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Title: Just Gerry

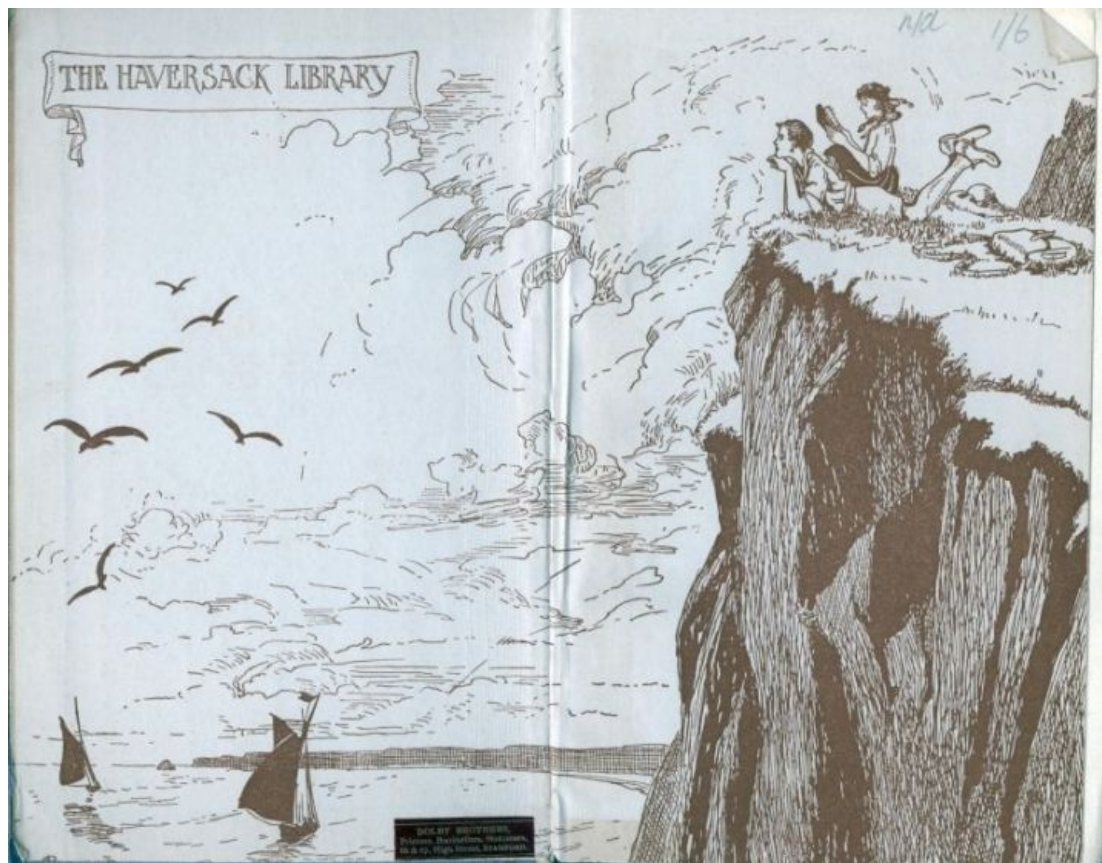
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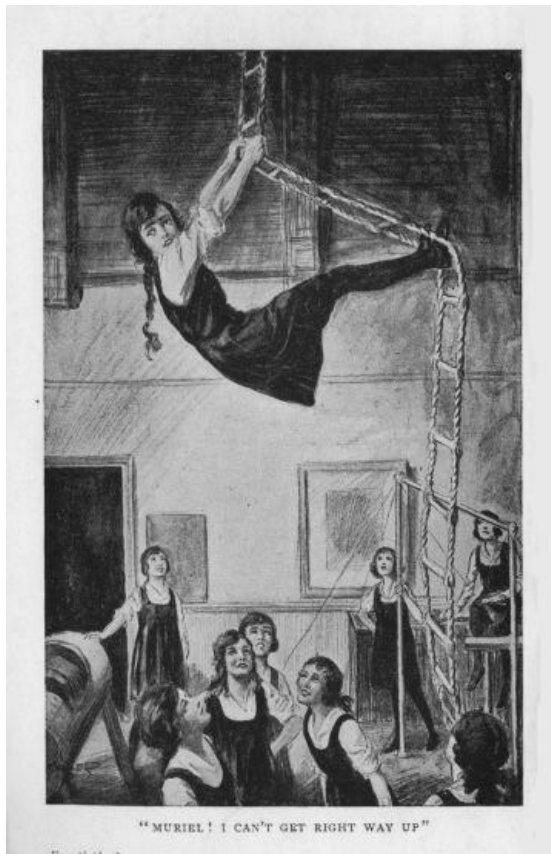
Release Date: July 27, 2010 [EBook #33270]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Al Haines

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JUST GERRY ***





**"MURIEL! I CAN'T GET RIGHT WAY
UP"**

JUST GERRY

BY

CHRISTINE CHAUNDLER

**LONDON
NISBET & CO. LTD.
22 BERNERS STREET, W.1
1920**

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY MORRISON AND GIBB LIMITED, EDINBURGH

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Fourth Form Detectives

A Fourth Form Rebel
The Reputation of the Upper Fourth
The Reformation of Dormitory Five
Jan of the Fourth
The Thirteenth Orphan
Snuffles for Short

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JUST GERRY

CHAPTER I

CUBICLE THIRTEEN

The new girl sat on the edge of her bed, and gazed round at the small domain which for the next three months would be the one spot in this strange new world of school that she could call her own.

It was really quite a nice cubicle, some eight feet wide by ten feet long—just large enough to contain a small white-counterpaned bed, a dressing-table and chest of drawers combined, a small washhand stand, a big wooden locker, and one chintz-covered arm-chair drawn up below the broad sill of the opened window. The cubicle walls were white, the furniture white-enamelled; while the curtain which cut the small compartment off from the rest of the dormitory, the toilet-cover on the dressing-table, and the covering of the arm-chair were all of a dainty cream-coloured chintz with a pretty pink rosebud pattern stencilled upon it. Everything was certainly very nice—much nicer than the new girl had expected—and she looked around with a certain

amount of satisfaction. Perhaps after all school would not be the dreadful place she had imagined it would be. Here, at least, would be a place of refuge if the world outside should prove too hard and unfriendly.

Number Thirteen—the numbers were painted outside on the doorposts—was the only cubicle in the Pink Dormitory across which the shielding curtain was drawn. In all the other cubicles unpacking was taking place in full publicity. Rules were in abeyance on this the first day of term, and the dormitory hummed with the shrill chatter that was going on all around. The school was reassembling for the autumn term, and there were many accounts of holiday doings to be retailed, and much conjecturing going on respecting new girls, new mistresses, new prefects, and new rules. The school year at Wakehurst Priory began with the autumn term, and any changes in the staff or the school routine were usually made then.

Cubicle Number Twelve was as yet unoccupied, but when the bustle of unpacking was at its height, a newcomer burst into the dormitory and rushed helter-skelter down the long corridor, calling out cheerful greetings to various occupants of the cubicles as she passed. Reaching Number Twelve, she tumbled her coat and hat and handbag unceremoniously on to the bed, and flung back the curtain of the next-door cubicle with a gay call of greeting.

"What on earth do you want to go pulling your curtains for, you old curmudgeon?" she cried impetuously, then stopped short in sudden surprise at the sight of the strange girl who was sitting on the bed.

"Who the dickens are you?" she ejaculated. "And what in the world are you doing in Dorothy Pemberton's cubicle?"

The new girl gave a startled jump and rose to her feet. She was a tall, slight girl, some fifteen years old, taller by a couple of inches than her inquisitor, and apparently older. But in spite of her seniority she looked at the intruder in a frightened sort of way, and replied nervously to her questioning.

"I—I—don't know. They told me it was my cubicle," she answered, shrinking away from this alarming intruder.

"*Who* told you?" demanded Phyllis Tressider, in such a truculent tone that the new girl retreated yet farther into her cubicle.

"The—the person who showed me here. She looked like a hospital nurse. I—I suppose it was one of the mistresses."

"You suppose just wrong, then," replied Phyllis, more briefly than politely. "That was Sister. I suppose if she showed you here she meant you to stay. But it's a beastly nuisance, all the same! Dorothy Pemberton always has slept in this cubicle, and it's a sickening shame if she's got to be turned out by a rotten new kid."

The "new kid's" face flushed scarlet. She was beginning some murmured apology when the situation was relieved by the entrance of a girl of about seventeen or eighteen years of age, who was hailed rapturously by all the other occupants of the Pink Dormitory. This was Muriel Paget, head girl of Wakehurst Priory, prefect and monitress as well, and Phyllis left for the moment her inquisition of the occupant of Cubicle Thirteen, to join in the chorus of welcome.

"*Muriel!* How perfectly ripping! You *don't* mean to say you are going to be our monitress this term? Oh, how quite too splendidly glorious! I say, *do* let me fetch you your hot water in the mornings. Do—do—there's a dear!"

"No—me—me!" interposed half a dozen voices. But Muriel held up her hand in laughing dismay.

"For goodness' sake, chuck it, you kids! *Nobody* is going to fetch my hot water for me. The maids can do it as they do everybody else's. I'm not going to have any of that silly rot going on in the Pink Dorm, if *I'm* to be monitress here. So I give you fair warning!"

"You *are* going to be monitress, then? Oh, how perfectly scrumptious!" And Phyllis Tressider executed a dance of delight. Muriel laughed again, pleased at her reception. She enjoyed popularity as well as most people, although she would allow no unhealthy sentiment to be lavished upon her. If people "adored" Muriel Paget, they had to do it from a distance, and not let the object of their worship know too much about it, either. Otherwise they ran a grave risk of "ructions" with the head girl. And to be "told off" by Muriel was no joke, as many of the girls at Wakehurst Priory could testify.

The head girl walked along the corridor towards the monitress's cubicle, which was at the far end of the dormitory—a bigger and somewhat more elaborately furnished affair than any of the other cubicles. As she passed by Number Thirteen, the curtains of which were still thrown back, the sight of the new girl and her rather frightened attitude caught Muriel's eye, and she stopped good-naturedly to speak to her.

"Hullo! Somebody new in here? What's your name, kiddie?" she asked, ignoring the fact that

she was only a couple of years or so older than the individual she was addressing.

"Geraldine Wilmott," replied the new girl shyly. Phyllis's unprovoked attack had unnerved her considerably, and she shrank away from the head girl's well-meant advances.

"She's got Dorothy Pemberton's cubicle—isn't it a shame?" said Phyllis, scowling darkly at Geraldine. "Dorothy's had that cubicle next to mine for years and years. It's too bad that we should be separated now, all because of a new kid."

"Jolly good thing you are to be separated, I think, if I'm to be your dormitory monitress," replied the head girl, with a smile that took the sting out of her words. "One of you alone is bad enough—but you two together are the limit! If Sister has really put you into different dormitories at last, she has my heartfelt gratitude!"

"They're not so far removed after all, worse luck," remarked the occupant of Number Fourteen, who was just finishing putting away her belongings in a neatly arranged drawer. "Dorothy's got Number Twenty-Nine, the next cubicle to yours, Muriel. She's in the same dormitory still."

"Why, Monica, old thing—how are you? I never saw you hidden away in there. Finished your unpacking? Then come along and talk to me while I do mine." And the head girl slipped her arm round Monica Deane and led her away. These two were great friends, out-of-school companions as well as form-mates, although pretty, vivacious Muriel Paget, brilliant at games and gymnastics as well as at lessons, was a great contrast to Monica, who, although studious enough, was painstaking and plodding rather than brilliant; and although keen and reliable at all sorts of games, would never make much of a mark at them.

Phyllis Tressider remained staring rather sulkily at the new owner of Number Thirteen, who, deprived of the comforting protection of the head girl, was growing momentarily more and more nervous under the hostile scrutiny. However, there came another interruption almost immediately, this time in the person of an astonishingly pretty person who flung herself effusively into Phyllis's arms, to be greeted with a delighted:

"Hullo, Dorothy, old dear! I am glad to see you again!"

For a few moments Phyllis's attention was diverted from the new girl. But she was soon recalled to a remembrance of her grievance by Dorothy's exclamation of surprise at seeing the occupant of her one-time domain.

"Hullo! What's up? Aren't I to be in Number Thirteen this term?"

"No. Isn't it a shame?" responded Phyllis, her disgust returning. "You're ever so far away—in Number Twenty-Nine, Monica says. This wretched new kid has got your cubicle. I *do* think it's mean of Sister to go turning you out!"

Dorothy's face fell considerably.

"Oh, I say, that's too bad! Why, I've been in Number Thirteen for ages and ages. Can't we get the new kid to change? Sister would never remember. Here, I say, you, what's your name?" addressing the shy and miserable occupant of Number Thirteen.

The new girl flushed hotly with embarrassment at this brusque mode of address. But she answered the question politely enough. Indeed, she was far too scared to do anything else—to her, discretion, in this case at least, appeared to be decidedly the better part of valour.

"Geraldine Wilmott," she said, under her breath.

"Well, look here, Geraldine Wilmott, this is my cubie. You won't mind changing into Number Twenty-Nine instead, will you? Phyllis Tressider and I have always slept in next-door cubicles ever since we first came to school."

"And that's the very reason you are to be separated now," said a voice behind them, and turning round in dismay the two friends saw the redoubtable Sister herself regarding them with a grimly humorous smile. "It's just because you and Phyllis always have been together that you're being moved. There were complaints enough of you last term, and if I'd had my way you'd have been in different dormitories altogether. But Miss Oakley said to give you one more chance, so I'm trying what the effect of putting you at opposite ends of the dormitory may be. You just leave Geraldine Wilmott alone, and get to work and unpack your boxes. And mind you put the things away tidily—I shall be coming round to inspect the drawers after tea." And Sister moved on down the dormitory, leaving two very disconsolate damsels behind her.

"Bother!" said Dorothy crossly. "I suppose there's no help for it, now. I shall have to go to Number Twenty-Nine." And with a scowl at the innocently offending new girl, she marched off to inspect her new cubicle with an aggrieved air.

Left to herself, Geraldine pulled her curtain again, and curled herself up rather forlornly upon the bed. In spite of the brave resolutions she had made when she left home that morning

not to cry or show her home-sickness, no matter how lonely or miserable she might be, the tears were very near her eyes at that moment. And a devastating feeling of shyness and fearfulness, which was the bugbear of her existence, descended upon her mind.

For of all the shy, nervous, frightened girls of fifteen that ever were, Geraldine Wilmott was surely the most shy and nervous and frightened! It was not her own fault. She had always been a delicate, highly-strung child, while a severe illness when she was seven years old had not improved matters. And then, three years ago, during the War, she had been in an air-raid, and the sights and sounds she had seen and heard that night had left an indelible impression upon her nervous system. She was fully aware of her own failings—almost morbidly so—and she did her best to struggle against the fears that so constantly beset her. But it was uphill work, and even the three years of peace and quiet in the country house her parents had taken, after the doctor had said that a country life was imperative for the little girl, if her nerves were to be saved, had not altogether accomplished a cure.

And now at last the doctor had prescribed boarding-school as a remedy for the nervousness.

"I really think it is worth giving it a trial, Mrs. Wilmott," he had said. "There is nothing wrong with the child's health. It is purely mental, and I believe that the society of other girls will do more for her now than all the care and anxiety you lavish upon her at home. Send her to a first-class school, a really big one. Don't make arrangements for any special privileges—just let her mingle with the other girls as though she were a perfectly normal child. She will never get the better of this nervousness while you spoil and pamper her at home."

"Really, I don't think I've spoilt her," began Mrs. Wilmott in some distress, but the specialist interrupted her.

"No, I dare say you haven't, in the accepted sense of the word," he said, with a smile. "And, of course, cosseting and pampering were what she needed when you first brought her to me. Her nerves were all to pieces, and school was the last thing I should have recommended then. But now it is different. She is—how old did you say? Nearly fifteen? More than old enough to go to school! And really there is no earthly reason why you should keep her at home any longer. She is perfectly healthy and well so far as her physical health is concerned, and I have no fear of a nervous breakdown now, so long as she isn't overworked. After a term or two at school I think you will find that she quite overcomes this shyness and nervous fear of things. Try it, at any rate, Mrs. Wilmott. It can do no harm, and it may do all the good in the world."

And so Geraldine's lessons with her resident governess came to an end, together with her quiet country life; and she found herself in Cubicle Thirteen in the Pink Dormitory at Wakehurst Priory, with all the unknown horrors of a first term at school waiting her.

But in spite of her nerves and her shyness, and her lack of physical courage, Geraldine had a queer kind of moral pluck that was really rather splendid in such a frightened individual. She knew nothing of the nerve-specialist's advice, or that she was being sent to school as a sort of last resource. She did not even consciously know that she possessed nerves at all, or that her shyness and fearfulness were largely due to that terrible October night three years ago. But she did know that for some reason or other her mother was always terribly anxious and worried about her. And she had made up her mind that, however bad school might be, she would never breathe one word of her unhappiness at home.

"I won't even tell her about my having been put into that other girl's cubicle," she thought to herself, as she sat huddled up upon her bed. "But, oh, I do so wish I hadn't been! I know—I'll begin my letter to Mother now. I can tell her about my cubicle, how nice and pretty it is, at any rate. And it will be something to do while I am waiting."

She fetched her writing materials and began a letter home, but she was not to be left long in peace. About ten minutes after Dorothy's reproachful exit, a bell rang violently through the school buildings, and hearing a general rush of footsteps down the dormitory, the new girl peeped shyly out into the corridor to see what was happening. There was nobody near except Phyllis Tressider, who was hurriedly scrambling the last of her clothes into an already overfull drawer.

"Could you—would you tell me what that bell is for?" asked Geraldine very timidly. If there had been anyone else to ask, she would not have approached her late antagonist. But there was nobody in sight at the moment, and the new girl at last plucked up sufficient courage to make her request.

Phyllis eyed her grumpily.

"Tea, of course, duffer," she snapped rudely. "Whatever else do you expect at this hour of the day?"

Then she caught sight of Dorothy Pemberton emerging from her cubicle, and went flying down the corridor to meet her.

"Come along, old thing," she cried. "Let's buck up and bag places at Muriel's table." And the two chums vanished, arm in arm, leaving Geraldine Wilmott to find her way as best she might.

The new girl was the only person left in the dormitory, and her face grew wistful, and a choking sensation came into her throat as she realised the fact.

"They might have just shown me the way," she murmured to herself, looking forlornly around her. "I don't think I'm going to like Phyllis whatever-her-name-is, and that Dorothy Pemberton. They needn't have been so beastly to me just because I'm in one of their cubicles. It wasn't my fault. Oh, well, I suppose I'd better go and try and find out where tea is." And the new girl made her way towards the door through which Dorothy and Phyllis had disappeared.

CHAPTER II

AN INTRODUCTION

Tea was in full swing when Geraldine at last found her way to the dining-hall. She stood for a few moments in embarrassed hesitation just inside the doorway, until a girl who was sitting at the head of the nearest table spoke to her.

"You haven't got a place yet, have you? Won't you come and sit by me?"

It was Monica Deane, the girl who slept in Number Fourteen Cubicle in the Pink Dormitory. Geraldine recognised her with a feeling of relief, and moved across to her table with alacrity. Monica spoke to a small girl sitting on her left hand.

"Shove up one, Vera, will you? And ask the others to move up, too. This is a new girl in my dorm, and I want to talk to her," she said, with a friendly smile at Geraldine as the girl slipped thankfully into the seat thus provided for her. "Pass the bread and butter down, Mamie," she added to somebody farther up the table. "And, Gwennie, run and get another cup of tea." Then, having thus attended to the new girl's immediate wants, she turned round to her with the obvious intention of commencing a conversation.

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions?" she began.

"Not at all," said Geraldine, looking up with a shy little smile. "I expect you want to know what my name is, don't you?"

"Well, yes—that was one of them," laughed Monica. "You've been asked that question before, evidently, from the tone in which you said it."

Geraldine laughed too. Already Monica's friendliness was dispelling that feeling of nervous resentment and shyness occasioned by the encounter with Dorothy and Phyllis. Neither of these two girls were at Monica's table, Geraldine was glad to see. The occupants of Table Number Three were mostly smaller children, none of whom the new girl had come across before. She turned to her new friend with a look of gratitude.

"I should just think I have! But so far, you're the only person who's asked me if I minded."

"Well, won't you reward me for my politeness by giving me the information?" asked Monica. And Geraldine responded to the kindly interest by confiding, not merely her name and age, but also many details of her home life. By the time the meal was over, Monica was conversant with much of the new girl's past history (always excepting the events of that October night; Geraldine never willingly referred to that terrible time)—not an altogether unusual experience for Monica, who had been the recipient of many a new girl's confidences. The senior had vivid recollections of her own first days at school, and she always made a point of being especially friendly to newcomers during their first few weeks at Wakehurst Priory. It had, in fact, become quite a recognised thing in the school for Monica Deane to take any exceptionally forlorn-looking new girl under her wing.

"What do we have to do now?" asked Geraldine, as, tea being finished, she rose reluctantly from her chair. She recognised the fact that she would not be able to stay with the elder girl all the evening, and she dreaded being left once more to her own devices.

"Well, that just depends. Nobody does anything regular the first day of term. Usually, of course, it's prep after tea. You've finished your unpacking, haven't you? Then I should think you'd better go to your sitting-room and find a book to read. I wonder which sitting-room you'll be in? Have you any idea which form you're going to belong to?"

"Oh yes. Miss Oakley sent me some examination questions to answer; and when I'd sent them in, she wrote back saying I should be put in the Lower Fifth," replied Geraldine.

"The Lower Fifth? Oh, well, come along then, and I'll show you your sitting-room," said Monica briskly. "You've got an awfully nice room. The Lower Fifth is one of the biggest forms at

Wakehurst, and in consequence it's been given the biggest sitting-room. You'll find plenty of people to be friends with you there. Dorothy Pemberton's in it, and Phyllis Tressider—you know, the girl who has the cubicle next to yours."

"Oh, *is* she?" said Geraldine blankly, a feeling of dismay creeping over her. Then a sudden impulse moved her to confide in Monica.

"I don't think I like either of them, much," she volunteered. "Especially not Phyllis Tressider."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Monica, stopping before a door and pausing with her hand on the knob to give some good advice to the new girl. "Look here, now, don't you go imagining things! Phyllis and Dorothy are both quite nice girls on the whole, and you'll get on all right with them, if you don't take too much notice of what they say just at first. They've always slept side by side in those two cubicles, ever since they came to the school, so naturally they're feeling a bit upset at being separated. Though, I must say, they've rather asked for it—the pranks those two used to get up to in the dormitory last term! But, of course, they know that it has nothing to do with you, really; and they'll soon come round and be nice to you—so long as you're nice to them. You'll find they'll make much better friends than they will enemies—and, if you take my advice, you'll try your best to keep them friends."

And with this, for Monica, unusually lengthy homily, the elder girl opened the door of the Lower Fifth sitting-room, and pushed Geraldine inside.

Judging from the number of people congregated in the sitting-room, the Lower Fifth was certainly a very big form. Geraldine shrank back a little as Monica ushered her in, bewildered and shy of the crowd of girls confronting her. But Monica laid her hand on her shoulder and led her across the room to a group of girls clustered round a vivacious individual with a crop of short curly hair, who was perched up on the edge of a table, swinging her legs to and fro and talking vigorously.

"Sorry to interrupt," began Monica, still with her hand on Geraldine's shoulder. "But this is a new girl, who tells me that she is going to be in your form. Her name's Geraldine Wilmott, and she's fifteen years old, and you needn't all start catechising her directly I'm out of the room. I fancy she's had about enough of that already. Jack," addressing the girl on the table, "will you have an eye to her for this evening? Put her up to things a bit, will you? and tell her what to do and where to go, there's a dear."

"Righto! Delighted, I'm sure!" replied Jack, stretching out a friendly hand to Geraldine. "How do you do? What dorm are you in? Have you unpacked your things yet? Is this the first time you've been to school, or did you go to a day-school before? What part of the country do you hail from, and how many brothers and sisters have you got?"

A shout of laughter from the group of girls around her greeted this string of questions, and Monica made a laughing protest.

"Oh, Jack—and I told you not to go asking her questions!"

"Well—but you said 'after you had gone out of the room,' so I thought I had better start straight away while there was still time," replied Jack, with an injured air, which was belied, however, by the twinkle in her laughing eyes. Then she turned to Geraldine in an impulsive friendly way that it was impossible to resist.

"You needn't answer them, though, if you don't want to. Come along and I'll get you a locker. We've bagged all the nicest ones already, I'm afraid. But I'll get you the decentest that is left, and next term maybe you'll get a better one." And Monica left the Lower Fifth sitting-room feeling that she had done her best for the new girl.

"I'm afraid she's in for a rough time of it, though," the senior thought to herself, as she made her way along the corridors to the small study which, as a member of the Sixth Form, she was entitled to have to herself. "She's just the type of sensitive girl who gets on worse at school than any other sort, although at heart they're usually quite nice kids. Still, if anybody can make her feel at home in the Lower Fifth, it's Jack. I wish she'd come across her before Phyllis and Dorothy appeared on the scene. Oh, well, it's none of my business, I suppose! I like the kid, but she'll have to fight her own battles. I dare say she'll shake down all right in the end—they mostly do."

And with this comforting reflection the Sixth Form girl entered her study, and banished the thought of Geraldine Wilmott from her mind.

CHAPTER III

THE WAYS OF WAKEHURST PRIORY

Meanwhile in the Lower Fifth sitting-room, Jack—Joanna Pym, Geraldine afterwards discovered her full name to be—was instructing the new girl in the ways of Wakehurst Priory.

"Ever been to school before?" she asked, regarding Geraldine with some interest, when Monica had left the room and most of the other girls had moved away, thus leaving the two alone together.

"No, never," said Geraldine, feeling that the admission implied some grave neglect upon somebody's part.

Jack appeared to take this view of the matter also.

"You're awfully old to come to school for the first time. Fifteen on your last birthday, didn't you say? You must be pretty good at lessons, though, to be in the Lower Fifth right away. Miss Oakley usually puts people into a form lower than they could go into, for their first term, because she says that entrance examinations are so deceptive, and if the girls are really good they can always be moved up. We don't often get new girls in the Lower Fifth—most of the new kids begin in the Lower School. I guess you'll be the only new girl in our form this term."

"Shall I?" said Geraldine. "I'm rather sorry for that. It would have been nicer if there had been somebody else new, too."

"Oh, I don't know. New girls are a rotten lot as a rule," replied Jack airily. "You seem rather decenter than most. But you will have an awful lot to learn if you've never been to school before."

"Why? Are the lessons so very difficult?" questioned Geraldine.

"Oh, it isn't the *lessons*," replied her informant. "Lessons don't really count very much at school, except with the mistresses. It's games and rules and—and—well, school etiquette in general, you know. I expect it will take you quite a term to learn all our school ways."

"Will it?" said Geraldine, looking rather alarmed. Jack hastened to reassure her.

"You needn't look so scared about it! Of course there are heaps of unwritten rules and things which you'll have to pick up, besides all the rules which the mistresses make. But people make allowances for you your first term, and I'll help you a lot, if you'd like me to. I've been here for years and years and years, and there isn't much about the old Priory I couldn't put you up to—though I'm not specially good at lessons," Jack added, with becoming modesty.

"Oh, I wish you would! Tell me about things, I mean. What happens next this evening? And what time do we start lessons, and when do we play games, and all that?"

"I'd better begin at the beginning," said Jack, nothing loath at the opportunity of exercising her tongue. Jack was an inveterate chatterbox. "Getting-up bell goes at seven, breakfast is at quarter to eight. Eight-fifteen to eight-thirty we tidy cubicles and make our beds. Then there's half an hour free, which we're supposed on fine days to spend in the quad or somewhere out in the grounds, before the bell goes at nine o'clock for prayers. We all assemble then in the Great Hall and march into Chapel for prayers, in the order of forms. You'd better stick to me to-morrow morning, and I'll show you where to stand and sit. After prayers, we go to our form rooms and work until eleven. At eleven there's half an hour's recess, when you can get cocoa and biscuits, if you want them, in the dining-hall. Then lessons again until one o'clock, tidy yourself, and dinner at quarter-past. Then there's a free time until half-past two, when either you have to go for a walk or play games."

"May you choose which you do?" asked Geraldine.

"Rather not!" answered Jack emphatically. "You're marked down which you're to be. Usually you get about four games' afternoons a week, and the rest walks. In the summer we do prep in the afternoon, and have games after tea. But this term we do prep in the evening, and have our hockey in the afternoon. Do you play hockey?"

"No," confessed Geraldine, rather uneasily.

"That's a pity," said her new friend. "How was that? Wasn't there any sort of a club in the village where you lived?"

"Y—yes—there was," said Geraldine. "But my people wouldn't let me join. Mother and Dad didn't approve much of hockey for girls."

"What a shame!" sympathised Jack. "Weren't you jolly sick about it?"

Geraldine flushed suddenly hotly red. She wished that she could have honestly said "Yes." But she was a very truthful person, and even to make a favourable impression upon Jack—to whom she had taken an immense liking—she could not prevaricate.

"Well, no, not exactly," she said in a low tone. "You—you see, I didn't much think I should care about it, myself."

"Not care about it!" Jack opened wide surprised eyes. Hockey was the joy and delight of her harum-scarum existence, and it had never before occurred to her that there could be an individual of hockey age in the world misguided enough not to care. "Why, it's a perfectly scrumptious game! It's an awful pity you've never played before. I'm afraid Muriel will put you into a dreadfully low team. Never mind, though, you must work as hard at it as ever you can, and you'll soon get moved up."

"But—but shall I *have* to play?" asked Geraldine in some dismay.

"Of course you will. Unless you've got a doctor's certificate to say you're not allowed. Everybody has to play here, unless the doctor says you mayn't. Never mind, you'll soon get to like it. Nobody could help liking hockey when once they've begun—it's such a ripping game!"

"Doesn't the ball hurt frightfully when it hits you?" said Geraldine nervously. She had watched hockey matches, although she had never played in one, and she did not feel at all inclined to participate in the game.

"Of course it does!" Jack laughed merrily. "But that's part of the fun. You feel my leg—all those little bumps and lumpy things down the front. That's from the balls I stopped last year"—with a proud inflection in her tone. "I'm third eleven now, B.1—they call the teams after the letters of the alphabet here—and with any luck I'll get into the second eleven this term. There are two vacancies—left outside and right half. I've no chance as outer, I'm not fast enough. Besides, Vera Maynce from the Fifth Remove is almost sure to get chosen for that. But I've got quite a sporting chance for right half. Gertie Page from the Upper Fifth might get it, but if I only do well in the trial next Saturday, I believe Muriel will give it to me. She told me at the end of last season that it would lie between Gertie and me, and I'd better not let myself get stale. And I haven't. My brother's been practising sending hard shots at me all through the hols. I'm getting no end of a dab at stopping them. You have to be good at stopping balls, if you play half-back," she added, for the information of the new girl.

"What happens after hockey?" asked Geraldine. She had been listening rather uneasily to Jack's account of the glories of the hockey field. To Geraldine's mind these would be more in the nature of tortures. Even before the air-raid she had always been rather a delicate child, and had never played any of the rough and tomboyish games in which most girls join as readily as their brothers. Consequently, she had never learnt to take hard knocks with the average schoolgirl's ready equanimity. And the idea of stopping balls on her shins amidst the mud and scrimmage of the hockey field rather appalled her. But she saw that it would never do to let this new-found friend of hers guess just how she felt about it. Geraldine could imagine the contempt that would come into Jack's eyes if she were to betray the fact that she was really afraid of the unknown game. And she made haste to change the topic before her companion should perceive the horror with which she was regarding her coming ordeal on the hockey field.

"Oh, after hockey," said Jack, readily taking the bait. "Tea, of course, after you've washed and changed. There's usually about half an hour's interval after we come down from the field. The tea-bell goes at half-past four, and the prep bell at five, so there's not much time between them. We do prep until seven. Then change for supper, which is at half-past seven. From eight to nine's free. The juniors go to bed then, while the seniors—all the forms above the Lower Fourth—go to Chapel once more for prayers. Then bedtime comes for everybody at nine-thirty. So wags the weary round from day to day," she concluded, with a fine poetical flourish. "If it wasn't for hockey and half-holidays, and Sundays and hampers and dormitory feasts, and other occasional rags, school would be an awfully dead-and-alive affair. But as it is, it has its redeeming features. I say, what dorm are you in?"

"The Pink Dormitory," answered Geraldine.

"You lucky kid! That's Muriel Paget's dorm this term. Half the girls in the school would give their eyes to be in your shoes."

"Why?" asked Geraldine in astonishment.

"Why? Because Muriel's head girl, and everybody in this school is cracked on her. At least, as cracked as Muriel will let them be! She won't let girls make themselves idiots over her—she squashes them horribly if they overdo the flowers and sweets and fagging business. Still, it would be jolly nice to be in her dorm; I wouldn't mind being there myself, though I'm not one of the most love-sick of her satellites, by a long way. I bet there'll be a rare old scrum to-night to fetch her hot water, and do those sorts of things."

"One of the girls did ask if she might fetch her hot water, this afternoon," volunteered Geraldine. "But she squashed her then. She said she wasn't going to have any of that silly rot going on in her dorm so long as she was monitress there."

"Did she? How awfully like Muriel!" chuckled Jack, with keen appreciation. "Who was the girl, do you know? Oh, of course, though, you won't! You're new. I quite forgot."

"I do happen to know that girl's name, though," responded Geraldine, pleased to be able to satisfy her companion's curiosity. "It was Phyllis—Phyllis Tressider, or some such name as that."

"Who's that talking about me?" said a sharp voice behind her; and Geraldine, turning round with a start, found herself looking into a pair of angry blue eyes as the owner of the name came up to the table on which the two girls had been sitting. The new girl gave an uncontrollable recoil and looked apprehensively towards her new friend, who, however, appeared wholly unconcerned at Phyllis's truculent attitude.

"All right, Phil. Keep your hair on, old girl," she said affably. "I was only asking Geraldine Wilmott a question which she answered."

"What was she saying, though? I won't have her going telling sneaky tales about me all over the place," said Phyllis, still regarding Geraldine fiercely.

"Oh, rot, Phil! Don't make such a how-d'y-e-do about a silly little matter," said Jack, sliding down from the table on which she had hitherto been perched. "I say, Geraldine, has anybody shown you round the school yet? No? Then come along and let me do the honours. It will fill up time nicely until the supper bell goes. There's only an hour to get through before then."

And Geraldine, only too glad to escape from the vicinity of Phyllis Tressider, made haste to follow her out of the Lower Fifth sitting-room.

CHAPTER IV

AN INCIDENT IN THE DARK

"That's the dining-hall, as you know," said Jack, as she guided Geraldine past the big room in which tea had taken place. "This passage leads out to the Chapel. Like to see it? Come along, then, and I'll take you to have a look."

The Chapel at Wakehurst was part of the original Priory buildings, and such restoration as was necessary had been done with due regard to the beauty of the old architecture. Geraldine gazed round with admiration as Jack held the door open for her to look in.

"We always have prayers in here," said Jack, closing the door quietly. Then as the two girls walked away, she added: "We have prayers twice a day, you know—to say nothing of Sundays! On Sundays one of the curates from St. Peter's comes up to the school to take the Early Service and Matins, and those who want to, go down to St. Peter's on Sunday evenings. Sunday evenings aren't compulsory though, so long as you've attended both morning services, and there's not a huge rush for them as a rule. Goodness knows we get enough church all through the week, without having it three times on Sundays as well!" wound up the graceless Jack.

"Once we always used to have to put our hats on every time we went into Chapel," she went on. "But Miss Oakley isn't so frightfully keen on old St. Paul's ideas about women as the last Head used to be, and she's abolished it for weekdays. Sundays, of course, you have to wear your hat, but not for everyday. It used to waste no end of time, putting them on and taking them off twice a day; and Miss Oakley said she thought it would be much more reverent really if we didn't always have to scramble and rush about with them just before and after service."

"Is Miss Oakley nice?" asked Geraldine.

"Nice? Rather! She's absolutely tiptop! The best Head we've ever had or are likely to have. You can't take liberties with her, though, and she doesn't half know how to jaw you if you're sent up to her. We are all frightfully keen on her here, but we're all half-scared of her too. At least, I know I am! This is the Great Hall, where we have mark-readings and assemblies and special meetings and things. Come on—you don't want to go in there now. You'll see quite enough of it later on. I want to show you the gym."

The gymnasium was a recent addition to the school, and quite a modern building. It was fitted up with all kinds of marvellous and intricate apparatus, and Jack proceeded to expand upon these with great gusto. But, much to her disappointment, she found that Geraldine was not nearly so interested as she might have been.

"Aren't you keen on gym, either?" she asked in surprise; and Geraldine shook her head.

"I've never done any at all," she answered. "I—I don't much think I shall like it. Swinging and climbing always make me feel so giddy."

"Well, you are a rum bird!" commented Jack. "No hockey, no gym—is there *anything* you can do, I wonder?" And she looked so concerned at the new girl's lack of accomplishments that Geraldine felt very humbled and apologetic.

"I'll have to try and learn," she said meekly, and Jack's face cleared.

"Oh yes, I expect you'll soon pick it up. Well, I think I've shown you pretty nearly everything. Let's go back to the sitting-room, shall we? It must be nearly supper-time now. I'm jolly hungry, aren't you? We'll cut across the mistresses' quarters to get there. We're not supposed to go that way as a rule, but it's ever so much shorter, and as to-day's the first day of term, I don't expect anyone will say very much, even if we are caught."

She opened a green baize door which led into a short passage, closed at the other end by another door—"to keep out the row," Jack explained, as she held it open to let Geraldine through. The second door opened into a square hall, carpeted with rich Oriental rugs, and lighted dimly by a shaded lamp at the far end. A number of other doors opened into the hall.

"The mistresses' sitting-rooms," said Jack, with a wave of her hand towards them.

As she spoke she stumbled over a big black curly-haired retriever dog, who lay stretched out on a rug, almost hidden in the dim light. She pitched forward on her hands and knees over his slumbering form, and Geraldine stopped short with a startled exclamation, as the dog rose lazily to his feet.

Jack laughed merrily as she picked herself up from the floor.

"Bruno! You old wretch, tripping me up like that!" she said, stooping to caress the big fellow. "Why, Geraldine, what on earth's the matter? He won't hurt you," as, looking up, she caught sight of her companion's frightened face.

"Are you—are you sure he won't?" Geraldine asked fearfully.

"Of course he won't! Why, Bruno's the best-tempered dog that ever was; aren't you, Bruno, boy? Look, he wants to make friends with you—he's putting up his paw to shake hands. Don't you like dogs?"

"N—not very much," said the new girl. "Not dogs I don't know. I like some dogs, though. I've got a darling little fox-terrier of my very own at home."

"Bruno belongs to Miss Oakley, but he's often about in the school, and he's a perfect pet," said Jack. "Do shake hands with him! He wants you to so much."

With an effort Geraldine conquered her nervousness sufficiently to take the friendly paw the dog was still holding out to her. And when once the introduction had been effected she lost her fear of him. Bruno, certainly, appeared good-tempered enough, and he seemed to take a fancy to the new girl. He followed the two girls back to the Lower Fifth sitting-room, and once there he sat down as close to Geraldine as he could get. It was quite difficult to persuade him to go back to his proper quarters when at length the supper bell rang.

"Very forgiving of him, considering how rude you were to him to begin with," laughed Jack, when at last they had succeeded in making the big fellow go back to the mistresses' part of the buildings.

Jack stuck to the new girl for the rest of that evening, much to Geraldine's gratitude. She even went so far as to accompany her to the door of the Pink Dormitory when the time came to go to bed, although her own dormitory, the Green Dormitory, was in quite a different part of the house.

"I couldn't do it another night because Alice Metcalfe, my dormitory monitress, is frightfully strict. But she isn't back yet—not coming till to-morrow, so I may as well make hay while the sun shines. Besides, it's first night, and nobody takes very much account of rules the first night," Jack remarked, still chattering gaily in the new girl's ear. In all her school career, Jack Pym had never before come across such a splendid listener as Geraldine Wilmott, and she was forming all sorts of plans in her own mind as to her future relationship with the new girl.

Just before the Pink Dormitory was reached, the lights in the corridor went out with a suddenness that was rather alarming because it was so very unexpected. As a matter of fact, two mischievous juniors had stayed behind and switched them off at the bottom of the stairs for a joke; but the majority of the girls did not guess this, and much laughing and confusion and screaming took place. Geraldine did not actually scream, but she was very near to losing her self-control, and her hand shot out and grasped the arm of the girl next to her with a tense grip which showed how very nearly her command of herself was gone.

The darkness only lasted for a moment. An irate senior hurried back to the switch-board and turned the lights on again, and the culprits decamped with all possible speed. Geraldine came to her senses again, and found to her horror that the girl whose arm she was clasping was not, as she had imagined, Jack Pym, but Phyllis Tressider, who was staring at her with undisguised amazement in her blue eyes. With a hasty apology the new girl loosened her grip of the other's arm, but that one moment of revelation had been enough for Phyllis.

"I say, did you see?" she said in a low voice to Dorothy Pemberton. "That new girl's face—it was as white as white! If she'd seen a ghost she couldn't have looked more scared. What on earth was the matter with her, do you think?"

Dorothy nodded in a satisfied way.

"I saw," she said. "And she was scared too! Downright funky at finding herself in the dark for just those few minutes. Oh, well, if *that's* the sort of girl she is, we shall soon know how to get even with her if she interferes with us. I say, old girl, we shall have to say good-night to each other here. Now we're so far away from one another it won't be safe for me to go to your cubicle or for you to come to mine—at any rate, not until we see what sort of a monitress Muriel is going to be. Oh, dear! It is sickening to think that we're separated, and that that wretched new kid is going to sleep in my cubie to-night!"

Meanwhile, the wretched new kid was saying good-night to her new-found friend, feeling far happier than she had dared to hope to feel on her first night at school, and quite unconscious of the fact that she had made such a revelation of her inner self to the two girls who were well on the way towards becoming her greatest enemies. With all her new thoughts and experiences filling her head, that little incident in the dark had almost vanished from her mind.

"See you in the morning, then," said Jack gaily, as she disappeared in the direction of her own dormitory. And Geraldine hastened to make her way to Cubicle Thirteen.

CHAPTER V

A CARICATURE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Geraldine was awakened next morning by the loud ringing of the getting-up bell, and she tumbled out of bed in a hurry, having been informed by Jack the previous evening that a bad mark was the result of a late appearance at breakfast. However, on this first morning, she was dressed in plenty of time, and even had to wait a few minutes before the second bell, which was the signal for the girls to leave their dormitories, rang through the school.

When she reached the dining-hall she found that the place she had occupied for her first two meals in the school was no longer vacant, it having been claimed by Vera Davies, the small girl who had been displaced by Monica the day before to make room for Geraldine. Vera was an ardent admirer of Monica Deane, Geraldine discovered later.

"I *always* sit here," the little girl said in a vigorous whisper as Geraldine came up. "You must find a place somewhere else—there's loads of room."

Geraldine looked about her in rather a helpless way. Then she caught sight of Jack Pym making grimaces at her from the other side of the room, indicating by various gestures and contortions that Geraldine was to come to her table. Not sorry to escape from the small Vera's hostile glances, Geraldine quickly made her way thither and was deposited at an empty place next to Jack at the end of the long table. Jack's immediate neighbour on her other side was Nita Fleming, another member of the Lower Fifth, who leant forward to smile amiably at Geraldine and was introduced at once by Jack.

"Nita's been longing to see you ever since I told her we'd got a new girl in the Lower Fifth," she remarked. "She's hoping that perhaps she won't be bottom of the form any longer, now you're here—aren't you, old thing?" with an affectionate tug at Nita's long, fair pigtail, a proceeding which led to instant retaliation by Nita upon Jack's short locks, and brought down upon the two the wrath of the prefect in charge of the table.

"Jack Pym and Nita Fleming—what are you doing? You're not to sit together, you two, if you're going to behave like this. Change places with that new girl next to you, Jack. Here, you," addressing Geraldine, "sit next to Nita Fleming, will you, and try and keep her and Jack in order if you can."

A mistress came in at this moment to say grace, and then the girls sat down to the meal. Geraldine took her place between Jack and Nita with the rueful reflection that she seemed fated to be the separator of friends at Wakehurst Priory. However, Jack and Nita appeared to bear her no malice, and bandied words with each other across her in the liveliest way, taking her into the conversation with the utmost affability. There was no such friendship between Jack and Nita as there was between Phyllis and Dorothy, Jack being very cosmopolitan in her friendships, and possessing as many different "partners" as there were walks in the week.

After breakfast the girls retired to their dormitories to make their beds and tidy their cubicles. Then came some half-hour or so of free time before the bell went for prayers. After prayers, the girls were marched to the Great Hall, where Miss Oakley, the headmistress, read out the form lists for the term, and made a few remarks appropriate for the occasion. And then the various forms departed to their respective classrooms, where the real business of the day began in earnest.

Although she had never been to school before, Geraldine found that she was not at all behind the rest of the class. She had been very well-grounded by her governesses, and although, of course, she was handicapped a little by not knowing the class methods, her general knowledge compared very favourably with the attainments of the rest of the form. Indeed, she won a word of approval from the Sixth Form's form-mistress, Miss Latham, at the conclusion of the lesson on English history.

"You have evidently had a very good grounding, Geraldine," the mistress said. "You appear to possess intelligence, too. If all your work is as good as your history, you ought to get on well in your form. Margaret, since you are her neighbour, will you show Geraldine some of those historical analyses you did for me last term, so that she may see how I want your preparation done?"

"Yes, Miss Latham," replied Margaret, a rather nondescript individual who occupied the desk next to the one that had been allotted to Geraldine; and the mistress, gathering together her papers, prepared to leave the room.

"It is a little early yet for your next class," she observed, as she rose from her seat. "But I have to see Miss Oakley before going on to the Middle Fifth, so I cannot give you quite your full time this morning. Who is head of this form? You, Hilda? Very well, then, see that nobody talks until Miss Parrot comes to you. You can be looking up some of those dates I want you to learn while you are waiting." And the mistress departed from the Lower Fifth classroom, leaving an apparently studious and orderly form behind her.

For a few minutes strict silence prevailed in the classroom. But after a while the silence was broken by subdued titterings from the back row, and Hilda Burns, the head of the form, turned sharply round to discover that Phyllis Tressider and Dorothy Pemberton were leaning over Jack Pym's desk. Jack was drawing busily.

"I say, do be quiet. Didn't you hear what Miss Latham said?" remonstrated Hilda, rather half-heartedly it must be confessed. The three girls in question did not take much notice of her appeal, and after a moment or two she made it again.

Dorothy turned to her with a delighted grin.

"We're not talking—we're only laughing. Hilda, do come and look! Jack's doing caricatures of the mistresses. Aren't they ripping?"

Several of the girls gathered round Jack's desk, Hilda herself amongst them.

"Oh, I say, how topping! Do do one of Pretty Polly and give it to me!"

"All right, I will presently. Wait till she comes in and then I'll try and do her. I have to see the person I'm caricaturing or else I can't get them properly. I did that one of Miss Latham during the history lesson just now. She never twigged."

"I don't wonder," declared Phyllis admiringly. "I didn't either. I thought you were just making notes. But when did you learn to do it, Jack? Of course I know you always were good at drawing, but I hadn't the slightest idea that you could do such ripping caricatures."

"I didn't know it myself," replied Jack, still busily working with her pencil. "But when we were at the seaside this year we came across a man who did them for the papers. At least I came across him. He saved my shoes and stockings from being washed away by the tide while I was paddling one morning. And then we all chummed up with him and he showed us some of his sketches, and we all started trying to do the people we saw on the beach, and he said mine were quite decent for a kid. There you are, Dorothy, there's your beloved Miss Latham. Who is it you want, Hilda? Pretty Polly? All right, I'll do her if I get the chance."

"Do one for me, Jack, there's a darling," cried a girl sitting close to Geraldine, and then the whole form began clamouring for drawings of their most beloved, or most hated, mistresses. Hilda felt it incumbent upon her to raise her voice again in protest at last.

"I say, *do* be quiet! Miss Parrot will be along directly. There'll be an awful bust-up if she catches us talking like this."

But her remonstrance did not have much effect, except that it rather served to increase the confusion. For Phyllis Tressider, crumpling up a sheet of paper into a ball, flung it at her with an injunction to "Shut up, dear old thing!" and the rest of the form promptly followed her example. In a few seconds the head of the Lower Fifth was almost snowed under with missiles of various sorts.

"I say—stop it!" she gasped, dodging an exercise book, only to receive a piece of india-rubber full in the eye. Then, as a quick step sounded in the passage outside, she sat up straight in her desk in an attitude of sudden attention.

"Cave—Miss Parrot!" she whispered hoarsely. In a moment the Lower Fifth was sitting rigidly at attention again, every sign of the late battle cleared out of sight as though by a miracle. Only

Geraldine, new to scenes like this, not realising what this sudden transformation might mean, was still sitting twisted round in her desk in the position from which she had been watching the uproar in interested amusement.

She soon realised what the sudden change meant though, when Miss Parrot, the form-mistress of the Lower Fifth, known throughout the school as "Pretty Polly" from her name and her supposed resemblance to the bird in question, came briskly into the room. The mistress's quick ears had caught the sound of the conflict from afar, and she at once pounced upon Geraldine's unconventional attitude as being the only sign of disorder her sharp eyes could perceive.

"Geraldine Wilmott, what are you doing, sitting like that in class? Turn round properly at once. I heard a great deal of noise as I came along—has anything been happening?"

There was no answer to her question; and after surveying the virtuously innocent faces before her the mistress was about to let the matter drop—reflecting that after all it was the first day of term, when a little leniency might be advisable—when her attention was attracted by the sight of a screwed-up paper ball lying on the floor just in front of Geraldine's desk. All the other missiles had been dexterously cleared away; but Geraldine, not realising any necessity for doing so, had failed to remove the one sign of the battle that had fallen near her desk. Indeed, she had hardly noticed that any had fallen there. Miss Parrot was of a very orderly nature. In her classroom nothing was ever permitted to be out of place, and the sight of the ball of paper was too much for her to pass over.

"What is that untidy piece of paper doing there?" she demanded sharply. "Is it yours, Geraldine? Bring it here to me."

Thus directed, Geraldine rose from her desk, and picking up the ball of paper took it to the mistress. Having delivered it, she was about to return to her seat, but the mistress stayed her with uplifted hand.

"Wait," she said authoritatively. "I want to see what this is. Some of you have been up to mischief in my absence." And she slowly unrolled the ball of paper, finally disclosing a rough copy of the caricature of Miss Latham, which Jack had discarded for some reason, and which Phyllis, all unaware of what it was, had used as a missile.

Although it was unfinished, the sketch bore a sufficient likeness to the mistress for Miss Parrot to recognise the original. Her face grew stern as she held the paper out to the girl who was standing beside her desk.

"Is this your work?" she asked in a cold tone.

Geraldine glanced at the paper. Then she flushed suddenly crimson with nervous shyness, and stammered out in confusion:

"N—n—no, Miss Parrot."

The mistress looked at her suspiciously.

"Are you *sure*?" she said.

Geraldine's confusion grew still greater, and the mistress felt that her suspicions were justified. The girl's stammered denial did nothing to allay them, and her voice when she spoke again was very stern indeed.

"Geraldine, you are not telling me the truth. You do know something about this paper. I command you to tell me at once what it is you know."

"I—I can't tell you anything about it," said poor Geraldine, not knowing what to do or say. But this answer only served to anger Miss Parrot yet more.

"You will please oblige me by thinking about it until you *can* tell me something," she remarked icily. "Go and stand over there," pointing to a place facing the rest of the class, "until you can remember whether or not this paper belongs to you. If that does not assist your memory I shall be obliged to take you to Miss Oakley after class."

Geraldine made a movement towards the appointed spot, but before she could reach it, Jack Pym rose abruptly in her desk.

"Please, Miss Parrot, I can't see that paper but I don't think it's got anything to do with Geraldine. If it's a drawing, I expect it belongs to me."

Miss Parrot's eyebrows went up.

"Indeed! Wait a moment, Geraldine. Suppose you come here, Jack, and see if you can identify it."

Jack made her way rather sulkily to Miss Parrot's desk.

"Yes, it's mine," she said. "I did it for a joke."

"A joke in very questionable taste, *I* think," said the mistress severely. "I am afraid I shall have to discourage your sense of humour, Jack, since it hardly accords with my own. You will take a conduct mark, please, and forfeit next Saturday's half-holiday. And I hope this may be a lesson to you to refrain for the future from using your undoubted talent for drawing in making vulgar representations of those who are put in authority over you. You may go back to your seat. And, Geraldine, you may return to yours. I am very sorry that I misjudged you; but really, you looked so guilty that I could not help thinking that you had something to do with the matter. Now, please, we will begin the lesson. We have wasted far too much time already."

The Lower Fifth dutifully turned to its books and plunged at the mistress's bidding into the intricacies of decimal fractions. But although Geraldine acquitted herself fairly well over the lesson that followed, she was not happy. She was miserable at the part she had played in getting Jack into trouble, and she had been, also, acutely conscious of hostile glances from her companions as she made her way back to her seat. Although it was not altogether her fault, she was uncomfortably aware that the caricature episode had not by any means enhanced her popularity with the rest of her form.

School life promised to be rather a difficult affair altogether, Geraldine reflected with a sigh.

CHAPTER VI

THE GERMAN LESSON

Geraldine was not long in discovering that her gloomy forebodings were amply justified. No sooner had morning school ended and the mistress departed from the classroom, than Phyllis Tressider stalked up to her desk and confronted her.

"You little sneak!" she said angrily. "Going and getting Jack into a row like that! Don't you know that the first half-holiday in the term is always given up to selecting the hockey team? Now Jack won't be able to play, and it's ten chances to one she'll get left down in the third eleven when she might have been chosen for second with any luck!"

Geraldine remembered then Jack's confidences respecting her prospects for the second eleven, and her heart sank still lower.

"I—I'm most awfully sorry," she faltered miserably. Then she looked round appealingly at Jack, who was putting her books away in stony silence, disregarding the condolences of her form-mates on her hard lot.

"Jack, I'm awfully sorry—truly most awfully sorry," she said pleadingly.

But Jack was feeling very sore about her lost hockey chances, and not by any means in a mood for being sympathised with. The tearful note in the new girl's voice only irritated her, and she said brusquely:

"Oh, all right—there's no need to be sorry. I suppose you couldn't help it." But she said it in a tone that did not make Geraldine feel much happier.

Phyllis gave an audible sniff of contempt.

"Couldn't help it, indeed!" she said ironically.

"Well, but truly, I don't see what else I could have done," said Geraldine unhappily.

"Then you must be an idiot," said Dorothy Pemberton, joining in the fray. "Nobody with any gumption would have let Miss Parrot catch them sitting like that. And you *might* have cleared away that piece of paper."

"I—I'm awfully sorry," faltered Geraldine again.

"What's the use of being sorry?" cried Dorothy testily. "Being sorry won't take away Jack's conduct mark or make Polly let her off detention on Saturday. You're just a silly, clumsy idiot—if you didn't do it on purpose—and I wish to goodness you'd never come into the Lower Fifth."

"Or to the Pink Dorm," put in Phyllis.

Geraldine cowered visibly under this attack.

"I keep telling you I'm sorry," she protested pathetically. "I never, never meant to give Jack

away. I wouldn't have breathed a word about it if only she hadn't owned up like that."

"Just as though she *could* have done anything else!" cried Phyllis hotly. "We're not that sort in the Lower Fifth, Geraldine Wilmott, whatever *you* may be! Of course Jack couldn't go letting Pretty Polly think that it was you who'd done that sketch—whatever a sneak like you might have done!"

As Geraldine had not sneaked, this remark was unjust, to say the least of it. But the new girl was too unhappy to protest any further. She returned to the task of putting away her lesson books, and Dorothy and Phyllis left the room arm in arm. Geraldine looked round forlornly at Jack, after the two chums had departed, but Jack was absorbed in conversation with Nita Fleming, and the two presently departed from the classroom, leaving the new girl to her own devices. Geraldine shed a few miserable tears when she was finally left alone in the empty classroom, but she was not allowed much time to indulge her grief. A bell rang loudly through the school buildings, and she had to mop up the tears hastily and hurry out to discover what the next proceeding might be.

Dinner was the next item on the programme, she found, and she joined in the stream of girls who were hurrying into the dining-hall. Jack and Nita were already in their places, and Geraldine made her way rather shyly to the vacant place on Jack's left side.

"May I—am I to sit here again?" she asked timidly.

"If you want to," replied Jack briefly. And Geraldine, not knowing where else to go, took up her position behind the vacant chair. As she did so, Jack murmured a few words in Nita's ear, and the next instant the two girls had exchanged places, so that Geraldine now found herself standing next to Nita instead of next to Jack. The action cut the new girl to the heart. Jack was so offended with her that she couldn't even bear to sit next to her at meals apparently! If there had been anywhere else to move to, Geraldine would certainly have moved, but there seemed to be no vacant places anywhere near, and she was far too shy to bring herself into prominence by going and hunting for one. So she stayed where she was, and when grace had been said, sat down next to Nita.

The meal was a very uncomfortable one for her. Jack and Nita evidently considered that she had been very much to blame over the classroom incident, and beyond seeing that she was supplied with table necessaries, bread, and salt and water, they left her severely alone, making no attempt to draw her into the conversation as they had done at breakfast. And poor Geraldine ate her meal in silence, wishing that Jack's unfortunate caricature had been at the bottom of the sea before she had had anything to do with it.

It was really rather hard upon Geraldine to be blamed like this, for she had never intended to get Jack into trouble, and, in their heart of hearts, the whole of the Lower Fifth knew this. The whole episode would probably have blown over in a day or so, if it had not been for Dorothy and Phyllis. These two, although almost the youngest girls in the Lower Fifth, possessed a great deal of influence in their form, and unfortunately they seemed to have taken a violent dislike to the new girl upon the first day of term. Anything that they could do to hurt and annoy her, they did, and the rest of the form were either too weak or too indifferent to interfere. Not that all the girls were actively unkind to Geraldine—but the majority of them left her severely alone, and the new girl, instead of making friends with her companions, grew more and more lonely and isolated as the days passed by.

Her own manner helped very largely towards this isolation. She was so shy and reserved herself that it was difficult for anyone to make friends with her, and besides she was so absorbed with the longing to make peace with Jack—who still remained coldly aloof—that she really did not give anybody else a chance. She simply played into Dorothy's and Phyllis's hands by her misery and shyness.

"She's so stuck up and superior—she doesn't *want* to make friends," was Phyllis's frequent assertion. And the rest of the form, not being possessed of any very great discernment, were quite content to accept this version of the case and to leave Geraldine severely to herself.

But if she did not get on well in the social life of the school, Geraldine was quite at home where lessons were concerned. She really possessed abilities considerably above the average, and although she was still new to the ways of the school, she acquitted herself so creditably during her first week as to call forth the special commendation of the form-mistress. It was after the German lesson one morning that Miss Parrot gave expression to her pleasure at her new pupil's accomplishments. Geraldine had distinguished herself during the class, and when Miss Parrot, anxious to see how far her pupil's knowledge of the language really went, had addressed some question to her in German, Geraldine had answered it so fluently, and at such length, in the German tongue, that the class gasped in astonishment.

"Very good, indeed, Geraldine!" said the mistress, and the lesson ended, but not—so far as Geraldine was concerned—the episode. When the new girl entered the Lower Fifth sitting-room after school that morning for the few minutes' interval before the dinner-bell rang, she was immediately accosted by several members of the form, Dorothy and Phyllis amongst them, who demanded to know how and where she had acquired such an intimate knowledge of German.

"I used to live in Germany when I was quite little," answered Geraldine, becoming nervous and confused at once, as she always did when she was questioned abruptly. "Didn't you hear me tell Miss Parrot so, when she asked me how I knew so much?"

"She didn't ask you—you story!" cried Phyllis indignantly.

"Yes, she did—in German," said Geraldine, goaded for once into making a mild retaliation upon her chief foe. "Do you mean to say you didn't know enough German to understand that?"

"Well, perhaps we're not all quite as clever as you," retorted Phyllis cuttingly—"riled," as she afterwards expressed it, by the "swanky air" Geraldine put on. "But *I* think it's rather suspicious your knowing so much German, added to all your other sneaky ways."

"What do you mean?"

Geraldine swung round angrily upon the speaker, aroused for once from her usual meekness. Phyllis was quick to see that she had succeeded in annoying her opponent, but she was far too astute to give her any advantage by making any definite accusation.

"Mean? Oh, nothing!" she replied airily. "Only, of course, if you *did* happen to be German, or partly German, it would account for a good deal, you see." And she slipped her hand inside Dorothy's arm and drew her chum away.

Geraldine sprang forward to intercept her as she made towards the doorway.

"If you're implying that I'm German—" she began. But Phyllis interrupted her.

"I'm not implying anything!" she said. "If your guilty conscience makes you imagine things—well, that's not *my* fault, is it? Come on, Dorothy, there's the dinner bell." And she made haste to escape from the sitting-room before Geraldine could pin her down to anything more than a vague aspersion.

"But, of course, she *is* German," she argued that afternoon to a select gathering of the Lower Fifth. "Everything points to it. She said she lived in Germany when she was little. I expect her mother was a German, if the truth were only known. And then her *sneakiness*—that's German, if you like!"

"I don't see that she is so very sneaky," protested Jack, who was still, in spite of her disappointment over the hockey team and her general acquiescence in the form's treatment of Geraldine, somewhat prepossessed in favour of the new girl, to whom she had taken an immense liking on the first evening of the term. "It really wasn't her fault that I made that caricature. And though, of course, she might have hidden the paper out of the way when she heard Miss Parrot coming, yet she was only a new girl—and perhaps she *really* didn't know."

"Oh, of course—if you're going to take her part——" said Phyllis in such a deprecating tone that Jack made haste to capitulate.

"I wasn't taking her part exactly. I was only pointing out that it seemed a little hard on her to be blamed for that caricature affair."

"And what about you?" demanded Phyllis. "Wasn't it hard on *you* to have to miss the hockey trial and still be down in B.1 when you might have been in the second eleven? You can sympathise with the new girl if you like. For my part, I think she got off very lightly. Why, most schools would have sent her to Coventry for doing a thing like that—especially when they found out that she was a German!"

"But even if she is a German—and I must say she doesn't look a bit like one; Germans are usually so big and fair and fat, and Geraldine's dark and thin—but even if she is, the war's over now, so I don't see that there's any actual harm in that," remarked Hilda Burns.

"I don't agree with you," said Phyllis darkly. "There *mayn't* be any harm in it, of course—I don't say that there is. But all the same it isn't nice to think that one is actually at the same school with a German girl—even though the war is over!"

"But *why*? They're not our enemies any longer," said Jack.

Phyllis regarded her scornfully.

"No, of course not! They're our dearest friends now, I suppose! I suppose you've forgotten all about the Patriotic League we made when the war was on, when we were Upper Third, Jack Pym?"

Jack wriggled a little uneasily.

"Well, yes, I *had* forgotten a bit," she admitted. "But now that the war's over we don't need that any longer."

"Have you forgotten Rule Six?" Phyllis went on steadily. "'That this League vows and declares

that it will for the future have no dealings with any person or persons of German nationality, either in peace or war.' Do you remember that?"

"Y—yes—I remember that," agreed Jack reluctantly.

"And how we all took a solemn oath that we would keep the rules, or else count ourselves traitors to our King and Country?" pursued Phyllis inexorably.

"Yes, I remember," said Jack.

"Well, there you are, then!" declared Phyllis triumphantly. "You *can't* go and make friends with Geraldine Wilmott, because you're a member of the Patriotic League. We won't send her to Coventry or do anything of that sort, because, of course, we haven't got any real *proof* that she's a German. But I vote we all steer as clear of her as possible for the future, and take jolly good care she doesn't get to know any of our private plans or secrets. She's just as likely as not to go telling them all to the mistresses if she gets to know them. You can't trust a person who's got German blood!"

And in this decision the Lower Fifth acquiesced, although it was really hardly possible for them to steer more clear of the new girl than they had done during the past week.

CHAPTER VII

GERALDINE MAKES A FRIEND

There was one individual in the school who took no part in the ostracism of Geraldine Wilmott. This was Bruno, the headmistress's big black dog. Bruno had taken a tremendous fancy to the new girl. Perhaps in his big-hearted way he had divined how shy and miserable she was, and wished to comfort her. And poor Geraldine, lonely and home-sick, found an unexpected solace in the dog's companionship. In the nature of things she could not see a great deal of him. Bruno was sternly forbidden the classrooms during school hours, and his presence in the dining-hall during meal-times was equally tabooed. The dog seemed to understand these restrictions, and kept to them faithfully. But at other times he made a special point of seeking out Geraldine and attaching himself to her. And the lonely girl was glad enough of his company during some of her solitary play hours.

Bruno was the cause of her making another queer friend in the person of Bennett, the school porter. One wet Saturday morning—there were no lessons at Wakehurst on Saturdays—the new girl was roaming rather forlornly through the corridors, accompanied by her canine friend, when Miss Oakley came upon her.

"Oh, here's that dog at last! I've been looking everywhere for him," said the headmistress. "He seems to have taken a great fancy to you, Geraldine. But he's got to go and be washed now. It's his bath morning, as he knows perfectly well. Take him along to Bennett, dear, will you? He's waiting for him round by the lobby door."

Geraldine laid her hand obediently upon the dog's collar and led him off in the direction of the lobby. Bennett, a grim-faced, middle-aged individual, who appeared to disapprove of schoolgirls on principle, was awaiting him, with a towel over his arm and a cake of soap in his hand.

"Miss Oakley told me to bring Bruno to you," said Geraldine shyly, as she handed her charge over. It was the first time she had come across Bennett, and she was duly impressed by the grimness of his appearance. Bennett's manner did not relax at her shy approach.

"Thank you, miss," he said dourly. He made a grab at Bruno, who, however, evidently did not relish the coming ordeal at all. In fact, his weekly baths were the bane of his otherwise peaceful existence. He deftly eluded the man's grasp, and, slipping by him, bolted back along the corridor towards the boot-lobby, the door of which happened to be ajar.

With a muttered imprecation Bennett stumbled after him, to find himself, when he was through the door, in the midst of a group of Lower School children changing into their gym shoes for an impromptu drill in the gymnasium. The boot-lobby consisted of three large rooms opening into each other and lined with boot-lockers. It afforded Bruno plenty of space for dodging his pursuer, and an exciting hunt ensued, in which Bruno's part was taken openly by the little girls, most of whom had excellent reasons for disliking the surly porter. Bennett looked upon the Wakehurst girls in general, more especially the smaller ones, as the plague of his life, and was not by any means averse to reporting their misdoings to authority. Many an order mark and conduct mark had been gained through his instrumentality, and his victims were only too glad to assist Bruno in eluding him. Some dozen or so of the little girls joined in the chase with great

zest, getting in Bennett's way at crucial moments, and shrieking with laughter at his abortive efforts to lay hands upon Bruno, who barked and dodged and frolicked about, thoroughly enjoying the fun.

The climax was reached at last when Bennett tripped over an outstretched hockey stick and measured his length on the ground. This rather alarmed the Lower School, the members of which hastened to make themselves scarce. By the time the porter had recovered himself, everybody had vanished, except Geraldine, who hurried to his assistance, and Bruno, who stood watching him from a safe corner.

"I say, I do hope you haven't hurt yourself?" said Geraldine solicitously.

Bennett shook his fist angrily in the direction of the departing children as he rose painfully to his feet.

"Young varmints!" he said. "I'll be even with 'em one day. I mayn't know their names but I knows their faces, and one day I'll make 'em sorry for this outrage. Come you here, you brute, you!" he added, addressing himself to Bruno, as he made another dive at the dog.

But Bruno was not disposed to yield himself up as yet, and another hunt followed. This time, however, Geraldine joined in the chase, and finally managed to catch and hold the dog until Bennett could reach him.

"Thank you, missie," said Bennett, more graciously this time. "I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure. Would you care to come and watch him bathed, now—seeing as you've helped to capture him?"

"Oh, I should love to!" said Geraldine, delighted at the idea of something to do this dull, wet morning. And she followed Bennett out to the washhouse on the farther side of the quadrangle, feeling happier than she had felt for some time. Talking to Bennett, surly as he seemed, would be better than talking to nobody at all.

Bennett, however, was not so surly as his outward manner had led her to believe. Geraldine's opportune aid in capturing Bruno, and her anxious inquiries as to whether he had hurt himself in his fall, had quite won his heart. He opened up to her on the subject of his experiences in war,—Bennett was an ex-soldier and had fought both in South Africa and in France,—and Geraldine was immensely interested in his reminiscences.

"I used to live in Germany a long time ago," she told him shyly. "I have been in France, too, but I don't remember much about it, for I was quite a tiny little thing then. Did you learn to talk French when you were fighting there?"

"I can't say as I did, exactly," said the man, scrubbing Bruno vigorously. "I learnt a word or two, here and there, such as 'Bong Jour' and 'Narpoo' and 'Beaucoup de Vin.' But not so as to be able to converse, so to speak. There was one chap in our company who was a regular nailer at speaking the lingo, but it got him into trouble in the end."

"How?" asked Geraldine interestedly.

"Well, miss, he was a rare one for the girls, you see. And being as he could talk to 'em, he used to have 'em all round him like flies round a pot of honey in every billet he were in. I dunno what he told 'em. But whatever it was, he told 'em all the same thing, and they all thought he was in love with 'em and meant ter marry 'em, and after a bit things got too warm for him altogether. And he had to go to the C.O. about it and own up, and get himself transferred to another company. It ain't no joke to have half a dozen sweethearts all after you at once. Not that I've ever had that experience myself. I'm just a-judging by what happened to Bill Sims. I ain't never had but one sweetheart in my life, and she gave me the chuck while I was fighting in South Africa, and I've had no truck with women in that way ever since."

"Oh, how mean of her!" said Geraldine sympathetically. "When you were away fighting for your country, too! She must have been a horrid sort of girl."

"Oh, well, I don't say as she were altogether to blame for it," said Bennett generously. "You see, I hadn't written to her regular like. For two years she never got no letter at all, and she reckoned I was dead or else gone off with some other young woman. So she got herself spliced up to Albert Brown, who lived next door. She was real sorry about it when I come back, and so was he. But it were too late to be altered then, so we all agreed to make the best of it. It ain't no manner of use crying over spilt milk. That's been my motto all my life, and will be to the end of it. After all, being a single man has its advantages, as you'll find, missie, when you gets to my age. There's only one thing I regrets I ain't married for, and that's when it comes to mending of my clothes. Socks I can manage, but patches beats me altogether. This coat I'm wearing now wants a patch terrible badly at the elbow. But though I've got a bit of the stuff it were made of in my pocket at this moment, I can't bring myself to start upon it, like."

"Don't you know any woman who could do it for you?" suggested Geraldine.

Bennett shook his head.

"Not that I could ask, so to speak," he answered. "Cook did say once as how she'd do it for me. But she ain't never noticed it again, though I always make a point of wearing my old coat whenever I'm in the kitchen. And I don't exactly like to remind her. Cook's that particular, you see."

"I'll tell you what! I'll do it for you," said Geraldine, struck by the brilliant idea. "I'm quite good at patching, truly I am. And I'd love to do it. You've been so awfully decent in letting me help you with Bruno. It won't be dinner-time for nearly an hour yet. I'll go and get my mending things and do it for you now." And she jumped to her feet and made her way towards the door.

"It's very good of you, miss, to offer," said Bennett dubiously. "But I ain't sure as I ought to take advantage of it." But Geraldine was already out of hearing and half-way across the quadrangle to fetch her workbag from the dormitory. Fortunately for her project, she met no one on the way, for in her excitement and interest at the thought of being able to do something for somebody at last, she had quite forgotten that it was necessary to ask permission if she wanted to go to the dormitory out of hours. In a few minutes she was safely back in the washhouse again, where, seated upon an upturned packing-case, she proceeded to patch the torn elbow in Bennett's coat with a speed and dexterity which aroused that individual's undisguised admiration.

"Well, now, missie, I'm sure I do thank you," he said heartily, when at last the coat was neatly patched and back on his shoulders again. "You are a real little lady, that's what you are. Which is more than I can say for some of them young varmints up yonder! And if ever there's anything I can do for you in return, you've only got to say the word and I'll do it."

"Thank you," said Geraldine, somewhat embarrassed by his excessive gratitude. "Is Bruno dry now? Shall I take him to Miss Oakley?"

"Yes, if you like, miss. I'll carry him up to the house for you, or he'll get himself all muddy again. My word, ain't he a weight just?" the man added, as he lifted the big retriever in his arms.

The dinner bell rang just as they reached the schoolhouse door, however, so Geraldine was not able to take the dog to the headmistress's room. She took him as far as the mistresses' corridor, and left him there, while she hurried off to brush her hair and wash her hands for dinner.

Nobody had missed her or noticed her absence apparently, which, Geraldine decided, was perhaps just as well. So far as she knew there was no rule at Wakehurst Priory to forbid girls from assisting to bath the headmistress's dog, but possibly somebody might have found some objection to her morning's occupation if they came to know about it. Since they did not, no harm had been done, and Geraldine reflected, with some satisfaction, that in Bennett at least she had found a friend.

And indeed she had! The school porter was at that moment exhibiting his newly-acquired patch to a circle of interested maids in the kitchen, all of whom were unanimous in praising the excellence of the handiwork.

"A grown woman couldn't have done it better," declared Kate, the linen-room maid.

"Little Miss Wilmott, did you say it was?" asked Cook. "She's a real nice little lady, to my way of thinking."

"That she is," said one of the dining-hall maids. "Always 'Please' and 'Thank you' whatever you do for her, and never any grumbling or ordering of you about. Pity there aren't more young ladies like her, I say, quiet though she is."

"And none the worse for that, I dare say," commented Cook.

So Geraldine, whatever her school companions might think of her, had at any rate succeeded in winning golden opinions in the servants' hall.

CHAPTER VIII

MAINLY CONCERNING A MOUSE

The Lower Fifth was a long way removed from the Sixth Form at Wakehurst Priory. Between it lay the Middle Fifth, the Upper Fifth, and the Sixth Remove. But things had a way of getting round in the school, as they have in other places; and in due course it came to the ears of the Sixth Form that the new girl, Geraldine Wilmott, was not exactly popular with her companions. She had done something rather "sneaky," the Sixth understood, and was vaguely suspected of being a German—or at any rate of having a good deal of German blood in her.

"Too bad of Miss Oakley to have admitted her into the school if it's true," commented Kathleen Milne, one of the prefects and a prominent member of the Sixth. "Of course, I know the war's over now, and all that; but all the same, one can't quite forget some of the things they did. I, for one, must say that I'd prefer not to be educated at a school where they take German girls."

"Who's that that's German?" inquired Monica Deane, looking up quickly from the book she was poring over. It was during the evening preparation, and Monica, with one or two other members of the Sixth, had repaired to the large room, half classroom, half library, where the Sixth Form classes were held. Being a somewhat privileged form, the Sixth were at liberty to prepare their work where they liked, either in their common room, or in the small studies of which each member of the form possessed one.

It was Kathleen Milne who answered the question.

"That new girl in the Lower Fifth—Geraldine Wilmott."

Monica banged her book indignantly upon the table.

"Rot! She isn't! She's as English as I am. She sleeps next door to me in my dorm, and the first day of term she was telling me all about her home and her relations."

"Well, Phyllis Tressider told me that she *was*," persisted Kathleen. "Her mother was German and married an Englishman, and they lived in Germany before the war. The kid jabbars German like a native. Fact, Monica. Phyllis says the kid told them so one day, bold as brass about it. She's got all their sneaky ways, too. She's always getting them into rows, and is an awful little funk into the bargain. If that isn't German, I don't know what is!"

Monica said nothing further then, but that evening after supper, she encountered Phyllis Tressider in one of the corridors and immediately cornered her on the subject of Geraldine's nationality.

"What makes you think she's German?" she asked. "Did she tell you she was?"

"Well—all but," said Phyllis. "You wouldn't have any doubts about it if you heard her talk their beastly lingo! She's got Pretty Polly beat to a frazzle."

"Well, I don't believe it," said Monica firmly. "And I think it's jolly rotten of you Lower Fifth kids to go spreading a rumour like that about the school. Even if it were true, the least you could do would be to keep it to yourselves. I didn't know that Wakehurst girls could be such rotten little sneaks!"

"We're *not* sneaks!" said Phyllis indignantly. "It's *she* who's a sneak! Why, she got Jack Pym kept in so's she couldn't be tested for the second eleven, on her very first day at school!" And she poured out a somewhat highly-coloured version of the episode of the caricature.

But Monica was not at all sympathetic with Jack's wrongs.

"She was new and didn't know," she said. "You are little brutes to go giving the kid a rough time just because Jack chooses to get herself into trouble. As for her being German—well, even if she is, she needn't necessarily be any the worse for that. I dare say there are some decent Germans—just as there are *some* rotten English people!" With which, for Monica, rather bitter little speech, the Sixth Form girl stalked away.

Phyllis chose to consider herself very much aggrieved by the wiggling Monica had administered, and seeking out her chum, Dorothy, she confided her woes to her. Dorothy was properly sympathetic.

"Well, anyway, if she isn't German, she's a beastly little sneak—and a rotten little coward into the bargain! Let's do something to show Monica what she is really like, shall we? If we could scare her up in the dorm when Monica was there, so that she could see what a funk she is, perhaps she'd believe us."

"But what could we do?" asked Phyllis doubtfully. "Ghosts aren't allowed ever since the Green Dorm scared that little kid, Molly Forest, into fits last winter. Besides, Muriel would be down on us like a ton of coal if we tried on anything of that sort. And I don't want to get into Muriel Paget's bad books if I can help it."

The conversation was taking place in the boot-lobby, a favourite haunt of the two chums since they had discovered that after supper they usually had it entirely to themselves. Dorothy was perched up on the top of one of the lockers, and Phyllis was just climbing up beside her, when a sudden click near by made them both jump down with a little scream.

"What was that? Did you hear it, Phil?"

"It came from underneath this shelf, I think," said Phyllis, stooping down to reconnoitre. Then she thrust her hand under the row of boot-lockers with a little laugh.

"It's a mouse, caught in Bennett's mousetrap. I was in here when he was clearing the boots

away yesterday, and he told me he was going to set one, because he was sure there was a mouse in the lockers somewhere. Look, here it is! Isn't it a darling?" And she held up a wooden and wire cage, in which a small mouse was held captive.

Dorothy clasped her hands with a sudden inspiration.

"The very thing!" she exclaimed delightedly.

"What is?" inquired Phyllis, mystified.

"Why, that mouse! It will do to frighten Geraldine with, *splendidly*. We'll put it in her bed to-night, and she'll scream like anything when she finds it there. That'll show Monica that you weren't much out when you said she was a funk."

"I say! It *would* be rather a lark," said Phyllis, her eyes dancing with mischief. "It won't make Muriel ratty, though, will it?"

"Not with us," declared Dorothy confidently. "She'll never find out who's done it, even if she *does* think it didn't happen to be there by accident. She'll probably be awfully ratty with Geraldine, though. She despises people who are afraid of mice. Don't you remember how down she was on Dora Wainscott last term because she screamed when one ran across the dining-hall one day?"

"But won't it get out before Geraldine gets into bed?" said Phyllis, longing to carry out the trick, yet half afraid of incurring the wrath of her beloved Muriel. Phyllis was as "gone" on the head girl as Muriel would ever permit any of the girls at Wakehurst to be.

"It won't if we tuck the bedclothes in tightly," replied Dorothy. "Come along, Phil, and let's put it in now. We shall just have time before prayers if we buck up. You scoot ahead and see if the coast's clear while I come behind with the mouse. Remember, you left your handkerchief up in the dorm, and felt you were going to sneeze in Chapel, but couldn't find Sister to ask permission to fetch it, if we meet anyone."

The coast proved to be quite clear, however, and the handkerchief excuse was not needed, which was, perhaps, just as well. The two had used it some half-dozen times already this term, although barely a fortnight had gone by. Arrived in the Pink Dormitory, Dorothy produced a candle and a box of matches,—both were strictly forbidden in the dormitories on account of the risk of fire, but that was quite a minor detail with these two girls,—and having cautiously struck a light, the two proceeded to deposit the mouse in Geraldine Wilmott's bed.

It was not a very difficult proceeding. The mouse was quite a baby one, and far too scared to make any effort to escape when Dorothy shook it out of the trap and covered it up securely with the bedclothes. Phyllis had already tucked the sheets in tightly so as to cut off any possible avenue of escape. And then the two conspirators made haste to restore the trap to its place under the boot-lockers and take their places in Chapel, the bell for prayers having already sounded.

The plot succeeded beyond their wildest anticipations. The occupants of the Pink Dormitory were just about to get into bed that night, and Muriel, as dormitory monitress, was waiting to turn the lights out, when there came a piercing scream from Cubicle Thirteen. The next moment a slender night-gowned figure burst into the corridor, shaking in every limb. A dozen heads were thrust out from behind curtains to see what was the matter, and the head girl came hurrying down the dormitory to investigate the cause of the disturbance.

"Why, Geraldine! What is the matter? Who has been frightening Geraldine Wilmott like this?" demanded Muriel sternly, as she joined the group of girls clustering round Geraldine.

"Nobody's been frightening her. She just screamed, and we came out to see what was the matter," said Phyllis Tressider, with an air of innocence and anxious solicitude. Had Muriel been watching her closely she might have suspected that extreme innocence, but as it was she was too much taken up with Geraldine to heed it.

"What is the matter, Geraldine?" she asked again, putting her hand kindly on the trembling girl's shoulder. "What happened? What was it frightened you so?"

"It was a m—m—mouse! It was in my bed. It jumped out at me when I was getting in. It's in my cubicle now. Oh, catch it for me! Do catch it!" the girl wailed. "I do *hate* mice so!"

"A *mouse*?" Muriel's hand dropped from the girl's shoulder, and her voice was expressive of the utmost scorn. "Fancy making all that fuss about a *mouse*! Really, Geraldine, I should have thought you were too old for such nonsense. Get into bed at once and don't let me hear any more of this rubbish."

"Oh, I daren't? It may be there still," cried Geraldine, struggling to control her terror but not succeeding very well. Mice were a real bugbear to her, and had been ever since a foolish nursemaid had scared her with them as a tiny mite, and the fear had grown worse instead of better during the last three years. But, of course, the girls of Wakehurst Priory could not be expected to know this, or to have understood the terror even if they had—least of all Muriel

Paget, whose own nerves were of that sane and healthy order for which mice and other fearsome creatures had no terrors at all. She stalked into Geraldine's cubicle and turned down the bedclothes of the small bed. But though she made a thorough search both in the bed and under all the furniture, no trace of the mouse could be discovered. It had utterly disappeared, and the head girl was inclined to believe that the occupant of Number Thirteen had imagined the whole incident.

"There's nothing there. Get back into bed at once," she commanded, having looked in every possible and impossible place for the cause of Geraldine's alarm. "Even if it was a mouse, it couldn't hurt you. It would probably be much more frightened of you than you are of it."

"There really is nothing there, Geraldine," said Monica kindly. "Come along and get back into bed and let me tuck you up. I'm next door to you, you know, and I'll come along in a minute if you're frightened in the night."

Geraldine allowed herself to be taken back to bed and tucked in by the elder girl. Now that her first fright was over, and the unreasoning terror that always possessed her at the sight of a mouse had passed away somewhat, she was very much ashamed of her panic, and dreaded the teasing it would probably bring upon her from the rest of the school. A remark which Dorothy Pemberton made, as she scurried back to her own distant cubicle at Muriel's bidding, did not tend to ease poor Geraldine's mind.

"I think her name rather suits her, don't you?" she asked of the dormitory in general. "She's nothing but a German Gerry after all!"

And although Muriel Paget commanded her sharply to shut up and get into bed, yet the titter of appreciation that went round the dormitory warned Geraldine only too surely that Dorothy had found a nickname for her that would stick.

CHAPTER IX

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE HEAD GIRL

And it stuck! From that day forward Geraldine was invariably known throughout the school as "German Gerry." "Gerry" alone the girl would not have minded so much. As a shortening for Geraldine, it compared quite favourably with most nicknames. But with the prefix of "German" the title became abhorrent to the unfortunate new girl, a fact which was very soon discovered by the Lower Fifth. And although Geraldine, or Gerry, as she now became, except to the mistresses and one or two of the older girls, did her best to disguise how much she minded, yet she could not help wincing sometimes when the objectionable name was uttered.

Once she tried the effect of a mild remonstrance.

"I wish you wouldn't call me that," she said one evening during preparation, when Phyllis Tressider addressed her by the title with a request for the loan of a book. "I'm *not* German—and I *do* so hate being called it!"

There was dead silence in the classroom. The Lower Fifth had been expecting Gerry to remonstrate for some time past, and her failure to do so had been put down as another sign of her weak spirit. The Lower Fifth was quite unable to comprehend the mentality of a girl who, from a sheer nervous dread of "rows," would submit to almost any treatment rather than protest. The form waited now with some interest to see how the situation would develop, leaving Phyllis to deal with it as she thought fit.

Phyllis thought fit to say nothing for the moment. And after a brief pause, Gerry spoke again.

"I'm *not* German, you know," she said pleadingly. "Not the very least little bit."

"Aren't you?" said Phyllis politely, but with the utmost indifference in her tone. "I say, has anybody done this beastly number eleven sum yet? Is $3\frac{3}{4}$ the right answer?"

"I'm not German, Phyllis! Truly I'm not!" repeated poor Gerry, her eyes filling with tears.

"Oh, aren't you?" said Phyllis again. "Of course if you *tell* us so——" with an ironic emphasis on the "tell." Then she broke off with an air of having done with the subject for ever. "But I'm really not interested, one way or the other," she concluded. "I say, Dorothy, you might tell me what your answer is to number eleven?"

"Then, *please*, don't call me that any longer," pleaded Gerry; but Phyllis ignored her altogether and turned to Jack Pym, who sat on one side of her.

"Extraordinary the number of Germans who're getting naturalised these days," she remarked conversationally. "Shows what a fat lot of patriotism they've got, doesn't it? As soon as their country's down and out they all desert her and refuse to acknowledge her any longer. Oh, well—I suppose it's all one can expect from a lot of German Gerries!"

"Oh, shut up, for goodness' sake, and let me get on with my prep!" growled Jack, planting her elbows firmly on her desk and bending over her papers. Jack had caught sight of tears in Gerry's eyes, and the sight had disconcerted her strangely. After all, Gerry was almost a new girl. It had really been quite an accident that she had got her into trouble on that first day of term; and even though she did speak German so well it need not necessarily mean that she had German tendencies. Did not Miss Parrot speak it equally fluently? Nobody would ever dream of accusing Miss Parrot of having German sympathies. Gerry really was having rather a rotten time of it, and it was a shame that Dorothy and Phyllis should be always at her like that. But unfortunately Jack was not strong enough in character to stand up on behalf of the new girl. She was always far too easily swayed by popular opinion, and since popular opinion appeared to be dead against Gerry, Jack dared not show her any sympathy. So she stifled her feelings of compunction and returned to work, endeavouring to banish all thought of Gerry Wilmott from her mind.

After this one attempt, Gerry abandoned all efforts to rid herself of the objectionable nickname. It never occurred to her to take the form into her confidence respecting the reason for her nerves. Indeed, she did not connect them herself with the air-raid night. Also, in the present state of affairs, there was really no one in whom she could confide, and in any case she would have found it difficult to speak of that terrible evening. She became more and more solitary, hardly attempting to speak to her companions, and a more miserable and lonelier girl than the one who inhabited Cubicle Thirteen, in the Pink Dormitory at Wakehurst Priory, it would have been hard to find. It really seemed as though some of the ill-luck proverbially attaching to the mystic number was hanging over her head. Lessons were almost her only solace. Having no other interest in life, Gerry set to work to excel in class, and did so well that she very soon rose to the top of the form, a place which had been divided pretty evenly hitherto between Hilda Burns and Dorothy Pemberton. The new girl's success in form work aroused more jealousy on Dorothy's part, and on Phyllis's, too. Phyllis's championship of her chum did not need much spurring, more especially when it concerned Gerry Wilmott.

But success in lessons cannot make up for unpopularity away from them. To a girl at boarding-school the social life is by far the most important part as a rule, much more important than the hours passed in the classroom. And Gerry, who was no exception to the general run of girls in this respect, found her position in form a very poor consolation indeed for all the other troubles that she had to bear.

Unfortunately, too, she was a hopeless duffer at games, never having played any before coming to school. Hockey was the principal pastime during the two winter terms at Wakehurst, and practice two or three times a week was compulsory for all except for a few girls who were exempt on account of some physical defect. Gerry, who, although delicate, had nothing really organically wrong with her, was obliged to take her turn with the rest; but she disliked the muddy pastime immensely, and took no interest in trying to improve her play. She was put down in the very lowest team of all, along with quite small children and a few other beginners like herself; and although the prefect who took charge of the hockey practice tried occasionally to "buck up" the slack girl from the Lower Fifth, she, herself, was not very interested in the game and met with no success.

Just before half-term, a series of dormitory matches was arranged by the head girl, who was captain of the first team and immensely keen on the game. Muriel was naturally anxious that her own dormitory should distinguish itself, and she selected her team with great care and much anxious thought. Several of the matches had been played, and so far the Pink Dormitory had been victorious against all the opponents they had met. Now they were down to play against the Green Dormitory, a very powerful rival, which also possessed, so far, an unbroken record. It was pretty certain that the Dormitory Hockey Cup, which was the prize of these inter-school matches, would go to one or the other of these two teams, and excitement in the school ran high as the day approached on which the final match was to be played.

There were thirty inhabitants of the Pink Dormitory, so it ought to have been possible to have chosen eleven players from amongst them without having to fall back upon one who had only begun to play that term, and who hated hockey into the bargain. Nevertheless, by a series of unlucky accidents, the number of possible players was gradually reduced, until on the very morning of the day fixed for the match against the Green Dormitory, Muriel found herself confronted with the problem of choosing between Geraldine Wilmott and a small girl from the Middle Third for her eleventh player. In her perplexity she consulted Monica, who, although she was not in the first school eleven, was quite a useful player and Muriel's principal reliance in the Pink team.

"There's literally no one else," the head girl said in despair. "Gladys and Bee are away for the week-end. Dora Wainscott's got a gathered hand, so she's out of the question; Ena Philpotts mayn't play at all this term; Sister's taking Pam to the dentist's this afternoon; and Ursula Hanson is going out with her aunt. All the others are either down with 'flu or just recovering from it, and Sister won't let any of them play until they've been up a week. That only leaves us Marjorie Brown or this new girl—Geraldine what's-her-name. 'German Gerry' the girls call her,

don't they? Have you seen her play—have you any idea what she's like?"

"No, I've never seen her play, but I shouldn't think she's much good. Who superintends her team practice? Do you know?"

"Yes, Kathleen Milne. She's right down in the bottom team, you see. But so's Marjorie, too, for the matter of that. I've asked Kathleen which is the best, but she doesn't seem to know much about either of them. Says they are both so rotten that she really doesn't know which is the worse."

"Kathleen's rather a slacker at hockey herself," commented Monica. "You can't really wonder her team doesn't do better when they've got such a slack coach. Can't you get that changed, Muriel? I don't see why it must always be a prefect who takes charge of the hockey practices for the lower teams. It would be much better to have somebody who knew something about hockey—even if it wasn't a prefect. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, it is rather a bad practice, and I mean to get it altered in time," agreed Muriel. "Only there's so much to be done, and I've only been head two terms, you know. Still, I really will see about it as soon as I can. But that doesn't help me out of my fix over the dormitory match. Which of those two shall I play? Gerry or Marjorie?"

"I think I should give Gerry the chance," replied Monica thoughtfully. "Marjorie is such a mite of a thing, and from what Kathleen told you she doesn't appear to be any better in her play. After all, one player won't make such a huge lot of difference since you've got ten of the original team left. You're really rather lucky, Muriel, only to have one of the eleven down with 'flu."

"Yes, I suppose I am," said the head girl. "Very well, then, it shall be Gerry. Where do the Lower Fifth hang out this time of the morning?"

"In their sitting-room, I expect, since it's Saturday and there isn't any prep," said Monica.

Muriel opened the door of her study and hailed a small girl who happened to be passing.

"Here, Babs, run round to the Lower Fifth sitting-room and tell Gerry Wilmott I want her in my study. If she isn't there, just hunt about until you find her. There's a good kid."

"All right, Muriel," said the small girl, and darted off on her errand—fagging for Muriel Paget was esteemed a great honour amongst the smaller fry at Wakehurst Priory. And so Gerry, sitting half-hidden in a corner of the sitting-room, buried in a book, was presently aroused by a violent jog at her elbow, and looked up to find Babs Hethwaite standing beside her.

"Muriel Paget wants you in her study. She says you're to go to her *at once*," burst out the messenger.

Several of the members of the form looked up interestedly at this announcement, and many curious eyes followed Gerry as she made her way across the room.

"Hullo, what's up? I wonder what German Gerry's been doing for Muriel to want her in such a hurry?" commented Nita Fleming as the door closed behind the new girl.

"Oh, nothing! Perhaps Sister's been complaining about her drawers or something," said Jack, rather resenting the tone in which Nita spoke. It was noticeable—or rather would have been noticeable if anybody had been interested enough to notice it—that Jack never spoke of Gerry by the objectionable nickname herself, although she made no comment when others used it. Always, whenever Gerry was unkindly spoken of by anybody, Jack felt an unaccountable desire to stick up for her and take her part. If Jack had only been a little braver, she probably would have done so. It was curious how drawn she had been to Gerry during that first evening of the term when Monica had handed the new girl over to her care. If only things had been different, she might have made a real chum OF Gerry Wilmott—Jack reflected rather wistfully. But though Jack was plucky enough where mice and hockey and material things of that sort were concerned, when it came to braving the good opinion of her fellows, her courage failed her altogether.

Gerry found Muriel sitting at her writing-desk, making out a revised list for the afternoon's match.

"Oh, there you are!" the head girl said, as Gerry entered the room in response to her "Come in." "Look here, you've got to play in the match this afternoon for the Pink Dorm. Gladys Williams is down with 'flu and you've got to take her place—right back. Do you think you can manage it?"

Gerry gave a gasp of dismay.

"Me! Oh, but, Muriel, I'm rotten at hockey!"

"I know you are," said Muriel candidly. "But there literally isn't anybody else—all the other girls in the Pink Dorm are away or down with 'flu, or something. I never came across such a lot in my life! I wouldn't put you in if there was anybody else—but there isn't. So you'll just have to play."

"But, Muriel——" protested Gerry desperately. But Muriel waved her protest aside.

"Not another word! You've got to play. It's for the honour of the dorm, you know. I shan't expect anything very great of you—just do your best and I shall be satisfied. It's 2.30 sharp up on the hockey ground, and mind you're ready in time."

Then, as Gerry still lingered, a look of distress on her face, the head girl rose from her seat and laid her hand kindly on her junior's shoulder.

"Look here, kiddie—you must try and get a better opinion of yourself. Having confidence in oneself is half the battle in everything, you know. Just make up your mind that you're going to play A1 in the match this afternoon, and you'll come through all right! You're such a quiet, shy person that you make the girls shy of you too, and you'll never make friends with them while you're like that. You just try and come out of the background a little and do things, and you'll find you'll get on much better all round."

Muriel smiled down very kindly at the younger girl as she said these words, and Gerry felt her heart go out to the head girl of the school. Almost it was on the tip of her tongue to confide some of her troubles to Muriel about that horrible nickname and the caricature that first day in class, and how the rest of the Lower Fifth suspected her of having German sympathies, if nothing worse! It was evident that Muriel knew that things were not quite right with her, or she would not have said as much as she had done.

But just as she was going to speak, the words died away on her lips. No! She wouldn't say! She wasn't a sneak, whatever the Lower Fifth might think, and since she had kept her own counsel so far, she would keep it to the end. After all, she didn't want to be friends with such a mean set of pigs as the Lower Fifth had proved themselves to be! Even Jack, whom she had liked so much that first day of term—but, no! Jack would not bear thinking about just then! And Gerry turned to leave the head girl's study with a murmur of thanks for Muriel's encouragement.

"I'll do my very best," she said earnestly. And Muriel gave her another friendly smile as she dismissed her, so that Gerry retraced her steps to the Lower Fifth classroom with a new feeling of happiness in her heart. Muriel was nice—whatever the girls in the Lower Fifth might be. And so was Monica, and possibly some of the girls in the Middle and Upper Fifth were not quite so beastly—yes, that was the only word for it—as her present companions. Gerry decided that she would work harder than ever at her lessons and try and get moved up next term, and then possibly, amongst new companions, she could make a new start, and find school life a much happier affair than it had been hitherto.

With which resolve she turned the handle of the sitting-room door and walked inside.

CHAPTER X

THE DORMITORY MATCH

As a rule when Gerry walked into a room, she might have been invisible so far as the Lower Fifth was concerned. But on this particular morning the form's collective curiosity was too great to allow it to keep up its dignified attitude of obliviousness any longer.

"What did Muriel want you for?" demanded Phyllis jealously, as Gerry came into the sitting-room.

"N—nothing much," answered Gerry nervously. She nearly always was nervous when questioned abruptly, more especially when Phyllis Tressider happened to be the questioner. "It was only—only that I've got to play in the dormitory match this afternoon."

"*You!* What on earth is Muriel thinking of? Why, you can't play hockey for nuts!" exclaimed Dorothy Pemberton in undisguised astonishment.

That was, to tell the truth, exactly Gerry's own opinion, but all the same it was not pleasant to have it confirmed so emphatically by somebody else. All her determination to play her very best that afternoon, and so justify Muriel's choice, slipped away from the new girl as she saw the incredulous amazement in her companions' faces. Of course she couldn't play! She was quite hopeless where games were concerned, and always would be. All the old lack of confidence and distrust of self flooded Gerry's mind again, quite undoing all the good Muriel's kindly encouragement had worked in her.

It was with a premonition of failure that she took up the place Muriel had assigned to her on the hockey field that afternoon. She felt physically ill with suspense and nervousness as she waited for the whistle to sound and the game to start—a nervousness which grew greater and

greater as the game went on and no balls came her way. Perhaps if the thick of the fighting had been down her end, some of Gerry's nervousness might have worn off. But, as it happened, the Pink Dormitory forwards proved themselves immeasurably superior to the forwards of the Green Dormitory. And nearly all the play took place down near the Green Dormitory's goal. On the few occasions when the Green forwards did get away with the ball, they were turned back easily by the Pink half-backs. Monica Deane, Gerry's companion at full back, stopped a stray ball or two, but nothing at all serious in the nature of a struggle took place at the Pink Dormitory's end of the field.

But although the Green attack was poor, its defence was strong enough, and in spite of the fact that all the play was down in the Green's goal circle, it was not until well after half-time that Muriel succeeded at last in scoring a goal for her dormitory. Gerry drew a breath of relief as the forwards returned to the centre-line. Incredible as it may sound, Gerry had not as yet touched a ball. There couldn't be much longer to play now—not more than another ten minutes at the outside. If she had not distinguished herself so far, at least she had not disgraced herself. Oh, if only Muriel would keep the ball at the other end until these next ten minutes were over, then she would be safely through her ordeal! Monica and the Pink goal-keeper were lamenting loudly at the dullness of their afternoon, but Gerry was almost praying that the inaction might continue to the end.

But, alas! her prayers were destined to be unfulfilled! Five minutes before time, the Green Dormitory made a desperate effort to break down the Pink team's defence. Jack Pym, from her place at half-back, got hold of the ball, and obeying the orders of her captain, Alice Metcalfe, not to pass it but to break etiquette for once and take it up herself, succeeded in getting it by the Pink half-backs. Elsie Lipscombe, centre forward for the Greens, joined her then, and together the two took the ball down until they were almost inside the Pink Dormitory's goal circle. Monica flew out to tackle them, and succeeded in stopping Elsie Lipscombe, who, however, tipped the ball back to Jack with an injunction to "get it into the goal circle and shoot for all you're worth."

"Into her, Gerry!" shouted Monica, flying after Jack, but unable to catch up with her. It should have been an easy matter for Gerry to have disposed of the ball, for at that moment Jack slipped suddenly and sent it accidentally a yard or so farther in front of her than she had intended. All that Gerry had to do was to stop the ball—it was not a hard one—and hit it out of the goal circle. But the panic which had been raging in Gerry's soul all the afternoon took complete possession of her at this critical moment. To her distorted imagination the ball seemed to have grown to three times its normal size, while Jack, bearing rapidly down upon her, appeared a veritable juggernaut. The ball was coming straight towards her, but she did not even attempt to stop it. Worse even than that: with a little shrill cry of terror she dropped her stick and fled!

Of course the goal was scored. The Pink goal-keeper was too utterly flabbergasted at her full back's desertion to do anything but stare after Gerry's fleeing figure. Jack, however, although she too was astounded at Gerry's behaviour, kept her wits about her sufficiently to pounce upon the ball and send it flying between the goalposts, thus making things even between the two teams again.

The whistle blew for a goal, and Gerry, recovering from her momentary lapse, returned to her place. She was trembling in every limb, overcome with shame at her exhibition of fear, and the coldness with which Monica and the goalkeeper regarded her as she crept forlornly back to her position did not help her to regain very much of her equanimity.

Muriel made a desperate effort to recover her lost advantage. But she could not succeed in breaking down the Green Dormitory's defence again, and the whistle blew for time at last without either side gaining the victory.

"Bother!" said Muriel, as she and Monica and one or two other members of the Pink team walked off the field together. "That means we'll have to play it again. We ought to have won easily, too. I messed up an easy shot for goal in the first half—if I'd only got that we should have been all right."

"Or if that little ass, Gerry Wilmott, hadn't funk'd," remarked Monica, rather bitterly. It was she who had given the casting vote in favour of Gerry's inclusion in the team, and she was feeling more or less responsible for the fiasco.

"Oh, well, I don't know," said Muriel leniently. "The kid didn't want to play, I will say that for her. I practically forced her to. It was my fault, I suppose, really, for making her do it against her will."

"You weren't to know that she was such a little coward, though," said Monica. Curiously enough it was Monica who was the more down upon Gerry for her exhibition of fright—Monica, who might have been expected to have had some sympathy with the shy new girl whom, up to now, she had rather taken under her wing. As it was, it was Muriel, brilliant, splendid Muriel, who had never known what it was to have an attack of funk in her life, who was the more inclined to make excuses for her. Ever since the mouse episode in the dormitory, which Muriel had since recognised to have been real terror and not merely affectation, as she had at first suspected, upon Gerry's part, the head girl had been observing Gerry with some interest, and the girl's genuine self-depreciation in her study that morning had touched her more than she quite knew.

"Poor kiddie, I expect she's feeling pretty cut up about it," she said sympathetically. And she actually waited until Gerry, forlornly lagging in the rear of the other players, came up, in order to speak a kind word to the disgraced member of her team.

Gerry, absorbed in her own miserable thoughts, did not see the head girl until she was nearly upon her. Then she drew up short with a nervous gesture, expecting a reprimand. But Muriel made haste to remove the apprehension she saw in Gerry's eyes.

"Come on, kid; you seem to have got left behind," she said gently. "Come and walk with me." And she slipped her hand through the younger girl's arm.

"Oh, Muriel—I am so sorry——" began poor Gerry, the tears coming into her eyes. But Muriel cut short the impending apology.

"Oh, rubbish!" she said. "Don't be sorry. Just do better another time. That's all I want. After all, we haven't *lost* the Cup, you know. We shall have another shot for it next week or the week after, and you must try and do better then."

"Oh no, no! Not in a match again! Please, please not, Muriel!" cried Gerry, with such a note of anguish in her tone that Muriel realised that this was not a case for the maxim, "You can do it if you only try," with which she was used to encourage people who in her opinion needed encouragement. In a vague sort of way it came home to her that Gerry's mentality was rather outside her experience of schoolgirl psychology, and for the moment she forbore to press the already overtaxed girl further.

"Very well," she said gently. "Don't get into such a stew over it. You shan't play in a match again until you feel more confident. But you've got to learn to play hockey, you know. I must take you in hand myself and see what I can do with you. Meanwhile you must cheer up, and not go fretting yourself to death over that one ball. It really doesn't matter an atom!"

And as they had now reached the school buildings, she let go of Gerry's arm, and with a kindly smile and an encouraging pat on her shoulder, she sent the Lower Fifth girl off to the dormitory to change, not a little comforted.

CHAPTER XI

A LESSON IN HOCKEY

But the comforted feeling did not last very long. There was no monitress on duty in the Pink Dormitory when Gerry reached it, both Muriel and Monica, who sometimes acted as the head girl's understudy, having been detained downstairs, and Dorothy Pemberton was taking advantage of that fact to change from her hockey things to her ordinary school attire in Phyllis Tressider's cubicle. Through the half-drawn curtains the two saw Gerry go by, and immediately brought their conversation round to the new girl's display of cowardice upon the playing-field.

"Wasn't it a shame we didn't win the match?" lamented Phyllis. "If it hadn't been for German Gerry's funking that ball we must have won."

"Sickening, isn't it?" agreed Dorothy, raising her voice so that there could be no possible doubt about the occupant of the next cubicle hearing the remark. "I can't *think* what made Muriel play her! I shouldn't think she ever would again!"

"Fancy being afraid of a hockey ball!" said Phyllis scornfully.

"Perhaps it was the sight of Jack that frightened her," suggested Dorothy. "Jack owes her something for the way German Gerry stopped her playing in that hockey trial. Perhaps she thought Jack was going to take it out of her then with a hockey stick!"

A little choked sound from next door assured the two that their shots were going home, and encouraged them to further efforts.

"I bet Muriel felt pretty ratty when the German turned tail," Phyllis went on maliciously. "Even Monica looked fed up—I guess she won't take German Gerry's part any more! And as for Muriel—I shouldn't think she'd ever speak to Gerry again! Muriel simply *hates* cowards."

Dorothy racked her brains for another hurting remark. But before she could think of one, rapid steps came down the corridor, and the next minute the cubicle curtain was thrust aside, and the head girl, flushed with indignation, appeared before the two conspirators' horrified eyes.

"There's one thing I hate even worse than cowards," said Muriel, with mingled contempt and anger, "and that is *sneaks*! It's one of the meanest, sneakiest things I ever heard of to go saying

things like that about a person when you *know* they can overhear you! I'm not the least bit ratty with Gerry. She didn't do it on purpose, and she's sorry enough about it, anyway, without you two little worms rubbing it in like that. You just shut up and leave Gerry alone. If I hear you talking like that again I shall deal with you pretty severely."

For a moment the two girls were too thunderstruck at the Nemesis that had descended upon them to make any excuse for themselves. Then Dorothy rallied her failing powers.

"We're *awfully* sorry, Muriel," she murmured in a deprecating tone. "We didn't know Gerry was in her cubicle and could hear us."

Muriel gave a contemptuous sniff.

"Don't tell such lies! If you had said that you didn't know *I* could hear, I might have believed you. Go back to your cubicle at once, Dorothy, and finish changing there. You know quite well that you are not allowed to change in another girl's cubicle or talk in the dormitory unless you've got permission. You can both of you take a conduct mark for this little affair."

Then, having seen the abashed Dorothy depart to her own cubicle, the head girl turned to Cubicle Thirteen.

"Ready yet, Gerry?" she asked kindly.

"N—not quite," came in muffled accents from behind the drawn curtain.

"Buck up, then—I'm waiting to walk down to tea with you," said Muriel cheerily. And when, a few moments later, a subdued and rather red-eyed person emerged from Number Thirteen, she slipped her hand through the new girl's arm again, and marched her through the dormitory and down the stairs and into the dining-hall, chatting gaily to her all the way, as though she had been some important fellow-prefect instead of merely a humble, insignificant member of the Lower Fifth who had just made a disastrous exhibition of herself on the hockey field.

Arrived in the dining-hall where the girls were assembling for tea, Muriel gave Gerry's arm a parting squeeze, and with a cheerful "Buck up, kid, and never mind what those little beasts say," she sent her off to her place at the bottom of Table Five, while she herself went to her station at the head of Table Two.

But not even the head girl's championship could save Gerry from the bad times that awaited her now. Indeed, in some ways, it rather made matters worse. Phyllis was furiously jealous of the favour Muriel had shown to the new girl, and Dorothy—although she was not so "gone" on the mistress of the Pink Dormitory as her friend was—was yet very indignant that their victim should have any favour shown to her at all. Both girls bitterly resented the way Muriel had spoken to them after the fateful hockey match; and the rowing they had received, and the ensuing conduct marks bestowed upon them, they had, quite unjustly, put down to Gerry's account. They took care that Muriel should not hear any more of their persecution of the new girl; but that did not deter them from carrying it on with an added zeal whenever they were quite sure that the prefect was not within hearing. They tormented Gerry by every means in their power; and though Gerry did her best to conceal from her torturers how much their jeers and gibes had power to hurt, yet she was so unskilled at hiding her feelings and felt their unkindness so keenly that the two were perfectly well aware of how surely their thrusts went home.

The persecution was not by any means confined to her own form, either. Nearly the whole school had been witnesses of her failure up on the hockey field, and those who had not been actually present had heard highly-coloured versions of the episode from those who had. The obnoxious nickname became more used than ever. Even the small girls from the First and Second Forms would shout "German Gerry!" after the new girl; and not even the little marks of favour Muriel sometimes showed her had power to turn the tide of popular opinion in Gerry's favour.

Even Monica, who had at first showed Gerry so much kindness, appeared to have given her up. She no longer smiled at her when they met in the corridors, as they frequently did. And as for Jack,—for whose friendship Gerry yearned more than for anyone else's,—she might not have existed so far as Jack was concerned. That episode up on the hockey field had put the finishing touch to Jack's wavering attraction for the new girl. She could not be friends with a girl who funkcd—that settled the matter. And Jack returned to her old companionship with Nita Fleming and three or four other members of the Lower Fifth, and tried not to see the wistful expression in Gerry's eyes when they sometimes happened to meet her own.

Gerry's next hockey practice promised to be rather a terrible ordeal for the girl. She began to dread it directly after the dormitory match, and was thankful for the brief respite afforded by the intervening Sunday. Monday, the day on which she should have played again, turned out so wet that hockey or anything else of an out-of-door nature was quite impossible. Tuesday was a walk-day for Gerry's team. But on the following Wednesday the practice could be avoided no longer, and after dinner Gerry went up to her dormitory to change into her hockey things, feeling very much as though she was on her way to be martyred at the stake.

Gerry was far and away the biggest girl in the very low team in which she had been placed. K.1. and K.2. were mostly filled with quite little girls from the First and Second Forms, with one

or two backward individuals from the Third, and one spectacled person, Sally Jones, from the Middle Fourth. Sally was rather an aggressive young lady altogether. Although she was not good at hockey she was certainly improving, and was usually put to play centre forward in the practice games. She was inclined to presume upon this position and her superior age to order the other children about. When Gerry slowly approached the ground on which the two K teams were supposed to practise, Sally regarded her with keenly-inquiring eyes, and noticing her obvious dejection prepared to improve the occasion.

"Here comes German Gerry," she observed. And with a quick turn of her wrist she flicked the ball she was idly knocking about full at the approaching girl, hitting her smartly on the shin.

Gerry, who had not seen the ball coming, gave an involuntary cry of pain, which occasioned a shriek of laughter from the small girls around.

"German Gerry! German Gerry! German Gerry's hurt again!" chanted one small damsel. The catchword was taken up by the others, and the air was filled with the clamour from some twenty lusty voices as the taunting cry rose on the wind. But it died down somewhat abruptly, as Sally, who, for all her spectacles, was by no means shortsighted, caught sight of Muriel Paget in the distance.

"Shut up! Here's Muriel!" she said in an awestruck voice. And the chanting stopped suddenly as the head girl came up.

Muriel looked rather sharply from Gerry's flushed face to the abashed countenances of the other children. But if she guessed something of what had been happening she did not betray her surmise.

"Places, please," she said briskly. "I'm going to take your practice to-day instead of Kathleen. So mind you all play up jolly well."

The team scurried to their places with alacrity. It was something very new and unusual for the head girl to come and take their hockey afternoon. When not playing herself, Muriel generally superintended the practices of the B or C teams. It was an unheard-of event that she should condescend to coach the K teams, who were usually taken in hand by some senior who knew very little more about the game than they did themselves. When Kathleen Milne took the practice, she generally contented herself by taking the time and leaving Sally Jones, or some other obtrusive person, to do all the rest. A practice under Muriel Paget would be something very different from the ordinary round of things; and although highly flattered by the honour, the teams looked forward with some apprehension to the next hour.

Muriel allowed the game to go on for about ten minutes. Then she blew her whistle sharply.

"I'm going to try you in different places," she said, as the play stopped. "You're none of you much good where you are. Now let's have a complete shift round." And she proceeded to change the players about until the whole field almost was transposed.

Up to now, Gerry had always played full back—or rather, she had stood in that position. It would be incorrect to say that she had "played" anywhere. But now Muriel signalled to her to come forward.

"You're no good at all as back, Gerry. Come and try centre forward for a bit. And, Sally, you take Gerry's place at full back. Now are you all arranged? Come along, Gerry, and take your place."

"But, *Muriel*—I can't play centre forward. Why, I don't even know how to bully!" expostulated Gerry, aghast at the greatness thus suddenly thrust upon her.

"Don't you? Well, that can soon be remedied. Here, where's the ball? Lend me your stick a moment, Betty. Now, Gerry, stand square. No, not like that—feet apart. So. That's better. Now—one, two, three—now hit the ball. See? Do it again until you've quite got it." And she made the younger girl repeat the performance again and again until Gerry really seemed to know the correct movements.

"Now, then, come along and begin. Here's your stick, Betty—thanks very much."

But Gerry still hung back.

"Oh, Muriel—I can't!" she breathed unhappily. But Muriel only smiled down into her face, kindly but very firmly.

"Now, Gerry, don't be silly. This isn't a match, and it doesn't matter a hang if you do make a mess of it. You can't live at Wakehurst Priory and not play hockey. We're all hockey mad here, you know, and I've made up my mind that you're going to learn to play. It was mostly for your sake that I came down to coach the K teams to-day. Buck up, now, and try. You can do it, you know, if you'll only think you can."

Thus adjured, Gerry made an effort. She took her place reluctantly on the centre-line and

began to bully. Much to her own surprise she got the ball away from her opponent, and on following up her advantage succeeded in getting it by the centre half also. She lost it then, but much encouraged by Muriel's approving "Well done, Gerry!" she made another great effort and retrieved it again. And thenceforward, although she did not distinguish herself very specially, she took quite an active part in the game, finding it a good deal easier and much less painful—even when she did inadvertently stop a ball on her ankle—than she had expected.

In making her play centre forward, Muriel had hit upon the one plan which could help her to overcome her nerves. Right in the thick of the battle there was no time for overmuch thinking, and the sick feeling of nervousness which had always crept over her hitherto when she stood at full back, waiting, waiting, waiting for the ball to come, was banished altogether. Towards the end of the afternoon, Gerry even succeeded in hitting a goal, much to her own surprise and the surprise of her fellow-players. It was more by good luck than judgment, but all the same it served to hearten her spirits immensely, and Muriel's smile of approval more than compensated for the pain her bruised ankle was causing her.

"You see you can play all right when you like," said the head girl when the practice was over. "Are you walking down with anybody? No? Good; then come and walk down with me. Let's see, now, when's your next practice? Friday, isn't it?"

"Yes, Friday," answered Gerry, rather hot and breathless from her exertions, but so pleased at her late performance that she did not mind that.

"Well, I shall come and coach you again then, and if you do as well as you did to-day, I shall move you up into J.2. It will be much better for you than playing amongst all those little kids. But you'll have to play forward always, never back. I always think you need to be rather a stolid individual altogether to make a successful back. I can't think why Kathleen ever put you to play there. Besides, you're cut out for a forward with those great long legs of yours. And you can run, too—I watched you particularly to-day."

Gerry's heart glowed within her, but Muriel's next words filled her with alarm.

"Now, do you know what I want you to do? We're playing the return match against the Green Dorm on Saturday week, and if you keep on improving, as I think you will, I'm going to put you down to play again for the Pink. No—wait a minute," as Gerry gave a little exclamation of protest. "It won't be back this time. I shall put you on the wing somewhere, or else half-back—I'm not quite sure myself yet. But I specially want you to play, and to play well. I want to give you an opportunity of wiping out last Saturday in the eyes of the school. And if you've got the grit I think you have, you're going to take it."

There was silence for a moment or two. Then Gerry spoke uncertainly:

"But—but suppose I funk again?"

"You won't funk," said Muriel, with a quiet conviction that did more to reassure the nervous girl at her side than any amount of arguing would have done. To some natures the greatest incentive to do well is the knowledge that somebody believes in them implicitly. Gerry, whose first impulse had been to refuse the offer in a panic and beg Muriel at all costs to leave her name out of the team, seemed to catch some of the elder girl's confidence. If *only* she could—if only she could overcome her nerves sufficiently to do well! If she could distinguish herself in the coming match and show the girls that though she was funky at some things she wasn't a coward all through, how splendid it would be! Oh, she would, she would! She would play and justify Muriel's confidence in her. She wouldn't funk again.

"Are you quite sure you're not *afraid* to play a coward?" she said, in such a low tone that Muriel could only just catch the obnoxious word. But she did catch it, and stopping suddenly, she laid her hands firmly on the younger girl's shoulders.

"Now, look here, Gerry, don't be absurd!" she said. "Even if some of the girls *have* called you that, there's no earthly reason why you should imagine that it's true. Just buck up and make up your mind that you won't be a coward. You *needn't* be, you know. Being brave isn't just a matter of not fearing things. The very bravest people of all are often those who are the most afraid and yet who conquer their fears. You conquered your fear quite a lot this afternoon. You got one quite nasty bang on your ankle—I was watching you and I saw—and you didn't make the least little bit of fuss about it. Well, if you've done that once you can do it again. Now, if I ask you to play in my team for the next dormitory match, will you do it?"

"Yes," said Gerry simply, raising her eyes to the head girl's face. And after a deep look into them, Muriel dropped her hands from her junior's shoulders with a satisfied smile.

"That's all right, then," she said. "And now we'd better both buck up, or we'll be frantically late for tea."

CHAPTER XII

THE NEW FORM-MISTRESS

"I say! Have you heard the news?" cried Hilda Burns, bursting the next morning into the Lower Fifth sitting-room, where the form was gathered awaiting the summons to prayers.

All the girls looked up at Hilda's excited entrance. Even Gerry, who as usual was finding in a book solace from her loneliness, stopped reading to hear what the news might be.

"No! What is it?" asked various voices; and Hilda, conscious of the importance of the tidings she carried, said impressively:

"Pretty Polly's ill. Really ill. Not just influenza and bed for a day or two. She was taken suddenly bad in the night, and they had to send for the doctor. And it's appendicitis, and she's got to have an operation at once, and she's going off in an ambulance to a nursing home this morning."

"I say! Poor Polly! I am sorry," said Jack. And the whole form proceeded to express its dismay more or less appropriately. In spite of her strictness and extreme prejudices in favour of tidiness, Miss Parrot was popular with her form; and real regret at losing her so unexpectedly was mingled with sorrow for her illness. It was not for a few minutes, however, that it dawned upon the Lower Fifth that this sudden calamity would leave it without a form-mistress.

"But I say! What about *us*?" exclaimed Dorothy at length. "Who's going to take our form? We shall have to have somebody."

"Miss Oakley's wired to an agency asking them to send someone," said Hilda, who had an uncanny knack of finding out these sorts of things. Her information proved to be correct, for when prayers were over and the Lower Fifth marched as usual into its classroom, Miss Oakley was waiting there for them; and after telling them of their mistress's illness, she came at once to the point which was exercising the minds of the form.

"I am glad to say that I have succeeded in getting somebody to fill Miss Parrot's place for the rest of this term. Miss Burton is coming from town to-day, and will take over your form from to-morrow morning. Miss Parrot's unexpected illness has rather upset the usual school routine to-day, and instead of your classes I am going to set you some exercises and questions to work out by yourselves. Miss Latham will come in to you for the last hour this morning and correct your answers and award your marks. I trust you all to behave well during the time you are unavoidably left alone; and to show your sympathy with Miss Parrot by doing all in your power to help her successor. Now, Hilda, bring me your books, and I will set you some work to do."

The Lower Fifth behaved themselves with exemplary virtue in the classroom that morning, and in due course the new mistress arrived. She was not introduced to her form until the next day. The girls were not very favourably impressed by her appearance. Miss Burton was thin and rather angular, sandy-haired and spectacled, and she gave the impression of being both irritable and exacting—an impression which the Lower Fifth found amply justified when they came into close contact with their new mistress. Miss Burton was really one of those people who ought never to have gone in for teaching at all, having no real liking for her profession, nor any sympathy with or understanding of girls. She very soon succeeded in ruffling the feelings of the Lower Fifth, and before the first morning was ended the whole form was in open rebellion.

It was over Gerry Wilmott that the rupture took place. Margaret Taylor, who occupied the desk next to Gerry's, was unable to find her place during the literature lesson, having, through inattention, missed the announcement Miss Burton made in the beginning of the class. The girls were reading aloud in turn a play of Shakespeare's, and as her turn drew nearer and nearer Margaret fumbled desperately with the pages, finally turning an imploring glance upon Gerry, who was watching her futile struggles with nervous apprehension. Gerry was only too glad to do anything for anybody,—the ostracism in which she was kept by the rest of the form precluded her as a rule from even offering aid on such an occasion as this,—and she leant over to her neighbour's desk and pointed it out, just at the very moment when Miss Burton happened to be looking that way. The new mistress banged on her desk with such emphasis that the girl who was reading at the moment stopped suddenly, and the class looked up in amazement, while Gerry gave a frightened little jump.

"You, girl! What is your name?" said Miss Burton, pointing her pencil at Gerry.

"Gerry—I mean Geraldine Wilmott," stammered Gerry.

"What do you mean by whispering to another girl during class?" demanded the mistress, blinking furiously at the culprit through her glasses.

"I—I wasn't whispering," said Gerry. "I—I was only showing Margaret the place."

"Don't prevaricate!" thundered Miss Burton. "You were whispering. I saw you."

Up shot Margaret's hand.

"Please, Miss Burton," said that young lady indignantly, moved for once to take the unpopular new girl's part, "she wasn't whispering. I'd lost my place, and I made signs to her to show me, and she was only pointing it out with her pencil."

"I don't believe either of you," said the new mistress. Then with a fiery glance at Gerry, she said ferociously:

"Go on with the reading from the place where the last girl left off."

This command was shot out with such venom as to render poor Gerry a thousand times more nervous even than usual. She had lost her own place hopelessly by this time, and as she fumbled with the pages in the vain endeavour to find it and comply with the order, Miss Burton spoke again in a triumphant voice:

"I thought so. You do not know the place yourself, therefore you could not have been showing it to your companion! You are both of you extremely naughty, untruthful girls, and you will each take a conduct mark for your deceitfulness."

"Please, Miss Burton, I wasn't deceiving you!" cried Gerry, goaded into one of her rare attempts at self-assertion. "I *was* showing Margaret Taylor her place, and I *did* know it quite well until you confused me and made me lose it."

Miss Burton grew scarlet with anger.

"How dare you argue with me!" she said. "I see that you mean to give me as much trouble as you possibly can, but I mean to take a firm hand with you. Go and stand in that corner with your face to the wall until the lesson is over!"

A gasp of incredulous amazement went up from the Lower Fifth.

"*Miss Burton!* We're not babies!" cried Hilda Burns indignantly. "We're Fifth Form and not used to punishments like that. You can't make Gerry stand in a corner!"

"Don't interfere!" said the mistress. "Geraldine Wilmott, do as I direct you, at once."

Gerry's momentary display of spirit had quite spent itself by now. With a white face she walked across the schoolroom and took up the position Miss Burton indicated. And there she stood in silent humiliation with her face to the wall, while the rest of the form, sulky and rebellious, dragged through the remainder of the lesson.

Miss Burton did not try any more drastic measures. Perhaps she realised that she had already gone too far. Or perhaps, having vented some of her anger upon Gerry, she felt more amiably disposed towards the rest of her girls. At all events, the lesson ended without another contretemps; and Gerry was permitted to come out of her ignominious corner and was seated again in her desk before Miss Latham entered to take her usual class in history.

The Lower Fifth managed to conceal their indignation during the history lesson, but when at last the morning's work had ended and the new mistress had finally departed from the classroom, the storm of anger burst. For the first time since she had come to Wakehurst Priory, Gerry found herself the centre of popular sympathy.

"What a beastly shame, Gerry!" said Jack Pym, coming over to Gerry's desk. "She's a beastly, mean pig—and she hadn't any right to treat you like that." And she put her hand caressingly on Gerry's arm, a proceeding which filled Gerry's heart with a sudden thrill of happiness. It was almost the first time Jack had spoken to her since that first unlucky day at school. Even her late humiliation seemed worth while if it was going to bring her Jack's friendship again.

The other members of the form, too, gave vent to many expressions of sympathy, and schemes of vengeance upon the new mistress were discussed.

"Tell you what—we'll strike!" said Dorothy Pemberton, always ready to take the side of lawlessness and disorder.

"How?" said Phyllis, eager to support her chum, yet not quite seeing how a successful strike could be engineered.

"Why, we won't do a stroke of prep for her!" said Dorothy. "We'll work for all the other mistresses doubly hard to make up, but when it comes to Miss Burton's work we won't do a thing. We'll all promise not to, and then if the whole lot of us are in it she can't do anything."

"She can give us conduct marks," said Hilda Burns.

"Yes, but she'll have to give them to the whole lot, so they won't mean very much. And although we shan't get any marks for her lessons, yet it won't really count, because we shall all

be in the same boat."

"She can complain to Miss Oakley," said Hilda.

"Well, if she does, that will be just what we want. Miss Oakley will jaw us, of course, but she'll make inquiries too, and when she finds out what a rotter Miss Burton is, she'll dismiss her right away. Let her go to Miss Oakley if she likes, it will be all the better. Who'll sign on to down books for Miss Burton?"

"I will, for one," cried Jack impetuously.

"And I," cried Phyllis Tressider.

"And I."

"And I."

"And I," echoed round the room.

There were one or two doubtful people, but Dorothy's arguments, aided by Jack's and Phyllis's persuasions, overcame the most conscientious individuals. One by one the members of the form gave in and took a solemn vow that they would not do a stroke of preparation for the new form-mistress.

At length it came to Gerry's turn to be questioned.

"You'll come in, Gerry, of course," remarked Dorothy, in a nicer tone of voice than she had ever before used towards the new girl.

For a moment Gerry hesitated. It seemed to her that they had not given the new form-mistress much of a chance. She might be nicer in a day or two—it would surely be kinder to wait a little while before declaring such open war upon her. But, on the other hand, it seemed as though a door had been suddenly opened which would lead to all the things Gerry most longed for—popularity, the sympathy of her form, Jack's coveted friendship. All the while Dorothy and Jack had been arguing with and persuading the other waverers to join the strike, Gerry had been battling strenuously within her own heart. She wanted, oh, so badly! to throw in her lot with the rest of the form. Marks and favour with the mistresses meant so little in comparison with all the other important aspects of school life. Jack's hand was on her shoulder, Jack's friendship lay open to her—Gerry instinctively felt—if she would only throw in her lot with the rest of the Lower Fifth. And after all, why shouldn't she? She had really had more provocation than any of the others, for it was she who had suffered the unjust and humiliating punishment. She looked at Jack, and at the eager expression on Jack's face she threw her conscientious scruples to the winds.

"Yes, I'll come in," she said, and Dorothy turned to the rest of the form with an air of triumph.

"That's all right, then. We're all in it. What prep has that old beast set us for to-night? Learn by heart that speech of Henry the Fifth's, work right through the algebra exercise, and write five hundred words in German on 'Spring.' Thank the Lord, she teaches us German! It will be some consolation for the rows we're bound to get into, to think we shall be able to cut out that beastly German for a bit. What does that leave us for to-night? French, history analysis for Miss Latham, and that science paper for Miss White. Good! We shall have a jolly slack time in prep to-night, shan't we?"

"There'll be an awful bust up on Monday morning, though," said Hilda Burns.

Hilda was still rather doubtful about the strike. As head of the form, she could not help feeling that she was slightly responsible for its good behaviour, and might be called to account for its lawlessness by the powers that were. But she was not strong enough to stand up against Dorothy and Phyllis and their powerful following, so she cast in her lot with the rebels and said no more against the graceless plan.

CHAPTER XIII

A BREAK IN THE CLOUDS

Gerry passed quite a cheerful dinner hour at Table Five that day. Jack had pushed Nita Fleming aside just before lunch and had herself taken the place next to Gerry.

"You don't mind, old girl, do you?" she said to Nita. "But I want to sit next to Gerry Wilmott, just for a change."

"I don't mind," said Nita good-naturedly, used to Jack's vagaries. And when Gerry arrived at the table, she found to her delight and surprise that Jack was to be her next-door neighbour.

"Thought I'd change with Nita to-day," observed Jack laconically, as, grace having been said, the girls sat down in their chairs. "I get fed up with sitting in one place all the time." And then, as though afraid to pursue the subject any further, she made haste to change the conversation.

"What's for dinner to-day?" she asked, as the maids began to hand round plates with a speed and dexterity born of much practice. "Oh, hang it all—it's boiled mutton again! And I bet you anything you like it will be boiled suet roll afterwards! Matron always likes to arrange things like that. Boiled mutton, boiled potatoes, boiled turnips—what did I tell you? I put my money on boiled suet roll for sweets."

"You're too optimistic," said Nita gloomily. "I feel in my bones it's going to be rice pudding. Or if it isn't rice it'll be sago. If there's one pudding I loathe worse than rice it's sago!"

"It won't be sago to-day," said Jack cheerfully. "We had sago on Wednesday. No—it'll be boiled suet roll, you just see if it isn't. Louie darling,"—to the maid who was handing her vegetables at the moment,— "what's for pudding to-day? Do tell us, there's an angel! Is it sago or rice or boiled suet roll? Tell us the worst at once and let's get it over."

"None of them, miss; it's treacle tart to-day," replied the maid, with a grin. Jack was as thoroughly popular with the maids as she was with everybody else at Wakehurst, and the little shriek of joy which the girl emitted at her announcement made Louie determined to see that the school favourite received a good-sized share of the popular sweet.

"Hurrah! Now I can even manage to eat a little boiled mutton," said Jack. And setting to work she tackled her viands with an appetite which drew forth a sardonic remark from Nita.

"For a person who doesn't like boiled mutton, I must say you're managing to get it down pretty well," she said.

"Ah, but you see, the thought of treacle tart to follow sustains me," replied Jack, quite unabashed. "What's your favourite pudding, Gerry? Treacle tart or the apple pie we get on Sundays? I wonder why on Sundays it is always apple pie?"

"It's one of the rules of the Medes and Persians," said Nita, "that's why."

"Which do you like best, Gerry?" persisted Jack.

"Apple pie, I think," said Gerry, laughing, as much with pleasure at being included in the conversation again after all these weeks of exile as with amusement at Jack's nonsense—which was put on, as she very well knew, to hide the awkwardness of this reconciliation. Gerry, like Jack, felt shy at the thought of any sort of "scene" taking place, and was only too glad to fall back into friendly ways in this commonplace manner. It was rather a case of making conversation all through that meal, but Gerry responded bravely to Jack's efforts. And both girls felt that they were well on the way towards renewing the friendship which had been so nearly formed between them on the first evening of the term.

"I say, are you walking with anyone this afternoon?" asked Jack abruptly, when, dinner being over, the girls were leaving the dining-hall.

"I'm playing hockey," replied Gerry regretfully. "Worse luck!"

"*Worse luck?*" said Jack in astonishment. Then remembering some of Gerry's reasons for disliking the game, she coloured violently. "Oh, well, never mind," she said quickly. "I was going to ask you to be my walk-partner, but of course if you're playing hockey you can't."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Gerry. "I should have liked to have walked with you very much."

"We'll fix up another day," said Jack. "Let's see; to-morrow's Saturday, so there'll be no walk, as there's a first eleven hockey match to watch. Sunday, I'm engaged to Nita. Monday, I've got hockey. Tuesday—is Tuesday one of your hockey days?"

"No, not next week," replied Gerry.

"Well, then, will you be my walk-partner on Tuesday?"

"I'd love to," said Gerry, in a tone that left no doubt of her sincerity. And so the two parted—Jack to get ready for her walk, and Gerry to array herself in her hockey dress with a glow of happiness in her heart which even the memory of her hour of humiliation in the class-room could not subdue.

Things really seemed to have taken a turn for the better for Gerry at last. Once again Muriel appeared to take the K teams' hockey practice, and once again Gerry managed to win the approval of the head girl. At the conclusion of the game, Muriel again elected to walk down to the school with her protégée, and signified her pleasure at Gerry's improvement in her play.

"I don't know that you'll ever be very first class, but there's no reason at all why you shouldn't turn out a very useful player. I'm going to move you up into H. Alice Metcalfe will be your coach there. I'll tell her to put you on the forward line somewhere and train you for forward altogether. Your next practice will be Monday. How are things going for you in your form now—better? I saw you laughing quite a lot at dinner to-day, so I rather imagine that they are."

"Oh yes, thank you—they're much better," declared Gerry, rather confused at the sudden interest evinced in her affairs by the head girl. Muriel was quick to perceive her confusion, and attributing it to the right cause made haste to turn the conversation, and talked hockey exclusively during the remainder of the walk to the school.

True to their compact, the whole of the Lower Fifth refrained from doing a stroke of work for their new form-mistress in preparation that evening, although one or two of the girls felt rather doubtful as to what the consequences of this "direct action" might be. Gerry especially was troubled with qualms of conscience. Not that she was especially afraid of consequences—she was too happy at being taken at last into favour by her form to trouble very much about them. But Gerry had a capacity for putting herself into other people's places which was rather unusual in a girl so young; and do what she would, she could not quite banish the mistress's side of the case from her mind. Miss Burton was new and strange. She would probably grow more human in time if the girls did not too openly set themselves against her. And it was horrible to be unpopular. Gerry had had full opportunity of finding out how horrible unpopularity was. She was trying so hard to be brave—to live up to Muriel Paget's estimate of her—wasn't it rather cowardly to go against her conscience like this just for the sake of gaining the good opinion of her form-mates? Gerry had a long wrestle with her conscience as she sat at her desk that evening, when, all the rest of her preparation done, she was debating within herself whether or not she should start upon the work Miss Burton had set. But in the end, her longing for Jack's friendship overcame her sense of right and wrong. And she stifled back the small protesting voice within her.

"I promised the others I wouldn't, and I can't break my promise now," she argued to herself.

And when the bell rang for the end of preparation, the struggle was over. Friendship had won, and Gerry, in company with the rest of the Lower Fifth, had left undone the whole of the work that Miss Burton had set.

CHAPTER XIV

CHESTNUTS

The week-end went by much more happily than Gerry would have believed possible a few days ago. The members of the Lower Fifth were rather shy of her as a whole, it is true. But although, with the exception of Jack and Nita, they made no positive advances towards the new girl, yet they did not behave nearly as coldly as they had been doing of late.

And Jack was friendly enough to make up for all the others. She was rather fixed up with partners for the various week-end events; but she chattered away gaily to Gerry at meal-times, invited her to stand with Nita and herself to watch the hockey match on the Saturday afternoon, and generally did her utmost to make Gerry feel happy and at home.

On Sunday evening after tea, Gerry, who had put in an attendance at both the morning services and had so secured exemption from the evening service at St. Peter's, went to the library to find a book. Having procured one which promised to be interesting, she returned to the Lower Fifth sitting-room, and finding it empty, curled herself up on the hearthrug in front of the fire, and prepared for a happy if somewhat solitary evening. She had not been established there very long, however, before the door opened and Jack came into the room.

She dropped down beside Gerry on the hearth-rug and peered over her shoulder at the book.

"What are you reading?" she asked. "Anything interesting? Do you want to read very badly, or will you mind if we put out the light? Nita's coming in directly, and we'd arranged to have a cosy confab in the firelight. All the others are going to the organ recital, and we thought it would be a splendid opportunity to have a nice quiet evening all to ourselves."

"Is there an organ recital?" said Gerry. "I didn't know."

"Yes, there's been a notice up about it on the notice-board all the week. You are a blind old bat, Gerry, always up in the clouds. I don't believe you know half that goes on in the school. Miss Martyn's giving one in the Chapel this evening, but you needn't go to it unless you want—it's optional. Stay here and have a jolly evening with Nita and me. Here comes Nita."

The door opened at that moment, and Nita came quickly into the room.

"Hullo, here you are! I've got them all right—" she began, then stopped short at the sight of Gerry. In the dim light—Jack had switched off the overhead lamps, and the room was only lighted now by the glow from the fire—she had not seen her quite at first. "Oh, it's you, is it?" she said, somewhat abruptly. "I thought you'd gone to the organ recital."

Jack grinned at Nita's look of dismay and turned to Gerry with a chuckle of amusement.

"It's all right—don't take any notice of Nita. She doesn't really mean to be rude—it's just her way. Don't stand there looking like a stuffed owl, Nita. Gerry won't split. Will you, Gerry?"

"Split? Split on what?" asked Gerry, looking from one girl to the other in bewilderment.

"Why, we're going to have a chestnut-roasting, Nita and I. We were out for a walk with the three Fourth Forms this afternoon. Miss Burton took it. And we went by the chestnut plantation on Sir John Boyne's place—you know it, don't you, up by Southdown Woods? Nita and I gave the rest of them the slip and lay low in the plantation until they'd all gone past. Then we just set to and stuffed our pockets with chestnuts. There were loads of them, all eating ones, you know, and when the walk came back we tagged ourselves on to it without anyone getting wise. And we've planned to roast them in here while the others are at the organ recital. We didn't mean to let anyone else know, but we don't mind you—do we, Nita?"

"Oh no, of course not," said Nita hastily. But there was not quite so much conviction in her voice as Gerry would have liked to have heard in it. However, Jack's evident anxiety for her company made up for Nita's lack of cordiality; and soon the three of them were amicably engaged in scorching their faces and burning their fingers over the chestnuts.

It was very cosy in the sitting-room, curled up on the hearthrug in front of the glowing fire, which Jack had taken care to build up well before tea and which was now a flaming mass of red-hot coals. Jack was in one of her merriest, maddest moods, and her mirth infected the other two as well. Nita forgot her slight annoyance at finding that Gerry was to be a participator in the chestnut-roasting, and Gerry herself was too happy for words as she sat beside Jack in the flickering firelight. For Jack was leaning against her in the friendliest way, and it seemed to the new girl that all her school troubles were over at last, and that nothing but friendship and happiness lay before her.

But suddenly, while the merriment was at its height, the sitting-room door opened abruptly, and a stream of light from the passage outside poured into the room. Nita sprang to her feet, and Jack and Gerry looked round in startled surprise. A thin, angular figure stood in the doorway, and a rasping voice exclaimed in disgusted tones:

"What is this smell of burning?"

"Jemima! It's Miss Burton!" muttered Jack, as she scrambled to her feet. "Quick, Gerry, stuff the chestnuts into your pocket! Anywhere—while I brush the shucks under the hearthrug. She can't have seen anything yet."

Gerry hastily gathered up what chestnuts she could lay her hands upon and stuffed them into the one pocket her dress possessed. Nita did the same, while Jack disposed of the empty shells as best she could. By the time Miss Burton had succeeded in finding the switch and turning on the light, nothing remained except the tell-tale smell of burning to betray the fact that any unlawful feasting had recently taken place.

Jack sniffed innocently into the air.

"Burning, Miss Burton? Is there a smell of burning?"

Miss Burton advanced into the room, looking suspiciously about her. Her days of chestnut-roasting were so long over, that she was unable to detect exactly the nature of the strange odour that assailed her nostrils, although she was well aware that it was something that should not have been in evidence in any well-conducted school. However, there appeared to be nothing that she could pounce upon, and she was obliged to confine her energies to strictures upon the unconventional attitudes in which she had surprised the three girls.

"Really, the way you girls behave in this school is atrocious! Fancy three big girls of fifteen sitting on the floor in that ugly attitude. And why are you sitting in the dark? Why are you here at all for that matter? Is there not an organ recital you ought to be attending?"

"The organ recital was optional, Miss Burton," said Jack respectfully. Respect seemed to her the easiest way of getting rid of this very unwelcome visitor. "And Nita and Gerry and I thought we would rather stay in here in the warm, and have a cosy talk over the fire."

"But why turn the lights out?" demanded the mistress, suspicious of the extreme innocence of the three faces before her. The innocence of two of them, rather! Gerry was not good at disguising her expression at any time, and at the moment she was looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"We like sitting in the firelight best," said Jack glibly. "It makes it seem so much more cosy

and mysterious. Don't you think so yourself, Miss Burton?" From the keen interest of her tone an uninitiated observer might have thought that it was really a matter of importance to her to discover the mistress's private opinion on this engrossing topic.

Miss Burton, however, was not to be thus beguiled.

"No, I cannot say that I do," she said stiffly. She gave another suspicious look around, but although she was not by any means convinced of the innocency of her three pupils' proceedings, there seemed to be nothing that she could lay hold of, and she turned reluctantly towards the door.

And then at that inauspicious moment, Gerry's pocket—stuffed far beyond its ordinary capacity with chestnuts—must suddenly give way!

There was a sound of ripping material, and the next moment a cascade of chestnuts poured out upon the floor. In a moment Miss Burton was upon them, and the mystery of the strange smell became apparent to her.

"I *thought* so!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "I knew you were up to some sort of mischief! Attendance at Chapel may be optional, as you say, but I am quite sure that you are not allowed to stay away in order to roast chestnuts!"

"There's no rule that says we mayn't, that I know of," said Jack, rather impudently.

The mistress glared at her.

"Don't be impertinent!" she said. "If you are allowed to do it, why did you attempt to conceal the chestnuts? Come with me to Miss Oakley—we will see what she has to say about it."

Any other mistress would have dealt with the affair herself, and not have taken it up to the Head in such a drastic manner. Jack gave a gasp of dismay. But she realised the futility of arguing with Miss Burton, and with a shrug of her shoulders she walked towards the door. Nita and Gerry followed in her wake, and the three culprits were marched along the corridors to the headmistress's study, Miss Burton keeping a strict eye upon them and bearing the chestnuts in her hands.

Miss Oakley was enjoying a quiet hour in her study, but she aroused herself at once to attend to the mistress's complaint. Miss Burton was a newcomer, and although the headmistress had realised already that her methods were not altogether the methods in vogue at Wakehurst Priory, yet courtesy as well as school discipline demanded that her complaints should be attended to. So she listened gravely enough to the recital of the reprehensible conduct of the three Lower Fifth girls, and their attempted concealment of the chestnuts.

"Geraldine Wilmott had hidden them in her pocket," said the mistress, having made out the worst possible case against the three culprits. "That shows that she had a guilty conscience, I am inclined to think that this girl is the worst of the three. She was very rude and insolent to me the other morning in class."

Miss Oakley glanced at Gerry's crimson face in surprise. The new girl always seemed so shy and quiet that rudeness and insolence were about the last things she expected from her. However, whatever the facts might be of the incident in class, they had nothing to do with the matter in hand, and she turned again to her contemplation of the chestnuts.

"May I ask where you obtained these chestnuts?" she inquired mildly.

Jack answered for the other two.

"Nita and I got them while we were out walking this afternoon, if you please, Miss Oakley."

"I don't think it does please me," said the mistress quietly. "The only chestnut trees that I know of near here belong to Sir John Boyne, and I know he is very particular about trespassers on his estate. Did you go into his plantation to get them?"

"Yes," said Jack.

"Then you acted very wrongly, Jack," the headmistress said gravely. "I do not suppose that you quite realised it, but what you were doing was nothing less than stealing. If you had been poor children and had been caught by the keepers, you would probably have been severely punished. As it is, I cannot allow you to escape all punishment for your wrong-doing. You will all three write out, 'I must not steal,' three hundred times, and hand your lines to Miss Burton not later than to-morrow evening."

"But, please, Miss Oakley, Gerry didn't steal them. She wasn't with us out walking, and she didn't know anything about it until after tea," said Jack.

"But she helped you to eat them, I suppose?" said the headmistress.

"Y—yes, but she didn't have anything to do with thinking of the plan. She just happened to be

in the sitting-room, so we asked her to join in," said Jack.

"Well, perhaps her crime wasn't quite so great as yours," said Miss Oakley, with a little smile. "All the same, since she took part in the feasting, I think she also must pay for her pleasure. Geraldine, suppose you write out, 'Chestnuts are bad for the digestion,' one hundred times—I think that will be enough for your share. Now you may go."

The three made their way back to the sitting-room, rather crestfallen at the ignominious ending to their cosy evening, and full of wrath against Miss Burton for what Jack termed her "beastly sneakiness." At least, Jack and Nita were full of wrath. Gerry was too unhappy at having got her friends into trouble to be angry with anybody.

"I'm most awfully sorry, Jack," she said miserably. "If only my beastly pocket hadn't burst it would have been all right! I always seem to be getting you into trouble! I am such a stupid ass over things!"

"Oh, that's all right," said Jack, trying to be magnanimous, although she could not help agreeing with Gerry about her stupidity. Gerry certainly seemed an expert at doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. "You couldn't help your pocket bursting, of course."

But in spite of her words, Gerry could not help feeling that both her companions blamed her a little for the unfortunate accident—Nita more so, perhaps, than Jack. It would have been some consolation if she had been allowed to share fully in the punishment, but Jack, with that scrupulous honesty of hers, had effectually prevented her from doing that. Gerry would gladly have done the lines for all three of them, but that, of course, was impossible, and she could only bear her own share of the burden laid upon them.

The organ recital was over by the time the three reached the Lower Fifth sitting-room again, and the members of the form had returned to their usual Sunday evening occupations. Grumbling greatly at their affliction, Jack and Nita got out their pens and paper and made a beginning at their punishment task, for they knew that it would be all that they could do to get the lines finished by the required time. The rest of the Lower Fifth listened sympathetically to their tale of woe, and many were the censures upon the new mistress for her unsportsman-like manner of dealing with the affair.

"Of course she ought to have lectured you herself, and let you off with a conduct mark at most," exclaimed Dorothy Pemberton. "Fancy taking you up to the Head for a little thing like that!"

"But what a silly ass you must have been, Gerry Wilmott, to go letting them drop just when she was going away," said Phyllis Tressider. Phyllis still bore a grudge against Gerry because of the rowing the head girl had given her on Gerry's behalf, and she had acquiesced very unwillingly into taking the new girl into favour.

"I couldn't help it, my pocket burst," said Gerry. And Jack, although she herself blamed Gerry a little for the accident, hastened to take her part.

"Shut up, Phyllis, and leave Gerry alone. It wasn't her fault. It was that beast of a Miss Burton! Never mind, though, we'll be revenged upon her to-morrow. Won't she be wild when she finds that we've none of us done a single stroke of the work she set!"

"She'll report us to Miss Oakley, right away—you see if she doesn't," prophesied Hilda Burns gloomily. "If she'll report a little thing like roasting chestnuts, she's sure to take a big matter like refusing to do our work up to the Head, too. We're in for an awful time, in my opinion. I think we were asses to have done it. It would have been better to have got even with her in some safer way."

"Well, it's too late now to begin repenting about it," said Jack cheerfully. "And, anyway, we're all in it together, whatever happens." And then she and Nita and Gerry settled down to their punishment lines.

CHAPTER XV

THE LOWER FIFTH IS MUTE

The first lesson on Monday morning was with Miss Latham. The Lower Fifth, by way of marking the contrast, or perhaps in order to soothe their guilty consciences, had given extra attention to their preparation for the English mistress, and matters progressed swimmingly in consequence. Miss Latham dealt out good marks lavishly. Then, with a word of praise for the careful manner in which the form had prepared its work, she made way for Miss Burton.

It was the German lesson first.

"Let me see—I set an essay for your preparation, didn't I?" began the new mistress briskly. "Hilda Burns, you are head of this form, kindly collect the papers and bring them to me."

Hilda rose from her desk, then hesitated, while her eye swept round the classroom. Every member of the form sat rigidly at attention, while every desk was bare of essay papers. With a little gasp of nervousness, Hilda endeavoured to break the news of the Lower Fifth's unpreparedness for the lesson.

"If you please, Miss Burton, I don't think there are any essays to be given in."

Miss Burton stared at her in undisguised amazement.

"No essays? What do you mean, child? Do you mean to tell me that nobody in the whole form has had time to do their preparation?"

"I—I don't think there are any essays done," evaded Hilda.

Miss Burton continued to stare at the head of her form for a moment or two. Then a grim expression came over her face and she turned to the other girls.

"Hands up, please, those of you who have done the essay that I set," she commanded.

Not a hand was raised. The whole form sat in rigid stillness; and the mistress put her question in a slightly different form.

"Hands up those of you who have not done it," she said.

With a promptness that would have done the form credit in a drill display, a hand shot up from every girl, while a stifled giggle ran round the room at the look of blank astonishment that spread over the mistress's face.

"I shall be obliged if someone will enlighten me as to why this work has not been done," Miss Burton said at length in her stiffest manner. But although she waited for an answer, none came. Once more she turned to Hilda.

"Hilda Burns, will you please explain why the form has not done the preparation that I set?" she demanded. But there was no satisfactory explanation to be got out of Hilda. The head of the form blushed and stammered and fidgeted, but no coherent answer was forthcoming from her, and at last the mistress gave up the attempt to elicit one.

"Since you refuse to give me any explanation, I can only put down your omission to prepare the essay to rank laziness," she remarked icily. "Possibly you thought that as I was a newcomer, you could do what you liked in my classes. You will find that you have made a mistake, for I assure you that I am going to stand no nonsense. Of course, there will be no marks for this lesson, and you will write the essay for the next German class in addition to the fresh work which I shall set you. I had intended to read your essays aloud and criticise them in class, but since they are not written I cannot, of course, do that."

"Thank the Lord they aren't written, then," muttered Jack in an aside to Phyllis Tressider. Unfortunately for Jack, Miss Burton's quick ears caught the remark and she pounced upon the offender in a trice.

"Joanna Pym, take a bad mark," she snapped. Then she resumed her address to the rest of the form.

"Since I cannot carry out my original intention of criticising your essays, I am going to ask you questions in German which I shall expect you to answer in that language. Dorothy Pemberton, you are sitting at the end of a row, I shall begin with you. Everybody pay attention, please. Dorothy, 'Was hast du während deinen Sommerferien getan?'"

It was a question to which Dorothy could have found any amount of suitable answers, but, mindful of the compact with the form, she sat in silence and the question passed to her next-door neighbour, Phyllis. Phyllis also passed it, and thereafter Miss Burton went from one girl to another without receiving any attempt at a reply. When the whole form had passed the question in dead silence, the mistress, quivering with anger, propounded another.

"Warum halten die Dichter der Frühling für die schönsten der Jahreszeiten?" she inquired, with a ferocity which was rather at variance with the peaceful tenor of the question.

Once again it was Dorothy's turn to answer. Once again she passed the question, and once again it travelled right round the form without eliciting a response in German or in any other language.

"Does anybody know the meaning of this sentence?" asked Miss Burton sarcastically, still struggling to preserve her self-control. Everybody knew it, of course, but nobody would condescend to say so, and the class retained its stubborn demeanour.

Then the mistress could contain her wrath no longer. The storm broke, and for a quarter of an hour the Lower Fifth sat and listened to a raging denunciation of its stupidity, its crass ignorance and unbelievable insolence, poured out upon them in no measured terms. By rights, the Lower Fifth should have writhed in its seats as it listened to the fiery condemnation of its new form-mistress. But in reality it did no such thing. It was delighted at having aroused the enemy to such indignant anger, and the members of the form drank in with unholy joy the richness of the abuse poured out upon them.

Towards the end of the lesson, however, Miss Burton suddenly calmed down.

"It is evidently no use *my* saying anything to you," she said. "We will see what Miss Oakley has to say when she hears about it."

It was a threat for which the Lower Fifth were prepared, certainly, but one which filled them with considerable uneasiness, nevertheless. The German lesson was over at last, but it was followed immediately by an algebra class which Miss Burton was also supposed to take. Absolutely no attempt had been made to touch the preparation set for it, and as soon as she had ascertained this fact, the mistress adopted a line of action for which the Lower Fifth was totally unprepared.

"Kindly put all your books and papers away in your desks. Pencils and indiarubbers, too, and rulers. Has everybody put everything away? Then you will all of you kindly sit in silence during this next hour. I do not intend to waste my time in trying to teach a class which refuses to allow itself to be taught. Since you have all elected to do nothing this morning, you can sit and *do* it, while I correct exercises for the Upper Fourth."

And to the form's dismay, the new mistress immediately set to work upon a pile of exercise books, leaving the Lower Fifth to sit idle and silent until the lesson should be over.

It is one thing to do nothing while an angry mistress is trying to make you work! Quite another to sit doing it in deadly boredom for a whole hour! The Lower Fifth had not known before how long an hour could be. There were not even pencils to fidget about with, and the form felt that it would almost rather have been marched at once to Miss Oakley than have to endure this dreadful inaction any longer. But Miss Burton, having made up her mind to the penance her form should do, was adamant. She sat industriously correcting exercises, and addressed no remark at all to the rebels, except to deal out order marks when people fidgeted more than usual. By the time the hour was over quite a lot of these distinctions had been gained.

"Well, we shall have some marks to give in, anyway," said Jack, when the Lower Fifth was released at eleven o'clock recess to refresh itself with cocoa and biscuits in the dining-hall. "Better have bad marks to give in, I suppose, than none at all!"

"I wonder what she'll do when it comes to literature and she finds we haven't prepared for that, either," said Hilda, with rather a tragic expression on her face. Hilda's conscience was troubling her a good deal. She had very lively visions of what the headmistress would probably say about her responsibility as head of the form, when the matter should get to her ears.

"Treat us the same way as she did in algebra class, I expect," said Jack, with a grimace. "Wasn't it a rotten thing to go and do? I'd much rather she had raved at us like she did over the German—that really was rather fun!"

"It was rather cute of her, all the same," said Dorothy, with a sort of grudging admiration. "It made me feel rather mean when she settled down to correcting those papers like that. If she hadn't been quite so lavish with her bad marks all the time, I almost believe I might have repented a bit then."

"Oh, you'll repent all right, later on. Don't you worry about that," said Jack philosophically. "You just wait until Miss Oakley has given us a jawing. She'll make you feel an utter worm; you just see if she doesn't!"

"I know she will!" said Hilda, with a groan. "I say, don't you think we'd better give in and tell Miss Burton that we're sorry? There's a perfectly awful time waiting for us if we go on with the strike."

"We've gone too far to draw back now," said Dorothy. "So we may as well go on a little longer and see if we can't accomplish something. We've set out to show Miss Burton that she's come to an up-to-date public school, and that her old-fashioned kindergarten methods won't go down here. Don't let's give in before the campaign's properly begun!"

"Courage, *mes amis*," cried Jack gaily, waving a biscuit over her head. "The worst is still to come, I admit, but we are martyrs in a good cause. We'll teach Miss Burton a lesson before we've done! And if we burn our own fingers in the doing of it—well, we knew we shouldn't get off scot-free before we began, didn't we?"

"Anyway, we shall have a bit of a run for our money," observed Nita Fleming, who had only just joined the group. "Miss Oakley's gone away till Wednesday—I was in the hall just now and saw her drive off. That means Thursday before the row can come off, at the very earliest."

"Hurrah!" shouted Jack. "If we all hold together till then we shall have broken Miss Burton's spirit, and shown her that she can't treat us as though we were just a parcel of kids. Thursday—why, who knows, we may have brought her to terms by then!"

"There's the bell!" said Hilda. "Buck up! it's Mademoiselle first, and we don't want to be late for her."

The French lesson passed off most successfully, full marks being gained by the whole form. Then came a breathless moment while the form waited for the reappearance of Miss Burton. But to everybody's astonishment it was the head girl, Muriel Paget, who walked into the classroom at the conclusion of the French lesson.

"Miss Burton isn't coming to this class," announced the head girl in cold tones. "Miss Latham has asked me to come and sit here during the lesson. Get out your *Henry the Fifths*, please. You are to copy out Act I. Scene ii. from the beginning, putting in all the stage-directions and footnotes. Those are Miss Latham's orders, and what you don't have time to do now, you are to finish in prep to-night."

"My hat! The whole of the second scene!" groaned Phyllis in a whisper. "Why, there's pages and pages of it!"

"Silence, please! There is to be no talking in class," rapped out Muriel, frowning. Phyllis, catching the frown, relapsed into instant silence, and meekly found the place in her copy of *Henry V*. Defying the new mistress was one thing, but to defy the head girl was quite another. And soon the whole of the Lower Fifth was struggling with ink-stained fingers and much inward groaning of spirit to accomplish the irksome and monotonous task allotted to it.

Miss Burton did not return to the classroom at all that morning, and at the end of school, Muriel set the preparation for the evening and prepared to take the marks. Miss Latham's awards for English came first and were duly noted down. Then came the marks for the German class.

"German, now," said Muriel. "Hilda Burns, how many?"

"None," came from Hilda.

"Dorothy Pemberton?"

"None."

"Phyllis Tressider?"

"None."

And so on throughout the whole form, right down to Gerry Wilmott, whose name as the last comer was placed last upon the list. Muriel made no comment upon the scandalous result, but called for the marks for algebra. Once again the same comedy was enacted. Then came the good marks obtained from Mademoiselle, and then the last class for literature. Muriel did not ask any questions respecting these.

"You have none of you any marks for literature," she said. "Any bad marks to give in?"

There were several, and the head girl's eyebrows went up as she put them down.

"Is that *all*?" she asked sarcastically, when at last she had disposed of all the upraised hands. Then she closed the mark-book and prepared to descend from the high desk.

"I hope you are pleased with your morning's work," she said, and went out of the room, leaving a somewhat discomfited Lower Fifth behind her.

"I say! The fat *is* in the fire if all the Sixth know about it!" said Dorothy uncomfortably.

"What a perfectly, beastly mean sneak that Miss Burton is!" exclaimed Phyllis.

"Well, all I can say is, we shall have to make things so beastly uncomfortable for her that she'll just *have* to go!" said Jack vindictively. Then she relapsed into a rather sheepish grin. "At any rate, it is to be hoped that we shall," she said. "For we've certainly succeeded in making things beastly uncomfortable for ourselves."

A remark with which the whole form mournfully agreed.

A GREAT DECISION

"Done your lines yet?" inquired Jack, catching Gerry up just as the latter was going into the Lower Fifth classroom for preparation that evening.

"Very nearly," said Gerry. "I've only got about another ten to do, I think. I've come in early so as to finish them and take them up to Miss Burton before the prep bell goes. How are you getting on with yours?"

"Oh, about half-way through, I think," said Jack carelessly. "But it doesn't matter. I shall do them in prep to-night instead of any of Miss Burton's work. I shouldn't bother about them at all if it wasn't Miss Oakley who had set them. As it is, I shall have to do them, I suppose. It doesn't pay to disobey the Head, I can tell you," she added, with emphasis.

Jack and Gerry were not the only two members of the Lower Fifth who had come in early for preparation that night. When they entered the classroom, they found several of the girls there already. Most of them were gathered around Hilda Burns's desk, apparently endeavouring to persuade her to some course of action.

"Here's Jack!" exclaimed Dorothy Pemberton in a tone of relief as the two newcomers came into the room. "I say, Jack, *do* come here and talk to Hilda! She wants to cave in and do Miss Burton's prep. I tell her that she'll be a traitor to the form if she does."

"Of course, she will be!" cried Jack. "And, besides, it won't be the slightest use caving in now. Miss Burton's got her knife into us like blazes. She's sure to take the matter up to the Head, anyway, so we may as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb!"

"That's what I say," said Dorothy. "But Hilda's got an attack of nerves or conscience or something. Pull yourself together, old girl, and stick to it. As Jack says, we're bound to get into a beastly row anyhow, so we might as well try and accomplish our purpose before we cave in."

"But what is our purpose?" argued Hilda, still unconvinced, but manifestly wavering.

"To teach Miss Burton a lesson, of course. To show her that she can't go sticking the Lower Fifth in corners as though we were a parcel of babies from the First Form! To make her see how jolly unpopular she's made herself, and to induce her to treat us better for the future if she stays on—which I jolly well hope Miss Oakley won't let her do!" said Jack, with a fine flourish of eloquence.

"Good old Jack!" said Dorothy approvingly. "That's put it in a nutshell. Now, Hilda, say you'll stick to it and refuse to work for Miss Burton, or—or we'll send you to Coventry or something!"

The threat was made laughingly. Dorothy knew well enough that Hilda's strength of purpose was not sufficient for her to stand out against the whole of her form when it actually came to the point. This was not the first time she had had to deal with the conscience of the head of the form. Hilda was apt to get these belated attacks of panic when nefarious schemes were afoot in the Lower Fifth, but never yet had she been known to make a stand for her convictions. And this occasion proved no exception to the general rule. Seeing that public opinion was all in favour of continuing the strike, she yielded, with one last feeble protest.

"Well, don't blame me when Miss Oakley comes down upon us like a ton of bricks!" she said, as she got out the books and papers for the preparation set by Miss Latham and Mademoiselle.

"We won't, old thing," promised Jack. "And if there's anything left of us after the Head's done with us, we'll let you say, 'I told you so,' as many times as you like! I'm sure it will be no end of a consolation to you!"

While this argument was in progress, Gerry had been quietly finishing her lines. She had now completed writing out "Chestnuts are bad for the digestion" one hundred times, and, fastening her papers neatly together with a paper-fastener, she glanced up at the clock. It still wanted four minutes to five o'clock. If she was quick she would just about have time to hand over her lines to Miss Burton before the prep bell sounded, and, getting up from her desk, she left the classroom and hurried along to the mistress's private study.

The bell rang just as she reached it, but, having come so far, Gerry did not mean to turn back now. She tapped at the door. Then, as no answer came, she tapped again, a little louder this time.

"Bother! She isn't there," she said to herself. "Never mind, though," she added. "I'll put them on the table where she'll be sure to see them." And turning the handle of the door, she pushed it open to go inside.

Then she stopped suddenly with her hand upon the door knob. Miss Burton was there, sitting in an easy-chair drawn up beside the cheerful little fire which was blazing away on the hearth. She was sitting in a very dejected attitude, leaning forward with her head bowed upon her hands—Gerry caught a momentary glimpse of her as the door opened. But before the girl could make any apology, the mistress was sitting bolt upright in her usual rigid position and glaring at the intruder with all her accustomed sternness.

"What do you mean by bursting into my sitting-room in this manner?" she inquired severely.

"I—I'm very sorry," faltered Gerry. "I did knock, twice—but nobody answered, so I thought you must be out."

"So you came in to spy round my room in my absence, I suppose?" said the mistress bitterly.

Gerry flushed hotly with indignation.

"No, indeed I didn't, Miss Burton!" she exclaimed. "I was bringing you my lines, and as you weren't here I thought I'd just put them somewhere on your table where you would be sure to see them when you came back."

"Lines. What lines?" asked the mistress as she held out her hand for the papers. Then, as Gerry gave them to her and she caught sight of the sentence written out so many times, the recollection of the chestnut episode came back to her.

"Ah yes, I remember," she said. "So you *have* condescended to do these for me, have you? What about the other two girls, Joanna and Nita? Are they writing theirs also?"

"Yes, but they had more to do than I had. They'll bring theirs along as soon as they've finished them," said Gerry, feeling suddenly more embarrassed and uncomfortable than ever. A bright flame from the fire had sprung up, and by its light Gerry saw something which filled her with dismay.

Miss Burton's eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles were unmistakably red and wet with tears! She had been crying! Gerry, who had cried so often during this unhappy term, knew the signs too well to be deceived.

"I suppose you felt you had to do them since Miss Oakley set them," said the mistress, still with that bitter note in her voice. "I have not time to examine them now. I'll look through them presently and let you know if they are tidy enough for me to accept." And she made a gesture of dismissal.

But Gerry still lingered. She did not quite know what she could do, but somehow it seemed impossible to go away and leave the new mistress in trouble behind her. Gerry was a tender-hearted person and she could not bear to see others in distress. She longed to be able to say something comforting, but no words suitable to the occasion came to her, and at last Miss Burton, seeing her still standing near the door, spoke to her in angry exasperation.

"What are you waiting for, child! Didn't you hear me say that I could not look at them until later? Go back to your classroom at once. The bell for preparation rang long ago."

Thus admonished, Gerry was obliged to leave the room, but she went very reluctantly, and her progress back to the Lower Fifth classroom was very slow indeed. A tumult of conflicting emotions was raging within her. All along she had been uneasily aware that the strike against the new mistress was wrong, and now the unmistakable traces of tears on Miss Burton's plain face had borne in upon her how very wrong and mean it was. Something must be done at once to stop it—that was evident—but yet what could she do? What could one girl do against many?—and an insignificant, unpopular new girl at that!

Just as she reached the top of the Upper School corridor she encountered the head girl, who stopped with a friendly smile as she recognised her.

"What are you doing here, kiddie?" said Muriel. "Oughtn't you to be in prep?"

"I'm just going," said Gerry. "I had some lines to take to Miss Burton, and I'm just on my way back."

"What have you been doing to get lines?" said Muriel. Then, without waiting for an answer to her question, she asked another:

"How did you get on at hockey to-day? Did Alice play you forward?"

"Oh yes, thank you. She put me outside right. And I think I got on much better," said Gerry eagerly. "I—I am beginning to think I shall like hockey when I've got a little more used to it," she added shyly.

"That's right!" said Muriel heartily. "I knew you would when once you'd found your feet a bit. Half the trouble was that you were put to play in the wrong place. Don't forget that you are playing for the dormitory again on Saturday."

"It's awfully good of you to give me another chance, Muriel," Gerry said gratefully. "I *do* hope I shan't funk again."

"Funk? Of course you won't," came the brisk reply. "Make up your mind that there's nothing to be frightened of, and funking will be the last thing you'll want to do. Nobody need ever be afraid of funking if they'll forget about themselves and just play the game."

"Muriel—" began Gerry suddenly, and then stopped abruptly.

"Well, what's the matter?" asked Muriel.

"Nothing. I—I was going to ask you something, but I don't think—yes, I will, though!" Gerry added, with sudden determination. "What would *you* do, Muriel, if you were doing something that you knew wasn't right, and yet you'd *promised* to do it?"

Muriel looked at the younger girl in some perplexity.

"What would I do if I'd promised to do something which I knew wasn't right?" she repeated slowly. "Well, the best thing would be not to promise, wouldn't it?"

"I know that," said Gerry. "But if you *had* promised, what then? It's wrong to break a promise, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—well, I don't quite know what to say," said the head girl. "It's rather a difficult question to answer off-hand. So much would depend upon the circumstances. Couldn't you tell me the whole story? Then perhaps I'd be able to advise you better."

"I'm sorry—I'm afraid I can't do that," said Gerry desperately, wondering what on earth had induced her to confide in the head girl at all. What *would* Muriel be thinking of her, she wondered. "It would be sneaking if I did. Can't you possibly tell me what you'd do if it was you, without my telling you everything?"

"It's rather difficult," said Muriel, frowning. "I don't want you to tell me things that you ought not. But, at the same time, I really don't see how I can answer your question until I know a little more."

"I can't tell you any more," said Gerry, a little wistfully. "But it doesn't matter. I daresay I shall be able to think of the answer for myself."

"Wait a minute," said Muriel, as Gerry was moving away. "I can't tell you just what I should do without knowing all the circumstances; but I'll tell you something my father told me when I first came to school, and perhaps that will help you a bit. It's helped me several times. He said, 'If ever you are in a difficulty, and don't know what is the right thing to do under any special circumstances, just think which would be the hardest—and it's ten to one you'll find that the *hardest* way is right.'"

Gerry's eyes were bent upon the ground for a moment. Then she lifted them to meet the head girl's gaze with a look of determination in them which touched Muriel strangely.

"Thank you," she said soberly. "That has helped—I guess I know now which is the right thing to do." And with that queer look of decision still upon her face, she turned away in the direction of the Lower Fifth classroom.

"Queer kid, that," thought Muriel, as she made her way towards her study, whither she was bound. "I like her, though, all the same. There's something in her, which is more than one can say for the majority of the kids here. It's a pity she's such an awful funk. She'd really be quite a decent sort of girl if she could only get over her nerves a bit."

If Muriel had only known it, the "awful funk" was on her way at that moment to perform a braver action than the head girl, with all her prowess at hockey and gym, had ever performed in her life.

CHAPTER XVII

INTO THE LION'S MOUTH

The Lower Fifth was deep in its preparation when Gerry entered the classroom. One or two heads were raised at her entrance, but nobody paid much regard to her as she walked across the room to her desk, which was in the front row. The Lower Fifth was trusted to do its preparation without a mistress's supervision, and, as a rule, this plan worked well enough. There was a certain amount of talking at times, it is true, but not a very great deal, and the little there was did not take place in general until all the more serious work of preparation had been accomplished. To-night the class was in the throes of a stiff bit of translation for Mademoiselle, and nobody felt inclined to break the silence.

Gerry reached her desk, but she did not sit down in it. She hesitated, then opened the desk and took out some books. Still she did not sit down, and once or twice she glanced nervously around the room, as though she were about to speak. But each time her courage failed her.

Her uneasiness communicated itself at length to her next-door neighbour, Margaret Taylor, who, finding the translation more difficult than she had expected, was inclined to be grumpy.

"I wish to goodness you'd sit down, Gerry Wilmott, and not keep fidgeting about like that. You're in my light, and goodness knows this beastly translation is hard enough without having to do it in the dark into the bargain," she snapped.

"I'm sorry," said Gerry. Then, having found her tongue at last, she plunged at once into what she had to say, fearing lest she would never find courage to say it at all if she let this opportunity slip.

"I want to say," she began, "that I'm—I'm awfully sorry, but I'm not going on with the strike any longer."

It was out at last! And Gerry waited in trembling expectation for the storm to burst. It was some while in coming, for the Lower Fifth did not take in quite what she was saying at first.

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Dorothy Pemberton, looking up from her exercise with knitted brows.

"I—I mean the strike about not doing Miss Burton's work," stammered Gerry.

"Well—what about it?" asked Phyllis Tressider menacingly.

"Only that—that I can't go on with it. I—I don't think it's quite fair to Miss Burton," said Gerry, finding the task even harder than she had imagined it would be.

"Do you mean to say that you're not going to stick in with the rest of us—that you are going to back out and do her work? Surely you're not going to be a traitor to the form like that?" cried Dorothy.

Poor Gerry looked acutely miserable. She felt Jack's reproachful eyes upon her, and she knew that if she persisted in her present attitude the friendship which was so precious to her, and which seemed at last to be within her grasp, would be dreadfully endangered. For a moment she felt that she could not go on. Why should she give up everything—Jack's friendship, the good opinion of the girls, the happiness of the last few days, and allow herself to be branded as a hopeless prig—all for the sake of a mistress who had shown her nothing but injustice? Then the memory of the red eyes behind Miss Burton's spectacles, the abject misery of the mistress's attitude when she had opened the door of the room, came back to Gerry's mind. Perhaps one girl couldn't do very much towards making things better for the unpopular mistress, but she could at least refrain from making things worse. The words Muriel had said to her in the passage about the hardest way being nearly always the right one, rang in Gerry's ears. There was no doubt in Gerry's mind as to which was the hardest way! For all her timidity Gerry had a curious moral courage of her own, and it seemed to her now that it would be the height of cowardice to give in just to gain the good opinion of her form-mates. A moment more she hesitated while she met Jack's astonished, reproachful gaze. Then conscience triumphed over even that unutterable longing for Jack's friendship.

"I don't want to be a traitor to the form," she said in a low voice, yet clear and distinct enough for all to hear. "But all the same, I can't go on with the strike. I was in Miss Burton's room just now and she had been crying, and I'm sure it was all about us. Whatever the rest of you are going to do, I, for one, shall do Miss Burton's preparation."

"But why, why, *why*?" cried Jack, starting up impetuously and coming over to Gerry's side. "Don't be a priggish little donkey, Gerry," she added, not unkindly. "You can't stick out when all the rest of us are in it. Hang on a little bit longer. We'll come out top of this struggle, you just see if we don't!"

"I'm sorry," repeated Gerry miserably, "but I can't, Jack. It—it isn't fair to Miss Burton."

"But who wants to be fair to her?" cried Jack impatiently. "Was she fair to you the other morning when she accused you of whispering in class and stuck you in the corner like a baby? Was she fair over taking that chestnut business up to the Head? Don't be a silly little fool, Gerry. Chuck your lot in with the rest of us, and let's get rid of this rotten mistress if we can."

"I'm sorry, Jack, but—but I can't," said Gerry again.

"Oh, Gerry, you can——" began Jack remonstratingly. But Dorothy Pemberton broke in upon her persuasions with an impatient exclamation.

"Oh, let German Gerry alone!" she said cuttingly. "Of *course* she won't stick in with us! She's far too much of a sneak, and far too much of a coward to risk a row with Miss Oakley. What's the good of arguing with a coward!"

"Look here, if we're not all going to be in it, I'm coming out too," exclaimed Hilda Burns suddenly. "It was all very well striking when we were all hanging together, but it's quite a different thing if some of them are going to back out. You can take me off the list of strikers too."

"Are you going to be a coward as well?" said Dorothy sneeringly. But it was too late. The defection started by Gerry spread rapidly. Since the morning, the strike, which had at first seemed to be merely a more or less harmless rag, had begun to appear in its right light, and the hearts of the Lower Fifth were no longer in the business. Several members of the form were glad to find an excuse for backing out of their contract, and soon some nine or ten of the girls had retracted their vows of defiance.

"Oh, well, of course, if you're *all* going to funk it, it's no good going on with it at all," said Dorothy sulkily. "We've all got to hang together or, of course, it's no use. I should have thought you'd have been ashamed to follow the example of a German Gerry, though!" she added, with biting sarcasm, as she cast a look of malevolence at Gerry.

Then her eyes fell upon Jack, who was still lingering hesitatingly by Gerry's desk, and the sight spurred her on to make one more spiteful thrust at Gerry.

"There's *one* thing, Gerry Wilmott, you may as well understand right away. *You're* not going to gain anything by what you've done to-night. You may have broken our strike,—no strike can stand out against a blackleg,—but all the same, you'll wish you'd stayed in with us before you've finished. I don't know what those *rabbits* are going to do," with a contemptuous glance towards Hilda and the other girls who had seceded, "but I think I can answer for the rest of the form all right. No decent girl in the Lower Fifth will ever speak to you again, if they can help it."

She turned to Jack.

"Surely *you* won't have anything more to do with such a rotten coward, Jack?" she said contemptuously.

Jack looked down at Gerry. But Gerry's eyes were fixed miserably upon her desk, and she did not see the questioning look upon the face of the girl with whom she most longed to be friends. And while Jack still lingered, Phyllis Tressider clinched matters.

"She's not only a coward—she's a sneak as well!" she said, glad to see her enemy in such disgrace again. "I bet she let those chestnuts drop out of her pocket yesterday on purpose to get you and Nita into a row."

"Oh, Phyllis, I didn't! Jack, it isn't true; I didn't do it on purpose!" cried Gerry, dismayed at such a motive being attributed to her.

But the shaft had gone home. Against her own better judgment, Jack had felt all along that Gerry had been unnecessarily careless over that chestnut affair. In her heart of hearts she had not been able to help blaming her a little for the row that had followed. And now Phyllis's unjust accusation went home to roost. Jack's better moment, in which she had been half-inclined to stand by Gerry, passed. Dorothy's taunts and jeers and Phyllis's malicious suggestions achieved their end. No, of course she couldn't be friends with a girl who was a coward and a sneak! And all unaware of the tremendous courage it had needed for Gerry to make her stand, Jack turned away and went back to her own desk.

And so the momentary break in Gerry's sky was over. The clouds were back again, as thick as they were before—thicker this time, if possible!

Truly, some ill-luck seemed to dog the steps of the unfortunate occupant of Cubicle Thirteen!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE END OF THE STRIKE

One thing Gerry's defection certainly had done—it had quite broken the strike. Phyllis and Dorothy tried their best to spur up the courage of the form again, but it was of no use. There were waverers, but the unity of the Lower Fifth was destroyed. Unless the greater part of the form would consent to down books, the strike was bound to fail. It would be no good for just a few of the girls to refuse to do their preparation.

"Then I suppose we'd better set to work and try and rub up some of Miss Burton's stuff," said Dorothy at last, with sulky resignation. "I've got Muriel's directions for literature down, but nothing for German or algebra. Anybody remember what she set us this morning?"

Nobody had actually taken down the preparation for the new form-mistress, but one or two people had vague recollections of what it ought to have been, and during the short time that remained that evening, a real effort was made by the class to prepare a little for the next day's lessons. Contrary to general expectation, Miss Burton turned up to take her refractory form the next morning,—the prevailing opinion in the Lower Fifth had been that she would "funk" it,—and

she was so agreeably surprised at her pupils' change of attitude that she made considerable allowance for deficiencies.

At the end of the morning's work, when lesson after lesson had passed and the Lower Fifth still remained dutifully attentive and amenable to discipline, the mistress's relief was so great that she was emboldened to make a short speech upon the subject.

"I am very glad to see that you have repented of your rebellious behaviour of yesterday," she said primly, blinking at her form a little nervously, nevertheless, over her spectacles. "Since you have made up your minds to submit to my authority, we will let bygones be bygones, and I will refrain from reporting your disobedience to Miss Oakley. You have had a very narrow escape, though. If Miss Oakley had not been away yesterday, I should most certainly have reported your conduct to her at once."

Then, as though repenting of her leniency, she went on in a more severe tone.

"But because I have let you off this time, you must not imagine that I shall do so again. I shall expect very much better work from you for the future. Your preparation for this morning's lessons was very far from perfect, and you will need to work very much harder to attain the standard I shall expect from you. Your algebra examples, Geraldine Wilmott, were especially badly prepared."

That, upon the whole, was hardly surprising! Gerry had been so miserable the previous evening, that it was a wonder that she had been able to do any preparation at all. The Lower Fifth smiled in broad amusement as the mistress made this pointed remark. It struck them as screamingly funny that Miss Burton should have picked out Gerry's work for special condemnation, when it was really entirely through Gerry that the form had done any work at all. They had yet to learn how fond life is of playing such practical jokes.

"It's all very well for her to talk like that," said Hilda Burns when the subject came up for discussion in the Lower Fifth sitting-room after tea that evening. The form was waiting for the bell to ring to summons it to preparation. "But she's jolly pleased not to have to report us to the Head! I happen to know that Miss Burton was most frightfully upset about us on Monday morning. It seems that Miss Oakley gave Burtie a pretty broad hint about not sneaking about us all the time—after that chestnut affair of yours on Sunday evening, Jack. Burtie was downright scared at the thought of having to go to her again so soon."

"How on earth do you know that?" said Jack grumpily. Jack had been grumpy all day. In fact, Nita declared that for some unknown reason she had been in a perfect wax ever since preparation the night before.

"Why, I was in the library just before tea, changing a book, and Monica was library monitress, and while I was hunting round the shelves Kathleen Milne came in to look up something for Miss Latham. And they began to talk about our little affair, and Kathleen said that Muriel had told her that Miss Latham had told *her* that it was no end of a relief to Miss Burton when we caved in. For Burtie was afraid that if there was another row Miss Oakley would have given her the sack."

"Doesn't sound much like Miss Latham to talk like *that*," said Jack scathingly.

"Oh, well, of course you don't suppose *she* said it like that, do you, donkey?" said Hilda impatiently. "That was what Kathleen said Muriel said, at least something like. I didn't hear any more, because Monica saw me listening and shut Kathleen up. Monica's always so awfully virtuous about not discussing the mistresses."

"It's jolly sickening to think how near we were to getting rid of that Burton beast," commented Dorothy, with a malicious look at Gerry, who was sitting forlornly at the table, attempting to engross herself in a book. "If it hadn't been for German sneaks we should have got her turned out in a week!"

"Yes—and got ourselves into a jolly fine row into the bargain," said Jack fiercely. "You're forgetting that part of it, Dorothy Pemberton."

Dorothy opened wide eyes at what she considered was an entirely unprovoked attack.

"All right, Jack Pym. Keep your hair on!" she retorted, with dignity. "You seem to forget that you were one of the ones who was keenest on the strike before that rotten German kid muffed the whole business for us."

A stifled exclamation came from the table where Gerry was sitting, and the new girl rose to her feet and hurried out of the room.

A spiteful chuckle came from Phyllis Tressider.

"You seem to have upset German Gerry, Dolly," she remarked to her chum.

Jack sprang to her feet in a sudden flare of temper. The abruptness of her movement upset the chair she was sitting upon, and she kicked at it viciously.

"Oh, you two! You are the meanest, caddiest girls in the whole school! Why can't you leave Gerry in peace?" she stormed angrily.

"My hat! Listen to the preacher!" jeered Dorothy, unperturbed. "I didn't know you'd turned into such a protector of the helpless, Jack. You'd better go after your precious friend and console her, if you're so jolly fond of her as all that."

"I've a jolly good mind to," said Jack, still furious. "I think the way we're all treating her is a beastly mean shame."

"What! Do you mean to say you'd be friends with a kid who got you and Nita into such a row over those chestnuts?" cried Phyllis.

Jack hesitated. Those chestnuts rankled in her mind badly. It was very careless of Gerry! Still, it *might* have been an accident, and, anyway, Gerry had been punished for it too, even if not quite so heavily as she and Nita. Dorothy saw her hesitation and quickly interposed. She had no wish to see Jack Pym friends again with Gerry. Dorothy had a shrewd suspicion of what Jack's friendship meant to the lonely new girl, and she was determined to prevent any sort of reconciliation if she possibly could.

"Did *you* think it could possibly have been an accident?" she asked, addressing Nita Fleming, the other unfortunate victim of Gerry's carelessness.

"I don't know," said Nita doubtfully. "At the time I thought it was, but afterwards—well, I really don't see how it *could* have been quite accidental," she ended up.

"Of course it wasn't an accident!" broke in Phyllis scornfully. "It was just what you would expect of a German sneak. Hasn't she been getting us into trouble all through the term? Have you forgotten the way she stopped your trial for the hockey eleven in the beginning of term, so that Muriel put Gertie Page in, instead? You can't say we haven't given her a chance. We were all quite decent to her after Miss Burton dropped down upon her in class the other day—and now look how she's paid us out! It was principally for her sake that we decided to strike at all, and then, when we're all deep into it, she goes and backs out! It's just what you'd expect of a German Gerry, though," she wound up contemptuously.

This was a way of twisting things round with a vengeance! Jack could not help feeling that it was more than unjust to Gerry. But Phyllis's ability of proving black was white was too much for Jack, who felt quite unable to argue with her. And a remark made by Dorothy clinched matters for the time being.

"If you *do* make friends with her again, we won't have anything to do with you either," she declared spitefully.

And this was more than Jack was brave enough to stand.

All through her school life Jack had been extraordinarily popular, and the bare thought of being out of favour with her schoolfellows was sufficient to deter her from taking Gerry's part any longer. Not that there was any real danger of her getting into their bad books. In her heart of hearts she knew very well that her standing in the school was strong enough to withstand any attempts Dorothy and Phyllis might make to stir up feeling against her. But Jack could not bear the thought of being unpopular with anybody. And when Nita got up and slipped her arm affectionately round her neck, with a caressing:

"You're surely not going to be such an ass as to try and take up with Gerry Wilmott again, are you, old thing?" she succumbed entirely.

"Of course I'm not going to take her up again," she said, with dignity. "She's such a little coward that I couldn't be *friends* with her, however much I might like her otherwise. But I do hate to hear Dorothy ragging her so. She and Phyllis are perpetually nagging at her and making beastly remarks in her hearing. It's so jolly mean to be always doing things like that!"

"I agree with you, there," said Nita. "I think we all do, except Dorothy and Phyllis. I vote we just let her alone now. As Jack says, it's beastly mean to keep on saying rotten things about her being German and a sneak, however much she may be one really."

"Who wants to keep on saying rotten things to her?" Dorothy said testily, realising that for once popular opinion was against her. "I'm sure I don't. I never want to see or speak to her again! I wish to goodness she'd never come to the school! Nearly every row we've had this term has been through her or about her in some way."

"There's the bell for prep," said Jack suddenly, glad of the opportunity of breaking off the conversation. "Come on, Nita, let's buck up and go in."

And the Lower Fifth ceased its wrangling over poor Gerry and hastened into the class-room.

CHAPTER XIX

THE LITTLE BLACK DOG

The next few days were very miserable ones for Gerry. It is true that, following Jack's example, the majority of the Lower Fifth did refrain from hurting her feelings by making unkind remarks. But the girls left her very severely alone, and after the happier conditions of the weekend, Gerry found her renewed solitude very hard to bear. The news that she was in trouble with her form for "sneaking" spread through the school, and although they had no part in the Lower Fifth's grievances, the rest of the girls refrained from speaking to the culprit as well. Nobody troubled to inquire just what shape her "sneakiness" had taken—that was the unjust part of it! Without hearing Gerry's side of the case, the whole school—with the exception of the Sixth Form, to whose august ears the rumour had not as yet penetrated—joined with the Lower Fifth in leaving poor Gerry out in the cold.

Not that anybody had ever held much converse with the hopelessly shy, silent girl, who, it was said, was an out-and-out German on one side of her parentage, and who had done many sneaky and cowardly things. But even such little formalities as passing the salt at meal-times, saying "After you" when washing hands in the cloakroom, or "Sorry" when banged into at hockey practice, were dispensed with now! Until you have tried it personally it is impossible to know how very, very lonely and uncomfortable being unpopular at school can be!

Added to all Gerry's other troubles, Miss Burton seemed to make a "dead set at her," as the form expressed it, during that unhappy week. Certainly Gerry's work was far from being well done. She was so utterly cast-down and wretched that it seemed almost impossible to do any work at all. It was really rather marvellous that she managed as well as she did. But to Miss Burton the work seemed atrociously performed, and she took no pains to hide her opinion of it from Gerry or from the form at large. Hardly a day passed without Gerry's being publicly scolded for her poor attempts at preparation, and returned lessons became a regular rule. The Lower Fifth listened to Miss Burton's tirades against the newest member of the form in unveiled amusement—with the exception of Jack! Jack's conscience was hurting her very badly during that week. If the truth had only been known, she was not very much happier than Gerry herself.

The Thursday following Gerry's plucky stand for law and order was an especially black day for the new girl. Miss Burton had been very irritable and captious in class, more so even than usual, and most of her anger was vented upon Gerry. At the close of the morning, Gerry found herself with two returned lessons, three bad marks, and a total of twelve good ones out of a possible fifty!

"Really, Geraldine," said the mistress as she closed her mark-book, "these results are disgraceful! One of the children from the First Form could have done better than that. Have you any explanation at all to offer of the slack way you are working?"

Yes, Gerry had an explanation! Quite an adequate one too! But it was not one that she could tell to Miss Burton. So she said nothing at all, merely clenching her hands tighter under the desk in the endeavour to keep back the tears that were not so very far away at the moment.

Her silence appeared to exasperate the mistress.

"Answer me when I speak to you, Geraldine. Have you any explanation to give of the disgraceful way you have done your work this morning?"

"No, Miss Burton," muttered Geraldine, hanging her head.

"Sit up properly in your desk, then, and don't sulk," rapped out Miss Burton. "I cannot bear a girl to sulk when she is scolded. It seems to me that you have got what was known in my nursery days as the Little Black Dog on your shoulders this morning."

A titter ran round the classroom and Gerry got fiery red. She had not been sulking—she had only been trying to hide how very near the tears were. But it was impossible to make Miss Burton understand this, and Gerry did not attempt it. If she had tried to speak she must assuredly have burst into tears. So she sat upright in her desk and tried not to mind, while Miss Burton continued to make sarcastic remarks at her expense, until at last, having somewhat relieved her ill-humour, the mistress left the classroom.

Gerry felt very depressed as she put her books listlessly away. Most of the form had departed soon after Miss Burton had left the room, only Gerry, and Phyllis and Dorothy, who were comparing notes on their morning's marks, remaining in the classroom. Gerry's eyes were so full of unshed tears that she did not notice that only her two special enemies were left in the room. If she had, she would probably have hurried over her desk-tidying and got out of their way. She always tried to avoid being left alone with these two, if she could possibly manage it. But it was not until Phyllis spoke to her suddenly that she awoke to the fact that none of the other members of the form were present.

"Well, sneak," said Phyllis, in a jeering tone. "Your precious Miss Burton, whom you stuck up for so bravely the other night, doesn't seem to thank you much for your championship, does she?"

Gerry said nothing. There really did not seem to be anything to say. With a great effort she choked back her gathering tears, and hastily finished putting away the books in her desk. But Phyllis was not to be balked of this splendid opportunity of baiting her enemy.

"She's sulky," she said to Dorothy, and the latter rose from her seat and came over to Gerry's desk.

"Perhaps she's forgotten how to talk," she suggested, with an air of mock anxiety. "She's hardly spoken to anyone for three whole days now, you know. They say when people never speak they forget how to use their tongues."

"Oh, do you think she's really forgotten?" giggled Phyllis, entering into the game.

It was all very silly and very absurd, but it seemed to the perpetrators of the unkind humour that it was deliciously funny, while to poor Gerry it was almost unendurable. She shut her desk and rose to her feet.

"Why can't you let me alone?" she pleaded, with quivering lips. "Why must you always keep on at me like this?"

"Oh, she hasn't forgotten—she still knows how to say a few words," said Phyllis, with an air of mock surprise.

Gerry made towards the door, but Phyllis was blocking the nearest path, and to escape she had to make a detour round the desks. Before she could reach the door, Dorothy gave a little shriek.

"Oh, look, look, Phil!" she cried, in pretended alarm. "Just look at that thing on her shoulders!"

"Where? What?" asked Phyllis; and Gerry, startled for the moment, turned half round, while her hand involuntarily went up to her shoulders. Dorothy broke into a scream of laughter.

"It's no good, German Gerry! It's the Little Black Dog, I meant. You'll not be able to shake that off by flicking at it."

Phyllis joined in her friend's laughter, and poor Gerry, with an angry glare at her tormentors, bolted out of the classroom, her skirt catching the door as she ran and slamming it to behind her.

"Oh, naughty, naughty!" said Phyllis reprovingly. But her victim could not hear. And there being no further amusement to be got out of Gerry for the moment, the two girls sauntered off to get ready for dinner, still laughing over Gerry's futile anger.

CHAPTER XX

AN AFTERNOON AT GYM

It happened to be wet that Thursday afternoon, and as all hockey practice was scratched in consequence, a gymnastic class was hastily arranged for the Middle School, to take the place of the outdoor exercise.

This quite met with the approval of the girls, the majority of whom were as keen on gymnastics as they were on hockey. An extra practice such as this, too, was specially enjoyable, for drill would be reduced to a minimum, and exercises upon the various apparatus would be the order of the day. The Middle School included the Lower Fifth, the Fifth Remove, and the Upper, Middle, and Lower Fourth Forms; and directly after dinner the girls concerned hurried to their cubicles to change into their gymnastic dresses.

Gerry was not looking forward to the afternoon with quite the same enjoyment as the rest of the Middle School. She was not at all keen upon gym. In fact, she would much rather have played hockey, which, now that she had grown used to it a little, she was really beginning to enjoy. Gym to her was still a very formidable affair, and the giant's stride, rings, vaulting horse, and parallel bars filled her with terror. So far she had escaped very lightly. Miss Caton, the gym mistress, had seen how nervous and frightened the new girl was of all the feats the other girls performed so gaily upon the different apparatus, and she had contented herself with initiating Gerry very slowly into their mysteries. But this afternoon Miss Caton was not taking gym practice. Muriel Paget and three other athletic members of the Sixth were officiating in her place, as Gerry found when she wandered into the gymnasium rather earlier than most people, because her changing

had not been delayed by all the talking and excitement prevalent amongst the other girls. There was nobody to come into Gerry Wilmott's cubicle in search of a mislaid hair-ribbon, or to borrow a darning-needle to cobble up holes in a stocking which the scantiness of the gymnastic costume might display to the eyes of authority.

The four seniors were gathered at one end of the gym, discussing what exercises they should give the school. Gerry made her way down to the other end, where, curled up against one of the radiators by which the room was warmed, lay Bruno, whom Gerry had not seen for some days past.

She stooped down to pat and caress him, pleased at seeing him again. Much to her surprise, however, he growled and showed his teeth for a moment, a very unusual thing for Bruno to do. She had never known him anything but good-tempered hitherto, and from the very beginning he had always shown a marked affection for her.

"Why, Bruno, what's the matter? Don't you know me?" Gerry said, keeping, nevertheless, at a safe distance from him. At the sound of her voice the dog rose to his feet, wagging his tail in a deprecating manner and thrusting his nose into her hand as though apologising for his irritability.

"Poor old fellow," said Gerry, cautiously stroking his head. "Wasn't he feeling well then, and did it make him cross?"

A group of girls drew near the radiator, Phyllis Tressider and Dorothy Pemberton amongst them. Gerry, in her absorption in Bruno, did not notice them at first, but Dorothy's sharp eyes soon discovered Gerry.

"Hullo! Look at German Gerry—she's found the black dog!" she said teasingly.

Gerry looked up with a start and flushed scarlet, but she made no reply, and Myra Davies, a girl from the Upper Fourth, inquired curiously:

"What on earth do you mean, Dorothy?"

"Why, German Gerry's found her black dog!" came the jeering answer. "It was sitting on her shoulders all the morning and she couldn't get it off. I knew it was a pretty big one, didn't you, Phil?" she added, seeing from Gerry's rising colour how surely her remarks were going home, "but I'm hanged if I knew it was such a big one as that."

Gerry closed her lips firmly and braced herself to bear the teasing in stoical silence. She knew it would do no good to say anything. Both Dorothy and Phyllis were far too quick-witted and too ready with their tongues for her to hope to compete with them in repartee. Besides, she knew quite well that if she were to venture to say a word, she would be greeted with a cool and astonished stare, while somebody would murmur something about "Germans," and so effectually silence any remonstrance she might try to make.

Fortunately for her self-control, Muriel turned round at this moment and called out orders for the forms to take up their places; and in the hurry of obeying the head girl's command, Gerry and her black dog were forgotten for the time being. Just before beginning the drilling, however, Muriel caught sight of Bruno, and sharply demanded to know who had let him into the gymnasium.

"Please, Muriel, I think he belongs to Gerry Wilmott," said Phyllis maliciously.

Muriel frowned severely at the girl.

"Don't talk rot, Phyllis," she said squashingly. "I don't know if you think that's funny—but if you do I'm sorry for your sense of humour. Gerry, did you bring Bruno into the gym?"

"No. He was here when I came in," answered Gerry, still hot and flushed, but very grateful to Muriel for so promptly crushing Phyllis's witticisms. She had been very much afraid that her enemy might have gone on to disclose Miss Burton's remarks in form that morning about the little black dog.

Muriel accepted her explanation without comment.

"Somebody had better turn him out," was all she said. "Phyllis Tressider, you seem to know a good deal about him—you can do it."

Phyllis cast a resentful glance at Gerry. Whenever Phyllis or Dorothy got into trouble with the head girl, they appeared to put it all down to Gerry's account, however unreasonably. There was nothing to be done in the present instance, however, but to obey the order, and Phyllis, leaving her place in the ranks, laid her hand rather roughly on Bruno's collar.

"Come along!" she said impatiently, attempting to drag the dog to his feet.

Bruno resisted her efforts to move him, and gave an ominous growl and snap which caused Phyllis to remove her hand from his collar with alacrity.

"I don't know what's the matter with him, Muriel, but he looks as though he was going to bite!" she exclaimed.

The head girl came over to her side.

"Nonsense!" she said. "Bruno bite? Why, he's the best-tempered dog I ever came across!" and she held out her hand coaxingly to the big black fellow.

But Bruno resisted all her blandishments, retreating farther into his corner, and at last Muriel thought it wiser to let him alone.

"Oh, well, perhaps he'd better stay," she said. "He seems very bad-tempered and unlike himself to-day. He won't be much in the way if he stays where he is now. Everybody will have to take care not to tread on him while marching round, that's all. Now, are you ready? Right turn! Lower Fifth, lead off in single file. Go!"

After some ten minutes or so of marching and arm and body exercises, Muriel ordered the girls to stand aside while the various apparatus were made ready. This was the time for which the girls were longing. Soon they were divided into four sections and sent to different parts of the room to practise on the apparatus under the supervision of the four prefects. The giant's stride was perhaps the most popular. This was a form of gymnastics in which the whole school delighted, and many envious glances were cast at the Lower Fifth, to which, as the most senior form in the Middle School, the giant's stride had fallen first of all.

"Come on, Gerry, here's a rope for you!" called Muriel to the new girl. Muriel had undertaken to direct the operations on the stride. But Gerry hung back.

"Please, Muriel, need I? I can't do it, really I can't. Miss Caton always lets me off it."

"Nonsense! Come along at once!" said Muriel impatiently. "I'll help you for the first round or two. You'll soon get used to it." And without heeding Gerry's remonstrances, she insisted upon the girl coming into the ring and taking her place at a rope.

"Hold on firmly with both hands to the bar," the prefect directed. "Swing your body well forward when we begin to move and I'll give you a good push-off."

Gerry hated this particular form of merry-go-round. It made her feel sick and giddy, and she was unable to work her body backwards and forwards rhythmically enough to keep her place in the magic circle. She gasped for breath and held on tightly while Muriel ran her two or three times round the ring, and endeavoured to work her body as the other girls were doing. But the result was a hopeless failure, and when the head girl, having given her pupil what she thought was a super-excellent start, left her hold, Gerry swung helplessly at the end of her rope, getting into the way of the girl who was swinging behind her, and finally bringing them both to an ignominious finish in the middle of the ring.

"What a donkey you are!" said Margaret Taylor angrily. She stooped down to rub her ankle, which Gerry had kicked rather hard in her efforts to keep herself going. "I was having a perfectly lovely swing, and now you've made me lose my turn." And she continued to glare angrily at the unfortunate new girl until the other striders dropped out one by one and the ring finally stopped.

Muriel made Gerry have one more try, but with no better results than before. After that, the new girl was handed on to Monica Deane, who was superintending the vaulting-horse. Gerry fared no better at this, and although each prefect in turn tried their hand upon her, none of them could find anything in the nature of apparatus upon which the new girl could perform with any measure of success.

Muriel Paget had been keeping her eye upon Gerry, and saw the hopeless exhibition the Lower Fifth girl was making of herself. But the prefect was determined to conquer the nervousness which was such a handicap to her protégée; and acting upon the plan which had succeeded so well with Gerry at hockey, she cast about in her mind for something to set her to do which would help her to make a start.

Finally she thought of the rope ladders.

"Nobody, not even the most hopeless duffer at gym, could make an utter mess of them, surely," she thought to herself, and ordered the ladders to be let down. But even here she had reckoned without Gerry's nerves! The girl was in a desperately overwrought state by this time. The troubles of the last few days culminating in her disgrace in class that morning, added to the hopeless exhibition she had been making of herself all through the afternoon, had rendered her unfit for even the simplest thing. When ordered to climb the rope ladder she obeyed dumbly, much in the way a condemned man might obey the order to walk to the scaffold; and, spurred on by Muriel's urging from below, she did succeed in mounting to a fair height. But rope ladders are not such easy things to climb as a novice might suppose. They have a nasty knack of doubling up and slipping away from you when you least expect them to, and when she was some thirty feet up this was what happened to the one Gerry was endeavouring to mount. And instead of trying to regain her balance, the girl gave way to the panic that had possessed her more or less all the afternoon.

She clutched desperately to the rope with her hands, and pushed hard with her feet, which, of course, only had the effect of turning her still more upside down.

"Let your body hang limp until you are in a proper position again," called Muriel. But Gerry was far too terrified and unnerved to act upon her directions, even if she had been able to take in exactly what they meant.

"Muriel! I—I can't get right way up," she gasped, struggling to keep her self-control. But Muriel did not realise quite how frightened Gerry really was. She spoke impatiently as she answered her, while a gale of laughter at the unsightly figure poor Gerry made as she clung to the rope like a drowning man, went through the gymnasium.

"Don't be such a little goat, Gerry!" cried the head girl. "Come down again if you can't go any farther, but for goodness' sake make an effort of some sort!"

Making an effort of any sort was quite beyond poor Gerry's power at the moment. It seemed to her that she would soon be hanging quite upside down, and when that happened she was sure that she would have to release her hold. Already everything was swimming around her; black specks danced before her eyes, and at last she gave vent to her terror in an anguished cry for help.

"Oh, Muriel! Muriel! I'm going to fall!" she cried, with a piteous note in her voice. And seeing that she really was in extremities, the head girl was obliged to run up the ladder herself and bring her down.

"Well, you *are* a little funk!" she said in some disgust, as she set Gerry on her feet again, and stood surveying her white face and trembling figure; while the Middle School, amused and interested spectators of the scene, pressed about the two at a respectful distance. She might have said more, but at that moment someone in the background exclaimed audibly:

"Why, of course! Isn't it German Gerry? What else do you expect her to do but funk!"

The head girl swung round sharply, but she could not identify the speaker.

"Who said that?" she demanded angrily. But nobody would give the culprit away. However, the remark had the effect of cutting short her reproof to Gerry, and with a dry: "Well, you'd better ask Miss Caton to let you have extra gym practice until you get into it a bit, I should think," she let the matter drop.

"That's enough for this afternoon. Fall in, please, order of forms," she said, addressing the assembled girls. Monica Deane went to the piano and struck up a lively march. And to the tune of "The Coster's Wedding" the Middle School marched out of the gymnasium and repaired to its various dormitories to get ready for tea.

CHAPTER XXI

HECTOR OR PARIS?

That evening the lists for the dormitory hockey finals were posted up on the notice-board. Muriel Paget and Monica Deane pinned them up on their way out from supper, and after the two prefects had departed a curious crowd quickly gathered round to see who had been selected. Much to everybody's astonishment, Geraldine Wilmott's name figured again in the Pink Dormitory list.

"*Surely* Muriel isn't to let *her* play again?" exclaimed Elsie Lipscombe, the Green Dormitory's centre forward. "Why, it was only through her that the Pink Dorm didn't win last time! It must be a mistake!"

"Play who?" asked Dorothy Pemberton, who came up just then arm in arm with Phyllis Tressider.

"Gerry Wilmott. She's down for left outside!"

"Not German Gerry?" cried Phyllis.

"Muriel must be cracked!" said Dorothy in disgusted amazement, as her eyes verified the truth of Elsie's statement. "What on earth Muriel can see in that little donkey I can't think! I don't think the head girl ought to show such favouritism. It was all very well putting her in last time when there was nobody else to play. But now there's Pam Henderson, and Dora Wainscott, and Bee Tyrell, and heaps of others. It isn't fair to go putting in a rotten little German coward who can't play hockey for nuts, and who even funks climbing a rope ladder!"

"Oh, well, I suppose Muriel knows what she's about," said Gwen Carter, an Upper Fifth girl, in rather a languid tone. "After all, neither Pam nor Bee are exactly geniuses at hockey, you know. I shouldn't think that even Gerry Wilmott was much worse. And Dora Wainscott's hand is still awfully bad. She was wearing it in a sling in form to-day."

"All the same, I think it's too bad that German Gerry should be playing," declared Phyllis loudly. She had caught sight of Gerry coming along the corridor, and had raised her voice purposely in order that she might hear. "I think it's a shame that we should be asked to play in the same team with her again, when everybody knows that the Pink Dorm would have won last time if she hadn't funkied."

Gerry heard, as it was intended that she should. But she took no notice, only hurried by the group around the notice-board with flushed cheeks and averted eyes. The girls stopped talking for the moment and watched her curiously. Just as she passed somebody gave a slight hiss, which was immediately taken up by three parts of the girls present.

"German Gerry!" called out someone, and the hissing grew louder as the girl fled by. Gerry's steps quickened into a run until she had turned a corner of the corridor and was out of sight of her tormentors. She had been on her way to the Lower Fifth sitting-room, but her reception in the passage made her change her mind, and she hurried on to the classroom instead, which was empty and deserted at this hour. It was against the rules to be there except in lesson hours, as Gerry knew well. But she had no other place of refuge, and once or twice lately this had served her in good stead. It was less risky than going to the dormitory, which was also out of bounds at this time, and there was no other place in the school where she could hope to find privacy.

She slipped into her desk and buried her burning face in her hands, grateful for the darkness and the silence. Although she did not realise it, Gerry was certainly getting braver. When she first came to school she would not have ventured alone into a dark room for anything in the world, in spite of her fifteen years. But now she was so absorbed in her greater trouble that she forgot to be afraid.

"Why do they hate me so?" she asked herself, and puzzled, as she had puzzled so many times before, over her unpopularity. It was not really so puzzling as she imagined. She was too quiet and shy to have won popularity easily in any case, even without her nerves, in such a big school as Wakehurst Priory; and, unfortunately for her, she had made two very bad enemies on the first day of term in Dorothy Pemberton and Phyllis Tressider.

Without being altogether bad-hearted, these two girls were responsible for a great deal of trouble in the school. They both possessed what so many of the girls lacked—personality; and they had a large following amongst their own set of girls who admired them for their ingenuity in mischief and the spirit of dare-deviltry which seemed at times to possess them. They had been "up against" Gerry from the very beginning, owing to the fact that Gerry had innocently usurped Dorothy's cubicle; and a series of unlucky accidents, occasioned by Gerry's newness to school ways and her rather unfortunate disposition, had simply played into their hands.

For some while Gerry was left in peace in the solitude of the classroom. But luck was against her that night, as it had seemed to be so often during the term. As a rule nobody ever dreamt of going near the classrooms after supper, but to-night Miss Burton must needs require a book from her desk and come to fetch it. And suddenly poor Gerry was startled by the abrupt opening of the schoolroom door and the switching on of the light.

She rose to her feet in a panic to find Miss Burton regarding her in surprised disapproval.

"Geraldine Wilmott! What are you doing here? Of course you know that it is strictly against the rules?"

"Yes, I know," said Gerry lamely, unable to think of any excuse for her presence in the classroom at this unauthorised hour. Dorothy or Phyllis or Jack would have thought of dozens in a moment! Indeed, it did not occur to her that there was any excuse to make. She was too fundamentally honest to try and wriggle out of the scrape as ninety-nine out of a hundred schoolgirls might have done. Miss Burton, however, with her lack of understanding, interpreted her reply as bald defiance, and was correspondingly severe.

"Then that means another bad mark for you. Really, you are incorrigible! I shall be obliged to report you to Miss Oakley if you don't soon make a decided improvement in your conduct. Go back to your sitting-room at once. And don't forget to give in your bad mark to-morrow morning."

Gerry wandered disconsolately back through the corridors. There seemed to be nobody about, and as she did not want to go to the sitting-room sooner than she could help, she went on to look at the notice-board, to see if Muriel really had put her name down for Saturday's match. From Phyllis Tressider's speech she gathered that she had done so. Somehow, after the incident in the gymnasium that afternoon, Gerry had quite expected Muriel to change her mind about putting her into the team. But, no! There was her name down, in black and white—Gerry Wilmott, left outside.

Gerry stood for a few moments gazing at the list, uncertain whether to be pleased that Muriel still intended to give her another chance, or to be frightened at the ordeal that lay before her.

And as she stood there, doubtfully regarding the notice-board, the head girl herself came along, and stopped to speak to her.

"Well, Gerry, I'm giving you your chance, you see," she said kindly.

"Yes—I see," said Gerry, turning round to face the prefect. "But, Muriel, are you—are you sure you think it's best? Supposing—supposing I funk again?"

"Now, look here, Gerry, I shall really get cross with you if you go on like this," said the head girl impatiently. And indeed, there was some reason for her impatience. She seemed always to be having to spur Gerry Wilmott on to the simplest acts of courage. "I keep telling you and telling you that you must have more confidence in yourself! You needn't funk if you'll only make up your mind not to. You've put up one or two quite good games since you've been playing forward, Alice says, and there's no earthly reason why you should not do the same on Saturday. If Dora Wainscott's hand was well enough for her to play, I should put her in. But it isn't, and you're just as good as any of the other girls in the dorm who are left—rather better than most of them. Now, are you going to buck up and do yourself and the dorm credit, or are you going to let me down?"

"I'm—I'm going to do my best," said Gerry, lifting earnest eyes to the head girl's face. "It's jolly good of you, Muriel, to give me the chance after the way I went on over gym this afternoon."

"Did you think I should cut you out because of that?" said Muriel. "You certainly did make rather an ass of yourself. But there's no earthly reason why you should do the same on Saturday. I should like to fit you up with a new backbone, Gerry Wilmott," she added laughingly. "You'd be quite a decent kid if you'd *only* buck up and be a bit more daring! You ought to take for your own the motto that the Red Cross Knight found written up over the door of the castle—'Be bold, be bold, be bold!'"

"It wasn't the Red Cross Knight; it was Britomarte," said Gerry, and Muriel smiled approvingly at her for the correction. It was something for Gerry even to dare to correct a quotation.

"Good for you, kiddie! So it was. Well, you get that thoroughly into your head by next Saturday and act upon it, and you'll do all right." And she hurried on her way, leaving a much inspired Gerry behind her.

"She is a brick!" thought the girl enthusiastically, as she walked slowly towards the Lower Fifth sitting-room. "I don't wonder all the girls are so keen about her. I *will* get that motto into my head, and I *will* play up and justify her choice of me for next Saturday, and I won't let anything the other girls may say or do affect me! I'll just keep saying the words over and over to myself whenever I feel inclined to funk, and see if that won't make me braver. Be bold, be bold, be bold!"

And then some lines of Longfellow's she had once heard came into her head in the inconsequent way such lines do occur to lovers of poetry:

"Write on your doors the saying wise and old,
'Be bold! be bold!' and everywhere—'Be bold!'
'Be not too bold'—yet better the excess
Than the defect; better the more than less;
Better like Hector in the field to die,
Than like a perfumed Paris turn and fly."

Gerry's face took on an expression of rigid determination as she repeated the lines to herself. And, throwing up her head with a little gesture of defiance, she said aloud:

"Well, I just *won't* be a 'perfumed Paris' this time, whatever happens!"

And with this bold resolve she walked into the sitting-room, and settled herself down in her usual corner with a book, until the bell should ring for prayers and bed.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DORMITORY FINAL

Saturday morning dawned at last. It was a splendid day for hockey, fine and bright, with a touch of frost in the air, not enough to make the ground hard, but just sufficient to dry up some of the worst of the mud and to make it exhilarating to run about.

There was great excitement over the match throughout the school. Even the girls who were

not directly concerned in the results of the game, either as members of the teams or occupants of the rival dormitories, were keenly interested, while the agitation of the two dormitories actively engaged was raised to fever-pitch. Some of the smaller girls in the Pink Dormitory had been occupied during the past week in manufacturing rosettes of pink ribbon, which they sold for twopence apiece to the members of the team and the partisans of the dormitory—a proceeding which promised considerable profit at first to the enterprising trio who originated it. Unfortunately for them, however, Muriel Paget descended upon them on the morning of the match with searching inquiries as to the monetary part of the transaction.

"But, Muriel, the ribbon cost us an awful lot of money," protested one of the small profiteers in distress, when the head girl ordered that all proceeds from the sale of the favours should be deposited in the dormitory missionary-box. "It was very good ribbon, penny-halfpenny a yard, and we've used yards and yards of it!"

"Well, you may keep back enough money to pay expenses," conceded the head girl. "Reckon out exactly how many yards of ribbon you've bought and how many favours you've sold, and then bring the balance of the money to me to be put into the missionary-box. And please remember for the future that you're English schoolgirls—not beastly little Jews."

With which parting remark she stalked off with much magisterial dignity, leaving three very crushed small girls behind her.

However, the three had the consolation of regaining the money they had outlaid upon their project, and also of having started a very popular scheme. The idea of the favours caught on. The members of the Green Dormitory were immediately bitten with the desire to sport green rosettes, and drawers were ransacked, and finally permission obtained for a messenger to be sent into the town to purchase a sufficiency of green ribbon to manufacture favours for the rival team and its supporters. Before the morning was over nearly every girl in the school sported a favour of one colour or the other. Pink favours predominated, partly because of the start obtained by the early vendors, and partly because the Pink Dormitory was Muriel's dormitory. The head girl was far and away the most popular person in the school, far out-rivalling Alice Metcalfe, the Green Dormitory's captain, in the girls' affections. Still, the Greens had quite a fair show of ribbons—enough at any rate to make a good "shout" for their side when the match should begin.

Gerry Wilmott, alone of her team, did not wear a pink rosette. She wanted one badly, but she had not quite liked to ask for one, and the three little girls who were selling them carefully refrained from coming near the girl who was known as a coward and a sneak throughout the school. Gerry looked at them very wistfully once or twice when they were in her vicinity, but in spite of her desire to be decorated with the colours of the dormitory for which she was to play, she did not dare to risk a rebuff by going up to them. She would have gone favourless up to the field itself if it had not been for Monica Deane, her next-door neighbour in the dormitory. Monica had purchased a favour quite early in the day, much to the distress of little Vera Davies, her devoted admirer, who presented her with one just before the match began, which she had made herself.

"Please, Monica, wear mine!" pleaded the little girl, coming into Monica's cubicle where the senior was changing into the gym dress which was the regulation hockey kit at Wakehurst Priory. "I begged a bit of the ribbon from Gladys and Betty and Marjorie, and made it for you all myself, to bring you luck! Please take your other one off and wear mine!"

"All right, kiddie, of course I'll have to wear it since you made it for me yourself," said Monica good-naturedly. "I'll give the other one away to somebody else, if there's anybody left in the school who hasn't got one."

Then a sudden thought struck her.

"Gerry, have you got one, or would you like mine?" she called over the cubicle wall, remembering that she had seen the Lower Fifth girl undecorated earlier in the day.

"No; I haven't got one. I'd like it very much," answered Gerry, in rather a low voice. The next moment the small pink favour came fluttering over the partition that divided her cubicle from Monica's.

"There you are, then," said the senior girl.

Gerry caught the precious bit of ribbon and pinned it on to the tunic of her gym dress with an odd feeling of pleasure in her heart. It seemed to her a happy omen that she should be able to wear her dormitory colours after all.

"Thanks awfully, Monica," she said gratefully. "I'll pay you the twopence for it sometime."

"You just won't, then!" said Monica gaily. "It's a present to bring you luck. Vera says it's much more lucky to have your favours given to you than it is to buy them for yourself. So, with two of us wearing lucky ribbons, the Pink Dorm really ought to win!"

"I hope we shall," said Gerry fervently. Then she added under her breath, "I'm going to try and do my share to-day, anyway, and justify Muriel for having chosen me."

This little episode of the pink favour quite cheered Gerry up. Perhaps the luck of the pink ribbon would counteract for once the unlucky influence of Cubicle Thirteen. Gerry was really almost beginning to believe that the ill-omened number of her cubicle must have something to do with the persistent misfortune which dogged her footsteps! Fortified by her precious talisman, she took her place up on the hockey field as left outside without nearly such quakings of heart as she had feared. And when once the whistle had gone and the play begun she didn't have time to think about being frightened. Muriel saw to it that her nervous left outer should have plenty of work quite early in the game; and by the time the match had been in progress for ten minutes or so, Gerry had lost all her gloomy fears in the excitement and interest of the struggle.

It was obvious from the beginning that it was going to be a hard-fought fight. Both teams were out to win. As before, the Pink Dormitory forwards were far superior to the forwards from the Green Dormitory, but the splendid defence of the latter team quite balanced this. Backwards and forwards the battle raged, neither side getting a chance to shoot for goal until the first half was nearly over. Then, much to everybody's astonishment, Elsie Lipscombe succeeded in getting through for the Greens.

"I say! That's serious!" said Dorothy Pemberton to Phyllis Tressider as the two girls stood arm in arm sucking lemons at half-time. "Fancy the Green Dorm getting a goal in like that, before we've scored one! We shall have to buck up like anything this half if we're not going to let the Pink Dorm down."

During the interval Muriel Paget went up to Gerry, who was standing a little forlornly on the outskirts of the group of players, with a reassuring word.

"Well, I don't think you need be afraid of funking now, Gerry; you're doing quite well," she said.

"No; I don't think I shall funk now!" said Gerry. "It's all thanks to you, though, Muriel. If I'd been playing back I know I should have felt just the same as I did last time."

"Oh, well, but you're not playing back now," responded the head girl. "So there's no need to worry over that! We've got to buck up like anything this half, though, for we're a goal behind. Mind you keep up if I do get away with the ball. And if it comes out to you when you're anywhere near their goal, pass it straight in, and then you'll be all right."

Muriel succeeded in scoring for the Pink Dormitory soon after the second half started, and the Pink team and their partisans breathed again. The score was now one all, and for some time it seemed likely that it would remain so. Nearly every girl in the school was up on the ground, watching the struggle, and as time passed on and still the goals stood at one all, the most intense excitement prevailed.

"Oh, they're going to tie again! They're going to tie again!" wailed Vera Davies, some seven minutes before time was up. "And I made the favour for Monica myself, on purpose to bring her luck! And now the Pinks aren't going to win after all!"

"It isn't over yet," said Marjorie Brown, the small girl from the Pink Dormitory whom Muriel had so nearly to put in to play instead of Gerry on the previous occasion. "Oh, look, look! Muriel's got the ball and she's got a clear run! No; she's lost it! Jack Pym's got it. No; she's passed. Oh, Vera, look! Dorothy Pemberton's got it now, and she's taking it up. Play up, Pink Dorm! Play up! Play up!"

Her cry was taken up by the whole school.

"Play up, Pink!"

"Play up, Green!"

"Stick to it, Dorothy!"

"Alice! Alice! Into her, Alice!"

"Play up, Muriel! Play up, Muriel!"

"Pink Dorm! Pink Dorm!"

"Green! Green! Green!"

A confused medley of shouts rose on the air, and the noise grew in volume as one by one the spectators, girls and mistresses alike, joined in. So great was the pandemonium that the referee's whistle could hardly be heard when it blew a moment later.

"What's that for? Is it a goal? Is it? Is it?" cried Vera, in an agony of excitement.

"No! It's off-side! Dorothy passed it forward. Oh, bother! That means a free hit for them. And Alice will take it and send it miles down the field, and time's nearly up! There can't be more than three minutes left now!" cried Marjorie, dancing about the ground in her impatience.

Alice Metcalfe came forward to take the free hit. Her forwards ranged themselves far down the field, while the Pink forwards also were obliged to retrace their steps to the limit imposed upon them by the penalty. Dorothy made a penitent apology to her captain.

"I'm most fearfully sorry, Muriel," she said. "It was quite an accident, but I'm afraid it's done for us, all the same. We'll never have time to score again now."

"Never mind. We'll make one last desperate effort before the whistle goes," said Muriel encouragingly. "Look out for Alice's hit and try and stop it if you possibly can, if it comes your way. It's our only chance!"

Whack! Alice sent the ball flying out to her right wing with a mighty "swipe," and a groan went up from the partisans of the Pink Dormitory. That hit surely had done it! Nobody could be expected to get in the way of such a terrific slog—Alice had excelled herself this time. The ball would inevitably go flying out of bounds, and by the time it could be recovered and thrown in again, the last three precious minutes would have sped by. Already the referee had her whistle to her lips. Once again the dormitory final would end in a draw!

But wait a moment! The Pink Dormitory's left outside, with a ribbon favour flaunting gaily on her breast, was standing right in the way of the coming ball. Gerry had watched Alice hitting it, and she knew that her chance had come. If she could stop the ball just right and centre it, there was just a chance that Muriel and Dorothy might be able to do something with it.

But could she ever stop it? The ball was coming with all the force of Alice Metcalfe's leather-bound hockey stick behind it. It needed some courage to get in the way of one of Alice's slogs! Gerry wanted to slip aside and let the ball go by. How badly she wanted to do it nobody but herself could ever know. Surely it wouldn't be cowardice to get out of the way of a ball like that! But her determination not to let Muriel down this time was strong within her, and she fought down the panic which urged her to step aside, and remained grimly waiting the advent of that flying ball.

The next moment a great shout went up from the spectators, friends and foes alike.

"Stopped! Oh, well stopped! Stopped, indeed!"

"My hat! That must have hurt! Did you see? It ran right up her stick and caught her on the nose. Why—if it isn't *German Gerry!*" cried Vera Davies in amazement.

It was an amazement which was shared by the rest of the school. The girls were so dumbfounded that the cheer suddenly died down, and nobody applauded at all when Gerry, recovering from the first stunning shock of the blow, passed the ball to her inside wing, Dorothy Pemberton, before the Green half-backs could tackle her.

Then events moved quickly.

"Centre it, Dorothy," called Muriel, and flew to intercept the ball, which Dorothy passed to her. Dodging, tackling, dribbling, and passing, the head girl and her inside left carried the ball into the enemy's goal circle. And before the Green defence could recover from the unexpected onslaught, the ball was safely through their goalposts, put there by Muriel's stick. The whistle blew for goal and time simultaneously, and a perfect storm of cheering broke from the watching school. It had indeed been an exciting finish to the dormitory hockey final!

There were certain formalities to be gone through before the teams could leave the field. Alice Metcalfe, as captain of the defeated team, called for three cheers for the victors, to which Muriel had to respond by calling for three cheers for the runners-up for the Cup. Then the rival captains had to shake hands and thank each other for the good game—a little ceremony which had existed at Wakehurst Priory since hockey matches first began, and which was never omitted.

But directly these formalities were over, and the girls who had been watching the match came flocking around the dispersing teams, cheering and asking questions and pouring out congratulations, Muriel looked about for Gerry Wilmott and hastened to her side.

"Well done, Gerry! You were splendid!" the head girl exclaimed. "It was all through you that we scored that last goal. If you hadn't stopped that free hit so pluckily, we could never have done it. I'm jolly glad I put you in to play."

Gerry's nose was bleeding badly, and it was cut and swollen from the blow she had received. Her head was aching too, and she was feeling dreadfully dazed and tired. But in spite of her injuries, the face she raised to Muriel's was a very happy one.

"I'm *awfully* glad I managed to stop it," she said.

"I say! You did get a bang, kiddie!" said Muriel concernedly, looking down at her junior's injured nose. "You'd better come at once and let me take you to Sister. She's got some ripping stuff for bringing down bruises. If we get it seen to directly, perhaps it will save you from being quite black in the face to-morrow."

And putting her arm round Gerry's shoulder, the head girl led her off the field.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PLUCK OF GERMAN GERRY

The head girl and her companion were joined by Monica Deane and Alice Metcalfe as they left the hockey ground. Both the seniors said nice things to Gerry about her great achievement and condoled with her upon the injury to her nose.

"I say! I am sorry," said Alice in contrition. "I suppose I ought not to have hit so hard, really. Miss Caton's always telling me that hockey isn't just a matter of hard hitting, and that I overdo the slogging part. But I never thought of anyone getting into the way of that ball. As a rule, people run for yards to get out of the way of my free hits."

"It was jolly lucky for us that Gerry *did* get in the way," laughed Muriel. "If the ball had gone out then, we should never have had time to score that final goal."

"I ought to bear you a grudge, Gerry, for losing the Cup for my dorm," said Alice. "I'm afraid you've got to pay for it, though. Your nose will be black and blue to-morrow."

"Oh no, it won't," said Muriel reassuringly. "I'm going to take her straight up to Sister when we get in, and get some of that wonderful lotion of hers to bathe it with. I got an awful whack on my forehead the end of last season, but when I put Sister's stuff on it the swelling went down almost at once, and it was hardly coloured at all."

"Gerry's nose will be awfully stiff and uncomfortable, though, for a day or two, however wonderful Sister's stuff may be," observed Monica.

"I don't mind," said Gerry happily. And indeed she was so relieved at having redeemed herself in the eyes of the head girl in the matter of hockey-playing, that she really would not have cared very much if her nose had been broken instead of merely bruised. She walked on down the field amongst the seniors, feeling that she would not at the moment have changed places with any other girl in the whole of Wakehurst Priory.

It was some ten minutes' walk across the hockey field back to the school. The three prefects and Gerry were well in the van of the returning girls. A few Fourth Form children were some distance ahead, but the majority of the school were descending more leisurely in the rear. Just at this moment, however, the half-dozen girls in front turned, and began running back, waving their arms and shouting as they ran.

"What on earth's the matter with those kids?" said Alice in surprise. "Have they gone quite mad?"

"They are shouting out something," said Muriel. "Can you hear what it is? Why! There's Bennett running, too. And some other men! One of them's got a stick—no, it's a gun! They're chasing Bruno, surely. What in the world can be the matter?"

There was an iron railing to the left of the hockey field which enclosed the hockey ground itself from the neighbouring meadows. The girls in front were running hard towards this railing, still shouting their words of warning to the approaching girls. This time they were near enough for Muriel to catch what they were saying.

"Mad dog! They're shouting out 'Mad dog!' Quick, make for the railings! Bruno's gone mad!" she cried to her companions.

She turned round and ran back towards the oncoming school, shouting out her warning. Alice and Monica followed her, and, seizing a bunch of small girls just behind, urged them towards the railings. The rest of the school had taken alarm by this time, and were making a wild dash for safety, but of the two or three hundred girls who were pouring down from the field, it was obvious that many of them could not be got out of the way in time. Besides, there was nothing to prevent Bruno from altering his course and making for the railings too. The men chasing the dog were too far behind to risk a shot with so many children about. If they should miss the dog, they could not fail to hit one of the girls when so many of them were in the direct line of fire.

All these thoughts rushed through Muriel's mind as she tried to hurry the girls towards the railings, assisted by such of the mistresses and prefects as were near at hand. There had been many reports in the papers lately of dogs that had gone mad and bitten people, and the head girl was well aware of the terrible results that might follow a bite from an animal suffering from rabies. She knew that a mad dog bites and snaps at everything that comes in his way—and how could they hope to get all these children out of the way in time!

Very much the same thoughts had come into the mind of somebody else, too! Gerry had been seized with panic when the cry of "Mad dog!" had reached her ears, and her first instinct had been to dash towards the railings out of Bruno's way. It was not until she was nearly half-way to safety that it had dawned upon her that none of her three companions were with her, and she stopped for a moment to look round and see what they were doing.

She saw Alice and Monica hurrying some of the smaller children into safety, she saw Muriel running to warn the girls behind. Then she looked at Bruno, who was near enough for her to see him plainly now. His mouth was wide open, his tongue was hanging out, and foam was dripping from his jaws. He looked very terrible, not in the least like the good-natured dog with whom Gerry had made friends on her first day at school.

For a moment, Gerry turned away, with a sick shiver of fear and repulsion. Then all at once something came into her heart, making her braver and stronger than she had ever been in her life before. Muriel was being brave. Muriel had not run like a coward towards the fence. Why, couldn't she be brave like Muriel, too? With a sudden desperate resolve, Gerry swung round and flew straight towards the oncoming dog.

Nearly every girl and mistress in the school saw the deed by which Gerry Wilmott established herself for ever in the annals of Wakehurst Priory. The few who were absent could find plenty of eager eye-witnesses to describe it to them. It was a picture which stamped itself indelibly upon the minds of a good many of the people present—the old grey school buildings in the background, framed by the black boughs of the November trees, the wide stretch of meadowland, and in the forefront the big black dog, pursued by the shouting men, making straight for the crowd of terrified children.

Then into the very centre of the picture dashed the blue-tunicked figure of Gerry Wilmott! German Gerry! The girl who was afraid of dogs and mice and hockey balls, and everything and everyone under the sun, apparently—dashing right in the pathway of the mad dog!

Exactly how she did it, Gerry never afterwards quite knew. In some way she managed to get behind the dog and fling herself upon him as he rushed past. She seized him by his collar and the long curly hair about his throat, throwing herself upon her knees on the ground as she did so. So powerful was he in his mad frenzy, that she was dragged along the grass for a considerable distance before she could bring him to a standstill. Then came a few moments that seemed like a lifetime of desperate struggling, while she gripped the snapping, growling dog round his throat with fingers that grew numb beneath the strain, and with stiff, taut arms held him away so that he could not spring upon her.

The struggle only lasted a few moments in reality, but to Gerry it seemed an eternity before she heard Bennett's breathless cry of "Hold on, missie I keep him still an instant longer," and knew that if it was more than an instant, she would have to let the dog go. Then came a sudden blinding flash over her shoulder, a deafening report in her ear. Bruno broke from her grasp with a frenzied leap, then came another report. And then—

And then the next thing she knew was that she was lying on the grass with Muriel and Miss Caton and Miss Latham bending over her, and with what appeared to Gerry to be the whole of Wakehurst Priory peering over their shoulders.

"For Heaven's sake, keep back, you kids!" cried Muriel in an irate voice, thrusting back the nearest of the eager throng. "Can't you see that Gerry's nearly fainting, and you will keep crowding round so that she can't get a breath of air."

"Go back, girls, at once," commanded Miss Latham, rising to her feet and waving the school away with a peremptory gesture. "Hurry up and get back to school, all of you. Whoever gets there first can tell Sister that she's wanted." An ingenious suggestion that almost instantly cleared a space round Gerry. If you can't get a front place as a spectator when there's an accident, the next best thing is to be the first to carry the news of it to somebody else. And with a feeling that they were really doing something of importance, some fifty or sixty girls set out at once to race down to the school to summon Sister.

Having thus procured breathing-space for Gerry, Miss Latham turned to the games' mistress, who was kneeling beside the girl.

"Is she bitten?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know," said Miss Caton uncertainly. But Gerry, who was fast recovering from her momentary faintness, made an effort to sit up, saying in a weak voice which she had some difficulty in recognising as her own:

"No, I'm not bitten—anywhere. It's only that I'm so giddy—and out of breath."

"All right, dear; lie down again and don't try to talk. You'll be better directly," said Miss Caton gently.

"I'm better now," said Gerry, resolutely putting aside the protesting hands that attempted to hold her down, and sitting upright. The movement nearly made her turn faint again, but she

conquered the feeling by a great effort and smiled into Muriel's anxious face.

"I'm all right. Really, I'm all right! He didn't hurt me a bit. Look at my hands, they're not even scratched."

Nor were they. And after much anxious questioning and examination the mistresses came to the conclusion that in some marvellous way the girl had escaped all injury.

"I can't think how he didn't bite you!" Miss Latham said. "But now, if you feel well enough, I think we'd try and get you down to the sickroom."

"Monica and I will make a carrying-chair of our hands for her," said Muriel eagerly.

But Gerry disdained all such assistance.

"I'm quite all right. I can walk by myself, thank you very much," she said, and demonstrated the truth of her words by rising to her feet. A little sick tremor ran through her as she caught sight of the men bearing away an inert black mass that had once been Bruno, and she swayed a little uncertainly. But Miss Caton caught her by one arm, and Muriel slipped her hand under her other shoulder, and she soon steadied herself; and the little procession began to make its slow way down the field.

With the exception of Monica and Muriel, all the other girls had gone by this time, hurried away by prefects and mistresses—all, that is, but one, who had somehow managed to elude the vigilance of those in authority. That one was Jack Pym, and her face was almost as white as Gerry's own as she came forward and joined the little party. In her hand she carried a couple of hockey sticks.

"I've got your stick, Gerry," she said rather awkwardly. "I saw it on the ground and I've brought it along for you."

Miss Caton dropped behind for a moment to speak to Miss Latham and Monica, and Jack slipped into her vacant place. Gerry's eyes sought Jack's with a wistful eagerness which was not lost upon the head girl.

"Give Gerry an arm, Jack," Muriel suggested. "She's a bit unsteady on her pins still."

Transferring both sticks to one hand, Jack hurried to obey. She drew Gerry's hand through her arm, giving it a squeeze which sent a sudden thrill of happiness through Gerry's heart.

"Thank you," said Gerry gratefully, as she returned the pressure. "It's decent of you to have brought my stick along. I'd forgotten all about it."

That was in effect their reconciliation and the beginning of a friendship which would long outlast schooldays. But though it was such a momentous happening to both girls, neither of them said anything in the least appropriate to the occasion. In fact, the only remark made by either of them at the moment was passed by Jack, as she glanced at Gerry's wounded nose.

"My eye, Gerry! You won't half have a lovely countenance to-morrow morning!" was all she said.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LOWER FIFTH MAKES AMENDS

Gerry was escorted in safety to the sickroom, where Sister's magical lotion eased the pain of her swollen nose and considerably improved her appearance. A strong dose of sal volatile brought back a little colour to her pale cheeks and a feeling of strength to her sadly wobbling legs. Then she was established upon a comfortable sofa in front of the sick-room fire and left to the enjoyment of a first-class sick-room tea—the sort kept for special convalescents, Sister informed her. As it consisted of hot buttered toast, superfinely thin bread and butter, apricot jam, shortbread biscuits, and sponge-cakes, Gerry agreed with her that it was certainly a great improvement upon ordinary schoolroom fare.

Downstairs in the dining-hall little else was discussed that tea-time but the subject of Gerry's pluck. A great change of feeling towards the Lower Fifth girl was taking place. Everybody realised that if it had not been for Gerry's presence of mind and extraordinary courage, many of the girls might have been bitten by poor Bruno. Whether the dog was really suffering from madness or only from some minor distemper remained to be proved. But those who had seen him that afternoon had little doubt upon the subject. He had been unaccountably moody and irritable for some days past—his surly behaviour in the gymnasium a couple of days previously had only

been one incident out of many—and the way he had suddenly run amok when the headmistress was about to take him for a walk that afternoon pointed to the supposition that he was really suffering from rabies.

"Mad? In course he was mad! Think I don't know a mad dog when I see one?" said Bennett, when questioned upon the subject by Dorothy and Phyllis, as he was taking away the muddy boots from the lobby just before tea. "If it hadn't been for that there young lady, there'd have been some humans mad as well—and serve some of them right!" he added, with a sour glance. For although the servants did not know the full ins and outs of Gerry's ostracism, yet they were well aware that "little Miss Wilmott" had been having anything but a happy time during her first term at Wakehurst Priory.

But Wakehurst Priory had thoroughly repented of its ways now! Gerry was the heroine of the hour, and there was considerable danger of the school losing its head in the other direction and making a popular idol of her. Even Dorothy and Phyllis were penitent, and openly acknowledged their remorse in the Lower Fifth sitting-room after tea that evening. As it was a Saturday evening there was, of course, no school work to be prepared, and the form was at liberty to discuss to its heart's content the subject which was occupying its mind so entirely.

It was Hilda Burns who made the suggestion that appealed most strongly to the form.

"I think we ought to make her a public apology," she announced dramatically, "to let the whole school know what beasts we have been." And her idea was taken up with much acclamation by the other members of the Lower Fifth.

"Yes, let's!" said Dorothy eagerly. "Let's go now and ask Muriel to call a school meeting, and then we'll ask for Gerry to come down to it, and we'll all step out in turn and tell her how frightfully sorry we are for having been such rotters, and ask her to make it up!"

"Come on," said Phyllis. "We'll go to Muriel now." And the form trooped off to the head girl's study.

Muriel was having a private tea-party in her own room with Monica and Jack Pym. The latter had disappeared since the hockey match, although the other members of the Lower Fifth had been too excited to notice it before. Tea in their private studies was a privilege the Sixth Form girls were entitled to on Saturdays and other holidays if they liked; and to-day Muriel had asked Jack to join in the cosy little party. The head girl was not an unobservant individual, and she had noticed Jack's unhappy face and remorseful manner during that walk down from the hockey field. And after they had seen Gerry safely into Sister's care she had invited the younger girl to come and have tea with Monica and herself. The three had been having a very serious discussion respecting Gerry Wilmott and her troubles as they sat round the study fire.

"Good gracious! How many more of you are there?" exclaimed Muriel, as one by one the Lower Fifth squeezed themselves into the small room. "Is that all? Margaret Taylor, you're nearest; do you think you can manage to shut the door? Now, then, what have you all come about?"

Dorothy acted as spokeswoman.

"About Gerry Wilmott, please, Muriel," she began. "We've come to tell you what utter beasts and rotters we've been to her all the term——"

"I think I know something about that already," interrupted Muriel. "Jack's been telling me."

This abrupt announcement rather upset Dorothy's elaborate explanation. It is disconcerting when you have buoyed yourself up to confession to find that someone else has done all the confessing for you. At any other time the Lower Fifth would have been seriously annoyed with Jack for having thus forestalled the dramatic little scene it had planned with the head girl. But to-night the whole form was so genuinely upset and penitent about its treatment of Gerry Wilmott that—although they did not know quite what to say for a moment or two—they bore no grudge against the informer.

"There's something Miss Oakley wants me to tell you about Gerry," went on Muriel, surveying the discomfited faces before her. "It's not to go any further, though. Only Gerry's own form are to know about it, and Miss Oakley trusts to your honour never to mention it to Gerry herself unless she confides in you of her own free will. I didn't know it until to-day, when Miss Oakley sent for me to go to her after we'd taken Gerry to the sick-room. If I had known it, I should have behaved very differently towards her myself! It seems that she was in a bad air-raid three years ago, when she was almost a kid. The house she was in was wrecked and a nurse she was awfully fond of was killed in front of her eyes, while she herself was pinned down underneath some wreckage for hours and hours before they could get her out. She wasn't hurt, but it upset her nerves completely. And it's mostly that that has made her so shy and nervous and funky of things. Her people sent her here to see what school would do for her. Nothing was said about her awful experience, because she can't bear to talk about it, for one thing, and for another the doctors didn't want her to be treated any differently from the other girls. And they thought she would have been if people knew. But Miss Oakley says I'm to tell you now, so that you may treat Gerry with more consideration in the future."

There was a dead silence in the room. If anything had been wanting to complete the Lower Fifth's humiliation it was this! The one excuse the form had had for its conduct had been Gerry's cowardice, and it put the finishing touch to its repentance to discover that even this was not entirely her own fault. The Lower Fifth's remorse, which had been acute enough before, was almost unbearable now!

"Well," said Muriel at length, as the silence still continued—"well? What are you going to do about it?"

"We thought that—that perhaps we'd better make Gerry a public apology," faltered Dorothy, her usual sang-froid deserting her for once under Muriel's coldly critical eye. "We thought if you would call a meeting of the whole school that we'd ask Gerry to come down, and then we'd tell her how frightfully sorry we are about having been so mean, and each of us would apologise to her in front of everybody."

"And jolly pleasant that would be for poor Gerry!" said Muriel. "Do you think she wants a public apology! To be made to feel an utter ass in front of the whole school just to ease your rotten little consciences! We'll give her a public ovation if you like, but not a public apology—at least, not one anything in the least like the scheme you've planned. If you want to make amends, I think it would be much more to the purpose if you went and told Miss Burton the truth about that strike of yours, and how it was Gerry who broke it down by her plucky action in refusing to go on with it."

The Lower Fifth gasped a little. Jack had certainly confessed with a vengeance! Somehow it had never before struck the Lower Fifth that Gerry's action on that particular occasion had been plucky.

"But of course, when you come to think about it in the right light, it was plucky of her," Hilda Burns said afterwards, when the matter came up for discussion in the Lower Fifth sitting-room. "It must have needed quite a lot of courage for Gerry to say what she did that evening."

"Yes. It was moral courage," said Jack. "She wanted most awfully badly to stick in with us and be friendly. But she just felt she had to stay out because she felt so sorry for Miss Burton, although she knew how beastly we should all be to her."

But that was afterwards. At the moment the Lower Fifth was scarcely able to view the courage of Gerry Wilmott in any light at all; it was so flabbergasted at having its past delinquencies cast up at it in this manner, and so dismayed at Muriel's suggestion that it should go and acquaint Miss Burton with the full details of the matter.

There was a moment's hesitation, then suddenly Dorothy Pemberton made a movement of acquiescence.

"All right, we will!" she announced. Then, turning round to the rest of the form, she asked briefly:

"Are you all game?"

"Yes," came unanimously from the ranks of the Lower Fifth.

Muriel Paget rose to her feet and faced her visitors with a pleased smile.

"Good kids!" she said approvingly. "Cut along at once and get it over. And then come back to me afterwards, and we'll see if we can't arrange some sort of public reception to show Gerry that we're sorry for all the things she's had to put up with this term. I think you'll find Miss Burton in her study if you go now."

Then the Lower Fifth, subdued, but resolute in its determination, filed out in a body and wended its way towards Miss Burton's room.

CHAPTER XXV

CLOUDS ARE ROLLED AWAY

It took some time to make Miss Burton acquainted with the true facts of the case. But when at last the mistress realised how very unjust she had been to the girl whose plucky conduct was the talk of the whole school, mistresses and girls alike, she was filled with remorse, and almost as penitent as the Lower Fifth. She hurried off then and there to the sick-room, and made ample amends to Gerry, remitting all the bad marks she had piled upon her unfortunate pupil during that black week, and expressing her regret over and over again.

Sister had to intervene at last and send her away.

"You'll have my patient in a fever between you all before you've done," the nurse said impatiently. "There's Miss Oakley been talking to her for a good hour, and Miss Caton and Miss Latham! There isn't anybody going to come in here now for the rest of the evening! And I'm not going to talk to you either, Gerry. You must just read your book and lie quiet."

Gerry was nothing loath to do that. The strain of the past week, indeed of the whole term, culminating in the excitement of the afternoon, had told upon her considerably. She looked so white and tired that it was no wonder Sister had been moved into forbidding any more visitors. But in spite of her tiredness, and her natural sorrow at poor Bruno's untimely fate, the girl was very happy. She curled herself up under the rug, and lay gazing into the fire with her book in her hand and a little smile on her lips. She had made good now in the eyes of the school. Nobody would ever be able to call her a coward again. And—best of everything, perhaps—Jack was to be her friend. Gerry knew well enough what that impulsive squeeze of her hand had meant without any explanations. Her first term at Wakehurst Priory was nearly over. It had been rather a terrible term—Gerry gave a little shudder as she looked back over some of its incidents. But many more terms lay in front of her, and though they might bring troubles and trials, yet somehow Gerry felt quite sure that none of them would be quite so bad as the one she had just come through.

She stayed up in the sick-room all the evening, and was served by Sister with a dainty little supper, sent from Miss Oakley's own table—soup and chicken and jelly and cream, with a cup of delicious coffee to finish with. Sister had intended that her patient should go straight to the Pink Dormitory when bed-time came, and not descend to the lower regions again that night.

"I'd send you there at once, but it isn't much good my letting you go until the others are up," she said. "They'll only go waking you up with their noise just as you've got to sleep, and you'd be better lying quietly here. I've a good mind to fetch your things along and let you sleep in the sick-ward to-night. Only you'll probably be all right in the morning, and it hardly seems worth while."

"Oh, no! Please let me go back to the dormitory to-night!" pleaded Gerry in alarm. In spite of her newborn courage, the prospect of spending a night alone in the sick-ward was anything but pleasant. Gerry was not to outgrow all her old terrors just at once. That perhaps could hardly be expected.

"Very well," agreed Sister. "If you'll promise to lie quiet and not talk to the others, you shall go. There's the Chapel bell just ringing. We'll wait until we hear them come out from prayers, then we'll get you along to the dormitory and into your bed by the time they've done saying good-night to Miss Oakley."

It was the custom at Wakehurst Priory for the headmistress to stand by the doorway of the Great Hall, whither the girls were marshalled when they came out from Chapel, and smile a quiet good-night to them, as they filed by her on their way to bed.

Sister's programme, however, was slightly disarranged after all. She had just got Gerry to her feet, and was preparing to whisk her off to the Pink Dormitory, when Jack Pym burst into the sick-room, a little breathless with haste, and apparently labouring under some intense excitement, with a request from the headmistress that Gerry might be allowed to go down into the Great Hall and say good-night. Sister demurred at first, but a request from Miss Oakley was almost equivalent to a command. And as Gerry had really recovered, except for the tiredness which was a natural reaction from her excitement, she at last agreed to let her go.

"Mind you be quick up though when she's finished with you," she said. "I shall be waiting for you, to see that you get quickly into bed, so mind you don't dawdle once you've said good-night."

"What does Miss Oakley want me for, Jack?" Gerry inquired, as Jack hurried her through the passages. But Jack only mumbled something indistinctly under her breath, and Gerry was obliged to control her curiosity until the Great Hall was reached.

The girls were drawn up in the Hall as usual, but, rather to Gerry's surprise, Miss Oakley was not there. Instead, Muriel Paget occupied the post of honour by the door. Muriel had been making a speech, it seemed, though it was not until some time afterwards that Gerry learned what it was all about. Then it was Jack who told her.

"She'd got permission, you see, from Miss Oakley to tell the girls that you weren't the least little bit of a German, that your father had been an ambassador or something, and that you'd lived in Germany when you were small, and that was how you learned to speak their beastly lingo so well, and that you hadn't done any of the sneaky things we thought you had—that they were all accidents the whole way through," Jack informed her friend some days later during one of their *tête-à-tête* walks, which soon became a regular proceeding.

When the two girls entered the Great Hall, Muriel intercepted Gerry and retained her beside her, while Jack slipped away to her own place amongst the rest of the Lower Fifth.

"Gerry," said the head girl, raising her voice so that every word she spoke could be heard at the farthest end of the Hall, "we've been talking about you, and I've been explaining some things

about you to the girls. And Miss Oakley said we might ask you to come down so that we could tell you a little of what we think of you—not only for your courage in stopping poor old Bruno this afternoon, and probably saving any amount of people from being bitten—but also for all the pluck you've shown this term under very trying circumstances."

Then, as Gerry turned suddenly crimson with embarrassment, the head girl turned to the expectant school.

"Now, then!" she called. "Three cheers for Geraldine Wilmott! 'German Gerry' no longer! Hip—hip—hip—"

"Hurrah!" shouted the school, and the cheering went on for so long that Muriel had to intervene at last.

"That's enough," she said, holding up her hand for silence. "There's something else I want to say. I want to tell Gerry—Geraldine, I mean," she added, correcting herself, "that nobody is going to use her horrid nickname any longer. We're all agreed upon that, aren't we, girls? Geraldine is Geraldine from this time forward."

But there came an exclamation of dismay from Gerry at that.

"Oh, Muriel!" she cried, gazing at the head girl with piteous eyes, and forgetting for the moment her confusion at finding herself the centre of interest like this. "But I'd *like* to keep the nickname, if you don't mind! Every body calls me Gerry now, and I don't want to be Geraldine again at all. I'd ever so much rather go on being just Gerry."

A ripple of laughter ran round the room at this spontaneous outburst from the shy new girl. Gerry coloured up in still greater embarrassment as she heard it, but Muriel put her hand very kindly on the younger girl's shoulder.

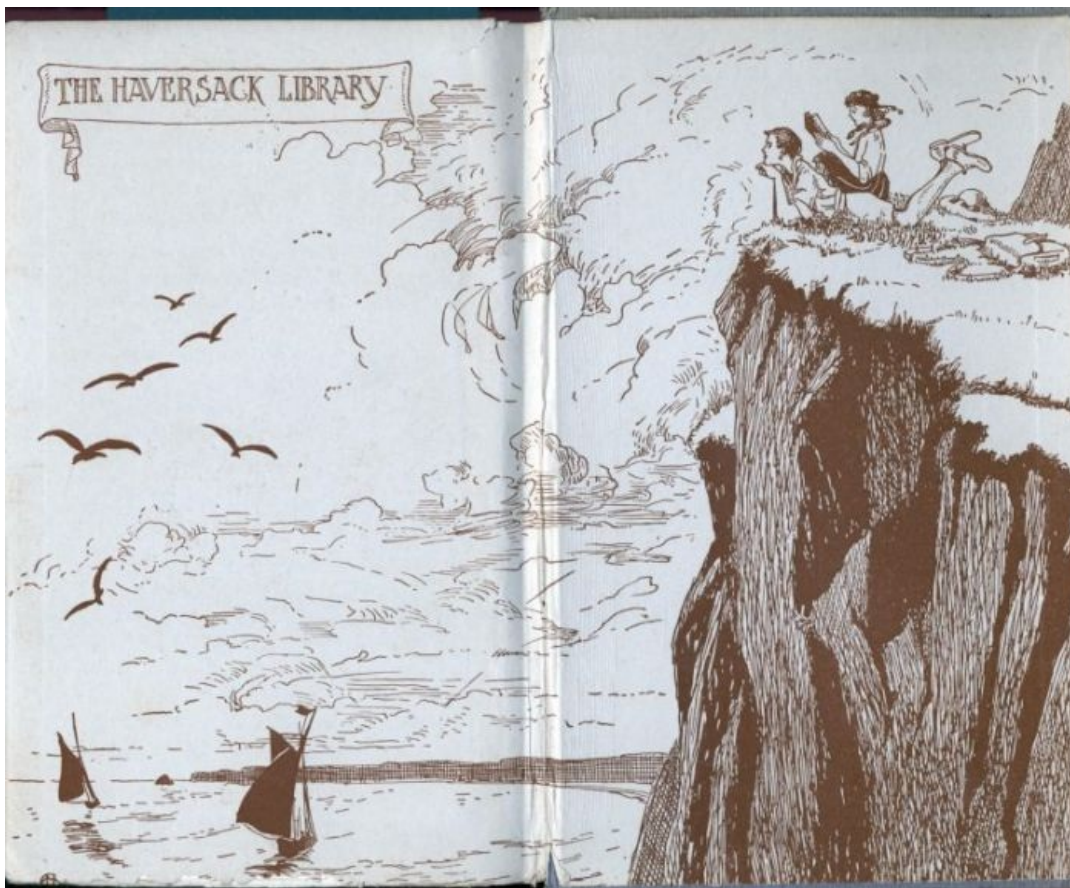
"Gerry it shall be, then, if you want it so," she said, with a smile. "But we'll drop the prefix, shall we! You don't want *that*. Girls, you've just given three cheers for Geraldine Wilmott. Suppose we give three more for—Just Gerry."

"Gerry, Gerry! Just Gerry!" cried the girls. And the cheers which rang out, accompanied by musical honours this time, confused Gerry so much that she ran out of the room to hide her emotion, and was discovered later by an irate Sister sobbing her heart out for joy on her bed in Cubicle Thirteen—the luck of which had surely changed at last!

"What on earth Miss Oakley meant by letting you send for the child to upset her like this, I don't know!" exclaimed that scandalised official severely, when Muriel and Monica came seeking the runaway with eager penitence. "It's enough to make her light-headed on the top of the shock she's had. Oh, don't talk to me about not meaning it! You just go and let me get her into bed. And for goodness' sake keep the dormitory quiet to-night, if you don't want her in the sick-room with a nervous breakdown in the morning!"

But it isn't tears of joy that hurt people! And after a night of unbroken slumber, the occupant of Cubicle Thirteen awoke refreshed in mind and body—unless you count a slightly swollen nose—to begin a new and happier career at Wakehurst Priory as—Just Gerry.

THE END



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JUST GERRY ***

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