helpers" was an honour much sought after and keenly appreciated.

[77] There was a large shed in the yard, where a joiner's bench had been fitted up, and on wet days this was devoted to carpentry or chip-carving, some of the best efforts being reserved for a small annual bazaar, generally held in aid of the Missionary Societies.

Sewing and embroidery were much encouraged. Miss Gray, the art mistress, taught the girls to design their own patterns, and had obtained some pretty results in appliqué and Oriental work. She was an enthusiast in handicrafts, and allowed many pleasant variations from the usual drawing course, thinking clay modelling, gesso, stencilling, wood-staining, and pyrography as important parts of an art training as line or brush work. The weekly afternoon spent in the studio was a revelation to Aldred, whose really artistic nature revelled in all these hitherto unknown delights. She took to them like a duck to water, and was absolutely happy moulding clay, or stamping backgrounds with the poker-work apparatus. She would have spent her whole leisure in the studio if that had been allowed, and would often beg a piece of clay, with which to practise modelling by herself.

Music, also, was not neglected at Birkwood. There were lessons in theory and harmony, as well as in piano playing and class singing. Sometimes the girls were taken to afternoon concerts, but these dissipations were generally reserved for winter, as there were so many other things in summer to fill up the days.

One Wednesday half-holiday, when she had been at The Grange for about a month, Aldred was sitting on the steps of the sundial, in company with Dora Maxwell, Myfanwy James, and Phœbe
[78] Stanhope The sundial was a place of general rendezvous in the garden. Here, as a rule, the tennis sets were arranged, sides chosen for croquet or basket ball, leaders elected, and disputes settled. It was as popular a spot as the market cross in a country town, and during play-hours was the universal centre for the whole school. The four girls had brought out books, and were enjoying reading, with intervals of chatting. Mabel was having a music lesson, so for once Aldred was apart from her almost inseparable companion.

"It will be so jolly when we begin hockey on half-holidays!" said Dora. "It's really been too hot for it so far; I quite agree with Miss Drummond in that."

"I'm always glad when the cold weather sets in, and we can settle down to all our ordinary winter arrangements," said Myfanwy. "I like the long evenings, when it's dark by tea-time, and we can sit round the fire and talk; it's really far more fun than the summer term."

"I love the summer best," said Aldred. "I like the flowers, and the leaves on the trees, and the birds singing. Winter seems lonely without them. I think it's so melancholy to have days and days without any sunshine!"

"I don't mind the evenings being dark, but I hate getting up before it's light," said Phœbe. "It's miserable to have to turn out of bed at seven o'clock on chilly November and December mornings. I'm never like the good boy in the story-books who gets up readily; it's always a wrench for me."

"We've hard enough work to rouse you, certainly," admitted Dora. "If it weren't for us, you'd be
[79] sweetly slumbering when the breakfast bell rings. I can't imagine how you'd manage if you had a room to yourself, instead of being in No. 5. Who wakes first, Aldred, you or Mabel?"

"Both together, generally," replied Aldred. "I don't see how anybody could sleep through such a fearful clatter as the bell makes. It gives me a horrible start every morning. It's worse than an alarm clock?"

"Oh, you'll get used to it in time!" declared Phœbe. "And then perhaps you won't notice it any

more than I do."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by Freda Martin and Blanche Nicholls, two of the prefects, who came past arm in arm.

"What are you four doing here?" asked Freda briskly. "Why aren't you playing tennis with the others?"

"There isn't room," replied Phœbe. "The Fifth Form girls have got up a tournament, and they'll keep the courts all the afternoon."

"Can't you have a round at croquet, instead?"

"We don't feel inclined."

"Basket ball, then?" suggested Blanche.

Dora leaned back against the stone shaft of the sundial, and yawned luxuriously.

"No, we're simply enjoying doing nothing," she confessed.

"You lazy little wretches, you ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Get up and take some exercise! Look here! if you care to run in and ask for your exeats, you can come with us for a stroll to Chetbourne. There are two of you apiece for us, so it will be just right to make 'threesomes'; only, quick's the word, and don't forget to bring your gloves!"

[80] The members of the Lower School were not allowed outside the grounds of the Grange without a teacher, except in very special circumstances; but the Sixth Form girls had the right of taking walks within certain bounds, if they went three together, and might occasionally extend the privilege to some of the younger ones, on the understanding that they were considered responsible for the latter. Each was only authorized, however, to give two such invitations in the course of a term, so that the lucky chance could fall to the lot of but a favoured few. In any case, no girl might pass through the gate without an exeat or special order from the head mistress, who always entered in a book the names of those who thus had leave of absence.

Phœbe, Aldred, Dora and Myfanwy sprang up with an absolute howl of joy. They had never anticipated such a piece of good fortune. The prospect of an outing was delightful, and they rushed at once into the house to secure the necessary permits from Miss Drummond, getting ready and returning with such record speed that the two prefects could not complain of being kept waiting. It was a beautiful afternoon in the middle of October, so warm and fine that it seemed more like the height of summer than autumn. Dahlias and hollyhocks were still in full bloom in the garden, the trees had scarcely begun to change colour, and, though the swallows had left, an industrious sparrow, mistaking the season, was flying with a piece of hay in her bill, as if actually contemplating another nest. The sun shone with an almost August glare as the girls left the Grange and started for their walk over the downs; but there was a pleasant breeze to
[81] temper the heat, and, as Freda declared, the dash of the waves always had a cool sound, at any rate. The road ran parallel with the cliffs, so that for the whole of the two miles they had an uninterrupted view of the sea, which lay calm and sparkling, with a gleaming sail here and there, or the smoke of a Channel steamer on the horizon.

"I've never been to Chetbourne," announced Aldred. "I suppose it's very jolly, with a promenade, and all that sort of thing?"

"It's the ordinary kind of seaside place," said Blanche Nicholls. "It's generally very full in the summer."

"Are there any entertainments on the pier?"

"Oh, yes!—pierrots, and a band."

"Shall we have time to go and hear them?"

"We're not allowed. Our bounds stop just at the beginning of Chetbourne. We mayn't go into the town, nor along the promenade."

"Why, what a swindle!" exclaimed Aldred. "I thought we were going to have some fun!"

"Isn't the walk enough for you?" asked Freda.

"It's very nice; but it would have been amusing to see a few niggers, or some performing dogs."

"The post office is our limit," said Blanche. "We always call a halt there. They have a splendid set of picture postcards, and some nice Goss china. A good many of us are collecting Goss."

"Then mayn't we go the least little scrap farther?" pleaded Aldred.

"Not a step!" replied Freda decisively.

Aldred said no more, and the six walked on, chatting of other matters, until they reached the outskirts of the town. The post office was a large shop, of a kind common at seaside resorts. A
[82] variety of miscellaneous articles were on sale—shell boxes, photograph frames, wicker baskets, cheap ornaments, and materials for fancy-work—and the younger girls found their allowances burning holes in their pockets, and stayed so long choosing souvenirs that their elders waxed

impatient.

"Haven't you finished yet?" said Freda. "You must have turned over every postcard in the box. Blanche and I want to go to the bookseller's. I think we might leave you here for ten minutes. You'll be all right till we come back," and she departed with her fellow-prefect to a shop opposite.

The others finished their purchases and paid for them, then stood waiting until their escorts should return. The post office was a long building, and had two glass doors, one of which opened on to the main street, while the other led into a side road. To the latter door Aldred strolled leisurely, and stood gazing out at the general prospect.

"Is that the beach down there?" she asked Phœbe. "I almost think I can see bathing vans."

"Yes; this road leads directly to the parade. It's only about half a minute's walk."

"I should like immensely to take a look at the sea front."

"It's a beautiful promenade," said Dora. "It seems a shame you can't see it."

"Couldn't we just run down to the end of the road, and have one peep?"

"What about Blanche and Freda? They'd never let us."

"They wouldn't see us go out at this door, and we should be back before they were."

"All right! I'm ready, if you are."

[83] "There can't be any harm in walking a hundred yards," added Phœbe. "Come along, Myfanwy!"

With one accord the four girls rushed out of the post office and tore down to the sea front. The promenade looked most inviting. The spell of warm weather had brought a number of autumn visitors to Chetbourne, so that there was quite a revival of the season. Children were digging on the sands, the seats and the shelters were full of people reading or chatting, and the constant stream of parasols, white flannels, and light dresses passing up and down opposite the Marine Hotel again suggested the month of August, rather than October.

"I believe the niggers are still here!" exclaimed Myfanwy excitedly. "Or perhaps they went away, and have come back again. Don't you see them at that corner by the tea-rooms?"

"There's certainly somebody with a banjo," said Phœbe. "I can't see for the crowd. Oh! I caught a glimpse then of a tall white hat and a red-striped jacket."

"I wonder whether it's the niggers or the pierrots?" said Dora.

"Do let us go and see!" begged Aldred. "It's such a very little way, we shan't be two minutes."

She seized Dora by the arm, and began to urge her in the direction of the music. Dora did not need much persuasion, and, as Phœbe and Myfanwy offered no remonstrance, they all marched briskly along the promenade. There was a spice of adventure in that, for they knew that they had no business to be there, and that if they were seen and recognized they might be reported to
[84] Miss Drummond, and get a severe punishment for breaking bounds. In any case, there were the prefects to be reckoned with. Blanche and Freda would be returning to the post office, and would be extremely angry to find that they had not waited.

"We'll manage to square them somehow," said Phœbe. "I don't think they'll tell Miss Drummond, although they'll probably scold."

"Of course, we shan't really stay a moment," maintained Dora. "We'll just rush straight there and back. They surely can't be very cross at that."

Yet, when they actually arrived at the rather congested corner where the light-hearted negro minstrels, with carefully blacked faces and striped collars, were making merry, they found it impossible not to stop and listen to the songs and jokes. The leader of the troupe was a humorist, and above the average of such performers; he kept his audience well amused, and it was not until he had sent round the inevitable hat, and bidden a polite adieu to the company, that the girls thought of stirring. Even then, their attention was at once claimed, first by a man with performing birds, and then by a Punch and Judy show. The poor little canaries were really clever, while the tragedy of wicked Mr. Punch is an ever-thrilling drama, and his squeaky voice has a peculiar fascination of its own. Time passed rapidly, and the four runaways began suddenly to realize that not only had they been gone much longer than a few minutes, but that they had wandered almost the whole length of the promenade.

"Why, we're nearly at the pier!" exclaimed Dora.

"We must turn back at once," said Phœbe.

[85] "Let us buy a few chocolates before we go," suggested Aldred. "Isn't there a shop here, or an automatic machine?"

"There's a kiosk on the pier-head," replied Dora. "They sell the most delicious American popcorn there, in little boxes tied up with striped ribbons."

"Then we'll get some."

"It's a fairly long way to the end of the pier."

"Well, when we've been away so long already, I can't see that a few extra minutes matter."

"'As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb'!" quoted Phœbe.

"Yes; Blanche and Freda will wait, and they'll scold in any case."

"You'll have to pay for me, then," said Myfanwy, "for I haven't any money left."

"All right; I have plenty," responded Aldred, putting down her pennies on the counter of the toll gate, and pushing hastily through the turnstile. "Now we can run, if you like. How jolly it is on these boards! You can just see the water through the chinks."

The pier was even more interesting than the promenade. There were so many different kinds of automatic machines, which, by the magic of a penny in the slot, would set a team of miniature cricketers to work, and cause mimic soldiers to drill, or ships to sail across imitation oceans. There was a little chalet where cheap jewellery and the polished stones of the neighbourhood were displayed; a fruit shop, and an emporium for sticks and fishing-rods. All these seemed to attract Aldred, and delayed her so much that the others were obliged to take her by the arms and
[86] tug her along towards the confectionary kiosk. She had just made an investment in chocolates and popcorn, and the girls were turning to hasten back along the pier, when Dora had an idea.

"Look!" she said; "the steamer's just starting. It always stops at the jetty, and it will take us to the other end of the promenade far faster than we can walk. It's only a penny fare."

"Yes, it would save time," agreed Phœbe. "Come along!"

The bell was ringing, so without waiting to ask questions the four ran down the steps and across the gangway on to the vessel. They were not a second too soon, for she started directly they were on board. The deck was rather crowded with passengers, but the four made their way to a fairly quiet corner, and managed to find seats. Several little coasting steamers ran between the pier, the jetty, the North End, and the lighthouse, and were much patronized by visitors in summer. It would only take a few minutes, so the girls calculated, to reach the first landing-place, which was close to the post office. Blanche and Freda would no doubt be waiting for them in a very irate frame of mind, but perhaps might be cajoled into not reporting the matter at head-quarters.

"Freda is particularly fond of popcorn, I know," said Myfanwy.

"We'll all cry *peccavi*, and say we're sorry," added Phœbe. "We certainly never intended to be away so long as this. It must have taken us half an hour."

"Perhaps they'll think we've started home," suggested Dora, "and imagine we're waiting for them on the downs."

"Well, we shall very soon see; we're nearly at the jetty."

[87] "I wonder why so many people are taking portmanteaux with them for this tiny, little voyage?" commented Aldred, looking round at the passengers, most of whom seemed to be encumbered with some impedimenta in the way of luggage.

"How funny! I never saw them on one of these steamers before," replied Myfanwy. "Perhaps the people are visitors going to stay at the North End."

"There's the jetty," announced Dora; "we shall be off directly. Hallo! Why aren't we stopping? Oh, Phœbe! Myfanwy! Aldred! Look: we're actually going past it!"

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[88]

CHAPTER VI

An Awkward Predicament

The girls sprang to their feet. It was unfortunately only too true; the vessel had steamed past the quay, and was heading out into the bay, away from the land.

The four looked at each other in consternation too great for words. What were they to do? Could anybody have imagined a more horrible situation? They must indeed have made some great mistake.

"Tickets, please!" cried the purser, coming round at this critical moment to collect the fares, and holding out his hand in anticipation.

"We—we haven't any!" faltered Dora. "We thought you stopped at the jetty."

"Why, no, miss. This is the Everston boat; we don't stop until Sandsend. You've got on the wrong steamer, that's what you've done. Didn't you see the notice up on the gangway? The North End boats have red funnels and a blue flag. A shilling each, please, to Sandsend, or half a crown to Everston."

"Oh, can't you turn back, and put us off at the jetty?" implored Dora, almost crying. "We don't want to go to Sandsend, and certainly not to Everston."

"And we're in a great hurry," added Aldred.

[89] "Sorry, miss, but it can't be done! The captain won't stop the steamer for anybody," said the man, smiling.

"Not if we went and asked him ourselves?" begged Phœbe eagerly.

"Not for the Queen of England!" returned the purser, as he waited, shuffling the tickets and some loose change suggestively in his hand.

The girls felt in their pockets in vain. Most of their substance had gone on postcards and popcorn, and all they could muster among them was sevenpence-halfpenny.

"I'm afraid we haven't enough money. We only expected to pay penny fares to the jetty."

Dora's voice trembled a little. She felt so upset, she scarcely knew what she was saying, and the others looked equally solemn and concerned. The purser rubbed his chin, as if in doubt.

"It's an awkward case, certainly," he said. "I can't think what they were doing at the pier-head to let you come on without tickets. This boat goes to Everston, you see, and stays the night there, so we can't take you back to Chetbourne. You'd best get off at Sandsend, and walk home along the shore. I'll make it all right with the captain about the fares."

Were ever four wretched girls in such a predicament? It was a judgment with a vengeance on their naughtiness. To be carried away by the steamer and set down at such a remote place as Sandsend seemed an appalling prospect, and they were quite aghast at the idea.

"Well, we have got ourselves into a scrape!" exclaimed Phœbe, as soon as the purser was out of earshot.

[90] "I was so sure it was the ferry-boat!" sighed poor Dora. "I feel as if I were to blame for proposing it."

"It wasn't your fault more than anybody else's," said Myfanwy. "I suppose we ought to have stopped to ask."

"We were in such a hurry!"

"How far is Sandsend from Birkwood?" asked Aldred.

"Six miles. It will take us a most fearfully long while to walk, and it's four o'clock now."

"Oh, dear! We shan't get in till supper. What will Miss Drummond say?"

"There'll be a regular hue and cry after us."

"What will Blanche and Freda do?"

"I suppose they'll go back, when they can't find us, and report us as missing. They wouldn't dare to stay in Chetbourne too long, and be late for tea."

"We're having a free excursion on the steamer, at any rate," said Aldred.

Dora appeared to think that a decidedly doubtful advantage. She was not a good sailor, and the sea was rough now that they were outside the bay. Phœbe, too, began to show signs of distress; and Myfanwy, usually so rosy and talkative, had suddenly grown unwontedly pale and pensive. Aldred was the only one who enjoyed the voyage; to the others it was the reverse of pleasant, and they were much relieved when the vessel at last arrived at Sandsend. They scurried across the gangway on to the quay with almost undignified haste.

"Oh, it is nice to feel oneself on terra firma again!" ejaculated Dora.

[91] "Or 'terra-cotta', as the old lady remarked!" laughed Aldred. "I'm afraid you wouldn't appreciate a yachting cruise, Dora."

"I certainly shouldn't. Nothing would induce me to go. I should be lying in my berth the whole time, in a state of utter collapse and misery. No yachting for me, thank you!"

"We'd better ask somebody which is the right way," said Myfanwy. "We don't want to make any more mistakes."

They found, on enquiry, that the high road ran inland over the downs, and that, instead of it being only six miles to Birkwood, as Dora had supposed, it was in reality nearer nine.

"The road twists, and goes round by Greenstaple," said the old sailor who directed them. "It's only a matter of five miles if you went as the crow flies, but you'd maybe get lost on the downs. It's about the same distance along the coast, if you care to go by the shore. The tide won't be up

yet awhile, and you'd have ample time to get round the headland, if you stepped out fairly well."

The beach sounded so much the most attractive route that the girls at once decided in its favour. It was a consideration to save four miles, and they all preferred the seashore to the hills. If they walked fast, they calculated that it would not take more than a couple of hours, and they would get back to school just before dark.

"We must 'step out', as the old man advised," said Phœbe. "No one must slack off, or lag behind."

[92] It was all very well to make good resolutions, but quite another matter to keep them. The beach near Sandsend was an especially fascinating part of the coast. It abounded with little, shallow pools among the rocks, where such a variety of beautiful anemones, madrepores, sea-cucumbers, and other marine objects might be seen that it almost resembled an aquarium. None of these treasures were to be found at Birkwood, where the cliffs were of a different geological formation; indeed, these particular few miles of shore were a noted spot for zoologists, and could show more choice species than anywhere else within a radius of fifty miles. It was not astonishing, therefore, that the girls stopped to marvel at some of these flowers of the sea, to watch the anemones stretching out their delicate, brilliantly coloured tentacles, to admire the corallines or the many strange forms of zoophytes, to chase spider crabs, and to pick up rare shells, and gather some of the lovely seaweeds that fringed the pools. They quite forgot the time, and went dawdling on from one interesting rocky basin to another, wishing they had a glass jar, or a bucket, in which they could carry some specimens back to the Grange.

"Don't you think we might put a few anemones in our handkerchiefs?" suggested Aldred.

"Not an atom of use! They die directly they're out of water. We tried it once before, and it wasn't a success," replied Phœbe.

"We'll tell Miss Drummond about the place, and ask her to bring us for an expedition some day," said Dora. "The school aquarium needs replenishing badly."

[93] They had been walking, or, rather, strolling for about an hour when they reached a small bay, which lay between two promontories. The water here was so low that they decided they might as well cross the sands, instead of keeping close under the cliffs; they made a bee-line, therefore, for the opposite headland, jumping over the narrow channels that intercepted their path. On the flat sandbank they found at least a dozen large jellyfish, left stranded by the tide. Aldred insisted upon picking up some of these and restoring them to their native element; and she kept poking about in so many heaps of seaweed, and investigating such a number of species, that the other girls began to despair of ever getting her back to Birkwood.

"We shall be all in the dark if we don't mind!" remonstrated Phœbe. "We've been sauntering along as if we had the whole day before us."

"And as if there were no tide! Just look behind you!" exclaimed Myfanwy.

Phœbe turned round uneasily. What she saw was enough to make her shout wildly to the others, and set off running as fast as she could towards the cliff in front. All the time they had been amusing themselves with the jellyfish, the water had been creeping stealthily and silently up, and had flowed in an ever-widening channel between them and the land. Except for a narrow space, which led to the rocks at the end of the promontory opposite, they were entirely cut off; and unless they cared to swim it was utterly impossible for them to reach the beach.

[94] Most of them were good runners, and could do well enough at the school sports; but it seemed quite a different matter to race with the tide, and much too risky a performance to be appreciated. They just reached the rocks before the sands were entirely covered, and were obliged to splash anyhow through pools, getting their feet horribly wet, for there was no time to stop and take off their shoes and stockings.

Once on the promontory they were safe enough, and they began to make their way back towards the mainland, scrambling over the rocks, which were slippery and slimy with seaweed, and becoming extremely draggled in the process. There were several claps of distant thunder, and rain, which had been threatening for some time, suddenly descended in a drenching stream. The tide came thundering in, dashing great waves against the rocks, and sending showers of spray to join the rain.

The girls plodded steadily on, hoping that they would soon regain the beach; but it was hard walking, and they were getting wetter every minute. All at once they came to a full stop. In front stretched a channel of water so broad that through the blinding rain they could barely make out the opposite side, against which some very ugly waves appeared to be beating. They gazed at each other in blank dismay.

"Perhaps it's nothing but a creek, and we can get round it," said Myfanwy. "I'm used to this kind of coast in Wales. Let us try to our left; it looks fairly promising."

She led the way, and the others followed as best they could. It was a forlorn hope, however. The end of the promontory was completely surrounded at high water, and was temporarily turned into an island; and for the time being they were as completely stranded as a crew of shipwrecked mariners.

"I'm afraid it's no use," confessed Myfanwy, at last. "We've got ourselves into a tight place, and we shall just have to stay here until the tide goes down."

[95] "Unless we could manage to swim," suggested Dora, looking dubiously over the channel to where some heavy breakers were booming against what seemed through the spray to be a steep and jagged precipice.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Phœbe, without any doubt in her voice. "We should be dashed to bits in that rough sea. There isn't a spot where we could land, even if we could struggle across. It would simply be madness."

"I don't want to try!" declared Aldred, with a shudder. "I can't swim, to begin with; and even if I could, I shouldn't venture through those waves. But what are we going to do?"

"Stop here till we can get off, I suppose," said Phœbe, shrugging her shoulders. "There's nothing else for it. We're in no particular danger, that's one comfort!"

"Let us climb higher up on to the rocks, and perhaps we may find some place a little out of the rain," proposed Myfanwy.

After considerable hunting about, they did at last come upon a ledge that shelved over so as to form a kind of cave; and creeping underneath, they squatted as close together as they could.

They were feeling the very reverse of jolly. It seemed anything but delightful to be sitting in a cramped position, wet through, without the chance of a meal, and with the prospect of spending perhaps the whole night in such unenviable surroundings.

"I'd give a great deal to be back in the classroom, learning my German prep.!" groaned Dora.

"I suppose an adventure never feels nice at the time," said Myfanwy.

[96] "No. I can't help suspecting that Stanley, and Shackleton, and all the explorers didn't enjoy the fun of the thing until they got home and wrote books about it," agreed Aldred.

"It sounds so thrilling when you read it," continued Myfanwy; "but when you're cold and wet and hungry, it takes the romance away."

"I wish we hadn't eaten all our sweets," lamented Phœbe; "I'm simply starving!"

It had grown rapidly dusk; there was not even light enough to see their watches, but they calculated that the time must be about half-past six. They were not sure when the tide would be at the full, nor how soon it would go down again sufficiently to enable them to cross on to the mainland.

"We certainly can't stumble over these rocks in the dark," said Aldred. "Unless there's a moon, we're fixed here until morning."

"I can't remember whether there's a moon or not," sighed Dora. "The sun doesn't rise particularly early either—not until about six, I believe."

"What will they be thinking at the Grange?" said Myfanwy, whose tears were beginning to wander slowly down her cheeks at the misery of the prospect in store.

As to that, no one liked to hazard a guess. In all the annals of the school it had never been recorded that any girls had been lost before; and they knew that Miss Drummond must be in a fever of anxiety on their account. The rain kept on steadily, and the time passed by slowly—very slowly; the long hours seemed interminable. It was most forlorn and wretched to sit crouched under the rock, with the dripping rain beating in upon their wet clothes, listening to the sound of the water dashing below them.

FOUR UNHAPPY TRUANTS

[97] "It's like a horrible nightmare," said Phœbe. "I wish I could wake up, and find myself in my own bed in No. 5!"

"It's so much worse now it's dark," groaned Aldred.

She was in a very dejected frame of mind, and would have burst out sobbing like a baby if she had not been too proud. Her friends were also in low spirits, and did not keep up their usual flow of jokes and chatter. All four snuggled as close together as they could, to keep one another warm, and sat silent, listening to the waves and the rain, till kind Mother Nature sent merciful sleep, and for a while at least they were able to forget their troubles.

Aldred had a long and confusing dream. She thought that she saw Mabel in danger of drowning, and that she plunged boldly into the sea, swam easily to her aid, and brought her back to shore amid the cheers of the school; and that Mabel was saying: "I knew you would come to the rescue. It's not the first time you have done a heroic deed!"

She woke with a start. The words seemed so clear, she could almost believe Mabel had really spoken them. Certainly she had done nothing particularly heroic that day; indeed, her conscience told her that she was mainly responsible for that unpleasant adventure. It was she who had begged the others to leave the post office, and urged them to go down the promenade and along the pier. But for her it would not have occurred to them to break bounds; they would have waited
[98] until Blanche and Freda returned, walked straight back to school, and considered that they had had an enjoyable afternoon, without transgressing rules. None of them, however, had accused her of this. They appeared perfectly ready to take the full blame—indeed, they had hinted that, as a new girl, she would probably escape the consequences of the escapade more easily than they.

"After all, it's mostly their fault, for they'd no need to come, even if I asked them," she decided hastily. "I'm not bound to explain everything and get into extra trouble. No one is likely to ask who suggested it."

She tried to stretch her cramped limbs, and felt so stiff that it was pain to move. But it was worse to remain in the same position; so, making an effort, she dragged herself up, and crept out from under the rock. The rain had stopped, and a full moon was shining outside, so clearly that she was able to consult her watch and ascertain that it was a little after ten o'clock. She roused the others immediately.

"Look—look!" she cried, shaking them eagerly. "It's bright moonlight! The tide will have gone down. We must try to get on to the sands at once."

Yawning and stretching, the girls emerged from the cave. It was sufficiently light for them to

see their way over the rocks, so they set off without further delay in the direction of the shore. They were now able to cross easily at the place where the channel had stretched a few hours earlier, and found themselves, after a considerable amount of scrambling, on the beach at the farther side of the promontory.

[99] It was the queerest walk home that they had ever experienced. Sands are generally associated with blue sky and bright sunshine, and those seemed very eerie and weird and strange in the moonlight, with the deep, dark shadows under the cliffs, and the sea gleaming silver in the distance. With one consent they took each others' arms. Aldred certainly did not feel sufficiently courageous to walk alone; moreover, she was tired, and could contrive to lean upon both Phœbe and Myfanwy, who were kind enough to pull her along without remonstrance.

The sands on this part of the shore were not very firm, and the girls' feet sank with every step, while they stumbled now and then over stones or clumps of seaweed. It took a long time to cover the three miles to Birkwood; the distance seemed twice as far as it would have done by day, and they were thankful when at last they found the path which they knew led up the cliffs to the Grange.

There was a light in the house; they could see it gleaming when they were still quite far off, and it seemed to hold out a promise of food and rest. As they opened the gate, the gardener's wife came running out of the lodge. She gave a shriek at the sight of them, and rushed straight up the drive to tell the news: and the four had barely arrived at the door before Miss Drummond herself came hurrying to meet them.

"Girls! Girls! Where have you been?" she cried, with such a look on her pale face that they realized for the first time what she must have suffered during all the hours of that anxious night.

[100] Freda and Blanche (as the girls had supposed), not finding them at the post office, had imagined that they must have started home, and had returned without them. They had been greatly dismayed, when they arrived at the Grange, to discover that the four had not come back. They reported their absence at once, and a teacher started for Chetbourne, to try to find them. When darkness fell, and they were still missing, Miss Drummond, in the greatest alarm, applied to the police, and bands of searchers were looking for them in various quarters. It had never struck anybody that they could have gone on the steamer to Sandsend, which lay in the opposite direction to Chetbourne.

The four truants were very glad indeed of the hot baths and basins of bread and milk that were waiting for them. They did not equally appreciate doses of camphor, but did not dare to remonstrate, being only too thankful that Miss Drummond had forborne as yet to scold. The Principal's chief object was to get them to bed, and to ward off any risk of colds or rheumatism that might follow their many hours of exposure in wet clothes. Fortunately, her prompt measures had the desired effect, and no evil consequences ensued. The girls were allowed to sleep late the next morning, and when they arrived downstairs seemed quite free from all aches, pains, coughs, sneezes, and other suspicious symptoms. They were in dire disgrace, however, for now that Miss Drummond was reassured as to their health, she turned her attention to their conduct.

"I'm most dreadfully sorry about it," said Mabel to Aldred that evening. "You see, Miss Drummond has always trusted us so entirely at the Grange, and this is the first time anybody has [101] ever gone out of bounds. She says it shakes her confidence in us. I'm afraid she'll stop all exeats for the Lower School. Of course, I know it wasn't your fault. You're a new girl, and how could you tell we weren't allowed on the promenade? You only went where the others took you. You'd no idea you were breaking the rules, had you?"

Aldred was brushing her teeth at the moment, therefore a grunt was her only means of reply. Mabel took it as the required denial.

"I was sure you hadn't," she declared triumphantly. "A girl who can do such splendid things always lives up to them. It was a mean trick to play on Blanche and Freda, when they had invited you all for a walk, but I was certain you weren't capable of it. Naturally, you're ready to take your share of the scolding (I shouldn't have tried to get out of that myself); but I'm so glad that I, at any rate, know you don't really deserve it!"

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[102]

CHAPTER VII

False Colours

The thunderstorm that had added to the unpleasantness of the girls' adventure at Sandsend seemed to herald a complete change in the weather. The beautiful Indian summer, so warm and genial, so full of kindly sunshine, vanished suddenly, and autumn, cold and bleak, appeared in its place. A sharp frost in a single night worked havoc in the garden, blackening the dahlias,

withering the nasturtiums, and reducing all the remaining annuals to a state of blighted ruin, so that what had one day been a flowery paradise was the next a scene of desolation. A strong easterly gale, following the frost, cleared the leaves from the trees before they had any chance of turning to crimson or gold, and stripped the last vestige of beauty from the hedgerows.

After this came days of pouring rain. The lawns and the playing-fields were sodden, the roads were deep in sticky mud, the row of bare elms dripped dismally on to the garden seats below, and the neglected sundial no longer told the hour of day, nor formed a centre for the throng of girls who generally haunted its steps.

"Baldur the Sun God is dead!" said Aldred, looking out of the window one damp afternoon at
[103] the cheerless prospect, and recalling Miss Drummond's lesson on Northern Mythology. "Loki has killed him with the piece of mistletoe, and he will never return to Asgard. All the Æsir are weeping for him, and the earth will be given up now to the frost giants and the spirits of the winds."

"Won't he ever come back?" said Mabel, falling in with her friend's humour.

"Just for a little while; but he always has to go in the winter, like Proserpine, who was bound to spend half the year with Pluto in Hades. I suppose there's no country, except the lost Atlantis, where it keeps summer all the year round."

"Why, you sound quite melancholy!"

"So I am."

"But why?"

"I don't know, except that it is so sad to see the summer gone."

Aldred could scarcely explain her attitude of mind, though she was conscious that the change in the world without affected her strongly. She had an extreme love of nature, an intense appreciation of beautiful things. No ancient Greek ever joyed in the sunshine more than she, or took greater pleasure in the scent of the flowers, or the blue of the sea and sky, or the song of the birds in springtime. Her artistic, poetical temperament was highly sensitive to all outward impressions; she was so keenly alive to the great, dramatic human tragedy and comedy that is being enacted around us, so in touch with the wonder and mystery of life, that what would pass unnoticed by many was to her the very essence of being.

Few people had ever sympathized with this side of her disposition. Her father had not realized
[104] it, Keith could not understand it, and Aunt Bertha had repressed it sternly. Modern schoolgirls are certainly not sentimental; they are more prone to laugh at poetic fancies than to admire them: and Aldred knew that on this score she would probably meet with ridicule from her form-mates. In consequence, she confined herself in public to the practical and prosaic, and, with the exception of an occasional private confidence to Mabel, kept her reflections locked in her own bosom.

There was certainly nothing in the atmosphere of the Grange to foster any tendency towards morbidness. The days were so fully occupied as to leave no time for dreaming. Though Aldred was clever, it took her whole energies to secure the place that she wished in the school. She was determined to be head of her Form, and, holding that object in view, toiled with a vigour such as nothing else would have wrung from her, and which would have caused unfeigned amazement to her former governess. It was not all plain sailing, for Ursula Bramley and Agnes Maxwell were also good workers; and even Mabel, though not specially bright, was very plodding and conscientious. Aldred soon found that she had to revise entirely her old method—that a careless German exercise could completely cancel a brilliant score in history, and that she must give equal attention to every subject if she wished to chronicle a record. The little tricks she had practised on Miss Perkins were not equally successful at Birkwood: she had tried reeling off her lessons very fast, so as to gloss over mistakes, but Miss Bardsley would allow her to finish, and then say:
[105] "Yes; now you may repeat it again, slowly. I did not quite catch the second person plural;" and Aldred, to her disgust, would be compelled to reveal her ignorance in a more deliberate fashion, and take the bad mark that ensued. She was at first a venturesome guesser, till her many bad shots drew scathing comments from her teachers and smiles from the rest of the Form.

"Even Lorna Hallam knows that Sir Philip Sidney didn't write the *Faerie Queene*, and she's supposed to be our champion bungler!" observed Ursula Bramley sarcastically, on one occasion. "As for history, you muddle up Thomas Cromwell with Oliver Cromwell! You'd better get an elementary book, and learn a few simple facts."

The girls would not tolerate Aldred's conceit. She quickly discovered that if she wished to be popular, it was unwise to claim too much credit for her achievements. The week after she arrived she had taken her place among the others at a singing lesson. Miss Wright, the mistress, began to teach the class the old English ballad, "Should he upbraid"; it was one with which Aldred happened to be familiar, so she at once took the lead and sang away lustily, beating time in a rather marked manner, and accomplishing the many little runs and trills with an air as if she considered herself indispensable. At the close of the lesson, as they were filing out of the room, she could not resist remarking to Ursula Bramley:

"It was a good thing I knew that song so well, wasn't it?"

"Why?" asked Ursula pointedly, looking her straight in the eyes.

[106] Thus cornered, Aldred could hardly say that she thought the class would have managed badly without her aid; her tact told her that the remark would be unpalatable and indiscreet, so she quickly changed her ground.

"Oh! only that I find it difficult to learn new things," she replied, in some confusion.

"Indeed! Well, I suppose you'll improve when you've been here a little while," returned Ursula, with a meaning smile that was partly a sneer, and made Aldred decidedly red and uncomfortable.

During the earlier part of the term, try as she might, Aldred was not able to see her name in the coveted position of heading the list for the Fourth Form. One week she failed in geometry, another in French; if her German was correct, her arithmetic proved inaccurate, and some unexpected slip would pull her down. At the end of the sixth week, however, she at last dared to hope. She was aware that she had done unusually well, both in the ordinary class subjects and in the Friday morning examination; while Ursula, her chief opponent, had had an exercise returned, and received a bad mark for botany. The lists were always posted up on the notice-board in the corridor just before tea-time on Saturday afternoon, and there was generally a rush to read them. On this particular Saturday, Aldred determined to be the first to cull the news. She was too proud to allow herself to seem anxious, so she hung about the corridor, pretending that she was searching for a lost piece of india-rubber, and that she was thrillingly interested in the view of the dripping garden through the side window. At last Miss Drummond appeared, pinned the papers neatly on to the notice-board, and re-entered the library. Aldred strolled up as casually as [107] she could; but Mabel, who had also been on the look-out, was before her.

"You're top! You're top!" shrieked the latter. "There it is: 'No. 1, Aldred Laurence.' Oh, how lovely! You've beaten Ursula by twenty marks. It's splendid! Come and see for yourself!"

Though inwardly she felt she had satisfied her ambition, Aldred took the announcement with the greatest outward sang-froid.

"Oh! am I?" she replied nonchalantly. "No, I don't want to see, thanks; I can take your word for it."

"How calm you are! I should have been fearfully excited if it had been: 'No. 1, Mabel Farrington.'"

"What's the use of getting excited? Let us go into the dressing-room, and wash our hands for tea."

Mabel linked her arm affectionately in that of Aldred, and accompanied her down the passage, talking as she went.

"I knew you would come out top, dearest!" she said. "You were certain to, as soon as you had grown used to the work here. It's always difficult for a new girl, when she has been accustomed to a different teacher; but I think you have fallen into Birkwood ways marvellously quickly. Don't you feel proud?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, I do, for you! To think of being twenty marks ahead of Ursula! It's a tremendous score! How do you manage to be so clever?"

"I'm not clever. It's sheer good luck, I expect."

"No, it's not good luck," said Mabel, putting back Aldred's dark curls with a caressing hand. [108] "It's something far more, only you're too modest to acknowledge it. You're behaving just as you did at Seaforth. Oh, I've heard about that episode! We all know of it, though you may think it was done by stealth."

"What episode?" gasped Aldred, suddenly red to the tips of her ears.

"Don't blush so, darling! I won't speak about it again, if you'd rather not; but I should like to tell you how much I admire you, not only for what you did, but for the way you've tried to make nothing of it afterwards. It's only one girl in a thousand who would have had the courage to rush into that blazing house, and crawl upstairs and down again; or the presence of mind to tie a wet handkerchief over the little boy's mouth. I should never have thought of that, I'm certain. Do you mind my mentioning it to you just this once?"

Now was Aldred's chance. The occasion when she might deny her identity with the heroine of the fire had come at last! How easily the mistake could be corrected, and the matter set right! She looked nervously at Mabel, and words struggled painfully to her lips.

"I—I'm afraid—you——" she began.

"Yes, dearest?" There was a little thrill in Mabel's voice.

"You're—you're thinking too—too well of me——" stammered Aldred, trying desperately to take the fatal plunge.

Mabel simply smiled. Her blue eyes were gazing into her friend's with adoring affection; her face showed how deeply her feelings were stirred, and how earnestly she meant all she had said.

"I was at Seaforth——" continued Aldred.

[109] "I know that."

"But—but——"

Oh, how hard it was to utter her confession! In the act, Aldred's resolution failed her; she stopped again, and was silent. Her embarrassment was most apparent.

"Would you really rather not speak of it, dear?" said Mabel gently.

Why did Aldred hesitate? Opportunity, like an angel of light, still tarried, and held open the door of honour. If she could only screw up her courage to the sticking-point!

"All right! If you don't like me to mention it, I'll say nothing more. I'm satisfied now I've let you know that your deed isn't absolutely hidden under a bushel. You're famous, in spite of yourself. You darling! I only wish I were worthier to be your friend."

Aldred shrank back at the words, and, disengaging Mabel's clinging arms, made an excuse to hurry away. She had the grace to be thoroughly ashamed of herself, and to feel that she could not bear any more praise at present.

"Why didn't I tell?" she moaned, in an agony of remorse. "I know I'm mean, and dishonest, and horrid, and the exact opposite of what she supposes. What would Keith say, if he knew? He'd never forgive me. He scolded me for not explaining that Mr. Bowden had painted part of my picture, and this is twice as bad. Keith is so absolutely honourable! I suppose I ought to go to Mabel now, and put things right. No, I can't! I simply can't! It would be worse than ever. I couldn't force myself to say it—the words would choke me!"

[110] A letter from Keith had arrived only that morning, a particularly nice, jolly letter, full of chatty news and of such affectionate enquiries about her own doings at school that it seemed to bring her into closer touch than usual with her brother. She wanted so much to stand well in Keith's opinion; and she recalled with a groan what he had said to her in the cornfield about her sketch: "Of all the sneaks, you're the biggest!" and, "Be a little straighter in future, if you want to keep chums with me." Yes, she was a sneak; it was not a pretty epithet, but it was a true one. In Keith's eyes this affair would be serious; he would never tolerate such conduct for one single moment. If she wished to act up to his principles, she must undeceive Mabel immediately, her own self-respect told her that. Yet she could not bring herself to do it, and for a whole week she wavered, her conscience reproaching her bitterly, and her pride pleading and ever pleading to put off the evil moment.

"It's impossible to tell her straight out," she decided at last. "I'll write a letter and give it to her; that will be much easier, because I needn't stay to watch her read it. I know Keith would have gone and owned up; but then, I'm not Keith—I always mind things so much more than he does."

Having resolved to make an explanation through the medium of pen, ink, and paper, she retired, when tea was over, to the empty classroom, and set herself to the unwelcome task. How difficult it was! She scribbled sheet after sheet, and tore up one after another. Her confession looked so bald and paltry when she saw it in black and white! It seemed so awkward to explain
[111] adequately how the mistake had arisen. After five fruitless attempts, she at last managed to arrive at a result which, if it did not satisfy her, at least contained the truth. She placed it in an envelope, and addressed it to Mabel Farrington, then stood turning it over and over in her hand. Was this letter to break their friendship?—so small a thing to have such a fateful result? Well, if it must be, she had better let it be done as quickly as possible; it was no use delaying any longer. Bracing up her nerves, therefore, she went down to look for Mabel.

It being Saturday evening, there was no preparation. Relays of girls were having their hair washed in the bathroom, and others were finishing stocking darning, or various pieces of mending; tidying their drawers, putting out their clean clothes, and performing the many small duties that seemed to accumulate at the end of the week.

The Lower School recreation room happened to be temporarily deserted by its usual rollicking crew, and Mabel was there alone, standing warming her hands at the fire. She looked up brightly as Aldred entered.

"Come along!" she said. "Isn't this a glorious blaze? We've got the room all to ourselves for once, and we'll have such a cosy chat! Why! what's this you're giving me? A letter? From whom?"

"From me. It's something I want you to know," replied Aldred shortly; and she would have turned to leave the room had not Mabel caught her by the arm and forced her back to the fire.

"Don't run away!" she exclaimed. "You're the most absurd girl! What are you writing to me about?"

[112] "You'll find out when you've read it," gulped Aldred.

"But why couldn't you tell me? What's the matter? You're actually crying! Dearest, have I done anything to offend you?"

"No, no! Do let me go, and then open the letter!"

"I shan't. You must stay here till I know why you are crying. Has anybody been nasty to you?"

"No; it's I who have done something wrong—I wanted to let you know—I'm afraid you'll never care for me afterwards—I daren't tell you—so please read it, and don't keep me now!"

Mabel looked puzzled, then suddenly enlightened; but instead of loosening her hold on her friend, she pulled her down on to the hearth-rug, before the fire.

"I understand!" she said. "Oh, Aldred, dear, I know all about that, you know!"

Aldred's face was a study.

"Yes, Agnes Maxwell told me before tea."

"What has Agnes to do with it?"

"Why, she heard you! She said all the others who had spoken English had reported themselves to Miss Bardsley, but she was sure you hadn't."

Aldred drew a long breath. It was quite a different crime that Mabel imagined she was confessing, a little slip that she scarcely recollected, and certainly had not intended to rake up. She had been guilty of expressing herself in her own language during the time set apart for French conversation that morning, but, having no desire to lose a mark, she had discreetly allowed her memory to fail her when the mistress asked if any girl had "communicated in English".

[113] "I must say I was very astonished," continued Mabel, "and very disappointed that you, of all people, should not have told; it seemed so entirely different from what you are. I couldn't believe that you would go a whole afternoon letting 'perfect' be down in the register, when you ought to have had a bad mark. Of course, I knew you would tell before Monday—luckily, Saturday's marks count for next week."

Aldred said nothing. She sat on the fender, poking the little, soft volcanoes that oozed out of the coal, squeezing them down, and watching the jets of gas that followed.

"It was a funny idea to write it in a letter!" said Mabel. "You always do quaint things; I suppose it's because you're such an original girl."

"Aren't you going to read it?" asked Aldred, in a strained voice.

"Why should I? I know what's in it. No, it shall go down into that hollow in the fire. Give me the poker. There! What a blaze it makes!"

Aldred watched her confession flare up and sink into ashes in the heart of the hot coals; there was a strange look on her face, a look that her friend could not fathom.

"Suppose I had said nothing at all about it next week, and had kept the 'perfect', would you still have cared for me?"

"Oh, but you couldn't!" cried Mabel. "It's impossible! Why, it wouldn't be you to do such a thing!"

"But if——"

"There are no 'ifs'. I could never believe any wrong of you, darling; and yet——"

[114] "What are you two crouching over the fire in the dark for?" exclaimed Dora Maxwell, bursting suddenly into the room. "We are going to act dumb charades in the hall, and Miss Drummond and the teachers are all there to watch. Come along! We've thought of some most lovely words, which I'm sure they'll never think of guessing."

So another opportunity was lost, and Aldred's secret was still untold. She dared not run the risk of breaking the friendship. If she was blamed for such a small fault, could she ever be forgiven for so much greater a deception? It was so sweet to be the very centre of Mabel's adoration, to be placed on a pinnacle, and loved with such rapturous devotion. Could she bear to see all this fade utterly, or even partially, away? No! She was glad and thankful that the letter had been burnt; she felt as if she had escaped from a great danger. She told Miss Bardsley about her "English communication", and took her bad mark with resignation; it was a small evil, compared with what she had avoided. There seemed no retreat now from the course she had taken; she could not in future plead the excuse that she was ignorant of her identification with the heroine of the fire. The affair had been mentioned so plainly that it was impossible for the most dense and obtuse person not to have understood the allusion. Had Mabel on the first occasion questioned her point-blank, I think she would probably have owned up immediately; but every wrongdoing bears its own ill harvest, and the second slip from the straight path is always easier than the first. Aldred persuaded herself that she had not told any deliberate lies, though she was fully aware that her
[115] silence made her equally guilty of falsehood. Finally, she tried to dismiss the whole thing from her thoughts. Mabel had promised not to speak of it again; surely it was finished with, and there was no need to trouble further? Yet it was a trouble. Deep down in her heart lay always the consciousness that she was sailing under false colours; every now and then Mabel would impute to her some better motive than really actuated her, or some virtue that she did not possess, and Aldred's inward monitor would give her an uneasy twinge, and remind her how very far she was below that high standard. There was also constantly present the dread that Mabel might learn the truth from some outside source; perhaps the cousin who had written to her before might hear more details, and write again, or some other friend might have been staying at Seaforth, and

might know full particulars. The horror of the thought would make Aldred shudder with apprehension; she was living, she knew, on a bubble reputation, and at one word it might collapse, and change her pleasant Eden of appreciation and adulation into a blank desert of disillusion and contempt.

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[116]

CHAPTER VIII

Amateur Theatricals

The half-term had seen Aldred at the head of her form, and by dint of hard application she managed to keep her position there fairly steadily; with such a clever rival as Ursula to contend against, it was impossible to win the coveted prize every week, but she scored a success so often that her average record was higher than that of anyone else. Miss Drummond was manifestly pleased with her progress; it was not often that a new girl came so quickly to the fore. Aldred had been sent to her with a reputation for both shirking lessons and defying authority, so she flattered herself that the atmosphere of Birkwood had worked a change, and remedied both these defects.

Aunt Bertha, who was kept well informed of her niece's progress, wrote to express satisfaction.

"I am glad to hear you are settling down and becoming more reasonable," ran her letter to Aldred. "It is high time you learnt sense, and if you can turn into an ordinary, rational being at the Grange, it will be well worth having sent you there. I hope the improvement will show itself during the holidays."

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"How hateful she is!" thought Aldred, tearing the letter angrily into little bits. "She always rubs me the wrong way, and makes me feel I'd like to do the exact opposite to what she wants. I don't get top to please her, at any rate! If she would improve during the holidays, perhaps I might too! I don't care what she thinks of me!"

Keith's approval was a different matter, and it was a keen pleasure to Aldred to be able to tell him of her triumph, and to receive his hearty congratulations.

"I know what it is to swat hard," wrote Keith, "so I think you've turned up trumps, and I'm proud of you. I'll take you into town as often as you like this Christmas, even to the National Gallery, though I detest the Old Masters."

With so much to fill up the time, the autumn term seemed to pass very quickly away. The weeks flew by, and dull November fogs were succeeded by early December frosts. It was no longer possible to go into the garden after tea; the days had closed in rapidly, and the lamps were lighted now by five o'clock. Every afternoon, when the weather allowed, the girls played hockey to keep themselves warm, and Aldred began to grow interested in the game, though she had not yet secured the proficiency that her ambition would have wished.

The situation of Birkwood, between the downs and the sea, so delightfully breezy and fresh in spring and summer, was decidedly cold in winter; Aldred was amazed at the number of blankets she required on her bed, and fully appreciated the hot brick that was allowed. Miss Drummond was indulgent in that respect. The bricks were placed every evening on a special stone intended
[118] for the purpose connected with the heating apparatus; by nine o'clock they were delightfully warm, and each girl carried her own upstairs, returning it next morning to its place.

"They're the greatest comfort; I should shiver all night without mine!" said Mabel. "I'm glad Miss Drummond lets us have them. One of my cousins goes to an absolutely Spartan school; they're obliged to wash in cold water always, and to take ice-cold baths, even in the depth of winter. Lilian put an india-rubber hot-water bag in her box, but she was not allowed to use it; the head mistress says she likes girls to be hardy. I think it must be wretched; we are better treated at the Grange."

Miss Drummond's arrangements were certainly calculated to make everyone at Birkwood as cosy as possible when the winds blew chill outside. There was always a cheerful blaze in the recreation room, and the girls were also permitted to keep up the fires in the classrooms, if they wished to do anything special there during the evening—a privilege of which they were glad to avail themselves towards the end of the term.

They were all very fond of acting, and each form intended to prepare a play for the last week. The strictest secrecy was observed about rehearsals.

"We don't want the others to have a hint of what we mean to do," said Phœbe Stanhope; "they mustn't even know the name of our act."

"And we must make all our dresses here too," said Myfanwy, "and any wigs, or moustaches, or

anything we need."

"Shall we have time?" enquired Aldred.

[119] "Yes; Miss Drummond excuses sewing when we're getting up theatricals. We may have the room to ourselves the minute we've finished prep. It gives us a good hour every night, and that ought to be enough, if we work hard."

"What are we going to act?"

"That's just the question."

"It's so difficult to decide!" said Mabel.

"I have a kind of notion that both the Sixth and the Fifth have chosen scenes from Shakespeare," observed Agnes Maxwell. "They keep talking in such grand language, and making quotations that aren't particularly appropriate! When Lilian Marshall wanted to call me back for something yesterday, she said: 'Tarry, Jew: the law hath yet another hold on you!' and the others sniggered."

"Then they'll be taking the Trial Scene from the *Merchant of Venice*. Yes, I'm certain they must be, because Eleanor Avery has a lovely red dressing-gown that they'll use for Portia's robe."

"And what about the Fifth?"

"Something from *As You Like It*, I fancy. Their classroom door was open as I passed last night, and I caught a glimpse of them painting scenery on great pieces of brown paper. It was evidently for a wood."

"It might be for *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*."

"Well, yes, of course it might."

"One thing is certain," said Lorna Hallam; "we mustn't decide upon Shakespeare."

"No; it would be too stale if we happened to choose the very same scene."

"Can't we have something comic?" suggested Myfanwy James.

[120] "Yes, a short farce," agreed Ursula Bramley. "There are several very jolly ones in the book Miss Bardsley lent me. It would be quite a change."

"Where's the book? Let us look at it."

The little plays were mostly old friends with new faces. Well-known tales had been dramatized, and given a humorous element that made them very suitable for Christmas performances.

"They're screamingly funny!" said Phœbe. "I expect we shall die of laughing when we're acting. Shall we have 'Beauty and the Beast', or 'Bluebeard'?"

"Which has the easier dresses?" asked Mabel.

"They're pretty much the same, and there are the same number of characters, eight in each. We can't take 'Cinderella', because there are too many parts; and 'Goody Two Shoes' has too few."

"'Bluebeard' seems the more dramatic," said Aldred, hastily dipping into the book.

"Who votes for 'Bluebeard'?" queried Mabel.

Six hands went up immediately; so the matter was considered settled, Myfanwy and Agnes, who preferred 'Beauty and the Beast', being in the minority.

"And now we shall have to decide the caste," said Ursula. "I think the tallest ought to be Bluebeard."

"Oh, I dare say, when you're an inch above everyone else in the Form!" Agnes sounded indignant.

"No, we must draw lots for the parts, as we always have done," said Mabel. "It's the fairest way, because then nobody can complain. We're all pretty equal at acting, so it doesn't much matter who gets Bluebeard or Fatima. There are eight characters, so get eight slips of paper, Dora, and we'll write one on each."

[121] "We must fold them exactly evenly," said Dora, "so that they all feel the same. What shall we shuffle them in? Can you make a place on your lap? Now, each girl must draw one in turn."

"Who's to begin?" said Aldred.

"The eldest. We always take it in order of birthdays. Nobody must unfold her slip until everyone else has drawn. Agnes, it's your turn first."

Aldred opened her paper with much anxiety, and read its contents with a frown. "An Attendant"—that was all! She was very disgusted to be obliged to take such a humble part, having hoped to get either Bluebeard or Fatima, or, at least, Sister Anne. She knew she could act well, and thought she certainly ought to be one of the more important characters in the play. It

was particularly aggravating, because Fatima had been drawn by Lorna Hallam, the girl with the worst memory and the least dramatic talent in the class; and Bluebeard had fallen to the lot of little Dora Maxwell, whose chirpy voice would not be nearly so appropriate to the occasion as the deeper tones of Ursula Bramley. If anybody except Mabel had suggested the plan of deciding the caste by lot, Aldred would have disputed the matter hotly; but she did not like to argue with her chum, so she was obliged to suppress her feelings and agree with the best grace she could. Mabel herself was to be Sister Anne, Phœbe Stanhope and Myfanwy James were the two brothers, Ursula Bramley was the Beneficent Fairy, and Agnes Maxwell another attendant.

"We ought to alter some of the parts," Aldred could not help suggesting. "It's ridiculous for Ursula to be a fairy! She's too tall, and her hair is brown. Why can't she change with Dora?"

[122] "No, thank you!" protested Dora. "I'm sick of being a fairy; because I'm small, and my hair is light, I'm always given a gauze dress and a wand. I'm tired of coming in disguised as a beggar woman, and then flinging off my cloak—it always catches on my wreath and pulls it crooked; and I've said I don't know how many ending-up speeches. I've drawn Bluebeard this time, and I mean to stick to him, whatever sort of a fairy Ursula makes."

"I shan't be such a bad one, I'm sure!" declared Ursula, rather offended. "You wouldn't make a better, Aldred; your hair's darker than mine."

"Well, I don't know how Lorna is going to learn all Fatima's long part," Aldred ventured to object; "she never gets through her recitations in class without a mistake."

"I'll manage, thank you!" retorted Lorna. "Besides, there's always the prompter behind the piano."

"The prompter! You ought never to rely on that!"

"I didn't say I was going to."

"Yes, you did! If people undertake a part, they ought at least to know the words, or let somebody else have it."

"I shan't give up my part at your bidding!"

"You're misunderstanding each other," interposed Mabel. "Aldred never meant she wanted you to give up your part, Lorna; I'm sure she was only sympathizing because she knows you find it hard to learn things."

"It's a queer form of sympathy, then!" grumbled Lorna. "I thought she wanted to be Fatima herself."

"Oh, no! That's most unlike Aldred. I wonder you could imagine for an instant that she would
[123] have such a motive! I think, when we decided to abide by the lot, it would be a mistake to have any changing; and we'd better set to work and learn some of our speeches, so that we can rehearse the first scene, at any rate, to-morrow. We must each borrow the book in turn, and keep looking at it in any odd moments we can spare."

"Yes; there won't be too much time, with all the costumes to think about as well," agreed the others.

Aldred mastered the dozen lines that fell to the Attendant in a few minutes, and handed the book on to Sister Anne. Feeling sure of her portion in the play, she could afford to criticize the others, and set to work to coach them vigorously at the evening rehearsal. Though some of them were not willing to fall in with her suggestions, she managed to make herself so prominent that, in spite of themselves, the girls allowed her to assume the leadership, and to constitute herself a kind of stage manager.

"Aldred is quite right," said Mabel, backing her up; "we certainly were not saying our speeches with half enough dramatic emphasis, and we weren't putting any spirit into them. I feel I was too tame."

"We haven't got as far as 'dramatic emphasis'," said Phœbe. "That would come afterwards."

"It's better to practise it as we go along, and as Aldred has had so much experience of private theatricals, we had better take her advice, and let her show us how it ought to be done."

Aldred's boasted experience was really confined to a few charades with the Rectory children at home; but she had considerable natural talent for acting, and could throw herself heart and soul into a part. It tried her very much to hear Fatima and Bluebeard give a dialogue as if they were
[124] repeating a lesson, to see the Brothers come strolling up to the rescue, instead of rushing in with hot haste; and to watch the very un-sylph-like movements of the Fairy.

"This is the way it should be done!" she would cry, and would go through the speeches herself, giving word and action as if she were really the character she was impersonating, her eyes flashing with enthusiasm and her cheeks aglow. Not one of her stage pupils could approach her fire, or the various delicate modulations of her voice; even Mabel, who tried her best, was very far behind.

"I can't put so much expression into what I'm saying!" declared Dora. "I have to think all the time whether I'm getting the words right."

"But you ought to know the words so well that you don't need to think about them—only to feel what Bluebeard would be feeling!" returned Aldred, who by this time could remember every separate speech in the play much better than the actresses themselves. "Can't you imagine yourself haughty and pompous, when you give Fatima the keys?"

"Why, no! I want to laugh!" giggled Dora.

Aldred stamped her foot; it was too irritating to see the part of Bluebeard usurped by one who had so little conception of his character. Dora's undignified rendering of the part was a constant annoyance. Fatima, too, was a great trial; she repeated her sentences in a monotonous, sing-song voice, without a vestige of passion.

"You take the keys from Bluebeard as if Miss Bardsley were handing you an exercise-book!" remonstrated Aldred. "And as for the cupboard scene, you look inside and say, 'Oh!' as casually as if there were nothing there!"

[125] "Well, there is nothing there!" retorted Lorna, rather resentful of so much interference.

"Oh, Lorna! There are the horrid, bleeding heads of all the former wives. Can't you pretend you see them, and give a proper shriek? Do let us have the piece again! You ought to look half-curious half-frightened, as you open the door, and then, when you've taken one peep, you should scream, and fall back nearly fainting with horror!"

It seemed no use, however. In spite of all Aldred's coaching and practical illustrations, Lorna could not rise to the required pitch, and continued to give the thrilling scene with the utmost tameness. Aldred was desperate. She felt that the success of the play depended upon this particular situation being adequately depicted, and was determined that Lorna should be forced to give a genuine start; and with that end in view she hatched a little plot. The rehearsals took place in the classroom, and Fatima was accustomed to use the ordinary door, to represent that of the fatal cupboard. Aldred persuaded one of the servants to dress up in a sheet and wait about in the passage, so that when Lorna looked out she should see something calculated to surprise her. Nellie, an under-housemaid, willingly entered into the scheme, and even improved upon it, according to her own ideas, by whitening her face with flour, so as to make herself as ghost-like as possible.

Aldred felt quite excited when Scene III was begun. She managed, without attracting anybody's attention, to take a stealthy peep through the doorway. Yes, there was Nellie, standing quite ready, and horrible enough to make even Aldred jump, though she was expecting to see her. All
[126] was in good training, and Lorna was rapidly coming to the fatal lines. She delivered them with her usual lack of fire:

"The key fits well—now, wherefore should I
fear?
I will at last discover what's in here!
Bluebeard's a hundred miles away in Spain;
In ignorance no longer I'll remain.
Turn, little key! Ope, door, for good or ill!
Reveal your secret—know I must and will!"

She flung open the door, as she had done at every rehearsal, in an absolutely wooden manner, and with neither interest nor curiosity in her tone; but her expression changed when she saw the vision in the passage, and for once in her life she accomplished a very excellent representation of the part. She shrieked with a horror that was only too natural, and drew back with a face as white as that of the sham ghost outside.

The girls applauded furiously.

"Well done!"

"Good!"

"Splendid!"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Lorna, are you acting?"

"Oh, I say! Catch her, quick; she's really fainting!"

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[127]

CHAPTER IX

Chinese Lanterns

Aldred's plot had been only too successful. Lorna's nerves were not of the strongest, and the apparition in the passage had been utterly unexpected; so, although she did not actually lose consciousness, she lay for a few moments with her eyes shut, and considerably terrified the other girls.

"Bring some water, somebody!" said Mabel, who was kneeling on the floor, holding the luckless Fatima in her arms.

"I'll get it!" cried Aldred, springing up before anyone else could volunteer, and darting hurriedly out of the room. It had just occurred to her that she might probably be blamed for this incident, and she wanted to avoid that if it were still possible.

"You must go, Nellie!" she whispered to the housemaid. "The girls will tell Miss Drummond if they catch you, and you'll get into trouble!"

"But I thought it was to be a bit of a joke, miss!" remonstrated Nellie, who could not see where the fun had come in.

"They don't see the joke. You'd better run! Do you want Miss Drummond to find you playing ghost, when you ought to be turning down the beds?"

[128] Aldred had been forcing Nellie along the passage as she spoke, and now she tore the sheet from the latter's shoulders, and flung it down the back stairs.

"Go and wash your face!" she commanded. "I didn't ask you to whiten it. You've made far more of this than I intended."

Nellie departed to the kitchen regions, highly offended. She considered she had been badly treated, but, as she certainly did not wish Miss Drummond to learn anything of the affair, she took Aldred's advice, washed her face, put the sheet away, and only aired her grievance to her fellow-servants.

Aldred, congratulating herself upon the success of her promptitude, fetched a glass of water to the classroom. Lorna had in a great measure recovered herself, but she was still pale and shaky, and anxious to claim sympathy.

"I saw something all in white in the passage!" she was assuring the other girls.

"Nonsense!" said Aldred brusquely. "How could you? Drink this, and you'll feel better."

"She must have seen something!" declared Phœbe and Ursula.

"Well, there's nothing there now, at any rate. Go and look for yourselves, if you don't believe me!"

"Perhaps the Third Form were playing us a trick," suggested Dora.

"It's extremely probable," returned Aldred. "Phyllis Carson loves practical jokes."

"It must have been Phyllis," said Lorna. "It looked very like her, and it is just the kind of thing she'd enjoy doing."

[129] "It was a great shame of whoever it was, to give you such a scare!" said Mabel. "It's never safe to frighten people, and I hate sham ghosts myself. Do you feel well enough to go on with the scene, or shall we stop for to-night?"

This incident (of which Alfred never divulged the authorship) had at least the desired effect of considerably improving Fatima's acting. Perhaps a nervous remembrance of what she had really seen returned to her in future when she opened the door, and supplied the lack of imagination; at any rate, she would give a very passable start and scream, and her whole manner was more interested and full of life. Even Bluebeard, owing to Aldred's exertions, learnt to suppress his ill-timed mirth, and to thunder as a domestic tyrant should; and the fairy, if not exactly graceful, to wave her wand elegantly, instead of brandishing it like a hockey stick or golf club. Having thus far perfected the business of the play, the girls turned their attention to costumes and scenery.

"We've only ten days left, so we must be very quick," said Mabel. "I've written home to Mother to send us anything suitable that she can spare. I think she'll let us have two gauzy veils and some glass bangles that she got in Jerusalem; they'd do nicely for Fatima and me. And perhaps she'll lend two daggers for the Brothers; but if she won't, we shall have to make cardboard ones, and cover them with silver paper."

"My sister has promised to send us some Chinese lanterns," said Phœbe. "They'll look lovely, and give quite an Eastern air to the thing."

[130] "Yes, we want the first scene to look like a piece out of the Arabian Nights," agreed Agnes Maxwell. "I'm rather anxious about Dora's costume; how are we to manage the beard?"

"Would blue Berlin wool do?"

"Rather expensive—we should have to use so much of it."

"A piece of blue tissue paper, cut into shreds?"

"No, thanks! I should look like a fly-catcher!" laughed Dora.

"Then I don't know."

"I can manage a beard, if you'll leave it to me," said Aldred. "I have a splendid idea."

"What?"

"Get a piece of new rope, and untwist it and comb it out; the tow is exactly like stiff, white hair. Then we'll dip it in strong Reckitt's Blue, and let it dry."

"Splendid!" chorused the girls.

Aldred's fertile brain was full of plans and suggestions. She not only made a most successful beard, but contrived fierce moustaches for the Brothers, and (greatest triumph of all!) even twined the tow into long, flaxen ringlets for Ursula, which certainly suited her appearance as a fairy better than her own dark locks.

Each Form was to have its act on a separate evening during the last week of the term, and the Fourth was accorded the privilege of the opening performance.

"Miss Drummond calls it a 'privilege'," said Phœbe, "but I think it's a doubtful one! It's like singing the first song at a concert. I always hate starting anything!"

[131] "We shan't be quite so much criticized as if we came last, though," said Myfanwy. "They can't compare our acting with the others'."

"No; and if the Sixth Form are getting up anything very grand and literary, 'Bluebeard' would sound pantomimey after it," agreed Mabel.

"And we shall have got ours over, and can enjoy the others' nights with free minds," added Agnes.

Nevertheless, it was a responsibility to feel that they must make a good beginning, and all worked hard to bring each little detail as near perfection as possible. The entertainments were always given in the dining-hall; it was a big room, with a door at each end, and had a brass rod fixed permanently to support a curtain, so that it was very convenient for performances. The actors could use the kitchen entrance, and have the large pantry beyond for a dressing-room, while the audience came in by the ordinary door.

The first scene was "An Apartment in Bluebeard's Palace", and the Form displayed all its ingenuity in trying to make a brave show of barbaric magnificence. Several gay shawls were hung over clothes-horses, and draped with scarves and sashes; the sofa, covered with a Turkish rug, represented an Eastern divan; Miss Drummond had lent a small Moorish table from the drawing-room and a hammered brass tray, with a quaint coffee-pot—contributions which greatly helped the Oriental effect. But the most precious "property" of all was the miscellaneous collection of Chinese lanterns that Phœbe's sister had sent. They were very fine ones, of various sizes, shapes, and colours; and added such a gala touch to the rest of the scenery as to make Bluebeard's Palace seem *en fête*.

[132] "The difficulty is to know where to hang them," said Aldred, holding up a combination of red, blue, and green, and admiring the brilliance of the result.

"We must fix a string tight across the room," said Ursula. "We can fasten it to a picture clip on either side, and then the lanterns will hang all in a line, just above the divan."

"They'll look beautiful, because they'll shine exactly on Fatima's head," added Aldred.

"Oh, but we mustn't light them! Miss Drummond particularly said so; she's so terribly afraid of fire. We're only allowed to use them for ornaments."

"How stupid! What's the good of them, if they mayn't be lighted?" demanded Aldred impatiently. "They'd be perfectly safe!"

"I dare say they would; but Miss Drummond is nervous, and she won't let us, so that's an end of it!"

"Miss Drummond is most absurdly tiresome and fussy!" thought Aldred, when the string had been arranged, and the row of beautiful lanterns was swinging overhead. "There couldn't possibly be any danger when they're hanging so high; we wouldn't stick our heads into them!"

She was alone in the room, for the other girls had gone into the pantry to dress. She could hear from their suppressed giggles that they found the robing nearly the most amusing part of the performance. Her own costume would not take long to put on, so she was not at all in a hurry, and had lingered behind to add a few finishing touches to the scenery.

[133] "Every one of them has a candle," she continued to herself. "I suppose Phœbe's sister made them quite ready; she evidently expected them to be lighted. It would be such a gorgeous illumination! I declare I'll try it, to see how it looks."

With the aid of a chair, she managed to set all the candles burning, and stood back against the curtain to admire the effect.

"It's perfectly lovely," she exclaimed; "like a real fairy tale palace! I never saw anything prettier—not even at the pantomime. Oh, I must leave them as they are! Perhaps Miss Drummond does

not really mind, only she feels bound to give tiresome orders. What an astonishment it will be for the others, when they come back! Now I must fly!"

It was within twenty minutes of the opening of the entertainment, therefore high time for Aldred to dress. She scrambled into her long dressing-gown, and put on her turban without much enthusiasm; her part was so small that she knew she would attract little attention, and probably not receive even a clap. Mabel was already arrayed in the pretty, gauzy robes that her mother had sent, and made a charming Sister Anne, though her blue eyes, carnation cheeks, and red-gold hair were hardly of Eastern appearance.

"You might, of course, be a Circassian; they're often very fair," said Aldred. "You look far nicer than Fatima. If you're ready, let us go and take a last peep at the stage."

Aldred expected to give her friend a great surprise when she opened the door, but she was not prepared for the scene that greeted them as they entered the room. The lanterns, the beautiful
[134] Chinese lanterns, instead of hanging proudly on their string, and shedding a brilliant lustre over the scene, were lying here and there upon the floor and on the divan. By the greatest good fortune none had yet caught fire, but the danger was great, and at any moment the thin paper might be set in a blaze.

Aldred grasped the situation instantly. The flames, rising up from below, had burnt through the string, and brought the whole row crashing down. She rushed forward and began blowing out the candles as fast as she could; with Mabel's help it was only the work of a minute, and no damage was done, but it was a miracle that the flimsy scarves and the wreaths of paper flowers had escaped.

"Who can have lighted them?" exclaimed Mabel, her cheeks quite pale at the unexpected disaster. "We left all perfectly safe."

Aldred did not reply; she was busy adjusting her turban, which had tumbled off in her hurry.

"I wonder if it could be Dora?" continued Mabel. "She's such a scatter-brain, she always does silly things!"

"It does not matter so much who's done it, as how we're going to set these lanterns up again in time," replied Aldred. "Where's the ball of string? Here! you hold one end, and we'll thread it through; I'll soon climb up and fasten it. I'll pull the burnt piece off first. Raise it up a little higher, please. That's right! Now, just a thought tighter, and it will do."

"How splendid you are!" sighed Mabel admiringly. "You have such presence of mind, blowing out the candles so quickly, and getting everything right in less than five minutes; nobody could
[135] see that we've had an accident. It looks just the same. I should like to know who——"

"The audience is coming in!" interrupted Aldred. "We must scurry back and see if the others are ready. There isn't a second to be lost. Miss Drummond can't bear to be kept waiting, and we promised to begin punctually at half-past."

The performance was an enormous success; of that there was not the slightest shadow of doubt. Thanks to Aldred's diligent drilling, the actresses "played up", and rendered their parts with a dramatic fervour that quite astonished the audience. Bluebeard threatened in a voice of growling thunder, and frowned fiercely in his character of tyrant. Fatima shrieked in such frantic agony when she opened the cupboard door that she made everybody start, and her swoon afterwards was particularly easy and natural; she scrubbed the incriminating stain on the key with desperate zeal, and pleaded for her life with heart-breaking sobs and an air of tragic appeal. Sister Anne looked out of the window with pitiful anxiety, and wrung her slim, white hands in melodramatic despair; while the Brothers dashed in with "neck-or-nothing" haste and slew the despot, who died with such groans and convulsive twitchings as to fully satisfy the cause of justice, and point an appropriate moral.

There was a storm of clapping at the end, as the principal "stars" formed in line to make their bows. Aldred, in her minor character, was standing at the back; but much to her amazement there was a sudden call for "Stage Manager", and Mabel dragged her forward to present her to the audience.

[136] "Hurrah! Bravo! Well done!" cried both girls and teachers, who, knowing the previous achievements of the Fourth Form, recognized the amount of cleverness needed to have so enormously raised the standard of acting, and appreciated Aldred's exertions.

"You must have a better part yourself, next time, my dear," said Miss Drummond, as she offered her congratulations. "You can teach others so well that we should like to see you taking a leading character. Everything was beautifully managed; there were no delays, and no hesitations. The grouping and attitudes were most artistically arranged, and the dresses and scenery lovely. You have made an excellent start, and the other Forms will have to look to their laurels if they wish to beat the Fourth."

It was very gratifying to Aldred to feel that her trouble had really been rewarded with success. The other girls, who had grumbled at her coaching and criticism during the rehearsals, were pleased now that they found themselves able to perform in such a superior manner, and generous enough to acknowledge how much they owed her. For once she felt she had risen to the height of popularity, and her ambition was satisfied. It was a pleasant ending to her first term, and a

favourable omen for those to follow.

There was only one little jarring note in all her happiness, and that was the accident to the lanterns. In the excitement of the play she had completely forgotten all about it, but Mabel mentioned the matter when they had gone to bed that night.

[137] "It's so very strange who could have lighted them!" she said. "We all knew Miss Drummond had forbidden it."

"Whoever did will get into trouble, then, if any fuss is made," replied Aldred.

"Yes, if it were mentioned at head-quarters, of course; but I didn't think of telling Miss Drummond."

"What were you going to do?"

"Only ask the other girls. It surely must have been Dora!"

"If we begin to talk about it, perhaps someone may mention it outside the Form, and it would get to Miss Drummond's ears. She would be very angry."

"She certainly would, because it really was dangerous. If the string had broken through while any of us were underneath, we might have been burnt to death in our light, flimsy clothes."

"It's all ended safely now, though. Isn't it rather mean to try to ferret it out? You don't want to get someone into a scrape."

"I don't indeed!" agreed Mabel. "Perhaps, as you say, it's as well to let things be. Ursula and Dora are always quarrelling, and if Ursula turned spiteful and gave a hint to Miss Bardsley, she'd feel bound to make enquiries."

"And we should probably never be allowed to use Chinese lanterns again."

"Oh! That would be dreadful! Phœbe says her sister told her we could keep these at school, and I thought we might act 'Catskin' at Easter, and carry them in procession."

"Then, mum's the word!"

[138] "Yes, you're right. You always do give good advice! Besides, it never struck me I might get anyone into trouble. You're such a thoroughly considerate darling, you make me quite ashamed of myself. What a glorious time we've had! I've enjoyed myself so much. Good night!"

Mabel turned over on her pillows, snuggled a little more cosily under the eider-down, and promptly went to sleep; but Aldred lay awake for a long time, thinking, and in spite of her brilliant triumph of the evening the tenor of her thoughts was far from satisfactory and agreeable.

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CHAPTER X

A Frosty January

School broke up on December 18th, and the little community at Birkwood was soon scattered far and wide. Aldred thought that this Christmas was the most enjoyable one she had ever spent; she felt as if she had returned to Dingfield on an entirely different footing, and that now she had quite a new position at home. Her father, who had taken slight notice of her before, had missed her while she was away, and began suddenly to appreciate how much his daughter was to him, and to give her a larger share of his attention than had hitherto fallen to her lot. Aunt Bertha, whose former attitude had been one of continual criticism, stopped nagging and fault-finding, and treated her niece almost like a visitor, allowing many small indulgences which she had never been accustomed to sanction, and relaxing some of her stricter rules. It was plain that she thought Aldred much improved, and, as some of the chief causes of friction had now vanished, she was ready to forget old grievances, declare a truce, and try to make the holidays pass as smoothly as possible. She no longer ordered Aldred about as if she were a child in the nursery, and would even consult her wishes, or allow her to express an opinion of her own, realizing that
[140] the girl was rapidly growing up, and could not be expected to remain for ever in the background. This altered state of affairs was very much to Aldred's mind. She had always felt that her aunt had not treated her fairly, and it was partly the continual sense of injustice that had caused her rebellious attitude.

"I'll do anything for Aunt Bertha now she asks me nicely," she thought to herself. "It was when she used to speak so absolutely autocratically that she made me feel so angry. I'll fetch her what she likes, if she'll say 'Please', and 'Thank you'; but I can't bear to be sent trotting as if I were a baby of three."

If only Aunt Bertha had known this, and had taken poor Aldred by the "right handle" sooner, a very great deal of trouble could have been saved; but she was one of those complacently tactless people who try to impress the stamp of their own dominant personalities upon everyone alike, and who rule with an utter absence of sympathy. She had not understood Aldred's character, and had concluded, therefore, that there was nothing to understand. She was agreeably surprised now to discover the various pleasant qualities that had begun to develop under Miss Drummond's genial influence, and admitted, almost in spite of herself, that her troublesome niece was turning into quite a nice companion, and that her society could actually be an enjoyment as well as a care.

Keith also appeared to consider his sister a far more reasonable and sensible person since her return from the Grange. He was never very expansive, but he gave her more of his confidence than before, talked to her of his own school life, and seemed ready to spend the greater part of
[141] his time with her. It had always been Aldred's ambition to have Keith as her special property, but he had not been altogether willing to devote himself to her, and had often hurt her by his coolness. Now that they were both in a sense visitors at home, Aunt Bertha arranged plans that would include the pair, sending them together to visit picture galleries and museums, and other interesting places, for Keith was old enough to escort his sister, and could be trusted to take good care of her. In this way, with the addition of various parties and festivities, the four weeks passed very quickly, and the fifteenth of January brought Aldred's school trunk once more out of the box-room, and saw her started on her journey to Birkwood.

Though the holidays had been so pleasant, she was glad to return to school; she liked the life at the Grange, and the thought of seeing Mabel again was absolute rapture. The two had corresponded freely, but writing was not so good as talking, and she was longing for a delightful private chat, to hear all her friend's news and tell all her own. Mabel seemed equally delighted at their re-union.

"You darling! How I've missed you!" she exclaimed. "There are simply a hundred things I want to tell you. If there were not that tiresome silence rule, I should stop awake till twelve to-night. Leave your unpacking, and come and sit down on my bed for a minute or two; I'll help you to get straight afterwards."

"And Miss Bardsley won't be up just yet," said Aldred, accepting the invitation, regardless of the fact that the greater part of her wardrobe was still in her box.

[142] "I told Mother all about you," continued Mabel. "You can't think how much she wants to see you. She's coming to town at the end of the month, and says she'll run down to Birkwood for an afternoon. I know she'll like you, and you can't help liking her—everybody adores Mother! I wish we were sisters, and that you lived at Grassingford, and that she was your mother too—how lovely that would be! But then, your own people at home would not spare you. It must be so dreadfully hard for them to part with you, even to go to school. When I know how I miss you for four weeks, I can sympathize with them losing you for thirteen. I don't know how they manage without you!"

Aldred did not say that she considered her family would not be quite so utterly inconsolable at her absence. She only kissed the sweet, pink cheek that was pressed against hers, and thought how blissful it was to occupy so large a place in Mabel's heart, and to find such a warm welcome awaiting her at Birkwood.

"There's nobody like you!" went on her adorer. "I stayed for a few days at Archdeacon Vernon's, at the New Year. His daughter is just my age, and Mother wanted me so much to meet her, for she said she was such an extremely nice girl. But she was absolutely nothing to you, dearest! I didn't feel I could ever be very fond of her; she's not so original, nor so jolly. No! I told Mother at once you were the only girl I had ever really cared for, and I couldn't do with another bosom friend."

Though Mabel was the chief attraction for her at Birkwood, Aldred was nevertheless glad to meet the rest of the Form, and to be in the midst of the lively school life again.

[143] When the unpacking had been successfully accomplished, and supper was over, all the girls collected in a close group round the classroom fire, to compare notes about the holidays.

"I've been to Switzerland," said Ursula. "We went to Les Avants for the winter sports. It was simply glorious! I learnt to skate and to ski. I felt most fearfully wobbly at first, but it was lovely when one got into it; so was the tobogganing—one went skimming down slopes at a tremendous pace. The ice was all illuminated at night, and we had fancy dress carnivals; it was such fun!"

"Lucky you," said Phœbe, "to be in a place where there was real frost and snow! We've been grumbling at the wet weather continually. I wonder how long it is since we had an old-fashioned Christmas—the kind of thing one reads about in Dickens, I mean, when Mr. Pickwick went skating."

"People say 'a green Christmas makes a fat churchyard'."

"Well, I'm sure one gets more bad colds with pottering about in the rain than one would with skating."

"I believe it's freezing now. I shouldn't be at all astonished if we had quite a spell of hard weather."

"'As the days lengthen, the cold strengthens'," quoted Myfanwy, who was fond of proverbs.

"I wish it would! We've never had any deep snow, or really severe frost, since I came to the Grange."

Phœbe's prophecy concerning hard weather was literally fulfilled that very night. The thermometer descended with a run, and by next morning great, feathery flakes were falling
[144] silently, and turning the landscape into a white world. The girls were very excited, and watched anxiously, hoping that the snow would continue; and they rejoiced as each bush and shrub in the garden became more and more smothered.

"The outlines of the walks are quite lost," said Mabel exultingly, "and the tennis lawn looks like a huge iced plum cake."

"It's not much use for Brown to try to sweep a path, because it gets covered up directly."

"Yes, but he has to go and feed the hens, you see. I wonder if Miss Drummond will venture out to look at her Partridge Wyandottes? She's never missed going to them at four o'clock yet."

"I wish she'd let us go with her; I should love to tramp over the snow!"

"So should I; but she says we must none of us go farther than the shed. Brown has swept the courtyard at the back. If it's fine to-morrow, we'll have some fun."

After falling steadily for twenty-four hours, the snow stopped, and gave place to bright sunshine. Miss Drummond ordered dinner to be earlier than usual, and by half-past one the whole school was out upon the downs.

It was an ideal winter's day. The sky was clear, with the cold, pale blue of January, so different from the deep, warm azure of July. The sun, low down on the horizon, though it was still near its meridian, sent long, slanting rays over the white waste, catching the tops of the hills and making them shine and sparkle like diamonds. Each bush and tree was coated with rime, and edged with
[145] a tracery of delicate lacework. The snow, crisp and hard, crunched under the girls' feet as they walked, and here and there they could mark the track of a rabbit or a bird that had hurried through the cold, to shelter under the protection of some gorse-bush.

"It's just like fairyland! It might be part of the Frost King's Palace!" said Aldred. "I'm sure the Snow Queen has been here. I feel as if we ought to find Gerda hunting for little Kay—I expect she's just behind that bush, riding the Robber Maiden's reindeer, with her hands in the big muff. The Lapland woman and the Finland woman can't be far off."

"What do you mean?" asked Lorna Hallam.

"You benighted girl! have you never read Hans Andersen?"

"I believe I did, ages ago, but I've forgotten it all."

"So much the worse for you, then!"

"Why, one can't bother to remember silly fairy tales!"

"Hans Andersen is not silly; he's a classic."

"Quite right!" said Miss Drummond, who happened to overhear. "I consider the dear old Dane was one of the truest poets that ever lived. His writing has a purity of style that sets it on a very high pinnacle in literature, and his thoughts are most exquisite. No one who has really appreciated his lovely, tender stories can ever be quite vulgar and commonplace. He seems to take all the simple, everyday things, and wave his magic wand over them and turn them into enchantment."

"But the tales aren't true, Miss Drummond!" objected Lorna. "One can't see fairies."

[146] "There is a meaning under it all, and the gist of the whole is, that if we persistently look at the beautiful side of everything, we are making our own fairyland, and seeing what is denied to those who dwell only on the prosaic and ordinary. It's a great quality to have, and one that brings a supreme enjoyment in life. If you're wise you'll cultivate it while you are young, and then you need never really grow old, because, although your hair may turn grey, you'll still keep the very principle of youth in your heart. Very few people can realize their ideals, so it is something to be able to idealize our real."

The place that Miss Drummond had chosen as the destination of their walk was a steep slope about a mile from the school. Here it was quite possible to make a good toboggan track, for there was a flat space in front and an easy way to climb up at the back. Half a dozen tea-trays had been requisitioned from the kitchen, to act as sleds.

"I wish we had a bob-sleigh!" said Ursula Bramley, who, after her experience in Switzerland, felt herself an authority on winter sports. "It's the hugest fun you can imagine, only you need two very good people to steer and act brake. Ours at Les Avants held a crew of six. My eldest brother used to take us down, and he only upset us once."

"I think little sleighs are better; they're not nearly so dangerous," said Agnes Maxwell. "A cousin of mine was fearfully hurt last winter at Samaden, in a bob-sleigh race; he fell on his head, and had concussion of the brain."

"Well, of course, you have to chance that. It needs pluck and skill if you're going in for racing; you mustn't be afraid for yourself—you could fall off a tea-tray, as far as that goes," said Phœbe.

[147] "You couldn't do yourself much damage if you did," laughed Ursula; "the snow's not hard enough. Now, we shall have to go down the slope a good many times before we make a decent track of it."

"I wish we had more tea-trays! We shan't get very many turns each, I'm afraid," said Myfanwy.

Six girls from the Sixth Form had been chosen to start, and made a trial trip amid much cheering and excitement.

"It's perfectly lovely—just like flying!" they declared, as the improvised sleds drew up on the level ground at the bottom.

"Miss Drummond, won't you try?"

"Perhaps I may, when the thing is well started, but for the present I would rather stand and watch. It certainly looks very tempting, and worth an effort. Mademoiselle, shall you venture?"

"Nevaire!" shuddered poor Mademoiselle, who considered a walk in the snow quite a sufficient adventure. "I should have fear to place myself on a thing so insecure, and to let myself glide thus! Oh, no, it would be an act of folly! We have no snows in Provence, and I have been brought up to love other pleasures."

"You shall have the next turn if you like, Mademoiselle," said Esther Vaudrey, one of the pioneers. "It's really not difficult at all, if you know how to tuck up your feet."

"It makes one warm, at any rate," said Freda. "Who's going next? We'd better take it in Forms."

The sport proved extremely popular, and for the next hour relays of girls were constantly going
[148] down the slope; the track was soon as smooth as a slide, and really made a very good course, quite enough to satisfy everyone except Ursula.

"It's nothing to Les Avants! You should have seen that!" she kept assuring the others.

"Then I wish you would go back to Les Avants!" exclaimed Phœbe. "What's the good of belittling this all the time, and trying to make out it's so tame? I call it bad taste! If you can't enjoy it, we can, at any rate."

"I'd enjoy it if I had my own little sled, instead of a tea-tray."

"Nobody wants you to go on a tea-tray," said Agnes. "You can miss your turn if you like—I'll take it instead."

That, however, Ursula was not ready to allow. She appreciated the tobogganing as much as anyone, though she liked the triumph of referring to her Swiss achievements.

The fun waxed fast and furious. The girls were keen on racing, and would start six together from the top, at a given signal; then there would be a lightning descent down the slippery slide, generally ending in a roll in the snow at the bottom, from which they would spring up, powdered from head to foot, but laughing and quite unhurt.

Miss Drummond and most of the teachers took an occasional turn, but Mademoiselle remained firm in her refusal to venture into what she considered such imminent danger to life and limb.

"It is the sport of men!" she declared. "In my country, such things are not for *les jeunes filles*. They do not go out to slide in the snow."

"But don't you think our girls look much brighter and healthier, with this brisk exercise, than if
[149] we had kept them cooped up in the schoolrooms all this beautiful afternoon?" asked Miss Drummond.

"Perhaps—yes, that I will allow. But custom is strong upon us, and to me, I find it still strange to see what is permitted to your English *Mees*."

"I'm glad we are English," whispered Aldred to Mabel. "French girls must have a stupid time, if they're never allowed to toboggan, or to go in the snow. If I were sent to a French school I'd run away, and come back to Birkwood!"

"There's no place like the Grange," agreed Mabel, brushing the snow vigorously from her dress. "If there's any jolly thing that it's possible to do Miss Drummond thinks of it."

Miss Drummond certainly justified the character that Mabel gave her, for when the girls, very warm and rosy after their exertions, returned to the school at four o'clock, they found a surprise waiting for them. Brown, the gardener, with the aid of two or three labourers who had been called in to help him, had shovelled away the whole of the snow on the asphalt tennis court, and piled it as a wall all round. He had then brought the hose, and was now busy flooding the court to a depth of three or four inches.

"It ought to freeze hard to-night," said Miss Drummond, "and by to-morrow morning there should be a splendid surface. Those girls who have brought skates to school will be in luck, and I shall be able to arrange for those who have not. I have written to Wilson's, the ironmonger at

Chetbourne, to send us out a parcel of several dozen to choose from."

[150] The prospect of a skating rink in the garden was hailed with joy, and the anxiety of the school was great lest the frost should give way, and frustrate their very delightful plans. The amusements of the cold spell so outweighed the discomforts that nobody (except poor Mademoiselle) grumbled at nipped fingers or chilly toes. Even Agnes Maxwell, who was a martyr to chilblains, suffered heroically, and did not wish for a thaw.

"It's quite the most severe winter I can remember," said Mabel, breaking the ice in her bedroom jug next morning. "I believe even my bottle of hair wash is frozen, and the glycerine cream is perfectly stiff; I shall have to melt it on the radiator before I can put any on my hands. Look at the window! It's covered with beautiful frost patterns."

"All the better for skating," said Aldred, who was trying to thaw her toothbrush. "I'm glad there has been no more snow to spoil our ice. I wish Miss Drummond would let us go out at once, after breakfast, instead of doing lessons."

Miss Drummond's good nature, however, did not extend to such a pitch of leniency as that, and the morning classes went on just as usual. About dinner-time, a young man arrived from Chetbourne with a large parcel of skates, and Aldred, who did not possess any of her own, was able to expend some of her pocket-money on a neat little pair.

"You've made a lovely choice!" said Mabel. "Mine are an old pair of my brother's that just fit me now; they're rather shabby, but they happen to be particularly good steel, and always 'bite' very well. There's the greatest difference in skates, in that respect."

"You'll have to help me," said Aldred, "for I've never even tried before, and I'm sure I shall be extremely stupid and clumsy."

[151] "It will be the lame supporting the halt, then," laughed Mabel, "for I'm certainly not a crack skater myself."

By two o'clock the whole school was disporting itself on the ice. Some girls (Ursula Bramley, in especial) seemed quite at home there, and cut figures of eight with aggravating ease while their less fortunate comrades strove to balance themselves with outstretched arms, or sat down suddenly on the slippery surface.

"I'd no idea one could feel so absolutely weak in the knees!" declared Aldred, subsiding on to the snowy bank after a first struggle round the rink. "I'm like a baby learning to walk. I wonder if I shall ever manage to strike out properly? Look at Ursula—she's doing the 'Dutch roll'. I'm green with envy!"

"There's nothing like practice," said Mabel, getting up and making a gallant effort to accomplish the "outside edge", but speedily coming to grief over it. "Give me a winter in Norway, and I'd undertake to waltz on the ice; but what can one expect on the first day?"

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CHAPTER XI

Venus in the Snow

THERE was generally sound sense in Mabel's arguments, though Aldred's impatience wanted at once to achieve great things. Skating, like everything else, has no royal road, and neither of the girls advanced much beyond the point of going alone. Aldred, rather to her chagrin, found she certainly could not compete with Ursula, and an aspiring dream of seeing herself queen of the rink vanished away. She was never without resources, however and as she was determined always to keep to the fore, she hit upon another means of making herself prominent. She remembered hearing that in Brussels, when snow falls, the most eminent sculptors of the city go to the Park and model snow statues, which are carefully guarded afterwards by the park keepers, and shown to the streams of visitors who flock to look at them. This was an idea worthy of being copied, and one of which she was sure nobody else would be likely to think. Abandoning her skates, therefore, one afternoon, she retired to the now deserted lawn, and set to work. The snow [153] was not such an easy medium as clay, but it was in prime condition for her purpose, being soft enough to model, yet stiff enough to hold together. Aldred's scheme was decidedly ambitious, for she had decided to make a representation in snow of the Venus of Milo. She had chosen that for her subject because of its lack of arms and its flowing draperies, as she knew it would be quite impossible to reproduce a Flying Mercury or the Dying Gladiator. She had really a strong talent for sculpture, and contrived, with the aid of a framework of broomsticks, to give her statue a wonderfully good pose. She had brought out a photograph of the original, which she constantly consulted; and she worked away with great enjoyment, shaping the snow with deft hands, and using some flat pieces of wood and a palette knife from the studio as her modelling tools. She felt it was almost one of the most exciting things she had ever done in her life. The keen joy of

creation, that true heritage of all who possess artistic ability thrilled her fingers, as she put dainty touches here and there, and watched the resemblance to the Venus evolve itself by slow degrees from her great mass of snow. She thought of Michelangelo, who saw the angel in a rough block of marble, only waiting to be released by his chisel, and felt as if she, too, were trying to free the goddess, and give her human form. For the time all thought of what the girls would say was forgotten, and she worked for the love of art alone, sighing with satisfaction as she successfully put in a delicate fold of dress, or a ripple of classic hair.

It was finished at last, even to the pedestal, and Aldred stepped back and looked at it with [154] mixed feelings. She had done her very best; she dared not add another impress, from fear of spoiling it, yet she knew how far it fell short of her ideal.

"I wonder if Phidias used to be contented with what he'd done?" she thought. "I suppose he was the greatest sculptor that ever lived. I remember reading that Millais once went to an exhibition of his own pictures, and came away very dejected. Shall I ask them all to come and see it now? I want so much to show it, but somehow I hardly dare. I almost think I'll leave it for somebody to find out, and just go back to the rink and say nothing."

She had not counted, however, on Mabel, who, missing her friend for an unusual length of time, took off her skates and went to hunt for her, tracking her in the end by her footsteps in the snow. Mabel's amazement when she reached the lawn was only equalled by her admiration. She rushed off instantly to fetch all the girls to look, even venturing to knock at the study door and report her news at head-quarters.

Aldred's snow statue made quite a sensation at the Grange. Miss Drummond thought so highly of it that she had it photographed, and invited many of her friends from Chetbourne to come and see it. It was such a daring and original project for a girl of only fifteen to have carried out entirely alone that she felt it reflected credit on the school to possess so clever a pupil. Aldred was praised to her heart's content, and received so much attention from teachers and visitors that she could certainly consider herself, for the time being, the most important person at [155] Birkwood. She was petted by the prefects, invited to skate by members of the Sixth Form who had ignored her existence before, and asked so often for her autograph that she grew almost tired of signing her name.

"There's to be a picture of your statue in the School Magazine," said Mabel rapturously. "That's a tremendous compliment, because Miss Drummond generally says it's too expensive to have illustrations. I'm going to ask her to have your photograph put in as well—just a tiny head, from that splendid snapshot which Dora took when you came last September. It would fit into a corner of the same page, and show the 'portrait of the artist'. I'll make up the extra money myself, if it will cost more to print. I shall bespeak six copies: I want to send one to Cousin Marion—she's gone to live in Germany for a year; she'll be so interested, because, you know, it was she who was staying at Seaforth last year, and who first told me anything about you."

Aldred's face fell. In a moment all the zest seemed to have faded out of her pleasure. This was indeed a grave danger. "Cousin Marion" had seen her namesake at Seaforth, and would probably recognize that the two faces were not the same; even a badly printed portrait might not conceal the lack of likeness. Would Mabel ever forget that wretched episode? Why must it always be raked up in this tiresome way? Whenever she thought it was safely consigned to oblivion, it appeared to rise again like a ghost, and threaten the destruction of her position. True, she had done much since she came to Birkwood to strengthen her hold on Mabel's affection, but she knew that her one deed of supposed heroism was the basis of their friendship, and the groundwork of [156] her general popularity; and she trembled to think what the effect might be if this foundation stone were removed.

"I don't want my photograph blazoned abroad," she said, almost crying. "I'd rather Miss Drummond didn't put either me or the statue in the Magazine. Promise me, Mabel, that you won't send a copy to anybody, if she does."

"But why shouldn't I?" said Mabel, much surprised.

"Because I don't wish it. The statue was a stupid thing, after all; far too much fuss has been made of it. I'm sorry I didn't knock it down as soon as it was finished!"

"Aldred! how can you say so?"

"Well, I'm tired of hearing about it, anyway," returned Aldred, "and I hope you won't mention it to your cousin; it makes me feel silly to have such a tremendous 'cock-a-doodling' over all my stupid little performances, which really aren't worth it."

"Well, I won't, if you so particularly ask me not to," said Mabel, in a disappointed voice. "But you can't always hide everything; it's not fair to the world if all the brave and clever things that are done must be suppressed—they're such a help and encouragement to other people. I, for instance, am ever so much better for having known you; you've been quite an inspiration in my life. My mother had a friend like that (it was Lady Betty Blakeney, who is now so famous) who had a tremendous influence over her, and first made her want to help poor people, and take up the work she does now; and she always hoped I should meet somebody who would be as much to me as her friend was to her. But I never did until you came to Birkwood."

[157] It seemed useless to protest; the more Aldred tried to shuffle out of her rôle of heroine the

more Mabel admired her modesty and her other imagined excellencies. Mabel was a girl who loved to idolize celebrities; it was partly a necessity of her nature, and partly a habit that had been cultivated at home by her mother, who had a kindred weakness. Before the two girls knew each other, Mabel had been obliged to confine her worship to book favourites; then, having met, as she thought, the realization of her ideal, she could not resist the temptation to endow her with the combined virtues of Portia, Rebecca, Ellen Douglas, Grace Darling, Flora Macdonald, and the "Nut-brown Maid", without stopping to put the various qualities to the test, and make sure that they actually existed. It is always better to err on the right side, and think too highly than too ill of people, but Mabel's mistake was to take Aldred so utterly on trust, and to blind herself wilfully to the many small indications of character that might easily have shown her that her idol was very far from perfection.

Aldred could not feel easy until she had made sure that the snapshot portrait was not to be included in the next number of the Magazine. She was afraid Mabel might break her promise, and send a copy surreptitiously to her cousin, and then the mischief would be done. She did not dare to mention the matter at head-quarters; it would appear conceited on her part to suggest that the idea had been broached, and she would feel very humiliated if Miss Drummond were to say: "Oh, no, my dear! I never dreamt of putting it in!"

[158] A plan occurred to her, however, by which she could defeat her friend's too enthusiastic project. She borrowed the negative from Dora on the pretence of wanting to look at it, and in handing it back managed to drop it and step on it, breaking it beyond all chance of repair. She apologized profusely for the accident.

"It was most clumsy of me!" she declared. "Could we possibly patch it up again, do you think?"

"No, we couldn't!" said the aggrieved Dora. "It would show a mark right across the face, however carefully we joined it. I've tried piecing negatives together before, and they're not worth the trouble of printing."

"Well, it was only a picture of me, not the lovely one you took of Miss Drummond and Mademoiselle."

"No; I'm glad it was not that. But I promised this to Mabel; she asked me last night if I could find it, and I've had such a hunt through all my negatives! She'll be quite cross that it's broken."

"You must put the blame on me, then, for it was my fault."

Secretly Aldred was exultant.

"I know Dora only took one print from it," she said to herself, "and that was spoilt in the fixing bath. It's impossible to take snapshots in midwinter, so I believe I'm safe for the present. I shall discourage Mabel strongly from buying a camera. I hope she won't get one given to her on her birthday! I'm glad her Cousin Marion has gone to Germany, so that she won't meet Mabel for a
[159] year, at any rate. So far as I can tell, she is the only person who has seen that Lawrence girl and knows what she is like."

The ice lasted for a whole fortnight, a totally unprecedented record in the annals of Birkwood, which, on account of its position near the sea, did not often come in for so severe an experience of frost. The rink proved the greatest success; the ice was apt to get cut up and rough by the afternoon, but when everyone had left, the gardener would turn the hose over it, so that by next morning there was once more a splendid, smooth surface.

January 29th happened to be Miss Drummond's birthday. The girls were accustomed to prepare some little surprise for her on such occasions, and generally acted a play in honour of the event; and the evening was always considered a holiday. This time, however, Miss Drummond announced that, instead of being entertained by her pupils, she wished to provide a treat for the whole school.

"It is full moon," she said, "and we shall have a carnival on the ice. The rink will be illuminated, and I expect we shall all find it quite a novel experience to skate by torchlight. Mind you don't catch colds beforehand! Anyone who is heard sneezing will have to stay indoors."

"It is a lovely idea!" said Phœbe, as the Fourth Form discussed the project afterwards. "We shall have the most glorious fun! I'll ask Miss Drummond if we may hang up the Chinese lanterns round the rink; it would be quite safe to light them out-of-doors, and they'd look so nice!"

"I hope I shan't have toothache again," said Dora. "Do you think Miss Drummond would let me go out if I muffled my head in a big shawl?"

[160] "No, I'm sure she won't, nor Lorna either, if she persists in that noisy coughing. If you can't smother it, Lorna, you and Dora will have to keep each other company in the classroom, and miss all the fun."

"Oh, that would be too bad! I'll manage somehow to get well enough, if I swallow every nostrum under the sun. Will you lend me your carbolic smoke ball? and I'll try it to-night."

In spite of many remedies suggested by sympathetic friends, Lorna was, however, obliged to forego the festivities. Miss Drummond was inexorable where health was concerned, and would not allow colds to be trifled with.

"Perhaps if I'd tried all the different recipes I might have cured it," said Lorna dolefully. "I've been recommended hot buttermilk and treacle, and honey with lemon, and black-currant tea, and elder syrup, and spirits of nitre, and ammoniated quinine, and to tie a wet handkerchief and a stocking round my throat, and sit with my feet in mustard and water!"

"I think the cures sound worse than the cold," said Dora, who was nursing a swollen face. "I've resigned myself to staying indoors. We shan't be the only ones, for there are at least eight others on the sick list. I don't much care; I'd rather sit near the fire and keep warm than skate with a raging toothache. No, I'm afraid I can't eat any chocolates, though it's kind of Miss Drummond to have sent us a box full."

[161] "If you look out at the landing window, you can just catch a peep of what is going on," said Mabel. "We'll tell you all about it afterwards. And if you're wise you'll let Miss Bardsley take you to the dentist to-morrow, and have that tooth out."

At half-past seven those members of the school who could show a clean bill of health wrapped themselves up warmly, and sallied forth to the carnival. The garden was really a beautiful sight. The full moon shone down upon the snow, glinting on the frosty branches of the trees, and showing cold and pale in contrast to the line of flaming torches that encircled the rink. All Phœbe's Chinese lanterns had been put up, and a number of others, which belonged to the Fifth and Sixth Forms; so that the scene resembled Aladdin's palace, with its rows of red, blue, yellow, and green lamps. It seemed very romantic to skate amid such surroundings, and the girls felt as if they were stepping into a picture or a scene from a play, as they took their first strokes, over the ice. Two friends of Miss Drummond had brought a mandoline and a guitar, and played lively selections, sometimes giving a song with a chorus, in which all could join, when the whole school swung round to the tune of "Oh! dem golden slippers" or "The old folks at home". The oil stove from the cottage had been requisitioned, and stood in a snug corner, keeping warm a large can of beef-tea, from which steaming cupfuls could be ladled from time to time by anyone who wanted refreshment; and a tray full of hot turnovers, which one of the maids carried from the house, was highly appreciated.

[162] As a wind-up to the festivities, everyone made an attempt to dance Sir Roger de Coverley—a very funny proceeding indeed on the ice, where strokes had to be substituted for *chassés*, and the ranks were apt to be abruptly broken by someone sitting down suddenly, with more swiftness than grace. Miss Reade and Miss Bardsley were heading the line, and passing under the upraised hands of Maude Farnham and Rose Turner, two of the prefects, when unluckily Rose tipped a little too far forward and lost her balance. Down she came with a crash, and in her fall she clutched wildly at Miss Bardsley, and not only brought both the teachers to their knees, but upset six couples who were following close behind and could not stop. There was quite a tangle of prostrate figures upon the ice, and much laughter as the girls picked themselves up, and tried to re-form the lines. Amidst the general scramble, nobody noticed for a moment that Miss Bardsley was really hurt; when she attempted to rise, however, her foot was so painful that she sank back with a groan.

"I'm afraid I must have sprained my ankle!" she exclaimed.

It was a case for "first aid", and the members of the ambulance class had very soon shown the advantage of their training by taking off the teacher's skates and boots, improvising a stretcher, and carrying her into the house, where Miss Drummond set to work at once with hot fomentations and bandages. Unfortunately, the mischief was greater than anyone supposed, for when the doctor from Chetbourne arrived next morning he declared that a bone was broken, and that the ankle must be put into splints.

[163] Naturally, this was a very awkward occurrence just at the beginning of the term. Miss Bardsley would be disabled for some weeks, and in the meantime, who would take her Form? For a few days one of the prefects did duty, while Miss Drummond wrote post-haste to a scholastic agency, to secure a teacher as locum tenens.

It was difficult to find anyone who was disengaged and could come at so short a notice, and Miss Webb, the mistress who finally arrived, was hardly to the taste of the Fourth Form. She had been a private governess in a family, and was not accustomed to class teaching; and the girls discovered in the first half-hour that she had not the slightest notion of how to enforce discipline.

"She told me to stop talking, and when I didn't, she simply took no notice!" chuckled Dora Maxwell.

"And she said: 'Ursula, dear, please do not fidget with your pencil,' in such a mild, apologetic little voice!" laughed Ursula. "Miss Bardsley would have glared, and said: 'Ursula, take a forfeit!'"

"She doesn't know anything, really, about the lessons," said Aldred scornfully. "She kept looking at the book all the time, to follow what we were saying."

"And you remember that sum that came out so funnily? I'm sure the answer was wrong in the book, and I wanted her to work it on the blackboard, but she wouldn't," put in Dora.

"Because she couldn't!" sneered Aldred. "She's evidently no good at arithmetic. We know more ourselves than she does!"

"And when we were having physical geography, and I asked her why the moon really had phases, she said it depended on the tide!"

"Well, she had got rather flustered, and put it the wrong way," interposed Mabel. "Of course, she meant that the tide depended on the moon."

[164] "Then why didn't she say so?"

"You muddle her by asking so many questions."

"Miss Bardsley never gets muddled; she always explains things so that one can understand exactly. As for Miss Webb, at the end of her physical geography, I feel as if I weren't sure whether the sun goes round the earth, or the earth round the sun."

"Well, it must be difficult for her, poor thing! to come here at a few hours' notice and have to take up another mistress's work," said Mabel. "I expect she's taught from quite different books, and doesn't know how far we are on in anything."

"It's not exactly that," said Phœbe. "I'm sure Miss Bardsley could set to work on someone else's Form, and manage their lessons in five minutes. The real trouble is that Miss Webb hasn't been used to teach in the way we learn things at Birkwood. She's old-fashioned, and expects you just to repeat what's in the book, and never minds whether you really understand it or not."

"That's fearfully out-of-date!" said Ursula. "She must have been educated a very long time ago. I wonder how old she is?"

"Quite fifty, I should think. Her hair is very grey," said Aldred. "She's older than Miss Drummond, I'm certain, and oh! what a vast difference there is between them! Miss Drummond is the cleverest person I know, and Miss Webb is a perfect noodle!"

"I don't see what's the use of troubling to learn her stupid lessons; they can't do us any good."

"Well, we must be able to reel off something, or she'd give us bad marks, and Miss Drummond would scold."

[165] "Yes, that's the worst of it."

"Freda Martin made a far better teacher; I wish she could have gone on taking us!"

"So do I; but, you see, she has her own work. She is going in for the Matric. next summer."

"Well, I vote we give ourselves an easy time with Miss Webb. We'll learn just enough to satisfy her and no more; and if we feel inclined to talk in school we'll talk!"

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[166]

CHAPTER XII

The New Teacher

It was very naughty of the girls thus to take advantage of poor Miss Webb, who was doing her utmost, according to her lights, to fill the gap occasioned by Miss Bardsley's enforced absence. She had no natural gift either for imparting knowledge or for keeping control over unruly wills, and had, indeed, quite mistaken her vocation. Teaching was to her, not a pleasure, but a weary grind to which she must continually brace her nerves; she could not help showing how distasteful it was, and her lack of enthusiasm was reflected in her pupils. Her classes were chaotic. The girls whispered, laughed, and played tricks upon one another with impunity; her faint remonstrances had not the slightest effect, and the more nervous she grew, the more out of hand they became.

Ursula Bramley, who prided herself on her wit, would delight in asking questions calculated to expose the mistress's ignorance, or to trip her up in some obscure branch of knowledge. She would come into school well primed with educational posers, and keenly enjoyed Miss Webb's discomfiture. She would meet all the unfortunate governess's attempts at evasion with firm
[167] determination, nailing her to the point until poor Miss Webb seemed more in the position of a candidate undergoing examination than a teacher conducting her own class.

"Baiting the cobweb," as Ursula called it, was the grand amusement of the Form, and it was very seldom that the victim emerged triumphant from the ordeal. Schoolgirls are thoughtless creatures, often very heartless, and it never struck the Form what pain they were inflicting upon a proud and sensitive lady, whose misfortunes obliged her to gain her living at an uncongenial occupation. To them she was simply a tiresome old bore, an object of mirth or contempt; and the agony that she endured in private did not enter into their calculations.

Mabel alone took no part in this unseemly state of disorder. Soon after the advent of Miss Webb she had developed a slight attack of influenza, and was laid up in the "hospital", a large room at the top of the house reserved for purposes of isolation. She was not seriously ill, but Miss Drummond was so afraid of infection being spread through the school that she kept Mabel away from the others for a longer period than was really necessary.

The latter certainly would not have countenanced any rudeness or discourtesy in class, but, her good influence being removed, Aldred was only too ready to follow the example of the others, and, as a cheap and ready means to win popularity, became one of the ring-leaders in the daily mutiny, vying with Ursula as to which could be the more clever at their teacher's expense. All kinds of petty annoyances were resorted to. If Miss Webb wished to write on the blackboard, the [168] chalk would be missing, or the duster mislaid. The desk lids were banged, books dropped feet scraped noisily, or the door was slammed on purpose. The girls would wilfully misunderstand the plainest directions, make ridiculous mistakes in their essays or exercises, and altogether try how far they could put the patience and good temper of the long-suffering mistress to the test.

One morning Miss Webb, in a feeble effort towards reform, announced that she intended next day to give the Form a viva voce examination upon the work taken since her arrival, and that she would submit the results to Miss Drummond.

This was a blow, for the girls had learnt their lessons so badly lately that not one of them was prepared, and they knew that the low standard of their marks would mean trouble with the head mistress.

"It's absurd to give us an exam, when it's not even the middle of the term!" exclaimed Dora, in much indignation.

"And a viva voce, too! We always have written ones at Birkwood," said Agnes, "with properly typed questions."

"Suppose none of us pass? Miss Drummond will be absolutely savage!" said Phœbe uneasily.

"Yes; she was not at all pleased with our reports last week," agreed Lorna.

"She asked how it was I had so many mistakes in my German exercises, and why my problems were all wrong."

"And she looked at the writing in my book, and said it was a scribble," added Myfanwy.

"What are we going to take for the viva voce?" asked Aldred.

[169] "Everything. It's to be from nine to eleven—a regular catechism in Roman history, and physical geography, and English literature, with grammar and parsing thrown in."

"Miss Webb said she would even ask us French verbs, and weights and measures," wailed Dora. "I know I shall fail! I'm no good at viva voces. I can remember the past preterite of *s'en aller*, or how many square yards there are in a square pole, when I'm writing an exercise, or doing a sum; but I never can think quickly enough when I'm asked point-blank. It all goes straight out of my head, and it's just coming back to me by the time the next girl is answering."

"Viva voces really are not fair," grumbled Myfanwy. "The nervous ones always do badly, however much they know."

"And when you don't know, it's still worse!" continued Lorna. "Miss Bardsley never gives them, at any rate, and that's quite sufficient reason why Miss Webb shouldn't."

"I call it quite impertinent for a temporary teacher to make such an innovation!" said Ursula loftily.

"Especially when Miss Bardsley is a B.A., and Miss Webb hasn't been to college."

"Yes. She has no business to alter any of our Form arrangements. We told her what we were accustomed to do, and she ought to stick to that, instead of introducing her own ways."

However much the girls might murmur in private, they could not openly rebel, or refuse to submit to the examination. It never struck any of them to take their books and set to work during [170] recreation time, to try to make up arrears. They much preferred to grumble, and bewail their hard luck.

"I hope she'll begin with literature and physical geography," said Phœbe. "I can manage fairly well with those, because it's easy enough to give examples of a dactyl and hexameters, or to describe a volcano; but when it comes to Roman chronology, I shall be done for! I can't remember the dates in the least, or the right order of the battles, or the names of the generals."

"We must try to spin out the first part," suggested Aldred. "We'll answer as slowly as we possibly can, and then there won't be so much time left for the Roman history. We can't go on again after eleven, because of the singing class and science."

"That's a good idea! Will everyone please remember not to hurry? I wonder if I could manage to drawl like Lorna?" chuckled Phœbe. "She always takes twice as long as anyone else to bring out her remarks!"

"I don't!" protested Lorna.

"Yes, you do. You needn't be so indignant; it's an accomplishment that we're all envying just at present, and longing to acquire!"

Preparation that evening, which ought to have been devoted to a steady recapitulation of forgotten dates and events, was conducted with the half-heartedness into which, under Miss

Webb's slack rule, the attention of the class had unfortunately degenerated. The girls learnt with one eye on their books and the other on their neighbours; they made signs, talked on their [171] fingers, and passed notes under the desks. Occasionally, when matters were really too bad to be ignored, Miss Webb would pluck up courage to venture a remonstrance, when there would be a brief interval of work; but within five minutes Aldred would be drawing caricatures on the fly-leaf of her grammar, Ursula uttering a vamped-up sneeze, and Dora signalling to Myfanwy behind Agnes's back. It was a farce of study, and at the end of two hours nobody had really made any headway or gained any fresh items of knowledge to use in the forthcoming ordeal.

Miss Webb gave a sigh of relief when the clock struck and her unpleasant task was over, and the girls popped their books untidily into their desks, and bolted from the room with a noise and hustling at the door such as they would not have dared to indulge in if Miss Bardsley had been there.

Next morning at nine o'clock the examination began. All took their seats, not at their own desks, but on a couple of forms placed in front of the blackboard, an arrangement insisted upon by Miss Webb, and carried out rather sulkily by the girls, who objected to be so directly under the teacher's eye. For once, Miss Webb really managed to enforce her authority. She separated Dora and Phœbe, the worst whisperers, peremptorily ordered Aldred not to loll, and told Ursula, who made an attempt at "baiting", to confine herself to answering questions, instead of asking them.

"Anyone who does not behave properly will take a forfeit, and this morning I shall subtract the forfeits from the general totals of the examination," she announced, looking quite stern and determined.

[172] Rather impressed by this unexpected burst of spirit on her part, the girls sat up straight, and gave their minds to the subject in hand. It was certainly very necessary for them to concentrate their attention, for both facts and figures proved coy, and apt to refuse to come at the call of memory. Miss Webb was methodical: she held the register in her hand, and recorded every girl's answer immediately it was given, entering it as right or wrong. The roll that resulted was hardly one of honour. Nobody covered herself with credit, or made even a tolerable show of information. Often a question would pass round the whole Form, and the number of misses to each name began greatly to outbalance the marks. The girls looked solemn. It was one thing to neglect Miss Webb's lessons, but quite another affair to have their deficiencies thus relentlessly written down and submitted to Miss Drummond, who would be sure to institute a close enquiry into the reason for such a universal failure. Everything seemed to go wrong, even English literature, upon which Phœbe had counted. Instead of taking examples of metre, Miss Webb asked for the chronological lives of authors, and lists of their works; or for the plots and principal characters of Shakespeare's plays. Physical geography fared no better, for she demanded an exact definition of terms, and very precise explanations of various phenomena, and would take no half-replies. She had evidently prepared carefully for the examination, and (when she was not continually interrupted by irrelevant questions) had a far better grasp of her subjects than her pupils had supposed.

The time dragged on slowly. No morning had ever seemed so long, in the opinion of the girls. [173] The weary rounds of literature and physical geography were succeeded by English grammar, with a discomfiting interval of French verbs. Aldred, surreptitiously consulting her watch, found it was just after half-past ten. Nearly half an hour, therefore, must elapse before lunch, and Miss Webb was already opening the Roman history primer. A look of horror passed along the Form. If their other subjects had been weak, this was decidedly weaker. Not one could remember a quarter of what she had learned. They had hoped that, as this subject was the last on the list, it would have been left so late that only a few pages could be covered; they certainly had not calculated on spending twenty-five minutes at it.

"I shall miss every turn!" thought Aldred. "It's dreadful! I've done so fearfully badly already. I believe I've only got about thirty per cent., and this will put me lower still. Miss Drummond never passes anyone on less than half marks. What can we do?"

She caught her breath, for an idea had suddenly flashed into her mind—an idea so daring, although so feasible, that its boldness almost frightened her. The small clock on the chimney-piece was not going, and Miss Webb generally kept time by the striking of the great clock that stood on the landing outside. If this clock could be put forward, the Form might be dismissed almost at once, instead of enduring the purgatory of any more horrible questions. Of course, there would be the danger of discovery, and consequently of getting into a serious scrape, but Aldred decided that something must be risked. A cold from which she was suffering gave her the necessary excuse.

[174] "Please, Miss Webb, may I go for a clean pocket-handkerchief?" she asked.

Miss Bardsley would not have allowed any girl to leave the room during an examination, but her substitute was more lenient.

"You must be very quick, then, Aldred," she replied. "If you lose your turn I shall count it as a miss."

Aldred was up and out of the door in a minute. Once on the landing she glanced cautiously round, to make certain that nobody was in sight; then, boldly opening the glass front of the clock, she moved the hands till they pointed to three minutes to eleven. She returned to her place,

ostentatiously displaying the clean handkerchief, just as the Form were wrestling with the Punic Wars, and by a lucky chance got the date of the battle of Cannæ, which was the only one she knew.

"What was the policy of Rome after this defeat?" asked Miss Webb.

Lorna could not remember, and the question passed on to Phœbe, who made a bad shot and answered wrong. Dora, Agnes and Myfanwy missed entirely, and Miss Webb was in the act of turning to Aldred, when the clock outside began to chime.

The teacher looked surprised, and glanced at her watch.

"I must surely be late!" she remarked. "I make it only twenty minutes to eleven."

"The landing clock is always right," volunteered Ursula, who, being doubtful herself as to the policy of Rome in that particular emergency, was as relieved as Aldred.

[175] Miss Webb did not dispute the matter, but closed her book. Perhaps she also was not sorry to find it was lunch-time sooner than she had expected. The girls did not need telling to go; they rose in a body, and fled downstairs in hot haste.

"It isn't really eleven yet!" panted Aldred, when they had reached the comparative safety of the hall. "Oh, don't make such a noise! Miss Drummond will hear us, and come out and send us back. Let us rush outside, into the carving-shed!"

"We knew it wasn't!" exclaimed Dora. "We all had our watches. How clever of you to put on the clock! I guessed in a second what you'd done."

"I wonder how soon Miss Webb will find out the mistake?" said Myfanwy. "The bell hasn't rung yet; she didn't think of that!"

"Well, I never was so glad to finish any exam in my life," avowed Phœbe. "Wasn't it detestable?"

"As bad as the Inquisition. It was a regular torture chamber. My unfortunate brains have been on the rack for two hours."

"Not quite two hours!" chuckled Aldred.

"No, thanks to you! but for an hour and forty minutes, at any rate."

"We must all have failed hopelessly; not a single one of us can possibly have scraped through."

"Yes; but it would have been worse still if we had gone on missing for other twenty minutes."

"Rather! Miss Drummond will be quite cross enough as it is, when she looks at the register."

The girls judged it discreet not to go indoors too soon for lunch, waiting until the pantry was likely to be full, lest their early appearance might excite comment.

[176] Singing was from ten minutes past eleven to twelve, and after that came science, with Miss Drummond, until one, both classes being held in the lecture-hall, so that there was no further lesson with Miss Webb that morning. A hockey match was played in the afternoon, which caused such excitement that the affair of the clock was forgotten for the time being; but it returned only too forcibly to the girls' minds, as they walked in to evening preparation. Would Miss Webb have found out the trick played upon her? And what steps would she take? They could not suppose that she would submit tamely, and ignore the whole circumstance. The most poor-spirited governess expects to keep her pupils in their classroom during school hours, even though she may not be able to exercise control over them while they are there. Would she show herself to be angry? or, worse still, would she report the matter to Miss Drummond? If so, trouble was in store for them.

Miss Webb, to their surprise, did neither. Her line of conduct was totally unexpected. She announced, quite calmly and briefly:

"I find that a mistake was made this morning in the time, and that you lost twenty minutes of your examination. By noting your marks during the ten minutes we spent on Roman history, I have been able to calculate the general average that you would have received during the entire half-hour, and, as a result, I have added one right answer and eight misses to each of your names on the register, and ten extra misses to Aldred Laurence, in lieu of forfeits."

[177] The girls groaned inwardly, but they knew they were checkmated. If they dared to remonstrate, Miss Webb would probably expose the entire episode to Miss Drummond, so they wisely said nothing.

They certainly well deserved all they had received, particularly Aldred, who for once had been a little too clever. Her additional bad marks placed her at the bottom of the list, a position she had never occupied since she entered the school. She was very irate in consequence.

"I detest Miss Webb!" she declared. "It was a disgustingly mean way of her to take revenge on us. How could she tell I had altered the clock?"

"Any idiot could have guessed that!" returned Dora. "It was perfectly simple to put two and two together; we all knew."

"Well, I think it was nasty of her, all the same, and I mean to pay her out."

"If you can."

"Oh, I'll manage it somehow!"

"Better not boast too soon."

"All right! Just wait and see!"

It was perfectly unreasonable of Aldred to feel aggrieved because Miss Webb had asserted her authority; but she chose to consider that she had been unfairly treated, and that she was justified in nursing her wrath. She cast about for some means of turning the tables and annoying the mistress, but it was rather difficult to hit upon anything safe; she had no wish to get herself into serious trouble, and knew that any open defiance would be reported at head-quarters.

"It must be something she can't fix specially upon me," reflected Aldred; "something that any of
[178] us might have done. The whole class dislikes her, so I shall really be acting champion for the rest; only, I think I won't tell them anything about it beforehand; it shall come as a surprise."

After serious cogitation, she decided to chalk Miss Webb's chair, so that her black dress should show a white impression of the cane seat and back.

"She won't know," thought the girl, "and of course we shall none of us tell her, and she'll be going about the school looking such a guy! She'll wonder why everybody is smiling."

By nine o'clock next morning Aldred had her unpleasant surprise already prepared. She had managed to slip into the classroom before breakfast, and to chalk the chair thoroughly; and she now sat in her place, laughing in anticipation. Miss Webb was punctual. She entered in her usual rather flurried, undignified manner, and was about to close the door after her, when she suddenly opened it wide again to admit—Miss Drummond and Mabel! This was a totally unlooked-for event. Aldred had not known that Mabel was returning to class that day, as it had been reported that she was to remain in hospital for the rest of the week; and she certainly did not expect the head mistress. Mabel walked quietly to her own desk, and Miss Drummond (alas for Aldred!) sank straight down on the chair that Miss Webb at once politely offered her.

"I have come this morning, girls, to say a few words to you," began the Principal. "I have examined your marks for the last three weeks, and also the list of the viva voce examination that you had yesterday. I wish to tell you that I am extremely dissatisfied. I have never seen such a
[179] low average from the Fourth Form, and I am sure that you are none of you doing your best. I cannot possibly allow such a state of affairs to continue; it is a disgrace to the school! I am greatly disappointed, as I had hoped for better things from you. It has been a very hard task for Miss Webb, who kindly came to help us in an emergency, to take up another teacher's work at so short a notice, and I believed that you would have realized her difficulties, and have made an effort to help her in every way in your power. Instead of this, you appear to have taken advantage of Miss Bardsley's absence to neglect your work. As I cannot trust you to do your preparation adequately and thoroughly in your own classroom, I am going to make a new arrangement, and you will bring your books each evening into the lecture-hall, and sit with the Sixth Form, when I can myself see that you are not wasting your time. I have also asked Miss Webb to bring me the register at the end of each morning. I shall check your marks, and any girl who, as I consider, has fallen below her usual standard, will stay indoors during the afternoon, to learn the lessons in which she has failed."

If Miss Drummond looked grave, the Form looked utterly crestfallen and ashamed. The girls sat perfectly still, gazing at their desks, for nobody dared to meet the Principal's eyes. As for Aldred, she was filled with blank dismay. It was bad enough to be scolded for ill-prepared work, but what was going to happen when Miss Drummond got up from her chair? That she hardly dared to guess, and she would have given everything she possessed if she could have recalled her silly act. She was kept for some time in suspense, as the head mistress called for their exercise-books, and
[180] insisted upon examining them all minutely, and asking various searching and awkward questions as to the reason for so many mistakes and misspelt words, and such bad writing. The Fourth Form had never endured such an unpleasant quarter of an hour, and Aldred, between her present discomfiture and her apprehension of what was to come, felt as if she were passing out of the frying-pan into the fire.

The dreadful moment arrived at last. Miss Drummond handed the exercise-books back to the monitress, and rose up. Aldred's trick had answered only too well: the pattern of the cane seat was imprinted most plainly upon the head mistress's handsome dress. As she turned for an instant to consult the time-table, everybody noticed it, and a universal gasp of horror passed round the room. Miss Webb blushed hotly, and hesitated as if in doubt what to do; then, apparently plucking up her courage, she nervously informed the unconscious Principal of the state of affairs. Miss Drummond looked keenly first at the chair and then at the girls.

"Who is responsible for this?" she asked, in a constrained voice.

There was no reply.

"I will give whoever has done it one more chance to confess."

Still Aldred held her peace.

"Very well! I am exceedingly sorry for the girl who is wilfully concealing this; her own

conscience will tell her how mean and despicable is her conduct. I consider this an act of such silly childishness and utter folly that in itself it is hardly worthy of my notice; the worst fault by
[181] far is the moral cowardice of the girl who has not the courage to own up, and offer an apology. It adds, I am sorry to say, to the bad opinion of the class that I have already been obliged to form. No, thank you, Miss Webb, there is no need to fetch a clothes-brush; I will ask one of the servants to attend to my dress, and to bring a wet cloth to wipe the chair before you use it yourself."

Aldred managed to avoid the other girls both at lunch-time and at afternoon recreation, making Mabel's return an excuse for devoting herself exclusively to her friend. She was most anxious not to be questioned on the subject of the chair. She was afraid she might be suspected of having played the trick, and did not see how she was to shield herself without a point-blank denial. Greatly to her relief, a bad cold from which she was suffering was pronounced influenza by Miss Drummond, who promptly packed her off to the hospital. She was not very ill, so it was a luxury to be an invalid for a few days, to miss classes, preparation, and practising, and to sit by the fire with an interesting book, and be fed up with beef-tea and jelly.

Mabel, who had completely recovered, was the only visitor allowed, a matter for which Aldred was devoutly thankful.

"It's perfectly horrid in school just at present," said Mabel, who ran up every afternoon to bring her news. "We have to do prep, with the Sixth Form, and Miss Drummond sits there herself, as well as Miss Forster, and keeps looking at us, to make sure that we're working. We hardly dare to lift our eyes from our books even for a second, and the room is so still that if anyone drops a pencil it makes quite a sensation. Before we go, each girl has to tell what marks she has gained
[182] or lost during the day. It's a regular confession! I can tell you, we have to be fearfully careful, and not make any more mistakes than we can help. It won't last long, though, because I hear Miss Bardsley is quite able to walk now with a stick, and she's to come back to class in a week from to-day."

"How blissful!" sighed Aldred. "Will Miss Webb be going, then?"

"Yes, on Saturday. I'm very sorry for her. Of course, she's not interesting, but she really did her best, poor thing, and I think the girls have behaved abominably. I wonder who chalked her chair?"

"Haven't they found out?"

Aldred's voice was very quiet, and she did not look at Mabel as she spoke.

"No. Everybody denies it flatly. I believe it lies between Phœbe and Dora. Ursula actually had the cheek to suggest that you must have done it! I was so angry with her!"

"You always stand up for me."

"I should think so!—I know you so well, dear. But Ursula is always jealous of you, and is inclined to be rather spiteful. I was obliged to take a very high hand with her. I said I should refuse to speak to anyone who connected your name again with the affair, and whoever spoke a word against you in future would quarrel also with me. That soon put them down. They're rather anxious to keep friends with me just now, because my aunt is staying at Chetbourne, and has sent me a box for Wednesday's *matinée* of *Julius Cæsar*. She asked Miss Drummond to allow me to go
[183] with one of the teachers and any friends I liked. I only wish you were well enough! I invited Miss Webb promptly. She and Miss Forster are to take us."

"Oh, I'm so glad Miss Webb is going!"

"Yes, I think she's pleased; but I'm sure the girls don't deserve a treat, and I believe I'll ask the prefects instead of them. It would really serve the Form right to be left out. The way they treated poor Miss Webb was most unchivalrous."

"Unchivalrous? Is that the right word?" queried Aldred, rather puzzled. "I thought chivalry was only for men, and that it meant fighting in tournaments, with your lady's favour fastened to your helmet, like they did in the Middle Ages."

"That was part of it, but Mother says real chivalry is for everybody, for girls as well as boys, and we can practise it nowadays, because it simply means refusing to profit by anyone else's weakness. The knights in olden times were bound by their vows of knighthood to defend all who couldn't protect themselves, and—oh, dear! I can't explain myself properly, but don't you see that, when poor Miss Webb was so stupid and helpless, we were bound to behave well and learn our lessons, simply because she wasn't strong enough to make us on her own account, and it was so cowardly to take advantage of her? That would have been chivalry."

"I think I understand," said Aldred, staring hard at the fire.

"Yes, I knew you would, though the others don't in the least, I'm afraid. I'm glad to say they're a little ashamed of themselves, though, and they're quite nice to Miss Webb now. By the by, we've
[184] started a subscription in the Form, to make her a present before she goes. You'd like to give something, wouldn't you?"

"Very much indeed. Please put my name down for ten shillings."

"A whole half-sovereign! How generous you are! Most of us have only given half-crowns. We

shall have twenty-five shillings now, and that ought to buy something really nice. Miss Drummond has promised to get it for us in Chetbourne. We don't know whether to choose a russia leather writing-case or a silver-topped, cut-glass scent bottle. I think you ought to have the casting vote, as you're giving so much more than anyone else."

"No; you settle it with the rest of the Form. I don't mind which, but it must be what the others like best."

"Well, I'll tell the girls what you say. I must go now, because Miss Drummond said I mustn't stay more than half an hour."

"Here are my keys," said Aldred. "If you'll unlock the workbox on my dressing-table, you'll find the half-sovereign in the lid. I can't go downstairs myself to fetch it."

"All right. I shall put your name first on the list."

"Oh, please don't! I'd rather have it last of all, if you don't mind."

"'I THINK I UNDERSTAND,' SAID ALDRED"

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The half-sovereign was conscience money, Aldred reflected sadly, as she returned to the fireside after bidding her friend good-bye. There was neither real pleasure nor merit in her gift, only a wish to make expiation for a fault that she dared not openly confess. She was like the Norman barons of old who gave large sums to the Church, to try to atone for the sins they still went on committing. She had no intention of explaining or setting the matter of the chair right, and her most earnest hope was that Mabel had succeeded in turning away the suspicions of the other girls from her, or, at least, in closing their mouths.

"They won't like to mention it any more, from fear of offending Mabel," she thought. "There's not one of them who would risk a quarrel. I expect I'm safe enough, and needn't worry about it: but oh, dear! Mabel thinks I'm so generous, and everything that's noble and splendid and good; I wonder what she would say, if she knew me as I really am!"

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CHAPTER XIII

Aldred pays a Visit

Miss Bardsley, after nearly six weeks' absence from school, returned to her work with renewed zeal, and under her judicious rule the Fourth Form was once more the abode of order and attention, Miss Webb's brief interlude was soon an old story, and Aldred, except for the inward monitor that insisted on recalling unpleasant things, was troubled with no awkward reminiscences, or demands for an explanation which she was not prepared to give. The days were so full and so busy at the Grange that the girls were generally occupied with the affairs of the moment, and they had neither time nor inclination for recollections of an episode that had reflected so little credit upon the Form.

The spring term was often called "Indoor Science Term", because on Wednesday evenings Miss Drummond gave lectures that were intended as a preparation for the botanical and zoological rambles held during the summer. In May, June, and July the girls would be taken to search for wild flowers upon the downs, and for marine specimens of all kinds on the beach; and it was Miss Drummond's object to enable them to understand beforehand what they were likely to find.
[187] Sometimes she had a magic lantern and sometimes a microscope, and always she had something interesting to tell and to show, whether it was the marvels of plant life or the wonders of the seashore; and she could make her nature stories sound as thrilling as human ones.

There were attendances also at concerts and University Extension lectures at Chetbourne, to which the school went in relays; Miss Drummond liked to keep her girls in touch with the outside world, and did not wish them to remain continually shut up in the Grange, as if it were a nunnery. At mealtimes, though she banned politics, she generally discussed the news of the day and any great events that were happening, so that nobody could plead ignorance of current topics. At the Debating Society all kinds of questions were aired and argued, the opposing papers being entrusted to members of the Fifth and Sixth Forms, though the Lower School was allowed to express its opinion. The meetings were conducted in a strictly business-like and orderly manner worthy of a college society, having been organized by Miss Forster and Miss Bardsley, who were both well versed in Girton traditions. Aldred enjoyed them immensely, and, finding several opportunities of putting in a few words, did not hesitate to avail herself of her chances. She was not shy, and had perhaps inherited a propensity for discussion from her barrister father, so she was able to do herself ample justice, and to reflect credit upon the Fourth Form.

"You simply squashed Freda on the subject of Socialism," said Mabel, after one particularly successful little speech. "Her thesis went all to pieces when you nailed her to the point, and she
[188] couldn't prove anything. I wish I had such clear brains! You see the weak spots in people's arguments immediately, and then you can bowl them over like ninepins."

Mabel herself had no gift of eloquence, so she appreciated Aldred's powers all the more, and was immensely proud of her success.

"I can't imagine how I lived before you came to school," she sometimes remarked. "I was a wheel without an axle. Now everything I do centres round you, and the best of it is that Mother likes you too!"

To both of the girls the great event of the term had been the night spent by Mabel's mother at the Grange. Lady Muriel Farrington not only had a warm friendship for Miss Drummond, but held both her personality and her methods of teaching in admiration and respect, and for this reason had entrusted her with her daughter. When up in town, she sometimes paid flying visits to Birkwood, as she knew that Miss Drummond would allow her to do so without disturbing the general routine of the school. She had been exceedingly anxious to come on this occasion, partly because Mabel had had influenza, and she wanted to assure herself that she was quite strong again; and partly because she wished to meet Aldred, and ascertain what kind of girl had gained such an intense, dominating influence over her daughter. She was extremely particular as to the friendships Mabel should form, considering her choice of companions one of the most important features in her upbringing; and she had been most careful to allow no intimacy with anyone whom she had not herself seen and approved.

[189] Mabel's letters had been so entirely filled with accounts of Aldred, to the exclusion of all other topics, that her mother felt it was high time to investigate this new and absorbing interest, and either give her sanction or take some steps to put an immediate stop to it. She had come to the Grange prepared to be very critical, and even censorious; but once introduced to Aldred, she had immediately fallen under the spell of her striking appearance and winning manners. No one knew better than Lady Muriel, however, that a picturesque exterior is not always an index to the mind; so she had a long talk with Miss Drummond about Aldred's character, and received such a favourable report that her fears were quite set at rest.

"I find your friend utterly charming," she said in private to Mabel, who was waiting in some anxiety to hear the verdict. "She is a most fascinating girl, evidently very clever and intelligent, yet so sweet, sympathetic, and winsome. I hear good accounts of her from Miss Drummond, who says she is entirely truthful, honourable, and straightforward (that was a question I particularly asked), and that she has a splendid reputation in the school. I am going to invite her to stay with us during the Easter holidays, and I hope very much that her father will allow her to come."

Mabel's rapture knew no bounds. She felt that she now had an official seal on her friendship, and she was longing to take Aldred home with her, and show her all the places that she had so often described.

"You'll see the house, and the park, and the lake, and our Alpine garden, and the tanks where we grow water-lilies, and our village club and library, and all Mother's pet schemes and hobbies,"
[190] she announced gleefully. "We'll have a perfectly delightful time! Grassingford always looks particularly pretty in spring, when the trees are just coming out, and we'll get Father to take us about in the motor, so that you can see the country. Do you ride?"

"A little," said Aldred. Her achievements in that line were limited to a donkey at the seaside, but she was not going to confess her lack of experience.

"Then we'll have some glorious scampers on Belle and Beauty. Belle really belongs to Geoffrey —that's my stepbrother, who is married, and lives a mile away—but he lends her to me sometimes, and I am sure he will this Easter if I ask him. I must take you to see Geoffrey and Rosamond, and my wee niece Margot. She's only five months old, and I haven't seen her since she was in long clothes. Then there are my cousins at the Rectory; I know they'll simply fall in love with you. Oh, I'm absolutely longing to introduce you to everybody and everything!"

Aldred's father readily gave his consent to the proposed visit, so April fifteenth saw the two girls starting off together for the holidays. Miss Bardsley took them up to town, and placed them safely in the train at King's Cross; and they would have no further change until they reached Helmsworth, the junction for Grassingford.

They were in a very exultant and hilarious frame of mind, literally bubbling over with excitement. They managed to restrain themselves while they were under Miss Bardsley's eye, but directly the train started, and she had waved a final farewell from the platform, they allowed
[191] their wild spirits to have free play, and laughed to their hearts' content, waltzed between the seats, gave three cheers for the breaking-up, and chattered like a pair of magpies. Fortunately, they had the compartment to themselves, or they could not have indulged in such enjoyable frivolities except at the risk of being taken for lunatics.

"I managed to buy a box of chocolates and a bag of pears," announced Aldred, triumphantly producing a parcel. "Miss Bardsley said there wasn't time, but I got the newspaper boy to run to the refreshment room while she bought our tickets."

"She's given us about ten thousand last directions! Can you remember any of them?" said Mabel.

"Never a one!" laughed Aldred. "The engine was snorting so loudly, I couldn't hear a single word."

"And I could only catch a word here and there. I have a general impression that we aren't to hang out of the window, or speak to strangers, and that we must call the guard if anyone disagreeable gets into the carriage."

"Well, we had all that before, from Miss Drummond!"

"And not to lose our tickets!"

"As if we should! I always keep mine in this inner pocket; it was made in my coat on purpose. I'm much more likely to lose my temper with so many instructions—we might be babies, five years old! I wonder Miss Bardsley did not tie a luggage label to each of us, marked, 'Perishable Goods, at Owner's Risk'!"

[192] "Yes, or 'Live Stock; Immediate," suggested Mabel. "Then we could have gone in the guard's van, and she would have been perfectly easy about us."

"There's only one outrageous thing that always tempts me," declared Aldred. "I do so want to pull down the cord, and stop the train!"

"A five pounds penalty if you indulge yourself, my dear."

"If I had five pounds I would, just for the sheer fun of it. All the people would rush out of the carriages, to see what was the matter. It would make such a sensation! By the by, how can the guard know who has pulled the cord? Suppose we simply looked innocent and astonished when he came to our compartment, he couldn't tell it was either of us; I don't think he could possibly know."

"As a rule, people only signal to stop in some great emergency, and then they would be anxious to call for help."

Aldred reached up, and put her hand tentatively on the cord.

"Shall I?"

There was real intention both in her eyes and in her voice.

"No, no! Aldred, stop! How can you think of doing such a dreadful thing!"

"I was only in fun, you dear goose!" said Aldred, with a rather forced laugh.

Mabel heaved a sigh of relief.

"Of course you were; what a silly I was to imagine you could be in earnest! You gave me quite a shock, all the same. I never saw anyone pretend so cleverly as you."

"Suppose I had pulled it? What would you have said to the guard when he arrived?"

[193] "Why, naturally I should have told him at once."

"Would you, truly? Are you sure?"

"What else could I have done?" Mabel looked rather puzzled, and distressed.

"You wouldn't really—and have me fined five pounds?"

Mabel's face suddenly cleared.

"Oh, I understand what you mean!" she cried triumphantly. "No, I shouldn't have the chance, because you would already have told him yourself! You naughty girl, how you love to tease me! I'm extremely stupid at seeing jokes."

"Well, I haven't five pounds to waste, at any rate," replied Aldred, leaning back in her corner. "If I were a millionaire, I might be tempted. What's the time? I feel very much inclined to investigate that basket of lunch."

It was a six hours' run by express to Grassingford, and before they arrived at Helmsworth Junction the girls grew thoroughly tired of the journey. They made the lunch spin out as long as possible, ate pears and chocolates, looked at the illustrated papers, and varied the monotony by taking little walks up and down the corridor.

"I get so stiff if I sit still all the time," declared Aldred, in reply to Mabel's objection that Miss Bardsley would have preferred them to remain in their seats. "Besides, the better view is on this side of the carriage, and we can't see it properly from our compartment."

Mr. Farrington met them at Helmsworth Junction, where they changed from the express to a local train; and at Grassingford a motor was waiting to take them to the Hall.

[194] Aldred thought she had never seen such a beautiful house, when a turn of the drive gave her a first glimpse of Mabel's home. It was built of grey stone, with towers and turrets, like a castle. The main entrance was under a carved archway that led into a courtyard, around which lay some of the principal rooms. A splendid wistaria covered one wall, and an equally fine magnolia another, while the greater part of the courtyard was devoted to an Italian garden, gay flower-beds in quaint shapes radiating from a fountain that stood in the middle.

Within, the house was as handsome as without. Mabel's father and mother had travelled much in foreign countries, and had picked up many treasures during their wanderings. There were lovely statues of Carrara marble, priceless Venetian glass, exquisite inlaid Italian cabinets, and carved oak cupboards from Germany; Chinese ivories and Indian lacquer work, Moorish lamps, rich Oriental draperies, Persian rugs, and Turkey carpets—to say nothing of pictures by old masters and modern artists, and a multitude of curios—embossed daggers, antique coins, Etruscan ornaments, old Nankin porcelain, Delft and Majolica, Roman vases, Greek urns, Sicilian jars and statuettes, and a medley of other articles, either ancient or modern, gathered from almost every corner of the world.

"It's like a museum!" said Aldred, when Mabel showed her some of the more interesting among the contents of the many cabinets.

"Yes. Dad and Mother have a perfect mania for bringing things home from abroad. They like to have specimens from every country they have been to, and each year the collection seems to grow bigger."

[195] "Have they ever taken you abroad?"

"Not yet. Mother says I shall enjoy it so much more if I wait until I know enough really to appreciate it properly. I'm to go when I leave school, and spend a whole winter travelling in France and Italy and Greece; but Father says that before I start he will give me an examination in the old Italian masters and in Greek architecture, and if I don't pass he'll leave me behind."

Mr Farrington was a connoisseur in all matters of art and archæology; he took keen pleasure in adding continually to his already large collection, and considered the finding of a genuine Van Eyck in a second-hand dealer's shop at Rheims the greatest triumph of his life. His special hobby, however, did not absorb the whole of his time. He had represented his county in Parliament, and though he had lost his seat at the last election, he found much to occupy him in local affairs. He was a magistrate, a Poor Law Guardian, and Chairman of most of the charitable institutions in the neighbourhood, taking an active interest in the Hospital, the Blind Asylum, and the Orphanage. In all his philanthropic work, Lady Muriel was his right hand. She was slightly socialistic in her tendencies, and had preferred to marry plain Mr. Farrington, a commoner and a widower, though she could have made a brilliant match in her own circle. She was thoroughly happy, however, in the sphere that she had chosen, and, troubling little about society, gave herself to a career of usefulness. She personally superintended the Workhouse Orphanage, knowing every child there by name; and spent one afternoon weekly at the Blind Asylum, reading
[196] or singing to the inmates, and inspecting their knitting and straw plaiting. She had instituted a

library and reading-room at Grassingford village, and was collecting funds to add a men's club and a lecture-hall; while the building of a mission church in an out-of-the-way corner of the parish was mainly owed to her energy and enterprise. A secretary was obliged to deal with her large correspondence, for she was practically interested in the temperance cause, in Women's Guilds of Help, the Fresh Air Fund, and the Boy Scout movements, all of which involved much trouble and considerable business ability, if they were to be a success.

In spite of her many duties, Lady Muriel always made time in the holidays to devote herself specially to her daughter. Mabel adored her mother, and was absolutely happy if she might accompany her on some errand of mercy, or take part in any of her various schemes. She liked to be asked to address envelopes, to write lists of names, or to discuss the programme for a village concert or the prizes to be offered at a flower show; and was already beginning to grow quite clever at organizing small local affairs. This Easter, Aldred was included in the conclaves, and made her first acquaintance with public and parish work. She had seen nothing of the kind at her own home, and it was a revelation to her to find how interesting it was to help other people. She and Mabel between them marked all the articles for Lady Muriel's stall at a bazaar, and were allowed to take special charge of the sweet department, selling dainty boxes of home-made bon-bons, and enjoying themselves immensely over it. They also arranged the sports for a party given
[197] to the Orphanage at the Hall, and worked very hard, distributing cups of tea and plates of cake; starting races and games of "Aunt Sally"; and generally amusing the children, and trying to give them a happy time.

"Aldred is simply splendid at this kind of thing!" said Mabel enthusiastically to her mother. "She keeps everybody going, and sees that all the little ones are playing too; they're so apt just to stand about and stare, you know. She thought of the loveliest games for them, and told them long fairy tales afterwards. They were absolutely delighted."

"I'm so glad to find she is a kindred spirit, and sympathizes with our work," replied Lady Muriel. "You have been most fortunate in your choice of a friend."

Though Aldred was thus initiated into the busy round of life at Grassingford Hall, the Farringtons did not neglect to entertain their guest, and provided plenty of amusement for her. She was taken in the motor to see all the sights of the neighbourhood—the beautiful mediaeval castle at Bonbridge, which still possessed moat, drawbridge, and portcullis in excellent preservation; the quaint old town of Bingdale, with its encircling walls and turreted gates; the valley of Malden, where the woods were in their spring glory, and the primroses were an absolute dream of delight; the ruined abbey at Dinvaux, which could boast of early Saxon carvings; and, last but not least, the view from the summit of Charlton Hill, whence five counties might be seen at once.

Though Mabel was Lady Muriel's only child, she had stepbrothers and stepsisters, who were married, and lived within reasonable distance. Several enjoyable visits were paid to their homes,
[198] for Mabel was very proud indeed of her various little nephews and nieces, and anxious to show them all to Aldred.

"I can't expect you to admire them as I do," she declared, "but they really are dears! I never know which is my favourite—Vera, with the thick, yellow curls; or Betty, with her big brown eyes. Miles is the cleverest, but Barbara says such funny things, and the baby is the most fascinating little rogue. They all came to spend Christmas Day with us, and it was so delightful!"

The cousins from the Rectory were frequently at the Hall, and were always ready to make up a set of tennis, or contribute to a musical evening. There were two girls, who had turned up their hair, and three boys, who, to Aldred's great astonishment, went to the same school as Keith, the eldest being actually in both his Form and dormitory. Aldred was quite excited at the discovery, and only wished her brother could have been there, to share the pleasure in her new acquaintances.

This holiday at Grassingford was the first visit that Aldred had paid alone, and she found it delightful to be free from Aunt Bertha's chaperonage, and a guest on her own account. It marked an epoch in her life to be thus transplanted into somebody else's home, and to see other people's ways. One thing that particularly struck her was that, in spite of their wealth and position, the Farringtons were extremely natural and unaffected. Mabel seemed quite accustomed to wait upon herself, and very ready to perform little services for others; and the family life was so simple, it might have served as a model for any cottage in the village. Aldred began to
[199] understand why Lady Muriel had selected Miss Drummond's school for Mabel, and to see in many of the arrangements at Birkwood the strong influence emanating from Grassingford.

She was very quick at picking up new ideas, and learnt many things at the Hall that she had not known before, whether points of social etiquette or fresh channels of thought.

"We shall make you into quite an antiquarian yet," said Mr. Farrington, who enjoyed explaining his curios to an interested listener. "You're already beginning to note the difference between Etruscan and Roman ornamentation, and to recognize a Greek coin when you see it. Tell your father to take you abroad when Miss Drummond has finished with you. It's the best coping-stone to put on any girl's education, and enlarges her mind in a wonderful way. In my opinion, six months on the Continent, studying the museums and art galleries, is worth three years at college. If he hasn't time to take you himself, he'd better let you go with us, and be a companion for Mabel."

"Oh, that would be too absolutely glorious!" exclaimed Aldred, with sparkling eyes.

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CHAPTER XIV

An Alarm

The Easter holidays were for three weeks, and to Aldred each day seemed more enjoyable than the one before. She was thoroughly at home at Grassingford, and felt as if she could have wished to remain there for ever. She had become a great favourite with both Mr. Farrington and Lady Muriel: her bright ways entertained them, and they were glad also for Mabel to have a companion of her own age.

"You seem more like a sister to me than Nora or Adelaide," said Mabel one day. "They were both married when I was quite tiny, so I haven't seen a very great deal of them—not having them living in the house, I mean. And Sibyl and Ida at the Rectory are older than I am, too. Francis is the nearest to me—he's seven months younger—but then he's a boy, and that isn't in the least the same as having a girl friend, is it? I couldn't talk secrets to him! Mother says she will invite you as often as your father will spare you, so we can look forward to plenty more delightful times together. We shall call the little blue bedroom your room now, and it will always be ready and waiting for you to come back to it."

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This was a very desirable state of affairs to Aldred. She was quite content to be half-adopted by the Farringtons, and to know she was such an acceptable and welcome addition to their household. She had never felt herself of any great importance at her own home, but here she was constantly considered, her opinion being asked and her wishes consulted; and she was well aware that with Mabel, at any rate, her will was almost law. She knew how greatly the rest of the girls at school had envied her this visit, and how it would raise her yet higher in their estimation when she returned to Birkwood. She would certainly have a good excuse in future for taking the lead in her Form, and letting the others plainly realize that they had not had her advantages.

It is at moments like this, when we are complacent with fortune, and think our happiness will never be moved, that Fate sometimes steps in, and with stern hand topples over all our schemes of self-advancement, and threatens us with utter desolation.

In the very last week of Aldred's visit, when she was at the height of enjoyment and gratification, and was beginning to consider herself almost a permanent fixture at the Hall, something happened—something that she might have anticipated, indeed, yet a contingency that had never occurred to her, and therefore as unexpected as unwelcome.

One morning, after the arrival of the post-bag, Mabel came running up to her friend with a look of bright animation on her face.

"From Cousin Marion!" she exclaimed, waving a letter enthusiastically in her hand. "She writes that she's staying at Evington, and wants us to go over and see her. I'm so glad, for I always wanted to introduce you to her."

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It was a very innocent remark of Mabel's, but it came upon Aldred like a bolt from the blue. Cousin Marion—the very person of all others in the world whom she most dreaded to meet! The shock was so great that she was obliged to clutch with trembling fingers at the back of a chair, to support herself. On no account must she allow her emotion to be noticed, so she waited for a few seconds until her voice was steady enough to reply.

"Your Cousin Marion! Why, I thought she was in Germany!"

"So she was, and had intended to stay for a year; but the baths did her so much good that the doctor said she was practically cured, and might return to England for the summer, at any rate. I'll read you a piece out of her letter. She says: 'It is ages since I saw you, so ask your mother to bring you on Thursday, and include your heroic little friend in the invitation. I well remember seeing her on the pier at Seaforth, but had not the pleasure of making her acquaintance'—Why, what's the matter, Aldred? Are you ill?"

"I'm afraid I must be bilious this morning, I feel so shaky, and headachy, and queer!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Mabel was at once all sympathy and concern. "You must come and lie down on the sofa, and I'll fetch you my bottle of eau-de-Cologne. There! Now you'll feel more comfortable. Would you like some soda water, or lemon juice? I believe it's a very good thing. I never remember your having a bilious attack before."

"I don't often," said Aldred, who, indeed, was seldom troubled with illness of any kind.

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"I'll ask Mother if she can give you some medicine. You must get well by to-morrow! We couldn't possibly go to Evington without you. Think how disappointed Cousin Marion would be—

and so should I, for I'm looking forward so much to taking you!"

In spite of herself, Aldred could not stifle a groan of despair.

"Do you really feel so poorly? Are you in pain? Perhaps we ought to send for the doctor. I'll go and fetch Mother immediately; she's a splendid nurse."

"No, no! Please don't!" cried Aldred. "I dare say I shall be better soon. I don't want to make a fuss, and upset everybody."

"You never do that, you're too unselfish and considerate. I know how ill you must feel, to mention it at all. I hope it's nothing serious!" and Mabel rushed off in quite a fever of excitement and alarm, to fetch her mother.

Lady Muriel was kindness itself.

"I expect you are a little overdone, dear child," she said. "We have been working you rather hard at sight-seeing, and perhaps letting you stay up too late. After the regular hours at school, the holidays are sometimes apt to upset young people. If your head aches, wouldn't you like to go to your bedroom, and rest quite quietly?"

"Yes, please," said Aldred.

She was devoutly thankful for the suggestion. Her one longing was to be alone, so that she might realize the blow that threatened her, and plan some means of averting it. Mabel's well-meant sympathy was almost agony in the circumstances; all she wanted was time to collect her thoughts. It was with a sense of intense relief, therefore, that she allowed herself to be put to lie
[204] down in her room. Lady Muriel drew the dark curtains across the window, rang for a siphon of soda water, and, having done everything in her power for the comfort of her young guest, took her departure, bearing with her the reluctant Mabel.

"Couldn't I just stay in the room, in case Aldred wants anything?" the latter pleaded. "I wouldn't speak a word."

"No, no! Aldred must be left quiet. If she can go to sleep, she may possibly feel better in the afternoon."

For once Aldred was quite glad to be rid of her friend. She hoped no one would disturb her for a long while, for she wished thoroughly to review the situation. This was indeed a catastrophe! A visit to Cousin Marion!—Cousin Marion, who would be sure to remember the appearance of the girl she had seen on the pier at Seaforth, and would realize in a moment that the two were not the same. She would no doubt express surprise at the difference, then questions would be asked, and the whole of the wretched affair would have to come out. It meant a complete exposure, and what the sequel would be Aldred dreaded even to imagine.

"They would call me a hypocrite and a deceiver, and so I am!" she thought bitterly. "I couldn't stay any longer in the house. I should be obliged to go home immediately; and what excuse could I give to Aunt Bertha for cutting short my visit? She would insist upon worrying the truth from me, and I should get into equal trouble at home. Keith would hear, and he would never forgive me. I don't believe I could even return to Birkwood, if all the girls at school were to know about it too."

[205] She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice, and that at any moment the frail ground might give way under her feet, and plunge her into the depths of the abyss. "Cousin Marion" seemed her evil genius; from the very first Aldred had been haunted by the fear of this meeting. It was wrong to wish people ill, but she regretted with all her heart that the German spa had effected so speedy a cure, and that the doctor had given permission for the invalid to return to England.

"I've been practising a fraud for the last eight months," she groaned, burying her face in the pillow. "I'll allow that much to myself, though I'll try to hide it from everyone else."

The agony she was enduring made her really feverish, for distress of mind is often far harder to bear than pain of body. She had gained all she wanted—popularity at school, a complete hold upon Mabel's affection, and a permanent invitation to a house where it was an honour to be received as a guest. And now, must all this be lost? The friendship had grown so necessary to her that she felt she could not live without it, and the prospect of estrangement and cold looks was appalling. At any cost she must manage to avoid this fatal expedition to Evington. She would sham illness, and ask to remain in her bedroom, so that they could not possibly include her in the party. To be sure, she would miss everything that was going on; but that was nothing, in comparison with the horror of an introduction to "Cousin Marion".

"If she comes over here, and asks to see me, I must have something infectious!" thought
[206] Aldred. "I wonder if I could rub anything on me to bring out a rash? Nettles might do it, only I can't go out to pick them. Was any wretched girl ever in such a desperate strait?"

She had had so little experience of ill health that it was rather difficult for her to feign symptoms. She had mentioned biliousness to Mabel on the spur of the moment, as it was the first idea that came into her head; but she had rarely suffered from an attack. She remembered, however, that it included a bad headache, and a disinclination to consume anything except soda water and biscuits.

"I shan't dare to touch proper meals, no matter how hungry I am," she reflected. "I expect I shall be nearly starving before to-morrow is over. I wish now I had said I had a sore throat, and then perhaps they would have been afraid of influenza, and have isolated me at once. Oh, dear! Mabel's tennis party is to be this afternoon, and I shall have to stop here and lose all the fun. Francis Farrington asked me to be his partner, and he plays so well that I'm sure we should have beaten all the others!"

She was shedding hot, bitter tears, not so much of regret for the long months of deception as of chagrin for the pleasure she must needs forgo. She was sorry, indeed, for the course she had taken, but it was not real repentance, only a wish to escape disagreeable consequences. Aldred had much to learn yet before she could set the desire for right above the love of approbation, or practise truth for its own sake.

When Lady Muriel and Mabel came to see her, about one o'clock, they found her with red eyes, a flushed face, and a genuine headache.

[207] "You must lie still," said Lady Muriel, after feeling her hot hands. "You seem quite feverish, and mustn't on any account try to get up and race about at tennis; it would be the worst thing possible for you. I'm so grieved about it, dear!"

"It's most disappointing!" echoed Mabel. "I should like to stay and spend the afternoon with you, only it would be so rude to the other visitors. Perhaps I can keep running in between the sets."

"No, don't!" protested Aldred. "You're indispensable, and will be needed out-of-doors all the time. You mustn't bother about me."

At present she much preferred her friend's absence. She was afraid she might not be able to play her part adequately, and that the loving, watchful eyes might discover how little she really ailed. Mabel also would be sure to talk of nothing but her Cousin Marion, in the circumstances the most unpalatable topic possible.

There was no lunch for Aldred that day; she ate three biscuits, the utmost limit she felt she dared allow herself, and drank some soda water. She longed for roast beef and potatoes, but knew that an invalid who could demand such solid fare would scarcely receive credence.

"I suppose I can hold out until to-morrow evening," she thought, "but after that I shall be obliged to confess to an appetite."

She spent an extremely dull afternoon, listening wistfully to the sound of voices wafted from the tennis lawn. There were no books in her room, and she had not liked to ask for one, lest the request should be taken as a sign of her recovery. She was virtually a prisoner, and though her solitary confinement was self-constituted, it was no less wearisome on that account. She was able
[208] to indulge in a cup of weak tea and a slice of thin, dry toast at four o'clock, but her supper was as unsatisfying as her lunch, and she felt nearly famished when her solicitous hostess, after performing every possible kind service, finally left her arranged for the night.

Oh, how she yearned to get up next morning, and present herself at the breakfast table! It seemed intolerable to be obliged to spend another day in bed on starvation diet, but she was forced to restrain herself, and to look subdued and suffering when her attentive friends paid their early visit.

"I hoped you would feel better to-day," said Lady Muriel, with real concern in her voice. "I shall telephone for Dr. Rawlins, and ask him to call and see you first thing, before he begins his rounds. I feel responsible to your father for you, and it is well to be wise in time."

In spite of Aldred's protestations, Lady Muriel insisted upon sending for the doctor, who came promptly in response to her message. He examined his patient carefully, took her temperature, felt her pulse, and made her put out her tongue. He looked at her so attentively, and with such keen eyes, that Aldred could not help turning rather red. Did he know, she wondered, that she was only shamming, and was he going to denounce her as a humbug? His expression, however, was inscrutable, and after asking her several questions, to which she gave reluctant replies, he turned to Lady Muriel.

"I think you have no cause for uneasiness," he said. "It is merely a slight, temporary indisposition, which will soon pass. I will make up a bottle of medicine that ought to do her good."

[209] "Mr. Farrington feared it might be motor sickness," observed Lady Muriel. "We have taken her about so much in the car, and the motion certainly affects some people."

Aldred caught at the suggestion as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

"Yes, it must be that. I'm sure it would make me sick to go in the motor again," she volunteered eagerly, raising herself on her elbow in her excitement, but sinking back languidly on to the pillow as she caught the doctor's contemplative eye.

"We wished very much to take her to Evington to-day, but I'm afraid she's not fit for it, poor dear child!" continued Lady Muriel.

"Let her stop at home, then," replied Dr. Rawlins, whose tone was hardly so sympathetic. "There is not the slightest need, however, for anyone else to stay on her account. She is much

better left alone, and I forbid Mabel to come into her room until this evening."

"I should scarcely like to leave her," objected Lady Muriel anxiously. "It is such a responsibility to have the charge of someone else's daughter!"

"Install one of the housemaids as nurse, to see that she takes her medicine. No, Lady Muriel! As your physician, I insist that you go out for some fresh air. I have your health to consider as well as that of your young guest. She'll be in no danger while you are away."

The medicine arrived shortly after the doctor's departure—much too soon, in Aldred's opinion. It was a huge bottle, and was labelled: "Two tablespoonfuls to be taken every two hours". Anything more absolutely disgusting Aldred had never tasted; it seemed a combined mixture of
[210] every disagreeable drug in the pharmacopœia. Burke, an elderly servant, had been placed on duty in the sick-room, and informed her patient that she had received express orders from Dr. Rawlins himself not to omit a single dose.

"He told me most particularly, miss, that you were to have it," she announced, in reply to Aldred's violent objections. "He said it was most important, and if I couldn't get you to take it I was to telephone for him, and he'd come himself and make you!"

Aldred swallowed her nauseous draught at a gulp. She was not anxious to receive another professional visit. She had gathered from the doctor's manner that he diagnosed the nature of the case, though he did not care to offend Lady Muriel by expounding his opinion. It was ill-natured of him, the girl thought, to give her so severe a punishment; he could not understand her motives, and he might have treated her with more consideration. The one redeeming point of the medicine was that it utterly spoilt her appetite, and took away all desire for food; and she was enabled to show a genuine lack of interest in the beef-tea and jelly that were sent up for her.

Another long, long day dragged itself out. Aldred was in the very lowest of low spirits. She had ventured to beg for a book, but Burke promptly replied that the doctor had forbidden either reading or conversation, and had recommended her to keep perfectly quiet. So there was nothing for it but to lie with half-closed eyes, listening to the everlasting click of Burke's knitting needles, an irritating sound in itself, and made worse by its monotony. Aldred counted the spots on the
[211] muslin blinds and the roses on the chintz bed curtains, and tried to imagine faces in the pattern of the wall paper; she recited in her mind every piece of poetry that she knew, and as much as she could remember of the play the girls had acted at Christmas. She was even reduced to repeating French verbs, to relieve her utter boredom; and hardly knew whether to be glad or apprehensive when Mabel paid her a visit at seven o'clock.

"We've had a glorious afternoon," said the latter. "The road was free, so we spun along, and got to Evington in an hour and a half. Cousin Marion was so delighted to see us! She'd have been very disappointed if we hadn't gone."

"I'm so glad you did!" put in Aldred.

"But she was fearfully disappointed not to see you, darling, and so sorry when we told her you were ill. We talked about you for quite a long time. Didn't your ears burn this afternoon?"

"I didn't notice."

"Well, I'm sure they ought to have done so. I won't tell you all we said, because you don't like to be praised, but you'd have been very flattered if you'd heard. Cousin Marion remembers you quite distinctly."

"I shouldn't know her."

"I dare say not; you wouldn't notice her particularly at Seaforth. By the by—isn't it absurd?—Cousin Marion actually thought you had sisters!"

"Why should she suppose so?" Aldred's voice was uneasy.

"She said they were with you, and so like you—one a little older, and the other younger."

"How ridiculous!"

[212] "Yes, I told her you are the only girl. Perhaps you had some friends with you at the concert?"

"I expect I had. I really can't remember now."

"And another funny thing: she said she was sure your name was Mary."

"So it is, Aldred Mary, after my mother," replied Aldred, thankful to be able to say what was really the case, though she knew her truth was only further aiding her deception.

"That explains it, of course. I suppose the newspaper forgot the 'Aldred', and simply put 'Miss Mary Laurence'. Newspaper reporters often make mistakes."

"So do other people," thought Aldred, though she did not say it aloud.

"We were so anxious for Cousin Marion to come over to Grassingford," continued Mabel. "Mother wanted to bring her home with us this afternoon, to stay for a few days, but she wouldn't be persuaded. She says her doctor has forbidden her to motor."

"Then won't she be coming at all?" Aldred tried to speak unconcernedly, but she could not quite banish the anxiety from her tone.

"Ah, I knew you wanted to see her! No, dear, I'm sorry to say it's impossible. She's still too great an invalid to take more than a gentle little drive in a landau. She might have come by train, but she decided that it would be too much for her. I'm afraid you won't meet her now, as we go back to school on Wednesday."

So the danger was over! The relief was so intense that Aldred had to bury her face in the pillow to hide her feelings. Her ruse had been successful, and for the present, at any rate, she might consider herself safe.

[213] "I've tired you out!" exclaimed Mabel self-reproachfully. "I might have remembered your poor head. How stupid and thoughtless I am! Good night, darling! I've missed you terribly all to-day. It will be absolute bliss when you're yourself again."

When Dr. Rawlins arrived next morning, he found that his bottle of medicine had been like the quack nostrums advertised in the newspapers, and had worked a lightning cure.

"I knew it would have a beneficial effect," he remarked, with a twinkle in his eye that only Aldred understood.

"Then you think she may really come downstairs, Doctor?" asked Lady Muriel, who was still a little worried.

"Most decidedly! There's nothing to prevent it. The sooner she's out in the fresh air the better. A game of tennis would be the best tonic I can prescribe. Her medicine? Oh, well, she's so wonderfully improved that I'll excuse her from finishing the bottle! She might keep it, in case she's ever troubled with the same symptoms again."

"Isn't he nice?" said Mabel enthusiastically afterwards. "I always like Dr. Rawlins so much. I think he's the kindest man I know. I often say it's almost worth while being ill, to have him come to see one. And he's simply enormously clever!"

"He certainly seems to cure his patients quickly," replied Aldred, with doubtful gratitude.

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[214]

CHAPTER XV

On the River

Aldred had found the family at the Rectory a decided addition to the attractions of Grassingford. The girls, although they were "out" and "finished", were very companionable, and made much of both Mabel and her friend; as for the boys, when first their stiffness and shyness had worn off, they proved exceedingly jolly. Mabel was on excellent terms with her cousins, who were frequent visitors at the Hall, and might always be counted upon to take part in any fresh plans or projects.

On the Monday following Aldred's sudden illness and recovery, she and Mabel were invited to spend the afternoon at the Rectory. It was their last opportunity, as they were to start for the Grange first thing on Wednesday morning, and Tuesday must be reserved for packing and saying good-byes.

"We're all off this week," said Francis Farrington, as the visitors were welcomed and borne away into the garden. "We are due back on Thursday, worse luck! I could have done with another fortnight. I hate school!"

"You lazy boy!" said Mabel.

[215] "All right! I'm lazy if you like. I wonder, though, how you'd care to change places with me, and be in old Barlow's Form. He's the most fearful Turk, and gets as savage as a bear if one doesn't construe properly—very different from your Miss Drummonds and Miss Bardsleys."

Mabel laughed.

"Shall I go to Stavebury with Piers and Godfrey, and you can take Aldred back to Birkwood?"

"Done! It would be jolly good fun—for me, at any rate. I should be living in clover."

"Except for the work—you mustn't forget that."

"Work! I don't call your lessons work! They seem mostly cookery and wood-carving, varied by hockey and tennis."

"Don't be nasty! We have to use our brains during school hours and prep., though we do have jolly times in between. You needn't laugh at cookery, for you were ready enough to eat the

queen's cakes that Aldred and I made last week."

"I'm not laughing. They were delicious; I only wish you'd make some more! All the same, don't you suppose that the amount of grind you go through is anything like equal to ours; if you had old Barlow to set your exercises, you'd soon find out."

"Well, you don't want girls to swat as hard as boys," said Piers, who was rather fond of airing his opinions on various topics. "Spoils their complexions! They're put in the world to do the ornamental."

"Are we, indeed, sir? Thank you!" replied Mabel, with a mock curtsy. "I wonder what you know about complexions, by the by? As for exerting ourselves, we can do quite as much as you, in our own way."

"Granted, so long as you keep to your own way, and don't poach on ours!"

[216] "Here, you two, stop bickering!" said Godfrey. "When Piers begins an argument he'll hold forth for hours together. We don't want to discuss 'Women's Sphere', or the 'Education Question'! Leave these to the Debating Society, and let's enjoy ourselves! How would Mabel and Aldred like to come with us to Holt's farm? The pater wants us to take a message there. It's only three miles away, and Aldred, at any rate, hasn't seen the river."

"I've never been to Holt's farm either," said Mabel "I haven't even crossed the ferry."

"It would be better fun than tennis," agreed Piers. "Our court seems a very poor affair after the one at the Hall; it's hardly worth playing on."

Both Mabel and Aldred felt disposed for a walk. It was a fresh and bright afternoon, and the prospect of seeing a new part of the neighbourhood was attractive. Mabel often went out riding on horseback, or in the motor with her parents, and thus knew the high roads for many miles around; but unless she accompanied her cousins, she seldom explored the lanes and by-paths.

"In one way it's much jollier to go on foot," she declared. "You can stop to pick flowers, or climb on to banks; and I do so enjoy getting over stiles!"

"You'll have enough of them this afternoon," laughed Francis. "There are at least twelve to cross, if we go through the fields by the river."

"Are Sibyl and Ida coming with us?" asked Mabel.

"No, they think the Grants may be calling, so they don't dare to be out. Would you each like a stick? We've an assortment here, in the umbrella stand; this is a nice little one with a crooked
[217] handle for Aldred, and I can recommend this cherrywood for you, Mabel."

The country at Grassingford was exceedingly pretty. It was not grand, nor mountainous, but was well wooded and dotted with picturesque farmsteads. There were deep lanes, with high hedges, which at the present season of the year were a mass of flowering hawthorn; and every little copse and spinney showed blue with hyacinths. There was a delightful spring-like feeling in the air, that combination of sun and breeze, bursting buds, and opening leaves which promises returning summer, renews all the vitality of human beings, and sets us singing like the birds for the mere joy of being alive. Such days seem echoes of the Golden Age slipped out of Paradise, days when we want to forget houses and cities and civilization, and go into the fields to learn the lessons Mother Nature has to teach us—lessons as old as the hills, but fresh every year, when they are fraught with the mystery of new creation.

The path to the river lay across fields, and it would have been difficult to find it without a guide who knew the way. It zigzagged between patches of growing corn and hay, turned sharply round corners, and for a short distance even led down the half-dry bed of a stream.

"The fact is, it isn't a proper path at all," said Francis. "It's only a short cut that we found out for ourselves; it saves a mile."

"It's lovely! I should want to come by it, even if it were a mile longer instead of shorter," said Aldred, who always preferred the romantic to the practical. "How do you manage when the stream is full?"

[218] "Oh! we can't get along unless we wade. We came once last winter and had to turn back; the water was up to this stone, a regular rushing torrent, very different from what it is now. Can you scramble over this wall? Take my hand. Now, you see, we are in the lane, and we shall get to the ferry in a minute."

The old-fashioned ferry was a most picturesque feature of the tidal river, a large, flat-bottomed boat being worked on chains, which stretched from one bank to the other. Sometimes a horse and cart, or a flock of sheep, would be taken over, as well as ordinary passengers, the whole cargo being slowly wound across the water by the ferryman, who turned a creaking windlass on board. The whole arrangement seemed a delightful survival of days when no one was ever in a hurry, and life revolved on leisurely wheels, as different from our modern rush and excitement as a bullock cart is from a motor car. Aldred was fascinated with the quaint contrivance, and anxious to cross on it; but Francis had other projects.

"I say! Wouldn't it be jolly if we could get Pritchard to lend us his small boat, and row ourselves up the river to Holt's farm?" he suggested.

"Ripping!" said Godfrey. "Why not?"

"It's not a bad idea," said Piers; "but have you fellows brought any money with you? for I haven't."

"I've left my worldly wealth in my other trousers' pocket," admitted Godfrey. "Francis, you'll have to pay the piper."

"All serene!"

"I wonder what he'd charge?"

"I don't know, but we can ask him. Here he is now. You'd like a row, girls, wouldn't you?"

[219] "Immensely!" said Mabel.

"Oh, I do hope he'll let us! It would be such fun!" added Aldred.

"We want to know if you'll hire out your small boat," said Francis to the ferryman. "What would you charge to let us have it for an hour, or perhaps a little longer?"

Pritchard stroked the short, grey stubble on his chin reflectively.

"Are you sure you can manage a boat amongst you?" he queried.

"Of course!" answered Francis, rather loftily. "We all know how to row; we're as accustomed to the river as you are yourself."

"I don't know about that," said Pritchard, smiling. "You haven't got fifty years at the back of you yet. It'll take a fairly strong arm to pull the lot of you, especially against the tide. The boat's bespoke for half-past four too."

Francis complacently felt his muscles, as if to suggest that he was quite equal to the occasion.

"Say what you want for it," he replied.

"We'll undertake to bring it back in heaps of time," interposed Godfrey.

"How would half a crown be for the hour?"

"I'm afraid I've only got a two-shilling piece with me," said Francis, coming down a little from his high horse.

"And two shillings is the usual price without a boatman," added Piers.

"I'd a deal rather you had a boatman with you, only I can't spare the time. Well, I don't want to
[220] be hard on you; we won't quarrel over the sixpence. One of the oars is spliced, and you'll have to be careful of it. Thomas, help to run down the boat, will you?"

With the help of two strong pairs of arms, the *Maid of Llangollen* went grating along the shingle towards the river. She was short and broad, and evidently not intended for racing. The boys inspected her with a critical eye.

"She's a dreadfully heavy old tub," said Piers, "but she's seaworthy, and I dare say we shall have some fun out of her."

"Who's to row stroke?" said Francis.

"I am, of course," answered Piers, in a tone that admitted of no dispute. "Godfrey may have the other oar, and you can steer."

"And what may we do?" asked Mabel.

"The ornamental, of course! You and Aldred can just sit and enjoy yourselves."

"We'd much rather take our share of the work."

"Well, perhaps we'll let you have a turn by and by, if you're so particularly anxious."

Pritchard by this time had run the boat down the bank and rowed her round to a small jetty, from which it was easy to board her.

"There's a nice place for you misses here, in the stern," he said. "Be careful! It's wet in the bottom. There's a tin can under the seat, if you want to bale her out."

It was most delightful on the river. In spite of her clumsy build, the *Maid of Llangollen* seemed to glide along in the easiest manner. Mabel and Aldred leaned back luxuriously in the stern of the boat, trailing their hands in the water, and watching the regular dip of the oars. The party were
[221] all in the best of spirits, and began to exchange jokes and sing songs.

"Yo di diddle diddle dee,
Five jolly sea-dogs are we.
We've to heave the anchor, and our friends all
hanker
To join our companee!"

chanted Francis.

"Is that original?" asked Mabel.

"Of course it is! Don't you know my remarkable style by this time? I'm the coming poet!"

"A modest one, at any rate!" laughed Aldred.

"Oh, it doesn't do to hide one's light under a bushel! Nobody believes in you nowadays unless you advertise yourself."

"I thought self-praise was no recommendation."

"Quite a mistaken idea! To alter Shakespeare a little, one can say: Sweet are the uses of advertisement!"

"You must give us a better specimen of your poetry before we'll believe in you," said Mabel. "I shall call you a doggerel rhymster at present."

"All right! How do you like this?—

'Tis unkind, most naughty Mabel,
Your poor cousin's lines to label
As but trashy, worthless rhymes
Only fit for strolling mimes.
Don't you see the genius burning
In each verse that I am turning?
Some fine day—I'll give a hint—
You may see my name in print!"

"It will be among the advertisements, then," said Aldred. "I suppose you really made up that one?"

"Certainly; a poor thing, but mine own," said Francis, with an attempt at a bow. "You needn't clap, because, after all, I'm rather modest, and it might raise a blush on my cheek."

[222] "We weren't going to—though we'd like to see the blush, I assure you!"

"Would you like another verse? I'm waxing poetical: I suppose it's a matter of practice."

"No, thanks, we've had enough!" exclaimed Piers. "You'd better drop poetry, and stick to steering; you've nearly bumped us into the bank more than once."

"Can't I have a turn at rowing now?" asked Mabel. "You promised I should."

"All serene!" said Piers. "You may take my oar. Steady! Don't go upsetting us!"

"Then let me have yours, Godfrey," said Aldred. "I do so want to try too!"

"It's the spliced one," said Godfrey, "but I don't suppose you're likely to smash it."

It was the first time Aldred had ever tried to row, and it was much harder work than she had supposed.

"Look here! you're not feathering your oar properly," commented Piers. "You oughtn't to put it in so deep, nor bring it out with a jerk. Watch how Mabel is doing it."

"Oh, I know!" replied Aldred rather impatiently. She did not like to receive any criticisms, and, setting her feet firmly, gave a mighty pull. The next instant over she went on her back, and away went the oar into the water. Luckily, Piers had plenty of presence of mind. He put out his hand and caught the oar just as it was floating past the stern.

"We very nearly lost it!" he remarked. "It was luckily near enough to reach."

Aldred retired into the stern again, feeling decidedly crestfallen, all the more so as Mabel was
[223] getting on nicely. Her friend's efforts did not last long, however; she soon declared that her hands would be blistered, and relinquished her seat to Piers, who was longing to be in command again.

"It's far better for you to look on," he said. "Girls aren't much good at rowing."

"How about Grace Darling?"

"Oh, well, she was the exception that proves the rule!"

"Here we are, close to the farm!" exclaimed Godfrey. "We must try to find a good landing-place."

They decided that it was not worth while for all to leave the boat, so Francis volunteered to get out. He ran across a field to the farm, delivered his father's message, and was back almost before the others had time to grow impatient.

"We must turn her about now," said Piers. "Oh, thunder! It's later than I thought; we shall have to hurry up, if somebody wants the boat at half-past four. Francis, you had better take Godfrey's oar."

Once on the river again they found that their return was a very different matter from their former journey. The tide was running out in a fast and strong current against them, and though Piers and Francis tried their utmost, they could scarcely make any headway. It was a heavy boat for two boys to manage, and the possibility of their being back in time seemed doubtful.

They had gone perhaps two-thirds of a mile, when suddenly there was a harsh, grating sound under them.

"Hallo! We've run aground!" cried Francis.

[224] This was bad news indeed, but it was only too true. They had not known that a sandbank was there; on their way up they had passed over it easily, but the tide was going out so rapidly now that already it was almost uncovered. The boat seemed stuck fast, and although the boys made every effort, they were not able to free her with their oars. They pulled off their boots and stockings, and, jumping overboard, tried to push or drag her from the shoal, but all to no purpose; she was sunk so deeply in the soft sand and gravel that they could not move her an inch.

"What are we to do?" asked Godfrey.

"Stay where we are, I suppose, till the tide floats her off again," replied Piers.

"It's a pleasant look-out, anyhow!" said Francis.

"And Aunt Winifred will be wondering where we are, too, if we don't turn up for tea," added Mabel.

"It's a pity we didn't bring some tea with us, and we could have had a picnic," said Aldred. "I'm so thirsty!"

"There's nothing to offer you but the river, I'm afraid."

"No, thanks, it's too muddy for my taste."

"'Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink!'" quoted Piers.

"And what our thirst will be ere long,
One doesn't like to think!"

rapped out the irrepressible Francis, whose muse was not quenched even by this disaster.

"We're in a fix, and that's the solemn truth," said Godfrey.

They were, indeed, in a most awkward predicament. By the time the tide was high again it
[225] would be midnight, and they certainly could not see to row in the dark. There was every prospect that they would have to spend the night on the shoal, without tea or supper, or extra wraps.

They waited for perhaps an hour and a half, while the sandbank grew to quite a respectable island. There were woods on either hand, so it was most unlikely that their plight would be noticed from the shore; their only chance of relief was from a passing boat—a faint hope, for as a rule there were very few craft on the river.

"I begin to understand how a shipwrecked mariner feels when he's waiting for a sail!" said Aldred.

"I believe I'd trade my watch for a plateful of bread and butter," said Francis.

Godfrey suddenly stood up in the stern and waved his hat.

"A boat! A boat!" he cried eagerly. "Hallo, there! Hi!"

Francis and Piers immediately joined him in making such a noise that nobody but a deaf person could have ignored it. The fisherman who was rowing in their direction evidently realized the situation; he signed to his mate to stay in the channel, then, clambering overboard, came wading in his tall boots on to the island.

"Why, it's Sam Ball, who sings in the choir!" exclaimed Godfrey.

Their rescuer regarded them with a rueful grin.

"You've got yourselves into a precious mess here!" he said briefly.

"Can you help us to pull her off?" returned Piers anxiously.

[226] "Pull her off! Couldn't do it with a team of horses! She'll have to stop where she is until the tide floats her. I'll take you off, and that's the best I can do for you. Hoist one of them young misses on my back; I'll carry them first."

He waded with Aldred to his own boat, returning to fetch Mabel, and the boys scrambled after him as best they could.

"It's Pritchard's boat, isn't it?" he said. "I'm passing the ferry, so if you like I'll tell him what's happened. If you cross through the wood there, and turn to the right of the iron gate, you'll find your way straight to the village."

The boys went home in rather subdued spirits.

"We shall have to go down to the ferry this evening and explain things to Pritchard," said Piers. "I hope he won't cut up rough about the boat."

"I'm afraid he'll want compensation," said Francis, "I split that spliced oar with trying to shove her off."

"What an abominable swindle! It'll take half our next term's cash. I don't believe the pater will stand it for us."

"I'm sure he won't, after that little affair of the rifle and old Carter's dog!" put in Godfrey.

"Well, never mind if we have to pay up. We shall survive it, I suppose," said Francis. "We're making Mabel and Aldred look quite uncomfortable. It seems a stingy trick to take them out rowing, land them on a sandbank, and then spend all the rest of the time growling over the damage. But I know one thing: if ever we have that boat again, I'm going to make a chart of the river first, and mark down all the shoals!"

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[227]

CHAPTER XVI

An Opportunity

Mabel and Aldred returned to Birkwood on terms of even closer intimacy than before. There is always a difference between a companion who is only an acquaintance at school and one who shares the many little home associations and interests that make a bond of union apart from the other girls, and give innumerable subjects for those confidential talks which are the chief joy of friendship. The bedroom that had once seemed entirely Mabel's was now taken up with joint possessions. Aldred had helped to buy the new gipsy table that stood in the window, and had embroidered half of the table-cloth that covered it. The cushion for the wicker chair was a present from Lady Muriel to both the girls; and the knick-knacks that they had brought back with them were so entirely mixed that it was difficult to tell which belonged to either. "All things in common" was Mabel's motto, and Aldred, who certainly got the better of the bargain, was only too ready to agree.

It was high summer now at the Grange—glorious, golden days, when the sea breeze, or the wind from the downs, tempered the warm sunshine, and established Birkwood's reputation for a bracing climate. As many lessons as possible were held in the garden. Each form had its own
[228] special open-air classroom, and the girls easily accommodated themselves to working out-of-doors.

"When you're accustomed to it, it's no harder than working in the house," said Ursula. "Of course, just the first day we can't help staring about a little, to look at birds and things, but we soon get over that. We're none of us babies, to need four walls round us to keep our attention, and it is so very much nicer."

The Fourth Form "room" was at the corner of the big lawn, under the shade of a large oak, almost exactly in the place where Aldred had made her statue of Venus in the snow. How different the garden looked now in its summer dress! It was difficult to believe that the asphalt court had ever been frozen and turned into a skating rink.

"I shall never forget our ice carnival," said Miss Bardsley. "My ankle is hardly strong yet, and I'm afraid it will always be thicker than the other."

"You had a long holiday, though," urged Phœbe: "six whole weeks!"

"An enforced holiday is no pleasure; I would far rather have been at my work. I don't feel that you've made up yet for all you lost while I was absent."

"Is that why we have a double allowance of Roman history now?" queried Ursula.

"Certainly it is. You must finish the book this term, if we have to take extra lessons on it. You naughty girls, don't pull such faces! You ought to be interested in the Emperors."

"Father says some day he'll take me to Rome, and I shall see all their marble statues," observed Mabel.

[229] "Lucky girl!" said Miss Bardsley. "I was fortunate enough to spend one Easter holiday in Rome, and saw the busts of the Emperors at the Capitoline Museum. They're the most beautiful likenesses in the world. You'll appreciate Roman history when you've been to the Forum, and the Colosseum, and all the other famous places."

"Why can't we study history that way?" suggested Ursula. "Suppose you were to take us all to Rome for a month, and we learnt about Romulus and Remus when we were sitting on the

Capitoline Hill, and about Trajan in Trajan's Forum, and Diocletian in Diocletian's Bath, and Nero at the Colosseum: it would be so interesting, and we should really remember it!"

"No doubt that is the ideal method; but think of the expense! I am afraid most parents would grumble at the school bills, if teaching history involved a visit to the scene of each occurrence. No! You're supposed to study all this beforehand, and then, when you have a clear idea of ancient and mediaeval times, you can go abroad with an understanding of what you'll see."

"But why shouldn't there be a mutual exchange of schools?" continued Ursula, who liked to discuss questions with Miss Bardsley. "Suppose a class from an Italian school were to come to the Grange for a month, and we were to go and take their place: they'd learn English games, and we should see the old temples and amphitheatres, so we should each have something we couldn't get in our own country."

"It would certainly be a splendid means of learning languages, especially if such an exchange could be effected with a French or a German school. But I fear we are not ripe for that yet; there
[230] are too many difficulties in the way of such international visiting. In years to come perhaps the State will organize it, and we shall see little bands of children starting with their teachers to study foreign life and get rid of insular prejudices. It would have to be a special department of the Board of Education."

"If Father gets into Parliament again I'll ask him to bring in a Bill for it," said Mabel. "He's very keen on Secondary Education."

There was so much to be done at Birkwood during the summer term that the days did not seem nearly long enough, though the school rose half an hour earlier than in winter. The girls played cricket as well as tennis, worked in their gardens, and were taken for walks on the downs or on the shore. These expeditions generally had a scientific object in view, wild flowers being brought home to be pressed and added to the school collection, or the pools left by the tide investigated for specimens to enlarge the already flourishing aquarium. There is an old saying: "If you are good, you are happy"; but Miss Drummond believed in the reversing of that moral process, on the theory that "if you are happy, you are good", considering that young girls, at any rate, would be more likely to grow up with nice minds and true instincts if all their environment was beautiful, and their days were filled with pleasures calculated to elevate and refine. There were few of her pupils on whom her system had not the desired effect, and the one or two failures had been gently eliminated, so as not to contaminate the rest.

With Aldred especially Miss Drummond's method had worked well. She was very different from the ill-disciplined girl who had arrived at the Grange last September. The pleasant but carefully
[231] ordered regime seemed quite to have counteracted her aunt's injudicious management, and she would have been utterly ashamed now of behaviour in which a year ago she had gloried. This improvement was largely due to Mabel's influence. The latter's implicit faith in her began to rouse a desire to become actually what her friend believed her to be. She conquered many little weaknesses, lest Mabel should notice them. She had soon found that a cross word or an unkind speech, the evasion of a rule, or the shirking of some small duty, would bring a look of puzzled surprise to the latter's face; and rather than that Mabel should be disappointed in her, she kept a tight hand on herself, and would repress anything of which her friend did not approve. It was not the loftiest of motives, but it was the first time in her life that Aldred had ever really tried to join the ranks of those who are striving upwards, and even a faint-hearted effort is better than none at all.

There are occasionally people in this world who seem to have the faculty of drawing the very best out of those with whom they come in contact. They create their own atmosphere, and by the strength of their winning personalities rouse all the sleeping good in others. Such a friend was Mabel, and Aldred, despite her false position, could not fail to be influenced by daily living with a character so much sweeter and more self-controlled than her own. Though she was still content to take credit that was not her due, she was gradually altering her standard, and beginning slowly but surely to realize that life consists of far more than the gratification of the moment, and that righteousness is a higher goal than pleasure.

[232] One morning, when the girls were sitting chatting round the sundial at eleven o'clock recreation, they noticed the telegraph boy from Chetbourne ride up on his bicycle and deliver a message at the door.

"No alarm for any of us, I hope!" said Phœbe. "It's rather silly, but I always feel a little scared when I see one of those yellow envelopes, and wonder if anything has happened at home."

"And yet people send telegrams about everything," said Myfanwy. "Probably this is only to offer Miss Drummond seats at a concert, or to tell her somebody's coming to visit the school."

"Oh, I dare say! But I get nervous, all the same; telegrams so often mean bad news."

Phœbe's apprehensions were justified in this case, though not on her own account. When morning school was over, the prefects reported that Miss Drummond had been suddenly called away.

"She has a mother living somewhere in the North, who is most seriously ill, and is scarcely expected to recover," explained Freda Martin. "She sent for a carriage at once, and started off to catch the 1.13 train at Chetbourne. I hope she'll arrive in time. She was most fearfully upset and

distressed, and couldn't make any arrangements; she only said Miss Forster was to take her classes, and she would come back as soon as she could."

This unexpected event naturally caused great commotion at the Grange. Miss Drummond had never before been absent during term time, and, though the other mistresses did their best in the circumstances, all seemed rather helpless without her. The principal taught the Sixth Form
[233] herself, and also took science classes throughout the school, so it was difficult to arrange to supply her place, it being impossible to engage another teacher, as had been done during Miss Bardsley's absence. By combining some of the classes, and omitting the science, Miss Forster managed to arrange fairly well; but as she had not been definitely placed in command over the entire establishment, she did not like to usurp too much authority on her own account. No one, therefore, seemed actually at the head of affairs, or really responsible; and there was a general feeling of disorganization and slackness.

"It's horrid without Miss Drummond!" said Mabel. "Nobody seems to know anything, or to be able to do anything while she's away. Even the medicine cupboard is locked up."

"That's no loss, I'm sure!" returned Aldred.

"Well, as it happens, it is. I've such a splitting headache, I was going to beg for sal volatile."

"Perhaps Miss Forster may have some."

"I asked her, but she hadn't; and then Mademoiselle came fussing along, wanting to know what was the matter. When I told her I had a headache, she declared it might be the beginning of something infectious, and said that I must sleep in the hospital to-night, and she would examine me to-morrow morning, to see whether a rash had come out. 'Ve cannot be too careful vile Mees Drummond is avay!' she said."

"But you're not really going?"

"I shall have to. I'd have asked Miss Forster to interfere, but she'd hurried away by that time. I've come to collect my night things now."

"What a ridiculous swindle! Can't I go too?"

"No; remember, it's a case of isolation!" said Mabel, smiling.

[234] "But you'll be afraid to sleep there all alone."

"Oh, no, I shan't! Mademoiselle offered to send Hunter—she's generally told off for hospital duty—but I said I'd rather not have her. I'm not a scrap ill; it's only my head."

"And Mademoiselle's idiotic nonsense! I never heard of such a silly notion as to pack you off there! She's absolutely mad!"

"Well, it can't be helped. There's no one to appeal to. Mademoiselle is as much in authority, I suppose, as Miss Forster, or Miss Bardsley, or anybody else."

"The school seems lost without Miss Drummond."

Feeling decidedly a martyr, Mabel, taking the various possessions she needed for the night, marched upstairs to the hospital.

"If it's anything catchable I'll catch it too!" Aldred called after her. "You're not to be ill up there without me! You may choose measles, or scarlatina, or anything you like; I'm quite agreeable, so long as I can have a share in it!"

"It's for Mademoiselle to decide the complaint to-morrow!" laughed Mabel, already half-way down the passage. "I don't mind what it is, so long as she doesn't declare it's suppressed smallpox, and have me re-vaccinated as a precaution. Good night!"

Aldred felt injured and aggrieved at her room-mate's banishment. It was really very tiresome and unnecessary of Mademoiselle to have insisted upon it.

"She's a Jack-in-office!" thought Aldred. "If she were head of the school, I should ask to be taken away. How particularly slow and stupid it is without Mabel! She's forgotten her bedroom
[235] slippers, by the by. I wonder if I dare take them up to her? On the whole, I think I'd better not; I suppose she'll manage without them."

It was a warm evening, and light until very late. Aldred undressed leisurely, and took a last delicious sniff at the roses that framed her window before she jumped into bed. She was tired, and dropped asleep almost immediately, falling into a confused dream, in which Mabel and Mademoiselle and measles were hopelessly mixed. The doctor had come to see Mabel, and had prescribed a huge bottle of nasty medicine, labelled "Two quarts to be taken every two hours". He was coming again, and was ring-ring-ringing at the front-door bell. Why did not one of the servants go to the door? And why was Mademoiselle sounding the gong? It was not dinner-time yet. Would nobody stop her? It would make Mabel's headache worse. In her dream, Aldred rushed downstairs, and tried to hold Mademoiselle's arm; but the clanging grew louder and louder, and with a start she awoke and sat up in her bed, half-awake.

The noise was actual fact. Somebody downstairs was hammering the gong, with frantic, jarring strokes; while the big bell that rang for classes was clanging lustily. There was a curious smell in

the air, very different from the scent of the roses outside; and there was also a ruddy light, surely neither that of the moon nor of the rising sun. Before Aldred had time to do more than rub her eyes, hurried footsteps resounded along the passage, her door was flung open, and a voice cried: "Fire! Come at once!"

[236] The girls at Birkwood had been trained in fire drill, and Aldred knew immediately what she must do. Her heart was beating quickly, and her hands were trembling, but she flung on her dressing-gown, slipped her feet into her slippers, seized a pocket-handkerchief and dipped it in the bedroom jug (all the work of three seconds), and dashed without further delay down the stairs.

The landing and hall were filled with dense clouds of choking smoke. To get to the front door was like passing through the mouth of a cannon, and Aldred felt almost suffocated before she reached the fresh air. In the garden several agitated teachers were trying to review an even more panic-stricken crowd of girls and servants. Mademoiselle was sobbing hysterically, and though all the teachers were striving each to number her own flock, they kept getting in one another's way, and missing count and having to begin again. Nobody seemed responsible, or in command. The gardener rushed about distractedly with buckets of water, assuring everyone that he had sent for the fire brigade from Chetbourne. The servants shrieked and wailed, and neighbours who came running from various farms and cottages on the downs only added to the general noise and confusion.

From one of the windows of the upper story flames were bursting, throwing a red glare over the garden. By this livid light Aldred pushed her way among the excited, jostling girls, scanning each face, and asking one constantly reiterated question: "Where's Mabel?"

Nobody knew. Nobody seemed to have noticed, in the general confusion, that she was not with them.

"Where's Mabel?" Aldred's voice was frantic with alarm.

[237] "Isn't she with you?" asked Miss Bardsley wildly. "I opened your door and called you both. Oh, girls, if you would only keep together, I could tell if you were all here!"

"She was sleeping in the hospital!" cried Aldred, disregarding the teacher's request, and tearing away to interrogate Mademoiselle—a vain errand, for the unfortunate French governess had fallen in a dead faint upon the grass.

Aldred grasped the fact only too speedily that there was but one terrible answer to her question. *Mabel was in the burning house, for nobody had gone to warn her!* Without a moment's hesitation, she rushed back to the front door. There was no alternative; the emergency was all-compelling. Mabel was in imminent and pressing danger; no one realized it, or had even missed her, and there was no time to appeal to Miss Forster or Miss Bardsley. She, Aldred, alone and on her own responsibility, must save her friend. There was not a second to be lost; already it might be too late, for the blaze was fast making headway. From the open door clouds of smoke belched forth as if from a furnace, and Aldred was driven back with blinded eyes choking and gasping for breath. It was her own fault. How stupid she was to forget, in her excitement, what she had learnt at the fire-drill practice! Her dripping pocket-handkerchief was still clasped, almost unconsciously, in her hand; she tied it rapidly over her nose and mouth, then, dropping on to her hands and knees, she began to crawl along the hall in the direction of the staircase. The difference was marvellous. Down on the ground the air was comparatively fresh and clear—she [238] could see the bottom of the umbrella stand and a pair of Miss Drummond's goloshes quite plainly; while only a foot higher the atmosphere was dense and impenetrable. The wet handkerchief also made breathing easier, and though her eyes were smarting and the heat was very great, she found it quite possible to get along. With half-closed eyelids, and her mouth well to the floor, she crept up the stairs; each one seemed a victory gained, and a step nearer to the accomplishment of her purpose. Oh, how many there were, and how interminable was the passage at the top! The heat grew more intense, and a roaring, crackling sound warned her that she was reaching the west wing, where the flames were raging worst and had burst through the windows.

The hospital was on the top story, so there was another staircase to be mounted. Dared she do it? Every fresh step cut off her retreat, and put another bar between herself and safety. Yet Mabel was there, solitary, unaided, in the midst of awful peril. No, she could not abandon her, come what might! She would face death with her friend, rather than leave her to perish alone.

She never remembered quite how she dragged herself along; her nerves were strung to the highest pitch, her brain felt bursting. The room she was in search of was over the kitchen, where the fire had originally broken out. Fortunately, it was a little clearer there, and Aldred was able to stand up; and by groping her way along the walls, she found the handle and flung open the door of the hospital.

"Mabel! Mabel!" she cried vehemently.

There was no reply. The room was filled with smoke, but the glare outside made just enough light to distinguish objects.

[239] "Mabel! Are you there? Mabel!"

Aldred was in an agony of apprehension. There were several beds in the hospital, and she ran from one to the other, feeling in them with eager hands. They were empty. Had she, after all,

come on a vain quest? Mabel must have heard the alarm bell, and have escaped and joined the others in the garden! Aldred's heart almost stopped beating, as for a moment the horror of the situation overcame her. Her search was quixotic, fruitless—she had risked her life for nothing! She moved instinctively to clutch a bedpost to steady herself, and as she did so her foot touched something soft. With a cry she dropped upon her knees. Mabel was lying on the floor just by the bedside, where she must have fallen, overpowered by the smoke, in an effort to make her way to the door.

With frantic hands Aldred dragged her friend across the room, and by sheer effort of will hoisted her up, so that her head might reach the open window. It was a task far beyond her ordinary powers, but in such moments a strength not our own is often given to us. The fresh air soon restored consciousness, and Mabel, to Aldred's intense relief, opened her eyes.

"What is it? Where am I?" she asked confusedly.

"The house is on fire, dear, and I don't know how we are to save ourselves. Stay where you are, and go on getting the air; I'm going to see if we can manage to get back down the passage."

Directly Aldred opened the door she realized that escape in that quarter was impossible. A roaring sound and a glare at the end of the landing told her only too plainly that the staircase had
[240] broken into flames. She shut the door again hurriedly, and, returning to the window, shouted with all her might. Would anybody hear, and if so, could they help? The Fire Brigade had not yet arrived from Chetbourne, and it was unlikely that there would be any ladder about the place long enough to reach to the top story of the house.

"Help! Help! Hallo!" Her voice sounded so thin and weak, compared with the crackling of the flames, she feared it would not carry far enough. Mabel, still in a half-dazed state, clung to her wildly, trembling and shivering with terror.

Would no one ever come? They were all watching the front of the house, and had completely forgotten the back.

At last! There was a shout from below, and a sudden rushing and noise, as the ever-increasing crowd poured round the corner.

"Fetch a ladder!"

"It's too short!"

"Tie two together!"

"There aren't two!"

"Tell them to jump!"

"No! No! They'd break their necks!"

"Someone go in and fetch 'em!"

"Impossible! The stairs are ablaze!"

"Does anyone hear the engine coming?"

"Not a sign of it yet."

"Then God help them, for we can't!"

The room was getting hotter and hotter. Aldred could hear the roar of the flames in the passage now. How long would the door keep them out? It was plain that, unless both girls were to perish,
[241] something must be done, and that instantly. Disengaging Mabel's clinging arms, Aldred propped her against the window-sill, then groped her way through the dense smoke across the room. The six beds in the hospital were always kept made up, perfectly ready for use. Aldred pulled off the twelve sheets one after the other, and carried them in a bundle back to the window, where, with trembling hands, she knotted them firmly together, just as Miss Drummond had shown in the fire-drill practice. She dragged forward the nearest bedstead till its foot almost touched the sill, and, fastening her improvised rope round a post, pulled it hard, to make sure that the knot was safe.

"Mabel," she said loudly, "we must try the sheet dodge. I'm going to lower you down. Let me tie this end round your waist, quick!"

"No! No!" cried Mabel, who had somewhat recovered her scattered senses. "I'll lower you! I'm the bigger, and stronger than you. Here, give me the end!"

"I shan't. You must go! Mabel, I insist! This is no time for arguing. My mind's made up, and I shall make you!"

Aldred was fastening the knot as she spoke, with quick fingers. She would take no denial. Had she not come to rescue her friend, and was she to be so easily gainsaid?

"But, Aldred! Aldred! If I go first, who will lower you afterwards?"

"I'll slip down somehow."

"You know you can't! It's saving me at your own cost!"

The heat was terrific, and the roar on the landing had increased sevenfold. With a crash the [242] door fell in, and a sheet of flame burst like a furious living thing into the room.

Aldred turned almost fiercely upon Mabel.

"For your father's and mother's sake! Think of them!"

Her nature was the stronger and the more masterful of the two. She had always been the dominating influence, and now, in this great and awful crisis, her will prevailed. Without further ado she pushed Mabel over the window-sill, and, clinging with all her might to the sheet rope, let her down as carefully and gently as she could. It was a great effort to regulate the descent of such a heavy dangling weight, but she feared to let her burden go with a run, lest Mabel's head should be dashed against the wall of the house. Oh, what a fearful, dizzy depth it seemed from the upper story to the ground! The crowd below stood stock-still, pressing tightly together shoulder to shoulder, and gazing upward, voiceless and almost breathless with suspense. Would Aldred's frail strength accomplish the task? The fire within had gained a grip of the room, and shone behind her head like a halo. Still she did not flinch or falter; she kept her nerve, and paid out her rope piece by piece, manœuvring the knots over the window-sill, and remembering every necessary precaution.

The flames rolled nearer. Strangely enough, now that death was almost at arm's length, she felt perfectly cool and collected, and far calmer than she had done when first she had entered the room. Every thought and effort of her being was concentrated on Mabel's escape; after that, she cared nothing. Only a few yards now! She set her teeth, and hung on grimly. She was nearly [243] spent, but she just managed to control the last quick rush as the rope's burden fell at length into the dozen eager hands upraised to help. The crowd had waited in silence, but now a roar rose up from below of deafening cheers and loud shouts of encouragement.

"Come down yourself!"

"Try hand over hand down the sheets!"

"Don't waste a minute!"

"Pluck will win yet!"

"We're all waiting to catch you, if you fall!"

But Aldred, standing exhausted and panting by the window, had no strength left for further effort. The heat of the flames and the smoke were overpowering. She had kept up by sheer effort of will until her friend was in safety; now the world seemed suddenly to be turning round her. There was a rushing in her ears, and her eyes grew dim. Through a thick haze she saw the crowd beckoning to her, and one man, more daring than the rest, begin to scale the rope, in the hope of rescuing her. He could never reach her in time, she thought vaguely; and she was too faint and giddy to let herself down hand over hand, as they were calling to her to do. She almost wished they would leave her alone; her work was done, Mabel was safe, and that was all she cared.

Why was the crowd suddenly turning round and hurrahing? The people were breaking up in wild confusion, and parting so as to leave a wide path in their midst. There were sounds of galloping horses and grinding wheels. What did it all mean? Aldred's fading senses just grasped a vision of men in bright helmets, of a great ladder that seemed to advance faster than the wind, [244] and of a tongue of flame that shot out from the room behind and enveloped her, and the fact that a strong arm at the same instant clutched her and snatched her away; then she went down—down—down, and everything sank into blank nothingness.

But the crowd below cried: "Thank God! The Fire Brigade came in the nick of time!"

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[245]

CHAPTER XVII

Loss and Gain

OWING to the strenuous efforts of the Brigade, the fire at the Grange was at last got under control; and though the main staircase was gone, and the west wing a wreck, all the eastern portion of the building was saved.

The new day showed a scene of great desolation—blackened walls, and staring, empty windows; garden and lawn trodden into a waste by trampling feet, and littered with broken glass, pieces of timber, and the remains of charred furniture; the greenhouse smashed to atoms; the sun-dial knocked over; and both pergola and rosery in ruins. The lecture-hall, one classroom, and the bedrooms that lay over them were untouched—a most fortunate circumstance, as they

provided a shelter for the girls, who were all clad in dressing-gowns and bedroom slippers. As soon as they were assured of the safety of that part of the house, the teachers marshalled the school there, access being easily gained through a French window. This wing, a later addition to the Grange, possessed a separate staircase, and had only communicated with the main building by means of a long passage and a door. At present, therefore, it proved a general asylum of
[246] refuge. The firemen collected and carried round any articles they could find which would be of use, and, since both larder and pantry had escaped, provisions, cups and saucers, and kettles soon made their appearance.

The classroom was turned into a temporary kitchen, and the servants, with the aid of the gardener, set to work to prepare breakfast. The girls who occupied the bedrooms over the lecture-hall lent various garments to the rest, so that by eight o'clock everybody was at least clothed and fed, though very much upset and agitated by the terrible occurrence.

A telegram was dispatched at the earliest opportunity to Miss Drummond, but it would not be possible for her to arrive until the evening. In the meantime, what was to become of her pupils? They could manage for the day, but it would be impossible to put the whole thirty-nine into three bedrooms. The Rector of the parish came to the rescue by at once assuming the direction of affairs, and making arrangements to send all home by the morning trains, himself advancing the money for their railway tickets. Most of the girls were travelling as far as London, where Miss Forster and the prefects undertook to see each safely started for her destination. In the circumstances, it seemed much the wisest thing to be done; the girls could not recommence lessons that term, and the sooner they were out of the way the better.

And where was Aldred? Speeding by express like the others, to tell her astonishing tale at home? No: in the midst of all the general excitement and confusion, she lay utterly unconscious of her surroundings. She had been carried into the bedroom over the classroom, and the Rector
[247] had sent for the nearest medical man, and for a nurse from the infirmary at Chetbourne.

"Can we save her, Doctor?" asked Miss Bardsley, who had applied first aid, and done everything in her power, considering the limited means at her command.

"She is badly scorched, and is suffering from a severe shock to the system," replied the doctor gravely. "Still, with careful nursing I think we may pull her through. You have telegraphed for her people? That is well. Absolute quiet is essential. I am thankful the other girls are leaving this morning."

"It is a blessing her good looks are spared," said the nurse, bending down to admire the pretty, pale face, mercifully unscathed by the fire. "I have not needed even to cut her beautiful hair."

"By some strange chance, or rather Providence, the tongue of flame that shot out so suddenly only caught her below the waist," explained Miss Bardsley. "The fireman had just seized her in his arms, and her head was thrown forward over his shoulder. One second later, she might have been burnt to death."

"How did the fire originate?" asked the doctor.

"Through carelessness in the kitchen, I am afraid; but it is difficult to tell until we can make proper enquiries. We are leaving everything for Miss Drummond to investigate herself."

"And this child? How was it she was left in the burning house?"

"She went to warn Mabel Farrington, a companion, who, without my knowledge, had been sleeping in the hospital, a room on the top story. In the darkness and confusion it was almost impossible to count all the girls. I had not specially missed Mabel. I had already been to her
[248] bedroom to rouse her with the others, and had not realized that she was not there. The teacher who had ordered her removal to the hospital fainted when the fire broke out, so of course could offer no information. Only Aldred knew of Mabel's whereabouts, and she, without consulting anybody, must have made her way up the tottering staircase to save her friend. The first knowledge I had of the matter was when I heard the crowd shout, and saw the two girls screaming at the window. We were frantic, but powerless to help. There was no long ladder on the premises, and all we could do was to wait for the arrival of the Brigade. Aldred made a rope of sheets and let Mabel down in safety; but the flames had taken such a hold of the room that there was no time for her to follow."

"Then she has saved a life!" said the doctor. "She'll be a little heroine among you, when she gets well."

"Ah, yes—when she gets well!" replied Miss Bardsley anxiously.

Poor Miss Drummond, called from her mother's sick-room, arrived that evening to find the Grange half-wrecked. Fortunately, she was well insured, and would suffer no pecuniary loss, but apart from that it was quite a sufficient catastrophe. Her school could not reassemble until the house was repaired and redecorated; and many treasures had been destroyed which it would be impossible to replace.

"You must try to look on the bright side of things," said the Rector, who was present to receive her. "The damage might have been much worse. Mr. Southey, your architect, came this morning
[249] to make an inspection, and told me he would be able to have all in order for you to re-open in September. And the garden will soon recover itself; you will be astonished how quickly

everything will grow up again. As for the little patient, she is much better this evening, and the nurse considers her out of serious danger. When we think of the tragedy that might have occurred, we must feel only too grateful that all your flock escaped with their lives."

"It is indeed a cause for thankfulness," said Miss Drummond. "I cannot tell you what anxiety I have suffered during to-day's journey. The telegram only gave the briefest message, and did not assure me of everyone's safety. I was left to imagine the worst, and the long hours in the train were agony. Fortunately, I left my mother on the high road to recovery, so that is another subject for gratitude. I shall be able to remain here now without feeling that my presence is absolutely necessary in the North. How very good it was of you to pack off the whole school so promptly this morning!"

"It was really an easier task than I anticipated. They all seemed accustomed to travelling. One of the girls, however, utterly declined to depart with the others, and I was obliged to permit her to remain. I thought you could reason with her better than I."

It was Mabel who had refused point-blank to leave the Grange, and who, now that Miss Drummond had returned, begged most earnestly not to be sent away.

"Let me stay near Aldred!" she implored. "I won't be the least trouble. I'll sleep anywhere—on a
[250] sofa, or a camp bed, or anything. No, I know I shouldn't be allowed in her room, but I should hear the doctor's report every morning and evening, and know how she was. And perhaps I might be of some help. I could carry trays upstairs, and wait on the nurse. I'd do anything in the world for Aldred! I like to feel I'm in the same house with her, and if I have to go it will simply break my heart. I'll write to Mother to-night, and if she agrees will you say 'Yes'?"

Neither Lady Muriel nor Miss Drummond could resist Mabel's piteous appeal. She was always rather a privileged pupil at the Grange, so for this once she was accorded her own way. The doctor grew accustomed to find her wistful face waiting in the passage at the conclusion of his visits, and liked to see the look of relief spread over it as he gave her a hopeful bulletin in passing. He would not consent to any visits, for he feared Mabel's presence would recall Aldred's memory of the fire, and he particularly wished to keep her from all excitement.

"Her friend is the last person whom it would be advisable to allow in the room," he declared. "She must not even peep round the door without my express permission."

It was hard for Mabel to be thus excluded, but she was sensible enough to understand the reason for her banishment, and did not attempt to transgress the doctor's orders.

So far Aldred, though she had quite regained consciousness, had never made the least reference to that terrible night. She recognized those around her bed—Miss Drummond, Aunt Bertha, who had come over immediately, and remained in close attendance on her; her father,
[251] who paid flying visits to see her; the nurse, and the doctor—but she made no enquiries for others, and did not even ask if Mabel were safe. Her burns were after all not very severe, and she seemed to be suffering more from general collapse. As day after day passed, and she still continued in the same state, her case began to puzzle the doctor.

"She ought to be making more improvement," he said. "She is no better now than she was a week ago. Her mental attitude does not satisfy me at all. Please watch her closely, and see if you can ascertain the reason for this set-back."

"I will do so," answered the nurse, who had had great experience with convalescent patients, and knew how often an apparently trifling cause can hinder recovery.

The result of her observation she communicated to Miss Drummond.

"I am certain the poor child has something on her mind," she declared. "It is this that makes her so restless and uneasy. I've several times found her crying, though she evidently didn't want me to notice it. She lies awake for hours during the night, and I'm sure it is not merely the pain of her burns that troubles her. Her eyes follow you round the room with the most pathetic gaze. I believe she's longing to confide in you, if she could only get you to herself, and that it would be the greatest comfort to her."

"Then I will stay alone with her this evening, when her aunt has gone to bed," replied Miss Drummond. "If it is really as you say, that will give her the opportunity she wants."

[252] The nurse always went on duty at nine o'clock, at which hour Miss Laurence retired to her own room. Miss Drummond had so far acted as an extra assistant to both, so she was able, without making her motive too apparent, to say that she was taking the nurse's place for the night. She did not wish to excite Aldred unnecessarily, only to afford her a chance of a private talk if she wished for it. She thought there was a look of gratitude in the dark eyes at this arrangement, but she could not be quite sure; so, having made her patient as comfortable as possible, she shaded the lamp, and left her to go to sleep.

For a long while Aldred lay fairly still, though by occasional restless movements the head mistress knew that she was wideawake. A pitiful little sigh at last brought Miss Drummond to her side.

"Can I do anything for you, dear? Are you in pain?"

"No, thank you—it isn't that."

"Something is worrying you, all the same?"

There was no reply.

"Is it anything you would like to tell me?"

"How did you guess?"

"Never mind how I guessed. Just remember that I'm your friend, and that I'm anxious to give you all the help I can. Don't be afraid! Let me know the trouble, and perhaps between us we can manage to set it straight."

Miss Drummond had the rare quality of absolute tact and sympathy. She said no more, only took her pupil's hot hand, and waited patiently for her to begin.

[253] It was a great effort for Aldred to utter her confession, but when once she had made a start she poured out the whole story of her false career at school from its very commencement, keeping nothing back, and mentioning even the affairs of the Chinese lanterns, Miss Webb's chalked chair, and the feigned illness at Grassingford.

"I couldn't bear to meet Mabel again, after what happened at the fire, and allow her to go on thinking me so much better than I am," she concluded. "I'd like her to know all—yes, every single horrid thing that I've done! She can never love me the same, but I'd rather make a clean breast of it, and lose her friendship, than feel so unutterably mean. Will you tell her, please? I haven't the courage to do it myself."

"To be sorry for our faults is the first step on the right road," said Miss Drummond. "It is a sad story, Aldred, and I don't condone anything, though it is a little comfort that you have at least done the very deed for which you took false credit at the beginning. Whether Mabel's friendship will stand the test or not, I cannot say; your plain and only course is to acknowledge the deception, and leave it for her to decide, and to set to work yourself to redeem the past. Now, I can allow no more talking. Remember, I am deputy nurse, and it is my business to see that you shut your eyes and go to sleep."

Aldred seemed so much calmer and easier next morning that the doctor was surprised at the change.

"If she only continues to improve at this rate, we shall soon have her well," he reported. "Keep her as cheerful as you can, and—yes—if she is asking so particularly for her friend, it will be advisable not to thwart her."

[254] Aldred's one feverish anxiety was to see Mabel, though she did not know whether she more longed for or dreaded the visit. The nurse, to whom Miss Drummond briefly confided an outline of the circumstances, decided, though she feared the effect of so much excitement, that it was better to get the meeting over than to allow her patient to remain in a state of such great suspense.

"I want Mabel with me alone," said Aldred, and she pleaded so hard that even Aunt Bertha was judicious enough to consent.

Propped up on pillows, Aldred gazed with nervous eyes as her friend entered the room. Mabel had evidently been crying bitterly, and had not entirely regained her self-control as she came and stood beside the bed.

"Miss Drummond has told you?" queried Aldred eagerly.

"Yes, she has told me everything. I can't deny that it has been a most terrible shock. I had believed in you and trusted you so utterly. I thought you hadn't a single fault. But oh, Aldred! Miss Drummond has been talking to me; she says we were both wrong, and that I was partly to blame for expecting too much. She told me I had set up an idol, and it was right that it should be broken down; that no human being is faultless, and that we must look for our example to the one perfect Pattern, Who can never disappoint us. Shall we start quite afresh now, with Him for our ideal, and try to help each other?"

Aldred's face was buried in the pillow; she was sobbing too much to reply.

[255] "I haven't thanked you yet for saving me," continued Mabel. "It was a braver thing by far even than what I supposed you had done, because you risked so much more."

"I'd have given my life for you gladly!" gulped Aldred.

"I know, and I feel almost unworthy of such love."

"Will you kiss me, to show you can forget what's past?"

Mabel bent her head. It was a kiss of complete reconciliation and forgiveness, and Aldred, with a glad leap of her heart, felt that the friendship that she had striven to build upon the shifting sand of a false reputation was founded at last upon the rock of self-sacrifice and mutual endeavour.

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Transcriber's Note:

Punctuation has been standardised.

The spelling of d'oyleys, caste and wideawake, and the alternative spelling for sundial/sun-dial have been retained as they appear in the original publication.

Changes have been made as follows:

Page 25 forming herself on the-prim pattern *changed to* forming herself on the prim pattern

Page 39 newpapers wanted to print her *changed to* newspapers wanted to print her

Page 49 "I" appears to have been missed in the printing process so helped her, too. remember exactly has been *changed to* helped her, too. I remember exactly

Page 132 but we musn't light them *changed to* but we mustn't light them

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