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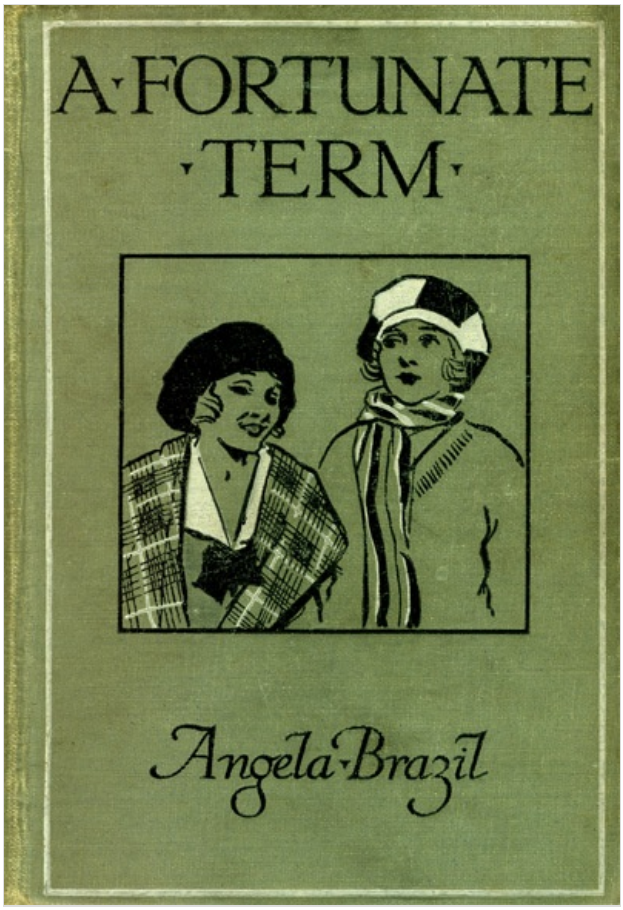
A FORTUNATE TERM



By ANGELA BRAZIL

"Angela Brazil has proved her undoubted talent for writing a story of schoolgirls for other schoolgirls to read."—**Bookman**.

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

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SHE FOUND TOM IN THE GREENHOUSE

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BY

ANGELA BRAZIL

Illustrated by Treyer Evans

BLACKIE AND SON LIMITED
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CHAPTER I

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Mavis and Merle

There had never been a week of worse weather, even for Whinburn, and that was saying something! Mavis, sitting up in bed with a dressing-jacket and two shawls round her and three comfortable pillows tucked at her back, could just see out of the window if she craned her neck a little. The prospect which greeted her was anything but pleasing—a wilderness of roofs covered with dirty snow, and a row of factory chimneys belching forth grimy smoke against a leaden sky.

From the street came the noise of tram-cars and tramping feet; a motor-lorry, thundering by, shook the house like an earthquake. Mavis, in the blessed lull between two storms of coughing, turned her eyes resolutely from the forlorn view of the outside world to the cheery interior of the bedroom, with its glowing fire, its bookcase full of attractive volumes, and its walls so covered with framed prints, photos, and picture postcards that there hardly seemed a vacant inch of [10] space left. Directly facing her, and in the place of honour, was a water-colour representing a landscape with a peep of the sea beyond. The trees in the painting were bare, but the undergrowth was green, and a patch of gorse blazed in the foreground, a rift of light from the sky gleamed on the waters of a stream, and the figure of a little girl was stooping to gather ferns. Mavis gazed at the picture for some time in silent contemplation, then:

"Muvvie, dear," she said suddenly, "I think you must have made a mistake when you told me you painted that in December."

Mrs. Ramsay, sitting with the mending-basket near the fire, snicked a piece of wool and put down the scissors.

"It's perfectly true, Madam Doubtful. Your mother doesn't tell fiblets. I sketched that in Devonshire the year before I was married. It was a milder winter even than usual, and I remember the gorse was in blossom at Christmas, and the laurustinus coming out in the gardens. I painted exactly what I saw, and no more. Can't you believe me?"

"Ye-e-s! But it's wonderful all the same. We don't get winters like that here in the north. When I look at the snow and the chimneys, and then at the picture, it's like peeping through another window into a different world. I only wish——"

But a severe gust of coughing interrupted Mavis's reflections, and when it was over she lay back, very quiet and white and exhausted, upon her three pillows.

Mrs. Ramsay, mixing a poultice by the fire, sighed as she stirred linseed meal into boiling [11] water.

"It's most unlucky you've started with one of your bad attacks of bronchitis before Christmas. How am I going to get you through the winter, child, if you've begun to take cold already? I'd like to wrap you in cotton-wool and pack you away in a box to sleep like a dormouse till the warm weather woke you up! Whinburn certainly doesn't suit you. It may be bracing, but people with delicate chests can be too much 'braced' sometimes. Is the poultice too hot? Be a brave girl! Remember, Father said 'the hotter the better!' Bear it as long as you can. Why, there's the bell! Is it Merle home already? Surely she's early to-day?"

Mavis, protesting against the poultice, looked up eagerly as stamping feet resounded on the stairs, and her sister, with coat and hat lightly powdered with new-fallen snow, burst into the room.

"Hello, Mavis! You've got the best place, in bed! It's detestable out to-day. The wind's like a knife, and it's beginning to snow again. Oh, it was cold at school! My fingers were simply frozen. The end of Miss Donald's nose was quite blue, and her temper was bluer. She snapped my head off when I asked her a question. We played tig in the gym at 'break', though, and got warm, but Gertie upset the coal-box and made such a mess, and Miss Greene scolded ever so, and said we were trampling coal-dust into the floor, and it would have to be washed again before dancing lesson. It wasn't really Gertie's fault; Joan pushed her. I met the postman outside, Mumsie. He [12] gave me this parcel. It's for you. You're always the lucker! I wish it was mine."

"We'll all share it together," said Mrs. Ramsay, taking the package to Mavis's bed and snipping the string with her scissors. "It has the Durracombe postmark, and it's Aunt Nellie's writing, and I think I shan't be very far wrong if I guess flowers."

The contents of the box were soon spread forth on the invalid's counterpane. They were an amazing display, for it seemed as if the seasons had overlapped, and late autumn had joined hands with early spring. There were yellow rosebuds, and passion flowers, and a few montbretias, and some Michaelmas daisies, a big bunch of purple violets, some primroses, polyanthuses, a pansy or two, blossoming ivy, little pink double daisies, and beautiful sprays of the yellow jessamine. Mavis fingered them delicately as if they were priceless treasures. The colour had flooded into her cheeks and her eyes shone like stars.

"Muvvie! Surely they come from a greenhouse?" she asked. "They *can't* be growing out-of-doors *now*."

"Indeed they can! You don't know Durracombe. The flowers go blooming along all the winter—if you can call it winter down there. I told you it was a different climate from Whinburn. Oh, how sweet they smell! I remember just the exact spot in the dear old garden where these violets grow."

Mavis looked out of the window, where the now fast-whirling snow was hiding the smoke of the factory chimneys, then looked back to the pure, clean, delicate blossoms that lay on her lap. [13]

"It's like a fairy tale!" she murmured. "Think of picking them in December! Muvvie, if I could go and stay at the place where these flowers grow I should get well."

"I verily believe you would," said Mrs. Ramsay thoughtfully, as she fetched vases and began to

place the drooping violets in warm water.

Mavis, at the time our story begins, was fifteen and a half, and exactly fourteen months older than Merle. It is necessary to state her age, because people always forgot it, and set her down as the younger of the two. Everybody, friends and strangers alike, gave precedence to Merle, the taller, stronger, more confident, and more dominating individuality. Mavis was an ethereal little person, who might be described as a spirit very lightly embodied in flesh. With Merle soul and body were balanced, with a bias towards the latter—on the whole she was of the earth, earthy. There was a sufficient likeness between the sisters to suggest that nature had reproduced an identical type in different mediums. She had painted the first delicately in water-colours, then had copied the same model more strongly in oils. Which picture you preferred was a matter of taste.

Fortunately there was a complete understanding between the girls. Their particular faults and virtues seemed to dovetail into one another without friction, and they were excellent chums, a useful factor at school, where Mavis often needed a defender, and Merle was constantly requiring the services of someone to help to pull her out of her numerous scrapes. [14]

Dr. Ramsay lived at the north-country manufacturing town of Whinburn, a prosperous but bleak corner of the kingdom, where smoke had stunted the trees and soiled the herbage, where flowers were scarce and bloomed late, and winter stretched its icy fingers well into autumn and spring. The house, like most doctors' houses, was on the main high road, and part of the garden behind had been turned into a garage, so there was very little room for the bed of bulbs and the perennial border upon which Mavis concentrated most of her outdoor energies. She toiled hard to have a floral display in the summer months, but it was disheartening work, for the frost always killed her wallflowers, and only the hardiest of plants would consent to make a sulky struggle against the smoky atmosphere that seemed to blight the very heart of vegetation and turn the choicest bedding varieties into sickly specimens. Merle, less deeply wedded to nature, had long given up gardening as a bad job, and had handed over her patch of unkindly northern soil to her sister. She was more interested in the car: she liked to watch the chauffeur clean it, and the high-water mark of her bliss came on the days when, on a quiet road and with no policeman within sight, her father would allow her for a brief space to assume command of the driving-wheel.

"I'll be your chauffeur, Dad, when I'm old enough to leave school," she would assure him airily. "I *do* think you might get me a driving licence now! Too young? What nonsense! We've no need to tell the Government I'm only fourteen. I'd soon drive as well as Greenhalgh if you'd let me try. I'm not afraid of anything." [15]

"I dare say not, but think of *my* feelings with a harum-scarum like you at the helm!" her father would reply. "You'd soon collide with a lorry, or land us in the ditch. I'll stick to Greenhalgh, thank you. He doesn't want to run at forty miles an hour."

"I'll take proper motoring lessons when I've left school," Merle would declare, "then I'll be ready to drive any car in the United Kingdom—that's to say, if I haven't made up my mind to be a lady detective."

Mavis, who was in bed when our story begins, weathered her December attack of bronchitis and came downstairs in time for Christmas Day, but with such white roses in her cheeks that her father looked at her anxiously, and called Mother into the consulting-room for a private confabulation, the result of which was a long private letter addressed Dr. Tremayne, Durracombe, Devonshire, which was posted without the girls' knowledge. Several other letters followed, and the brisk correspondence had just reached a satisfactory conclusion on a certain January day when Mavis, with a shawl round her shoulders, was peering out of the window at the flying snowflakes.

"Watching the feathers from Mother Carey's chickens, bairns?" said Mrs. Ramsay. "I'm afraid it's going to be a wild night. The wind's rising. I like the snow when it's newly fallen, but it gets dirty directly in Whinburn." [16]

"And I don't like snow at all, Muvvie," replied Mavis. "We were building castles in the air just now, and mine was to live in a lovely wood where it was never really winter."

"My castle was to be a chauffeur or a lady detective!" laughed Merle. "Perhaps both! It would be great sport to go dashing about the country in a car, unravelling mysteries and catching jewel thieves. Will you come with me, Mavis?"

Mavis shook her head.

"I've told you I'm going to live in a house with an enormous garden, and a wood where I can watch the birds. I'd rather track tomtits than jewel thieves. You shall come and stay with me when you're tired of chasing your burglars. It will be fine and warm in my wood, with no slushy snow *ever*, or yellow fog, only lovely flowers and ferns the whole year round, and I shall go out without being eternally wrapped up. That's my castle in the air!"

"Don't you wish you may get it, that's all! It sounds like El Dorado. Oh, I'll come and stay with you right enough when you find such a fairyland. Woods like that don't grow near Whinburn. Look at the sky now! It's actually trying to snow again!"

"It won't snow in my *wood*!"

"And I say such woods don't exist except in your imagination," declared Merle emphatically.

"Not quite the fairy land Mavis pictures, but there's a very good approach to them in Devonshire," said Mrs. Ramsay. "I've something I want to tell you chicks. How would you like to go to Durracombe and stay with Uncle David and Aunt Nellie? Don't look so incredulous! It's really true. We've arranged to send you for three months, and I'm to take you down there next week." [17]

This was news indeed, such news that at first the girls were hardly able to believe it. They had never been in Devonshire, and had not seen their mother's uncle, Dr. Tremayne. Their father, Dr. Ramsay, busy with his own professional work, had little time to spare for visiting, and when he snatched a holiday the family had generally gone to Scotland, or to some east-coast seaside resort. He was fond of the north, which has a charm all its own, but his wife was a Devon woman, who could not forget the county of her birth. She had told her children stories of its beauties, its mild air, its early flowers, its legends of pixies, its smugglers' coves and blue stretches of sea, its moors and dancing brooks, till they had come to look upon it as a sort of Elfland, a fairy-tale country that had no more real existence than the kingdom at the top of Jack's beanstalk. Uncle David and Aunt Nellie, too, though familiar household names, were entities as unsubstantial as characters in a book. To go and stay with them at Durracombe seemed as amazing as a visit to Robinson Crusoe's island or a sojourn with Robert Louis Stevenson in the South Seas. When their minds were adjusted to the new idea they demanded details. [18]

"Three months! We shall miss school for a whole term. Oh, Mummie, what fun! Shall we find cowslips in the fields? And can we go paddling in the brook? It sounds gorgeous!"

"You certainly won't find cowslips in January. Don't expect impossibilities. And as for paddling, I forbid anything of the sort before Easter. Don't congratulate yourselves that you're going to have a term's holiday. There's a very nice little day school in Durracombe, kept by the late vicar's daughters, only ten minutes' walk from Uncle David's house. Don't pull faces! Of course you must go to school, and you'll probably like it. How long can I stay? About a week. I shall take you there and see you settled, then I must fly back to Father, for he's not accustomed to doing without the whole of his family. I wish he could have come with us, but it's quite impossible for him to leave his patients at present. If you catch another cold, Mavis, before we go away, I shall be really cross with you. We hope Devonshire air will work a cure and stop these perpetual bouts of bronchitis. As for you, Merle, there's really no reason for sending *you*, except——"

"Except that my little sister couldn't and wouldn't and shouldn't go without me. We're practically twins, and we're no more use apart than the two blades of a pair of scissors. Oh yes, Mummie darling, we'll be patterns of virtue. Don't worry about us. We'll cheer up Aunt Nellie and amuse Uncle David, and wake the new school up too, I dare say. Don't look horrified, sweetest, I'm half joking. Mavis is such an angel-girl she needs me to drag her down a little or she'd just go floating off to heaven like a balloon, and never find her way back. I act earthly ballast for her, and keep her anchored to this world. She'd never remember her tonic if I didn't remind her. I'll keep an eye on her down in Devon, and see that she doesn't sit in draughts or get her feet damp. Trust her twin to look after her. Whenever she wants to do silly things I'll scold till I'm hoarse. You don't know how I can croak when I like!" [19]

"As if I were going to do silly things!" interrupted Mavis indignantly. "Really, to hear you talk, anybody'd think you were my grannie instead of fourteen months younger than I am! I hope this new school will be decent. We shall miss Janie and Edna."

"But think of getting rid of Miss Donald for a whole term, and not having Miss Hanson to teach us algebra. Oh, what a jubilee! Our desks will be empty in IVA. Sounds quite pathetic, doesn't it? Sort of twin tombstone business."

"They grew in beauty side by side;
They filled one school with glee,"

laughed Mavis.

"And now they're going to have some
larks
In Devon by the sea!"

finished Merle.

"Durracombe—Durracombe—Durracombe," repeated Mavis. "Yes, I like the name. It grips me somehow. I feel I can be happy at Durracombe. I shouldn't want to go to a place called Porkville or Mudbury. There's a great deal in a name. Mumsie, dear, I wish we were starting to-morrow. I can't wait. I want to see Durracombe at once." [20]

"You silly child! And I, who have all your clothes to get ready, am thankful to have at least a week to turn round in. I don't say I'm not looking forward to seeing Devon again, though. We shall be ever such a jolly trio when we set off in the train, shan't we?"

"And where do I come in?" asked a mock-lugubrious voice, as Dr. Ramsay joined the party. "My family appear very anxious to run away from me. It seems to me I'm to be left out in the cold. Poor Papa! Sitting alone by his desolate hearth with only the cat for company. My heart bleeds for him!"

"Daddy! You naughty boy! You ought to come with us," cried the girls, forcing their father into an elbow chair and seating themselves on the two arms, so as to be in position to administer smacking kisses on both his cheeks. "You know very well Devon won't be *quite* Devon without you. We hate to leave you behind. Now, promise us something! Oh, it's perfectly easy and possible, and we know you can do it. Say yes! You'll be kissed to death by wild daughters if you don't. It's your only chance of life! Now or never! There! You've promised to come down to Durracombe at Easter to fetch us home."

"Have I indeed? Oh, I dare say!"

"I'll keep him to his bargain," laughed Mother; "but I expect when the time comes he'll be [21] fussing to start. We're not a family who can bear to be divided for long, are we?"

"Rather not!" said Merle, slipping from the arm-chair to pull Mother into the charmed circle. "You shall come in the car, darlings, and motor us back, and I'll drive whenever there's a smooth bit of road ahead. It's a topping idea."

"Only your driving doesn't happen to be included in the bargain, you young puss! We've some respect for our limbs, and prefer to reach home with bones unbroken," declared Father, escaping from his tempestuous daughters to answer the insistent telephone-bell that was ringing loud peals of agitated warning in the hall.

CHAPTER II [22]

"The Moorings"

The tiny town of Durracombe consisted mainly of one very long and enormously wide street. Everything that was of any importance was situated in this High Street—the church, the bank, the public hall, the reading-room, the free library, the best shops, and the Swan Hotel. Each Friday it was turned into a species of market, with stalls, and barrows, and butter-baskets, and shouting men driving frightened cattle, but on great festivals, such as Empire Day, it became a gay café, for tables and forms were placed on the pavements and the school children were entertained to tea in the open air, while the town band played patriotic music. Being such a small and compact place, it had the advantage of beginning and ending quite suddenly. The river marked the boundary. On one side of it you were in civilization, with a mayor and police and a town crier, and the privileges of gas and the telephone, but directly you crossed the bridge you were in the happy fields that owned no sovereign but Dame Nature, and in quite a few minutes you seemed to have left the world behind you.

Dr. Tremayne's house was the very first when you entered Durracombe by the road from the [23] south. Its green front door with the brass plate stood in the High Street, but its garden wall overtopped the river, and its side windows looked out over the fields to the open country. People coming to fetch the doctor on a black night could see his red surgery lamp from the top of the hill a whole mile away. It seemed to hold out promise of help like a kind hand stretched across the darkness of the river. For the last forty years Durracombe and district had depended upon Dr. Tremayne. Time had, of course, brought changes, and the dark-haired man who drove a high gig in the 'eighties was now grey and elderly, and did his rounds in a two-seater car. Quite apart from medicines the mere sight of him seemed to do his patients good. His very atmosphere was electric, and he had that true gift of healing that helps people to get well of their own accord. Certainly no one within a radius of thirty miles was a greater favourite than "the dear old doctor", and his small biscuit-coloured motor was a familiar feature on the country roads. His three children were married and settled down in various parts of the globe. None had followed their father's profession; so, though he might be proud of a son who was a judge in India, a barrister in London, or a successful civil engineer in Canada, he could claim no help in his practice from his own family. His wife, grey-haired and elderly too, was somewhat of an invalid, and most of the housekeeping was done by Jessop, an invaluable old servant who attended to the surgery, took [24] patients' messages, sterilized instruments, washed medicine bottles, could give first aid in an emergency, and was generally almost as great a feature of the practice as the doctor himself.

It was to this rather old-fashioned household that Mavis and Merle, sworn to the most exemplary behaviour, were sent for three months in the hope that in the soft Devonshire air Mavis would catch no more bad bronchial colds, and would have a chance of setting up her health and growing the two extra inches which she still needed to set her head on the same level with Merle's.

To the two girls everything in Durracombe seemed delightful. The mildness of the climate amazed them. After the nip of Whinburn's perpetual east wind, lifeless hedgerows, and desolate winter fields, it felt like a sudden jump into spring to find campion, herb robert, and dead-nettle blooming by the road-sides, catkins waving on the hazel bushes, clumps of snowdrops and Christmas roses under the apple trees, violets beneath the sheltered wall, primroses peeping

through last year's dead leaves, and the missel thrush chanting a triumphant song in the yew tree that overhung the river.

Mother, as happy as if she were a girl again, took them round to her favourite haunts: the beacon-top, where you could catch the first view of the sea, eight miles away; the moor with its rushes and soft, short green grass; the fields where cowslips would be found later on; the fir wood that seemed like a wilderness of Christmas trees; the marshy flats where you could see the [25] wild ducks flying; the little quarry where the sand-martens had burrowed holes for their nests—all the dear delightful spots that she had known as a child, and had described to them so often that they recognized them the moment they saw them.

"It's gorgeous! Muvvie, if only you weren't going away I'd think myself in Paradise," declared Mavis, with pink cheeks, and standing on tiptoe as if she were growing already. "Uncle David's a dear, and so's Aunt Nellie, and as for Jessop, she's just a sport—that's what I call her. Bridge House is simply A1, and if school anything like comes up to it, well—I shall say it's the time of my life. It's going to be the nicest term I've ever had."

"Don't congratulate yourself too soon," croaked Merle. "School's school all the world over, and there's sure to be something to put up with. *I'm* not looking forward to sums and exercises. When do we start? To-morrow! Ugh! Enter it as a black day in the calendar of Merle Ramsay, and probably of the school too, for they won't find me soft wax in their hands. I've got ideas of my own, and when people begin to try to mould me I'm apt to turn katawampus. Mumsie, darling, don't shoot up your eyebrows! There! I'll promise and vow to be a perfect seraph. They'll call me St. Merle before they've done with me. Honest, Mumsie, I will *really* try! You know how I flare out, but I'll make a bouncing start at this new school and think of you every time I get into a pixie [26] mood. If I don't, the Devonshire pixies had best steal me away and have done with it. I'd be a good riddance to everybody, I dare say."

Merle spoke half in jest and half in earnest. There was laughter in her voice, but her eyelashes were suddenly wet. Mrs. Ramsay laid a tender hand on her younger daughter's shoulder. She was not laughing at all.

"I hope both my girls are going to grow this term," she said quietly, "in character as well as in inches. There's room for improvement in both of you. Mavis must stir about instead of always dreaming and reading, and Merle must curb that little demon that sometimes gets possession of her. I expect to find two very sweet girls when I come to fetch them at Easter. We want this term to be in every sense a fortunate term."

"We'll do our level best, Muvvie! Can't you trust us?" whispered Mavis, linking her arm in her mother's, as they turned from the wood and began to walk down the hill-side towards the little town where the next eventful months of their lives were to be spent.

But Merle, who always hid her deepest feelings under a joke, chirruped out an impromptu ode to the future:

"School! School! School!
They'll probably call me a mule!
And stick me to stand,
With a book in my hand,
And a dunce's cap, on a stool!"

So it ended in the three of them laughing after all.

There was no large college or high school for girls in Durracombe, only a very small private [27] establishment kept by Miss Mary Pollard and her sister Fanny, daughters of the late Rev. Horatio Pollard, formerly vicar of the parish. They educated about twenty-four children, half of them from the immediate neighbourhood: Opal Earnshaw, the bank-manager's daughter; Edith and Maude Carey, from the Vicarage; Christabel Oakley, who rode over on her bicycle from St. Gilda's Rectory; the three little Andrews, from Fir Tree House; Major Leach's small grand-children; Betty and Stella Marshall, who lived with their aunt, Miss Johnson, while their parents were in Buenos Ayres; and twelve resident boarders, most of whose parents were stationed in India, and who, born under burning skies, had been sent to Durracombe for the sake of its soft air and mild winter record, until they should be sufficiently acclimatized to stand their chance as hardy specimens in bigger schools.

"The Moorings" was a large, pleasant, white house with green shutters and a veranda, and it stood at the bottom of a short road that led from the High Street. It was what is commonly known as "a dear little school", that is to say it was rather old-fashioned and out-of-date but very comfortable and "homey", and the classes were more like lessons with a private governess than working with a form. Miss Pollard, whose hair was as silver as spun moonlight, had dropped behind the more modern methods of education, and, feeling rather diffident in the schoolroom, [28] concentrated her attention on the housekeeping, cossetted up the delicate children, aired the linen, superintended the dormitories, and acted nurse to anybody who was lucky enough to be kept in bed. The bulk of the teaching rested in the hands of Miss Fanny, who was thorough, if old-fashioned, and whose original methods, by a curious coincidence, actually anticipated those of some of our most advanced educationists, and so placed her ahead of as well as behind the times.

It was into this small community, more like a big family than a school, that Mavis and Merle were introduced one January morning, causing visible thrills to the occupants of other desks as

they took their seats. To plunge suddenly from the work of one school into that of another is a rather bewildering experience, and by the time the half-past twelve bell sounded, the Ramsay girls felt as if their standards had been turned upside down. Mavis, shaky in general over history, had reeled off the dates of the principal battles in the Civil War, the only period of which she happened to have any special knowledge, and Merle, by an equal fluke, worked correctly all her problems in mathematics, a lesson which she usually abhorred. They were so astonished at scoring on these subjects that they naturally hoped to do better still in the French class, for languages had been their one strong point at Whinburn High School. But alack for their self esteem! The girls at The Moorings had concentrated on French, and not only translated easily from a book which was much too stiff for the Ramsays, but chattered quite fluently with [29] Mademoiselle Chavasse, whose encouraging remarks and questions were palpably not understood by her new pupils. It is humiliating not to be able to express yourself in a foreign tongue when others are talking it all round you. Merle, who never liked anybody to "go one better" than herself, was particularly aggravated by a fair-haired girl who sat near her, and who, as she conversed with the teacher, kept the corner of her eye on the new-comers as if judging the impression she was making on them.

"I don't like her! I shan't *ever* like her!" thought Merle irately. "She's conceited, and those eyes are sneaky. It's nothing so much to talk French. I suppose they're used to it. She needn't think I'm admiring her cleverness, for I'm not. I'll pluck up courage myself to say something next time Mademoiselle looks at me."

But Merle's powers were not equal to her courage, and when Mademoiselle gave her another chance she turned scarlet and stuttered, and generally made rather a goose of herself, to her own infinite indignation and evidently to the amusement of the rest of the class, especially of the fair-haired girl, who tittered openly till she met the teacher's outraged gaze, when she suddenly straightened her face and tried to appear quite unconscious. Mavis, profiting by her sister's example, did not commit herself to speech. Mademoiselle Chavasse's accent was unfamiliar and difficult to understand, and most of her remarks might as easily have been in Greek as French, to judge by the standards of Whinburn High School. Both the Ramsays were particularly relieved [30] when the lesson came to an end.

At 12.30 Mavis, who had been sent to the school with a special recommendation that her health should be looked after, was carried off by Miss Pollard to be weighed and measured and otherwise inspected, while Merle, with boots and hat and coat on, and all impatience to be off, waited for her in the cloak-room. The other day-girls had scurried away with hardly more than a glance in her direction, and she sat alone, kicking her heels and not in the sweetest of tempers, till one of the boarders, passing the door, peeped in, saw her, and entered. The new-comer was a nice-looking girl, with grey eyes and a plait of very dark hair. She smiled in quite friendly fashion.

"Hello!" she began. "Sitting here all by your lonesome? Why don't you go home?"

"Can't. I'm waiting for Mavis."

"Is Mavis the other? She's rather sweet! I like her fluffy hair and that blue velvet band. Somebody said she was older than you, but she doesn't look it."

"People often take us for twins," conceded Merle.

Iva Westwood shook her head.

"No one with eyes, surely! You're alike in a way, but not very. Opal Earnshaw was fearfully angry that you beat her in maths. She's been cock of the walk till now."

"Which is Opal Earnshaw?"

"That fair girl who sat near you."

Merle's face darkened. [31]

"That was why she tried to take it out of me in the French class, then?"

"Oh, Opal tries to take it out of everybody. She won't be very pleased you two have come, I expect. You're too old to stand her bossing."

"Why do other people stand it?"

"Well, you see, she's head of the school, and Miss Pollard and Miss Fanny are her godmothers."

"What difference does that make?"

"A great deal of difference, as you'll soon find out. Everything their darling god-child does *must* be right, that's the long and short of it. They favour her fearfully."

"What a blazing shame."

"Yes, some of us get rather fed up I can tell you. We mutiny every now and then."

"Count on me, then, next time you have squalls."

"Thanks!"

"Tell me about some of the other girls. Who's that one in the green jersey who sat by the

window and dropped her pencil-box? Is she nice?"

"Edith Carey! Ye-e-s, she's nice enough in a way." (Iva's tone was unconvincing). "She's the kind of girl who drags on your arm when she's tired, and insists on kissing you when she's got a bad cold."

"I understand—exactly. I suppose the other green jersey is her sister?"

"Maude? Oh, she's not a bad sort either. Rather a slacker though, always late for everything. We say she'd be late for her own funeral. She made us miss the train once when we were going [32] an excursion. What are the others like? Well, we call Aubrey Simpson the jackdaw, because she's always talking. Muriel Burnitt makes fun of everybody. You should hear her take off Mademoiselle! Nesta Pitman may be a little nasty to you at first, but don't mind her, because it's only her way with new people. She'll soon come round. She's rather off-hand, but a real sport!"

"So are you, I should guess!"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm Cornish, and Cornish people are supposed to be queer. At least Devon people say they are."

"Mother is Devon."

"Then I expect you'll think me queer. Are you living with your uncle, Dr. Tremayne? *He's* a sport if you like! He used to come and see me when I had scarlet fever, and he brought me strawberries long before our own were ripe. I wish I weren't a boarder. We live fifteen miles away, at Langoran Rectory. It's too far to come every day, or I'd bike, like Christabel Oakley. We used to have a governess at home until my brother went to school and——"

But Iva's reminiscences were broken by the appearance of Mavis, rather hot and injured after her health examination, and very anxious that they should not be late for one o'clock lunch. Iva, hearing a bell, disappeared without further remark, and the Ramsays hurried back through the town to Bridge House, where Aunt Nellie, who admired punctuality as a cardinal virtue, was [33] looking out of the window for them. They compared notes while they washed their hands.

"Are you going to like it?" asked Mavis eagerly.

"Um—I don't know! I certainly shan't like Opal Earnshaw, and she needn't think because she's head girl and all the rest of it that *I'm* going to truckle to her. They must be a poor-spirited set to let her lord it over everybody. Who said she did? Why, Iva Westwood. She was talking to me in the cloakroom. I could be chums with that girl! There's something about her I rather take to. She's Cornish, and they say Devon and Cornish people never can agree, but perhaps we'll hit it in spite of that. She said you were rather sweet! Don't screw up your mouth! She meant it as a compliment really. Do you think teachers ought to have their own godchildren for pupils? No, I've not suddenly gone mad, but Iva told me Miss Pollard and Miss Fanny are Opal's godmothers, and think everything she does is absolutely perfect. 'The Queen can do no wrong' sort of idea! I think it's horrid to have favourites. There goes the gong. Help! Give me the towel, quick! We mustn't be late for lunch on our first day without Mother, or Aunt Nellie'll think us horrible slackers."

CHAPTER III [34]

The School Favourite

Mavis and Merle walked into the dining-room just in the nick of time to satisfy Mrs. Tremayne's sense of propriety. She was a dear, nervous, old lady, who had never had any daughters of her own, and had rather a hazy notion of girls in general, and was indeed a little frightened of schoolgirls; but she tried to be very kind to her great-nieces, and had told Jessop to be sure and look after them. Jessop did not need any telling. It was she who had arranged their bedroom, and had put the little table in the window, and the two basket-chairs, and the bookcase full of tales of adventure and bound volumes of *The Boys' Own Paper*. The iced soda-cake was of her making, and so was the plateful of delicious treacle toffee.

"It's twenty years since the boys used to come home from boarding-school for their holidays, but I haven't forgotten what young folks like," she explained to Mavis and Merle, as she helped them to unpack. "It's more like a boys' bedroom than a girls' perhaps, but I just collected anything of Master Richard's and Master Cyril's that I could find about the house. If you don't care about them we'll take them out."

"But we *love* boys' things," declared Merle, admiring the pictures of dogs and horses on the [35] walls, opening the drawers of the cabinet of birds' eggs, and touching the whip and the cricket bat with friendly fingers. Mavis was already deep in *Coral Island*, and temporarily deaf to the outside world, but she had just sufficient sense of manners left to grunt "It's a gorgeous bookcase!" before she lost herself in the South Seas among the palm trees.

"Two very nice young ladies, and to have them here is like old times," Jessop had confided to Tom, the factotum. "The house has always seemed dull since Master Cyril went away. Miss Mavis reminds me of him, with her blue eyes and that gentle little voice of hers. Now, Miss Merle is like Master Percy. He'd a way with him! I never knew what was going to happen next when he was at home. 'Jessop' he'd say, 'you're a wonderful woman!' Then I knew he meant to coax me to let him keep his rabbits in his bedroom, or do something of that sort. Girls are quieter than boys, but these two will cheer us up a little, I dare say. We all seem to have grown old here lately."

And Tom, the factotum, polishing boots by the back door, agreed with her. Twenty years ago he had been the coachman, and, immaculate in his grey livery and silver buttons and top hat with the cockade at the side, had driven the high gig about the country lanes. It had nearly broken his heart when his master decided to give up the horses and take to motoring instead. There were tears in his eyes when he groomed Czar and Ruby for the last time. But, though Dr. Tremayne [36] might march with the century, and visit his patients more quickly in his new automobile, he had no intention of parting with his old coachman, and determined to turn him into a chauffeur instead. So Tom learnt to drive the car, learnt almost too well, indeed, for, determined not to show the white feather, he waxed foolhardy, and would career round corners with one wheel off the ground, or dash down hills at such breakneck speed that the doctor, not usually a nervous subject, would gasp with relief to find himself alive at the bottom. Something plainly had to be done, or Tom would soon have broken the family's bones, and the question was how to shelve him without giving him offence. The riddle, fortunately, solved itself by the retirement of Dalton, the factotum-gardener. Dr. Tremayne decided to retrench and to keep only one man-servant. In future he drove his own car, and Tom was installed in Dalton's place, to weed the walks, clip the grass, polish the knives, and carry the coals. He made friends at once with Mavis and Merle, or rather he merely transferred to them the friendship he had given to their mother twenty-five years ago, when she used to spend her holidays at Bridge House, and rode Cobs, the white pony, whose grave lay at the bottom of the paddock. To Tom, motoring was the sign of a degenerate age, and he would descant to the girls about the good old days, when people were not in such a frantic hurry and could wait for the doctor until he drove up behind a well-groomed horse, and [37] made such a case for the past times that Merle, in spite of her ambition to drive a car, began to wish Czar and Ruby and Cobs were still in the stable, and she herself could be clad in Mother's old riding-habit and flourish Cousin Percy's discarded whip as she ambled along the lanes on pony-back.

That, however, was before she had had a run in the little, yellow Deemster car. After the first trip to Chagmouth she completely changed her mind.

For a week life went on with the greatest regularity at Durracombe. Every morning the girls were called by Jessop promptly at half-past seven. They started for school at twenty minutes to nine, returned home for lunch, rushed back to The Moorings by 2.30, did their preparation and practising in the evenings, and went to bed at nine o'clock. Uncle David was nearly always out, or busy in the surgery, and Aunt Nellie sat by the fire, knitting or taking little naps. She would ask very kindly about their lessons, then, hardly giving them time to answer, would plunge into reminiscences of her boys' schooldays. Life, for her, still centred round Percy, Richard, and Cyril. When the girls wanted to talk they went to Jessop. It was to her they poured out their experiences of their new school, and she listened with the flattering interest of one who really enjoys hearing. She never read any books, so perhaps the little adventures described humorously by Mavis or Merle took the place of chapters in a serial story. She was familiar directly with the [38] names of all the girls and teachers at The Moorings, and most delightfully ready to "take sides", and like those whom they liked and agree about the iniquities of those who offended them.

For this first week had not been all plain sailing. It is often really easier to get on in a big school than a little one. There is more elbow-room among two hundred girls than among two dozen. Nobody except Iva Westwood had seemed particularly pleased to welcome them. Opal Earnshaw palpably resented their presence.

"Miss Pollard is only supposed to take twenty pupils," she remarked, on the day after their arrival. "I know she refused two other girls, so I can't think why she should have broken her rule."

"But those girls would have been boarders," objected Iva.

"Well, where's the difference?"

"A great deal when it means two extra beds in a dormitory."

"It means two extra seats in a room that's already overcrowded," declared Opal loftily. "If the school is going to take any more new girls it had better build an annexe and let them have classes there."

"Sorry to be on the earth!" said Merle sarcastically. "Perhaps you'd like us to sit inside the cupboard? We shouldn't crowd you out there."

Opal looked her up and down, from her velvet hair-band to the tips of her shoes, then she gave a kind of snort.

"I suppose you think yourself ever so clever," she retorted. "Girls from big schools generally [39] give themselves airs."

"Other people can give themselves airs," snapped Merle, warming to the battle. "Big schools teach manners at any rate!"

"Oh, we don't mean anything against *this* school," hurriedly put in Mavis, who generally tried to take the edge off her sister's cutting speeches. "We think it's going to be quite jolly. I'm sorry if we've taken the desks where you've had your museum, but where *are* we to keep our books and things?"

Opal, who was grudgingly removing the contents of two desks, which for a whole term had been devoted to a collection of natural history objects, had the grace to look rather ashamed of herself.

"Oh, it's all right," she temporized, "but what I'm to do with all our birds' eggs and butterflies goodness only knows! I daren't keep them in any of the other classrooms or those juniors would be fingering them and they'd be smashed to bits. I suppose I must pack them in boxes and get Miss Fanny to stow them away somewhere."

"Can't I help?" said Mavis, coming to the rescue.

Iva had just arrived on the scene bearing some large cardboard boxes, into which the three girls transferred the little collection. It seemed quite a pity to have to move it, for it had been so carefully set out. There were certainly grounds for Opal's ill humour, though even the most unreasonable of head girls can hardly expect a mistress to reserve desks for a museum when she [40] can give them to two extra pupils. The fact was that Opal had been "first favourite" at The Moorings for too long. It would have done her all the good in the world to be sent to a large boarding-school and find there were people more important than herself. Miss Pollard and Miss Fanny, devoted friends of her mother, undoubtedly spoilt her, lent a ready ear to her complaints, but listened coldly to anybody who made accusations against her. The knowledge that she will receive support at all costs from head-quarters is a dangerous weapon for a girl in a position of authority. During the whole of last term Opal had done pretty much what she liked, and when others grumbled would declare: "Well, go and tell Miss Pollard and see which she'll believe, you or me!" an argument which was so unfortunately well founded that the luckless objectors preferred to suffer in silence.

It was not in the nature of things that a disposition such as Merle Ramsay's could be in the same school with Opal Earnshaw without a clash. Merle loved fair play, and was always ready and willing to stand up for anybody's rights, including Mavis's and her own. Her first instinct had been to clear their new desks by tipping the unfortunate museum on to the floor. That was Merle all over. She preferred forcible methods to diplomacy. It generally needed all Mavis's tact to smooth over the difficulties roused by Merle's ardent partisanship and freedom of speech. Many were the squalls from which she had rescued her sister at the Whinburn High School, and [41] apparently she would be required to perform the same office for her at The Moorings.

Opal calmed down and was fairly civil during the morning, but on that very afternoon arose another unfortunate occasion of dispute. The Ramsays had finished lunch early, and hurried back to school in order to have a little fun with the boarders before lessons began at 2.30. They liked Iva and Nesta, and also some of the younger ones, and meant to enjoy half an hour with them in the playroom. Merle was by nature a public entertainer. She could not spend ten minutes in the company of other girls without wanting to start games or organize a sing-song or in some way get up amusement. During the Christmas holidays she had been poring over an article on palmistry which she found in a magazine. As the result of her studies in that direction she offered to tell the fortune of anybody who liked to consult her. She was instantly besieged by an excited crowd, all thrusting forward their hands at once for inspection and trying to push one another aside.

"Cheerio! This won't do!" decreed Merle. "One at a time, my hearties! Take your places in an orderly queue and come up in your turns to the witch, or she'll fly away on her broomstick and tell you nothing! Iva first, then Nesta, then you others, and no squabbling. Anybody who tries to push in front will be turned to the end of the queue. That's kismet!"

Merle could always keep order among juniors. The small fry giggled, but formed into line and [42] kept their places while Iva and Nesta consulted the oracle. The prophecies were rather startling but sufficiently exciting to make eight young heads bob up and down with eagerness to secure their turns before the bell rang for afternoon school. Iva had been sent away a little dubious between the attractions of "foreign travel" and a warning of "danger by sea", while Nesta was openly rejoicing over a prospect of "wealth and honours" in spite of the "accidents" scattered over her future path. It was now the turn of Mamie Drew, and that short-skirted damsel was just advancing with rather awed eyes and a nervous chuckle, when the door opened and Opal Earnshaw strolled into the room.

"Hello! What are you all doing here?" she exclaimed. "Fortunes! Oh, I say! I *must* have mine told. What can you make out of my hand?"

And, thrusting Mamie aside, she spread out her palm for Merle's inspection.

Now it was partly Merle's love of fair play and partly her antipathy to Opal, and partly a little bit of "katawampus", but the three feelings combined made her thrust away the hand in a very peremptory fashion, and brought an extremely tart note into her voice as she said:

"No pushing in front! Go to the end of the queue and take your turn with the others. It's Mamie

next."

"I don't mind," volunteered Mamie, making way for Opal.

"But *I* mind!" snapped Merle. "It's I who's telling the fortunes and I'll do it as I like, and take you in order. If you don't want to come next, Mamie, get out of the way can't you, and let Joyce have her innings! Opal must wait like other people." [43]

Opal, however, as head girl, considered herself highly insulted.

"You needn't think I'm going to wait at the end of a queue of kids," she retorted angrily. "I don't care about your old fortune-telling, thanks!" and she flounced out of the room.

She was very glum indeed all afternoon, and would not look at either of the Ramsays, though Mavis, to make amends, offered the loan of a new penknife, and even tendered a surreptitious chocolate.

"I took her down, didn't I?" smirked Merle, as the sisters walked home up the High Street, and watched the retreating figure of Opal, who had scuttled past them with averted eyes, hurrying towards her own front door.

Mavis sighed. Her naturally kind and peaceful disposition and her loyalty to Merle were always pulling her in opposite directions.

"I'm afraid Opal just detests us. Perhaps you might have let her take Mamie's turn as Mamie actually offered."

"Certainly not." (Merle's voice was firm.) "If you begin to let a girl like that butt in whenever she wants, you never know where you are. I think she's the limit. She'd no need to look so annoyed when we arrived at school. What does it matter to her? The Moorings isn't run for her private convenience!" [44]

"She couldn't forgive us for taking those spare desks and turning out the museum."

"Bother her museum!"

"It's rather a nice one anyway. It seems a pity it has to be put by in cardboard boxes."

Mavis was really concerned about the little collection of curiosities that had been so neatly spread forth in the unoccupied desks. She cogitated for a long time as to how the difficulty could possibly be overcome. Finally she sought Tom, with whom she was already on terms of great friendship. She found him in the greenhouse, repotting some ferns.

"Oh, Tom!" she burst out eagerly. "Do you think there's anything about the place I might take to make a museum?"

Tom stroked the grey stubble on his chin reflectively.

"A museum?" he repeated. "That's a big order, Miss, isn't it? I went through the museum in the castle grounds at Taunton once. It must be ten years ago. Or will it be twelve now?"

"Oh, of course, I don't mean a museum like that," explained Mavis, "only a kind of box arrangement with some glass over it, to put butterflies and birds' eggs in, very like—" (her eyes wandered round the greenhouse) "very like what you grow seeds in."

The nice part about Tom was the alacrity with which he caught up suggestions. At his age it was really amazing.

"A very good idee, Miss," he agreed. "I know what you want. Master Cyril used to keep his butterflies in boxes like that. I'll hunt about and see what I can find for you." [45]

"Smart-looking boxes and some pieces of glass to fit over them?" pleaded Mavis.

"You leave it to me," was all Tom would promise, but there was a twinkle in his eye as he stooped over his ferns again.

Every morning Mavis asked him for the boxes, and each time he either pretended to have forgotten or was ready with some excuse. At the end of four days, however, he took her into the old harness-room, where he had a joiner's bench and a variety of tools, for he acted handy man to the establishment.

"How will these suit you, Miss?" he enquired, in a would-be nonchalant tone.

Mavis gave an absolute bounce of surprise. There on the bench lay two most beautiful cases. Tom had planed the boxes and made lids for them, into which he had fitted the pieces of glass. They were stained brown and varnished, and were lined neatly with dark-blue cloth. The old man was evidently bursting with pride at his handiwork, though he affected an attitude of indifference.

Mavis made haste to congratulate him.

"It's the cleverest thing I've ever seen done in my life," she purred. "Oh, they're just too lovely for words—absolutely topping! Thanks, a thousand times over. You must have simply *slaved* to finish them so quickly."

"Oh, I just worked at them in odds and ends of my time," said Tom casually, looking very [46] pleased all the same. "That varnish is a bit sticky yet, but I dare say it'll be dry by the morning. If you want the boxes at school I'll carry them round for you to-morrow some time."

"Oh, thanks! Could you bring them at eleven o'clock 'break'? That would be scrumptious. I must fetch Merle to look at them at once, and Jessop too. You don't mind?"

Tom delivered the cases next day with admirable punctuality; indeed he was standing on the school doorstep exactly as Miss Fanny rang the big bell for break. The girls, pouring into the hall, saw him deliver the treasures into the safe custody of Bella, the housemaid. Naturally they crowded round to look.

"Hello! What are these for?" asked Opal. "What stunning cases!"

"They're for Miss Ramsay," proclaimed Bella.

Mavis, with rather a red face, stepped forward.

"If you think they'll do to keep the birds' eggs and butterflies and things in will you please have them as a museum for the school," she said quickly. "Tom, my uncle's coachman, made them on purpose."

"Jolly decent of him. They're A1," approved Opal. "Better than the desks really, because of the glass lids. I say, I'm going to bolt my lunch in two secs, and get down those boxes and spread out the collection again. The things will look no end on that dark cloth." [47]

"Spiffing," agreed Iva, who was also inspecting the new acquisitions.

"Hurry up with your lunch then, and help me to arrange them. No, I can't have a dozen people's fingers interfering! I'm curator of the museum and I won't have it smashed. Three are quite enough. Iva and Mavis and I are going to do it, and we don't want anyone else, thank you! You can come and look at it when it's finished. I'll put the cases on the window-sill in the big schoolroom. Mavis Ramsay" (this last communication was whispered) "I don't mind telling you I didn't care for you before—it was mostly the fault of that sister of yours!—but I think now you're an absolute sport. You and Merle aren't a scrap alike. Nobody would ever take you for sisters."

CHAPTER IV [48]

Red Devon by the Sea

Mavis now found herself placed in a somewhat embarrassing situation. The school favourite had taken rather a fancy to her and extended overtures of friendship. Had she been at The Moorings by herself she might have responded, but it was impossible to be chums with a girl who displayed such open hostility to Merle. The two were "diamond cut diamond". Each was a strong character, and neither would give way an inch. They squabbled and heckled one another continually. If Opal had had even a term's experience of a big school, and if Merle had possessed a little tact and forbearance, they might have rubbed along together. As it was they went about like two thunderclouds. Mavis found her best safety lay in neutrality. She was quite nice to Opal, but not expansive, and whenever opportunity offered she patched up a truce, though the task of peacemaker was often a thankless business, for Opal would say: "Oh, of course, you side with that sister of yours!" and Merle would indignantly accuse her of not taking her part with sufficient vehemence.

Merle had found an ally in Iva Westwood. Iva was a rather out-of-the-way girl, proud and [49] reserved. She did not often care to wage battle with Opal herself, but she keenly enjoyed hearing somebody else do it, and was ready to act "backer-up" within limits. She appreciated both the Ramsays, though her particular temperament was more attracted by Merle. In a certain off-hand, abrupt fashion she might be considered a chum.

On the second Friday afternoon after their arrival at Durracombe, Mavis and Merle went to The Moorings as usual. To their immense surprise, when they arrived there, they found the whole school arrayed in light frocks, silk stockings, and sandalled slippers.

"Hello! What's the meaning of this? Is there going to be a party?" they asked quickly.

"Party? No! Don't you know it's dancing afternoon?" replied Nesta, re-tying her pale-blue hair-ribbon, which was coming off. "Surely Miss Pollard told you?"

"She never said a word about it."

"Well, she told Opal to tell you at any rate. Just when you'd gone home this morning I heard her say to Opal: 'Run after those two and remind them it's dancing afternoon.'"

"Opal never came near us. What a shame!" blazed Merle.

"We didn't have dancing last Friday," objected Mavis.

"No, because Miss Crompton hadn't come back. We shall have it every Friday now." [50]

"Where? In the playroom?"

Nesta laughed.

"Oh no! We don't have it at school. There's no room big enough. We go to Miss Crompton's class in the public hall."

"Well, look here! What are we to do?" asked Mavis. "We can't turn up as we are? Shall we run home and change into 'war paint'?"

"I don't know. You'd better ask Miss Pollard. Oh, here she is! Miss Pollard, please! Mavis and Merle didn't know it was dancing afternoon."

"How very annoying! I told Opal to remind you," said the mistress, turning to the aggrieved pair almost as if it were their own fault. "Go home to change? Oh no! There isn't time now. You must all come along at once or we shall be late. It's a tiresome mistake but it can't be helped and you mustn't miss the lesson. You'll know better next week."

"Might we *tear* home and change, and run on to the public hall?" begged Mavis desperately.

"No, no! You must all come together. Never mind. I'll explain to Miss Crompton, and it will be quite all right."

It was all very well for Miss Pollard to say "Never mind" in so easy a fashion. Mavis and Merle [51] were furious. They possessed dainty dresses, thin stockings, and dancing slippers in their wardrobe at Bridge House, and when the whole school was arrayed *en fête* it was most humiliating to be marched off in their brown knitted jerseys, ribbed stockings, and ordinary serviceable shoes. They both looked daggers at Opal, who just then put in an appearance very prettily got up in a white *crêpe de Chine* dress and a big, pale-pink hair-ribbon. She started guiltily when she saw them.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you two about the dancing. It simply went out of my head," she exclaimed.

"Then your head's as empty as a brass nob," exploded Merle. "It was just *criminal* of you to forget. I believe you did it on purpose."

Even Mavis did not attempt to palliate Merle's home truths, for she was bubbling over with [52] injury, and sharper words still might have followed had not Miss Fanny arrived and swept her whole flock from the house for a "crocodile" walk to the public hall. The big room here, engaged by Miss Crompton, was certainly a very good one for the purpose, with a polished floor and nice decorations, so that it looked quite festive and "Christmasy", as the girls, having left their coats and hats and over-shoes in the cloakroom, marched in and took their places. The class was not confined to the pupils at The Moorings; girls from various country houses in the neighbourhood, and a sprinkling of little boys were also there. The array of light dresses and thin shoes made the Ramsays more indignant than ever. And there would have been plenty of time to go home and change. Miss Crompton and her assistants were so long in getting the children arranged, that Mavis and Merle might easily have been back from Bridge House, robed in their best, before the first dance began.

Miss Crompton ascertained that her two new pupils were no novices, then placed them in the senior class. In revolt against what some parents termed "stage posturing" she had revived some of the old Victorian square dances, and was teaching the first figures of the quadrille. Merle happened to be *vis-à-vis* with a girl of about her own age, a tall athletic girl with fair hair, who looked as if she would be more at home on horseback than in a ballroom, but who, nevertheless, gaped at the Ramsays' morning costumes with unconcealed scorn, and arranged the skirt of her own pretty dress rather ostentatiously, as if calling attention to the difference. When she met Merle in "the ladies' chain", instead of joining hands as the figure required, she deliberately refused the outstretched fingers and swept past without touching them.

To Merle it was an open insult. She looked at Miss Crompton to see whether the teacher had noticed, but Miss Crompton's attention was concentrated on two special bunglers, and though the incident happened again as the girls crossed back to their own places, it drew down no reproof.

"Slack teaching here," thought Merle, fuming with wrath. "Such a thing would never have been allowed in our class at Whinburn. I don't know who that girl is, but she's an out-and-out blighter. This is one of the most grizzly afternoons I've ever had in my life."

The Ramsays were indeed glad when half-past four arrived, and they were able to go home and [53] pour out their woes to Aunt Nellie and Jessop, both of whom were most sympathetic and indignant about the whole business.

"I'd have brought your dresses to the town hall for you if I'd only known," declared Jessop.

"It was a great mistake of Miss Pollard's; she ought to have sent you home to change, even if you missed part of the lesson." (Gentle Aunt Nellie sounded quite wrathful). "How could you

dance properly without your thin shoes? Never mind, dears! You'll know better next week, and we'll take care you go really nice. I wouldn't worry any more about it if I were you. Do your preparation this evening, and if it's fine to-morrow perhaps Uncle David will take you with him to Chagmouth. That will give you something else to think about, won't it?"

The girls cheered up at this suggestion. They were very anxious indeed to go out with Dr. Tremayne in his little Deemster car. He had a branch surgery at Chagmouth, a village ten miles away, and every Saturday he spent most of the day there, seeing patients and visiting a sanatorium to which he was consulting medical officer. He would have taken the girls on the previous Saturday, but there had been a strong gale, and he was afraid of Mavis running any risks just at first.

[54] "When you're acclimatized we shan't fear a puff of wind or a few drops of rain," he said, "but we'll harden you gradually, like Tom does with his bedding-out geraniums."

"Devon wind and rain are so soft they don't hurt me," urged Mavis. "The whole air has a different feel from the north. It's nearly as mild as our summer. Uncle David, I just want to forget I ever had a sore chest!"

"That's the best way; still we must go slow and sure. I don't want to have to order you to bed with a bronchitis kettle."

"I hope I've said good-bye to that wretched old kettle for evermore. I didn't want Mother to pack it, but she put it in. I'll give it away willingly to the first person who needs it."

Saturday morning fortunately proved fine and mild enough to dispel all fears on Mavis's behalf, and the girls were ready and anxious to start long before Dr. Tremayne had finished his work in the surgery. They fumed round the waiting-room door, casting indignant glances at the patients seated within, and hoping their cases were not serious, and would not require much of the doctor's time and attention; then, finding such hanging about rather dispiriting, they went to the garage and helped Tom to polish the brasses of the car—a praiseworthy occupation that kept them busy until the last patient had been dismissed from the surgery.

[55] "Just a few bottles of medicine to make up, and then we're off," said Uncle David, giving some instruments to Jessop to sterilize. "Have you each got a warm scarf, girls? And where's the rug? Tell Tom to put my bag inside the dicky, there won't be room for it in front to-day. You two will have to sit close, but we'll squeeze in somehow."

The little yellow car was only a two-seater, but it held three at a pinch. Mavis, in the middle, sat as far back as possible, so as not to incommode Uncle David's left arm as he drove, while Merle sat a little forward, to give extra room. Jessop tucked the rug over their knees, Tom started the engine, Aunt Nellie waved good-bye out of the open window, and at last they were off, over the bridge and along the road that led to the south. It was a lovely sunny morning, with great fleecy clouds on the horizon, and a blue sky overhead. Small birds were flitting about in the hedges, and large flocks of rooks and starlings were feeding in the ploughed fields. The banks were green with masses of beautiful hart's-tongue ferns, and all nature seemed alive and stirring and thinking of spring. The car whizzed along at a good pace, and they were soon scaling the hill and crossing the portion of the moor that lay between Durracombe and Chagmouth. The glistening drops from yesterday's showers still shone on the brown heather, sheep were feeding on the patches of fine grass, and wild little ponies stampeded away at the approach of the car, as if they were running a race with motor power.

[56] It was so beautiful on the uplands that the girls were quite sorry when the open, hedgeless road dipped between banks into a valley and turned into the orthodox deep Devonshire lane. Down and down they went, so steeply that Uncle David seemed to be hanging on to the brakes, and for at least two miles there was no occasion to use the engine, then quite suddenly they whisked round a bend of the road and caught a glimpse of the village lying below them. Chagmouth came afterwards to mean so much to Mavis and Merle that they never forgot their first sight of it. It burst upon them, a compact mass of picturesque houses lying huddled between two magnificent headlands crowned with gorse and brown bracken.

[57] A rushing stream ran through the valley, flowed under several bridges, and poured itself into the harbour, where gulls were flapping and screaming, and the rising tide was rocking the fishing-boats gently to and fro. Out beyond the jetty white sea-foam was flying round jagged rocks, and a motor-launch was making its way cautiously among chopping waves. Though it was only the first of February, the village, owing to the large number of its half-exotic shrubs, was framed in a setting of green, among which the little colour-washed houses shone like flowers. Seen as a bird's-eye view from the road above, Chagmouth indeed looked like a gigantic flower border with the emerald sea for a lawn. As they dipped downward into the ravine there rose up towards them certain scents and sounds intimately connected with the place, and afterwards indissolubly associated with it in the minds of the two girls—the murmur of running water, the cries of sea-gulls, the twitter of small birds, the salt smell of the sea, the pungent smoke of burning driftwood, and the faint, aromatic odour of moist evergreen shrubs steaming in the sunshine.

Dr. Tremayne halted at a house at the top of the village, and took his car round into the stable-yard. The house was a farm, and he rented rooms there for the purpose of his profession. A brass plate upon the door set forth his surgery hours. People in Chagmouth, unless they were seriously ill, kept their aches and pains until Saturdays, for it was a long way to fetch the doctor from

Durracombe to pay a special visit. The waiting-room at Grimbal's Farm was generally full when he arrived, and there were enough messages from patients requiring his attendance to keep him busy for the whole of the day.

When the car had been put safely under cover, Uncle David took Mavis and Merle beneath the great arch of fuchsias that framed the doorway and into the wide, old-fashioned hall, where the farmer's wife, who had been watching for the car, was standing to greet them.

"Well, Mrs. Penruddock, how are you? Anybody waiting for me this morning?" began Uncle David. "You see I've brought my nieces with me to-day. They'll take a look round the place while I'm busy. Can you manage to find any lunch for them, do you think?"

"Of course I can, Doctor," smiled Mrs. Penruddock. "It's a nice day for them to see Chagmouth. [58] It's really quite warm down by the harbour. There are ten people in the waiting-room, and I have the messages here. Mrs. Glyn Williams said there was no hurry, any time would suit her."

"I'll go up in the afternoon then, when I take the Sanatorium. I'll see the people who are waiting now, and then have lunch, please, before I begin my round. Have you a watch, Mavis? That's right! Then run down and look at the sea, you two girls, and be back by one o'clock. Don't forget the time, because I shall have a long round to-day, and must make an early start."

Dr. Tremayne disappeared into his surgery, and Mavis and Merle, after a few directions as to [59] their route from Mrs. Penruddock, turned down the street that led towards the sea. Chagmouth was nothing more than a village, though its natives liked to call it a town. To enter it was like exploring a new world. The road to Chagmouth was happily too steep and narrow for charabancs, so that, even in summer, trippers, with their terrible train of sandwich-papers and cigarette-ends, had not yet discovered it and defiled its beauty. It was the most picturesque jumble of fishermen's cottages that could possibly be imagined; its narrow alleys, its archways, its flights of steps, its green half-doorways, its tiny windows and chimneys set at every quaint angle, its cobble stones and deep gutters, seemed a survival from old days of wrecking and smuggling, and transported one's charmed imagination back to the eighteenth century. Every corner was an artist's subject, the roofs were yellow with lichen, and many of them were covered with masses of ferns; fishing-nets hung out to dry over palings, and clumps of valerian and stocks and snapdragon grew in the crevices of the walls. Sea-gulls were everywhere, as tame as chickens. They sat in rows on the roof ridges, they perched on the chimneys, and flapped down into the streets to catch the bread the children threw for them, they swam with the ducks in the wide pool where the stream emptied itself into the harbour, and circled with loud cries round the jetty and the arcade where the fish was packed. Nobody in Chagmouth ever molested the gulls; they were the mascots of the village, and, according to all traditions handed down from time immemorial, to injure one of them would be to court instant bad luck and risk at sea. Even the naughtiest boys did not throw stones at them, and they were indeed considered almost as sacred as are the storks in some countries.

Mavis and Merle, much thrilled with their surroundings, plunged down the narrow little street [60] and along flights of steps and under a deep archway, till they found themselves by the harbour, where red-sailed fishing-boats were at anchor, and blue-jerseyed, bronze-faced men were sitting on casks or on coils of rope, smoking, and talking about prospects of future catches. It was such a picturesque sight that Mavis wanted to linger, but Merle, who could catch a glimpse of the spray beyond the breakwater, pulled her on towards the sea. So they climbed one flight of steps, and went down another on the far side of the jetty, finding themselves on a strip of sand and shingle with high rocks and a headland behind, and the stretch of green open channel in front.

The midday February sunshine made gleaming, dancing lights on the water. Each wave as it rolled in showed a transparent window of amber, then fell in foaming white on the beach, carrying back with it a mass of grinding pebbles. The south wind was fresh, but not at all cold. Mavis drank in great gasping breaths of it, as if it were something for which she had craved and pined. A fortnight of Devon had already brought a pink tinge to her cheeks, and the sea air to-day was turning them rosy. The girls walked about on the shore, picking up shells, examining the great tangled pieces of seaweed, and peeping into the pools among the rocks. They would have liked to go round the point, but Mavis's wristwatch warned her that time was galloping, and that if they meant to climb back up the hill to Grimbal's Farm they must turn at once and hurry their steps; so, very reluctantly, they said a temporary good-bye to the beach, promising themselves many further visits there on future Saturdays, and each taking a cockleshell to carry in her pocket as a charm to lure her again to the domain of the sea-nymphs.

CHAPTER V [61]

Fair Maids of February

Mavis and Merle had lunch with Uncle David in the parlour at Grimbal's Farm. It was a quaint,

old-fashioned house-place, with a horsehair sofa, a cabinet full of best china, some enlarged family photographs in gilt frames, a very ancient piano, and a round table. It had the faint, musty, shut-up scent that clings to a room which is used only once a week, but a blazing fire of logs, and a bunch of snowdrops on the table, helped to give it a more occupied air. To the girls it was all part of their delightful new experience at Chagmouth. Everything was different from home, and therefore interesting, and when Mrs. Penruddock brought in a bowl of Devonshire cream with the roasted apples they felt they were indeed in a land of plenty. When the meal was over, Dr. Tremayne retired into his dispensary to make up medicines, telling the girls to wait about for him and not go too far away, as he would soon be starting on his round, and would take them in the car.

Of course they did not want to stay in the house, so, accepting Mrs. Penruddock's invitation "Go just wherever you like", they started to explore the farm premises. Clumps of snowdrops were [62] growing among the grass in the orchard under old apple trees, some of whose branches held boughs of mistletoe. Bulbs were pushing up in the garden, and the daphne mezereon was out already in the warm corner near the bee-hives. Through the stackyard flowed the stream which was such a feature of Chagmouth, and here its glittering, tumbling waters had been harnessed to turn a waterwheel that worked a churn, a turnip-cutter, and other farm implements. The wheel at present was still, and the girls could go quite close and examine it. It was a picturesque affair, yellow with lichen and moss, and with green ferns growing on the wall against which the water dripped. It was so utterly different from the unlovely, whirling, modern machinery to which they were accustomed in Whinburn that they climbed down the steep, narrow steps to get a nearer view. Birds were flitting hither and thither like dainty water nixies, great sprays of periwinkle trailed down the banks, and the stream danced by with a gurgling murmur as if it were trying to put some story into words. Mavis, standing on the lowest of the steps, and leaning against a blade of the waterwheel, threw sticks on to its bosom and watched them as they bobbed along on their way towards the sea.

"Hello!" called a voice from above. "If you don't want to get knocked into the water you'd better come up. The wheel will be turning in another moment. We didn't know you were down there."

The girls made a hurried ascent of the steps, and came scrambling up into the stackyard. The [63] stream might have its attractions, but they had no wish to try a February bath in it. At the top, by the door of the churning-shed, stood a boy of perhaps sixteen, a dark, good-looking boy, with clear brown eyes that sparkled and twinkled like the dancing water below. He held out a strong hand and helped them up the last of the awkward steps.

"Dr. Tremayne sent me to look for you," he volunteered, "and a hunt I've had. I thought you must have gone down the town. I wouldn't have found you, only I heard your voices. He's ready to start, and in two minds whether to set off without you or not."

"Is he waiting? Oh, I'm so sorry! Where's the car? On the road by the front door? Can we cut across the orchard here? Oh, thanks! We won't be two seconds," and Mavis, scrambling over a fence, made a bee-line for the house in hot haste.

"We'd no idea it was so late," added Merle, scurrying after her with only half a glance at the knight who had come to their rescue.

The boy stood watching their race across the orchard with an amused look in his dark eyes, then he picked up a piece of rope and went away down the stackyard to the stables, whistling softly to himself as he walked.

The girls arrived at the front door of the farm at the very eleventh hour, for Dr. Tremayne had started the engine, and was on the point of setting forth for his visits. They scrambled into the [64] car, pouring out breathless apologies.

"You were nearly left behind," he commented. "I've a long round and couldn't wait, but I thought you'd like to come with me to the Sanatorium; there's such a glorious view up there. It would have been a pity to miss it. Yes, put that scarf round your neck, Mavis, certainly!" as a scrimmage went on between the two girls, Merle trying to force wraps upon her sister, which the latter fiercely resisted.

"I hate to be eternally coddled," protested Mavis.

"You know what Mother said. You must put on extra things in the car, especially when you're so hot with running. She told me to make you."

"Right-o! only don't quite smother me, please," agreed Mavis, giving up the struggle and submitting to the warm scarf. "Anything for a quiet life. Do keep still, and sit more forward, can't you? Uncle David hasn't room to drive. Are you going straight to the Sanatorium now, Uncle?"

"I must call at The Warren first to see Mrs. Glyn Williams. That's the house, the white one among the trees. They've a beautiful sheltered garden there. I wish I could grow early vegetables like they do. They seem to escape all the frosts. It's the most forward bit of land in the countryside."

In another minute they had passed the great gates and were motoring up the laurel-bordered drive to the house. Dr. Tremayne stopped his car on the carriage sweep opposite the glass front door, drew off his thick gauntlet gloves, took his case of instruments, and rang the bell. [65]

"You'd rather stay with the car than come inside?" he asked the girls. "I shall probably be perhaps twenty minutes—not longer, I hope! Walk about, Mavis, if you feel chilly. I'm sure Mrs. ——" but at that moment the butler opened the door, and the rest of the doctor's sentence went unspoken.

For a space of five minutes the Ramsays stayed quietly in the car, then Merle began to grow restless. She amused herself by inspecting the various levers.

"I could start as easily as anything," she announced airily.

"Oh, Merle, *don't*! Uncle David will be so angry if you play any of your pranks with the car. Let us get out and walk about till he comes back. I'm tired of sitting still."

Anxious to keep her sister away from temptation, Mavis hustled her out of the car on to the drive, and began to pace up and down the carriage sweep. But this did not content lively Merle. She wanted to sample the garden.

"Uncle David was just going to tell us to go when he went indoors," she contended, and there seemed so much truth in her argument that Mavis yielded, though slightly against her better judgment.

It was so warm that they took off their coats and left them inside the car, then they selected an interesting-looking path among the bushes, and started to explore. Certainly it was a delightful garden; it had lawns and shrubberies and flower-borders, and a brook with a rustic bridge over [66] it, and a glade that looked a veritable fairies' dancing-place. Mavis and Merle were thoroughly enjoying themselves. They were in no particular hurry, because they thought when Uncle David came out of the house and missed them he would sound his motor-horn as a signal for them to return. They walked on, therefore, some considerable way along the course of the little brook. Quite suddenly they heard voices, and from a path slightly ahead two girls turned into the glade. The Ramsays remembered them instantly. They had been present at the dancing-class yesterday, and it was indeed the elder of them who had behaved with such extreme rudeness to Merle in the ladies' chain. The recognition seemed to be mutual. They came forward briskly towards Mavis and Merle, who stood still, feeling decidedly caught, but determined to hold their own.

"Hello! What are you doing here in our garden?" began the elder girl inhospitably.

"Looking at your flowers," answered Merle.

"Well, I must say that's rather cool. Don't you know you're trespassing?"

"No, I don't!"

"Well, you are at any rate. These are private grounds."

"So I suppose, but we're not doing them any harm by walking round them."

"Oh, Merle, *do* let us explain properly," put in Mavis, trying to stop this unseemly fencing. "We [67] came with our uncle, Dr. Tremayne, and we got tired of sitting in the car waiting for him, so we took a walk. We didn't think anyone would mind."

"Is Dr. Tremayne your uncle? Why didn't you say so before?"

"You never gave us a chance!" snapped Merle. "Of course he's our uncle. There goes his hooter. We must scoot back, because he'll be in a hurry to start."

"I can show you a short cut," volunteered the younger girl, speaking for the first time, and running in front she led the way, between bushes and through a vegetable garden, back to the carriage sweep opposite the front door.

Here Dr. Tremayne was hooting loudly to recall his wandering nieces, and looked not a little relieved at their appearance.

"I thought I'd lost you again," he said, as they came up. "So you've been making friends with Babbie? Where's Gwen? Is her wrist better? I wanted to look at it. Yes, fetch her, please, Babbie! I may as well see her while I'm here."

Mavis and Merle, with eyes fixed on the distant landscape, sat in the car while Dr. Tremayne made a hurried examination of Gwen Williams's wrist. They did not look in her direction as they drove away, though they nodded a stately good-bye to Babbie.

"Think of meeting *that* girl here," whispered Merle to Mavis. "Isn't she odious?"

"I wish we'd never gone into their garden," Mavis whispered back. "If there's anything in the [68] world I hate it's being caught."

The brief episode had upset them both. They did not care to explain it to Uncle David, and sat rather silent and glum as he drove up the road to the Sanatorium. It was not flattering to have been taken for trespassing trippers, which was evidently what Gwen had supposed them to be. Her reception had certainly been most impolite, and was calculated to hurt anybody's feelings. They cheered up a little when they reached the top of the hill, and began to forget about it, for in front lay such a view of cliff and sea and sky as to send all cobwebs flying away to the region where dismal things belong. The Sanatorium had been built in a glorious situation, and surely no place in Devon had a more beautiful prospect from its open windows. Dr. Tremayne halted

outside the gate for a few moments, and pointed out to his nieces certain distant features of interest, such as the lighthouse, and Port Sennen harbour. He was expatiating upon the clearness of the afternoon, when a voice called him by name, and, turning round, the girls saw, hurrying along the road after them, the boy who had helped them up the steps from the waterwheel at Grimbal's Farm. His dark face looked hot. He had evidently been running fast.

"I hoped I'd just catch you, Doctor," he exclaimed breathlessly. "You left this in the surgery, and I was sure you'd want it."

"My stethoscope! Great Scott! I thought it was in my pocket. Thanks, Bevis! I should have had [69] to go back for it. I suppose you came by the cliff path?"

"Yes, it saves half a mile at least."

"You're going home that way? I wonder if my nieces would care to go with you for the sake of the walk. Girls, would you rather wait in the car outside the Sanatorium or try the path along the cliffs to Chagmouth? Bevis would act guide."

After their previous experience of waiting for Uncle David, Mavis and Merle did not hesitate a moment, and accepted their escort with alacrity. A ramble would be far more fun than sitting still in the car, or wandering surreptitiously round a strange garden. Dr. Tremayne was in a hurry, so the moment they had scrambled out he pulled his starting-lever and set off again.

"We'll meet at the farm. Mrs. Penruddock will give you some tea. I shall be back by five, so be ready for me then," he called, as he drove away along the road through the Sanatorium grounds.

Left behind, Mavis and Merle felt their first and most obvious duty was to make friends with the boy who was to act as their guide back to Chagmouth. Beyond the fact that his name was Bevis they knew absolutely nothing about him. They wondered whether he belonged to Grimbal's Farm, or was merely a visitor there. His dark, alert face and his speech and general bearing marked him as utterly different from homely Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock. Merle, calling up a mental vision of the stout, ruddy-haired woman who had charge of the surgery, and the slow, [70] heavy-featured farmer whom she had seen in the stackyard, decided hastily, "They can't be his father and mother!" Whoever he might be he was a handsome boy, with a look of natural distinction about him, that "stamp of the gods", which is the hall-mark of a noble mind, quite irrespective of the accident of birth. His dark hair had a crisp curl in it, and his mouth held beautiful curves when he smiled. Merle, who had lately taken several violent prejudices, in this instance decided hotly in his favour. Merle never liked people by halves. All her world consisted of foes or chums.

Bevis, who had readily accepted the office of guide, seemed doing his best to make himself agreeable. He led the way along a path across some fields and on to the headland that skirted the sea. There was a track here among the gorse and dead bracken, so faint indeed that the girls would not have found it for themselves, though Bevis walked along confidently. Below them lay the sea, and great jagged rocks, round which crowds of gulls were whirling and calling, and here and there flew a cormorant, like a black sheep among the white flock, diving occasionally under the waves in quest of fish. There could hardly be a pleasanter companion than Bevis. He knew the names of all the birds, and could tell where he had found their nests. He pointed out two distant black specks, that to the girls might have been anything, but which he assured them represented a pair of choughs that built every year on the cliffs.

"We tried to get some eggs," he explained, "but the nest was in such an awkward place, we [71] couldn't reach it even with a rope."

"Do you mean to tell me you'd let yourself dangle over the edge there to collect eggs?" asked Mavis. "Don't you turn dizzy?"

"Not a bit. As long as I know the rope isn't frayed, I'm all right. There's something rather jolly about hanging in mid-air. I feel like a bird myself. I once got a hooded crow's egg from that cliff over there. I gave it to our school museum."

"Do you go to school near here?" asked Merle, hoping to draw some information. But Bevis shook his head.

"I've left now," he said briefly, and changed the subject.

As they neared Chagmouth the track they had followed led them down the side of the cliff to where some allotment gardens lay under the shelter of the headland. Many of these were neglected and uncultivated, but a few showed signs of recent digging. Bevis, pausing by a small wooden gate, pointed downwards.

"That's ours," he explained, "and if you don't mind I want to fetch my knife. I believe I left it there yesterday when I was working. I won't be a minute if you can wait."

"Oh, do let us come too, please!" urged the girls.

So they all went down, scrambling along a kind of sheep track till they reached the level patch of rich soil below. The little plot of land was mostly devoted to vegetables, but it also held a few [72] fruit-trees and some flowers. There was a fallen stump in its midst, which made a capital seat, and here the girls settled themselves to rest while Bevis looked for his knife. Snowdrops grew in profusion around them, lifting tall stalks and pure white heads above the herbage through which

they had pushed. The late afternoon sun just touched the roofs of the little fishing-town below, though the beach lay in shadow. Up among the woods some glass windows gleamed like gold.

"Is that The Warren, where we went with Uncle David?" asked Merle, as Bevis came back, pocketing his knife. "Whose place is it? It has lovely grounds."

"Yes, that's The Warren sure enough. Whose place is it? Why, it belongs to General Talland. He's the landlord of most of Chagmouth."

"I thought some people named Williams lived there?"

"So they do, but they don't own the village, however much they may think it. They only *rent* the house—it's not theirs. We Chagmouth folks don't want one of your fine society squires thrust down our throats. We'll manage our own affairs."

Bevis spoke bitterly, with a look towards the house on the wooded hill that sent no goodwill towards its occupants. Merle, burning to relate her experiences at The Warren, was about to ask more, but Bevis turned abruptly away. He was friendly, but so plainly reserved that nobody with an ounce of tact would have tried to force his confidence. Even Merle, not usually over-discreet, [73] had the sense to keep back the dozen questions that rose to her lips. Their companion was bending among the grass and brambles picking snowdrops. He gathered the finest ones, with the longest stalks, arranged them into two exactly equal bunches, then offered them shyly to the girls.

"We call them 'Fair Maids of February' about here," he said. "It's the first of February to-day, and you're the 'fair maids', so you ought to have some of your own flowers if you care to take them."

"Oh, thanks!" (Mavis and Merle were flattered by the compliment). "We'll love to have them. We'll take them home in the car. What beauties they are! I never saw such big ones before. Did you plant them here?"

"I put a few bulbs down years ago, and they've spread. They will if you never touch them. Shall we go on now? Mother'll have some tea ready for you, I expect. The Doctor generally gets his at the Sanatorium. I promised to make up some medicines for him, so I must hurry back."

The girls followed, considerably mystified. Bevis's connection with Grimbal's Farm was a puzzle. He left them in the stackyard and plunged into one of the barns, and later on they caught a glimpse of his dark, curly head through the door of the dispensary. They did not see him again before they left. Mrs. Penruddock, kind but too busy for conversation, brought the tray into the parlour and left them to have their tea, and they had scarcely finished eating saffron-cake and [74] hard-bake when Dr. Tremayne arrived, in a violent hurry to get back to Durracombe. So they scrambled into their coats and wraps, picked up their bunches of snowdrops, and took their seats in the car, and next moment they were off up the steep hill that led out of the ravine. Before they whirled round the corner they turned their heads for one last peep at Chagmouth. The little town lay huddled in twilight, and the sea behind was dim as the sky, but the brook purred joyously on its pebbly course among the gardens, and the faint scent of burning driftwood was wafted up from below.

"This day's going to be specially marked in my diary," murmured Merle. "It's been a day of days."

"I feel somehow as if it were the beginning of something else," answered Mavis. "Uncle David, you'll bring us here again, won't you?"

"Any Saturday that's fine."

"Then I shall simply live for fine Saturdays and Chagmouth. It's the loveliest place I've ever seen. I don't believe there's anything else like it in the whole of the wide world, or anywhere else out of Paradise. That's how I feel about it!"

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[75]

CHAPTER VI

A Child of Misfortune

Mavis and Merle were brimming over with curiosity about Bevis and about several other affairs in Chagmouth, but they had to keep their questions to themselves, for Dr. Tremayne considered that narrow Devon roads in the gathering darkness required his whole attention, and that conversation might mean an accident.

"You're requested not to speak to the man at the wheel," he replied, in answer to Merle's first eager inquiry; "it takes me all my time to drive."

So the girls subsided into quiet, and did not even speak to one another, but sat watching the glare of the headlights on the road and the dark outlines of the high hedges and banks above. They made up for their silence, though, after supper, for they found Jessop in the pantry, and, offering to wipe the silver for her as an excuse for their presence, they began a brisk catechism.

Jessop was a kindly old gossip, a native of Chagmouth, and had all the affairs of the little town at her fingers' ends. She was nothing loath to discuss its inhabitants while she washed up the supper things.

"To begin with, who is Bevis?" asked Mavis eagerly. "We can't make him out at all. He speaks [76] and looks like a gentleman, and yet he talked about working in the fields. Does he live at Grimbal's Farm? What relation is he to Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock?"

"He called Mrs. Penruddock 'Mother'," added Merle, "but he doesn't look the least bit like her son. Is he or not?"

"Yes and no," said Jessop, wielding her dish-cloth as she talked. "Mrs. Penruddock has been a good mother to him for a matter of over fourteen years now, but his own mother lies in Chagmouth churchyard. She must have been a handsome woman from all accounts, though I never saw her myself. It was my cousin, Mary, who was barmaid at the 'King's Arms' at the time, who told me. It's a long story. There are many in Chagmouth besides you who've asked themselves if Bevis isn't a gentleman born. But nobody has ever been able to answer the question."

"Why? Oh, do tell us!"

"We want so immensely to know."

Jessop wrung out her dish-cloth with rather irritating slowness, then hung it to dry on a nail. She seemed turning matters over in her mind, and her mental processes were apparently no swifter than her actions.

"I don't see why I shouldn't. There's nothing you oughtn't to hear," she replied at last, as if coming to a conclusion. "Everybody in Chagmouth knows about Bevis, and if I don't tell you [77] somebody else will. It's nothing to the lad's discredit, I'm sure. I always say I've a soft corner for Bevis. Such a fine boy he always was, and he'll make a fine man yet—he's worth two of young Williams at The Warren in my opinion. But some folks are born with silver spoons in their mouths and others aren't. Bevis isn't one of the lucky ones, poor lad! Providence always seems to be taking him up and throwing him down again. What'll be the end of him goodness only knows!"

The story which Jessop told to the girls, while she polished the silver in the pantry, was lengthy and interspersed with many comments and reflections of her own, and many quotations from what other people had said, but the main facts of the case, as related to Mavis and Merle, were briefly as follows.

Rather more than fourteen years ago, on a stormy afternoon in late autumn, such inhabitants of Chagmouth as happened to be standing on their doorsteps, or looking out of their windows, noticed a closed conveyance from Kilvan station drive along the main street. The occurrence was sufficiently unusual to arouse comment. Except in the summer season tourists rarely came to Chagmouth, and if any stranger made his appearance during the quiet months of the year the villagers were naturally inquisitive as to his errand. In a small place every item of news is of interest, and those who saw the conveyance pass at once began to speculate whether the Rector's sister had come to pay him a visit, or whether old Mrs. Greaves's sailor son had returned [78] home on leave. The bystanders near the market square had the opportunity of satisfying their curiosity, for the carriage stopped at the King's Arms Hotel, and from it stepped a lady, young, handsome, and well-dressed, and carrying a little child in her arms. She interrogated the landlord, who had come to the door at the sound of wheels, paid and dismissed the driver, gave one hasty glance round the square, then entered the hotel.

Those inhabitants of Chagmouth who witnessed her arrival agreed afterwards that she was "a dark-eyed, smart-looking sort of person, with an air of London fashions about her", but their glimpse was a brief one, for next moment she and her child and her travelling-bag had disappeared inside the doorway of the little hotel, and the conveyance was toiling up the hill on its way back to Kilvan station.

Inside the "King's Arms" the lady gave her name as Mrs. Hunter, and engaged a private sitting-room and a bedroom, explaining that she had heard of the mild climate of Chagmouth and wished to try the benefit of its sea air. With the help of the chambermaid she bathed her little boy and put him to bed. Later she was served with dinner. At about nine o'clock she rang the bell violently, and the servant, who came in response to her summons, found her huddled in an armchair, half fainting and fighting for breath.

"My heart," she panted. "It's one of my heart attacks. Can you fetch a doctor? Oh, I am dying!" [79]

The terrified girl ran for the landlord, who hurried in with brandy. In the midst of the general panic someone was dispatched for the village nurse, and the ostler mounted a bicycle and rode away to Durracombe to summon Dr. Tremayne. The people at the "King's Arms" did their ignorant best. They laid the patient on the sofa, rubbed her hands, bathed her head, and tried to force brandy between her blue lips; but long before any medical aid could reach her, she gave one last shuddering gasp, and passed away beyond reach of human help. Dr. Tremayne had been

paying a night visit to a farm on the moors. It was not possible for him to arrive at Chagmouth until the following morning. He found the place all agog about the tragic event that had happened. Mrs. Jarvis, the village nurse, had performed the last offices. Mr. Tingcomb, the landlord, had solemnly collected the poor lady's possessions and had locked them up in his safe, and his wife and the barmaid between them were trying to still the wails of the little, dark-eyed boy, who did not take readily to strangers and refused all their well-meant offers of comfort.

Such a case had never been known in the neighbourhood, for not only had the stranger succumbed within a few hours of her arrival at Chagmouth, but the news soon leaked out that it was impossible to identify her. There were no papers of any kind either in her pockets or in her travelling-bag. Her purse contained six pounds in gold and a little silver, but no card or address [80] to mark its owner. The police, called in to investigate matters, could obtain no clue. On hearing all the evidence they ventured the opinion that the lady had probably given a false name. London newspapers published an account of the romantic happening, and for perhaps a week the public wondered over it, then other and more important matters cropped up and it was forgotten.

Meanwhile, in the absence of any information as to who she was or whence she had come, the stranger had been laid to rest in the little churchyard on the hill, and the rector, in charity, presuming her to be one of his flock, read Christian burial-service over her. Whatever her errand in Chagmouth her earthly body found its last home there, and most of the villagers, some in kindly sympathy and some in mere curiosity, attended the funeral and left flowers upon her grave.

Naturally, amid the whole of the sad and perplexing business, the great centre of interest was the dark-eyed baby who was toddling about the passages of the "King's Arms". He had made friends with Mrs. Tingcomb and the barmaid, but resented being kissed by the dozens of women who came to see him and gossip over him. He was a bonny, sturdy, little fellow, possibly about two years old, who could walk, but beyond a few words had not mastered even the elements of speech. The chambermaid, who helped at his first bath, remembered that his mother had called him Bevis. The possession of his Christian name was felt to be something, though all other information about him was painfully lacking. For several weeks the police did their best to trace [81] his relations, and Mr. Tingcomb lived in hourly expectation that somebody would arrive suddenly in a station conveyance to claim him and take him away. But nobody came. The excitement died down, and presently even the local newspapers ceased to refer to the case. People began to shake their heads and say it was plain the poor lamb wasn't wanted, or his friends would have turned up from somewhere to find him. Mrs. Tingcomb, very much occupied with her house and the bar, began to complain to her neighbours of the burden of her charge. It was nobody's business at the "King's Arms" to look after a lively boy whose toddling feet led him into every mischief. She even hinted that she considered the time had arrived when she could conscientiously hand him over to the Poor Law Guardians at the "Union", whose obvious duty it was to provide for him.

At this point of the proceedings Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock had stepped into the breach. Eight years before they had lost their only child, a boy of three, and they now proposed to adopt little Bevis to fill up the empty gap in their household. They were kind, homely people, without much education, but thoroughly respected in the village, and everybody at once agreed that their offer solved the difficult problem. To save the child from the stigma of being brought up at the Union was everything. Even the poorest fisherman's home would have been preferable to that. So little [82] Bevis, with the approval of the whole of Chagmouth, was formally adopted and transferred to Grimbal's Farm, where he grew apace and learnt to call Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock Father and Mother. If gossiping tongues could only have kept silent he might have continued to believe they were his parents, but one day, when he was about seven years old, he came back from school crying as if his heart was broken. Some of the boys had teased him and told him the story, with several exaggerations, of how he had been left at the "King's Arms" and never claimed. Mrs. Penruddock comforted him as best she could, but she acknowledged to her neighbours that he was never the same child afterwards. The knowledge had shattered his Paradise. He was a very proud, sensitive boy, and the taunts of his schoolfellows rankled. Henceforward he felt a sense of difference between himself and other children. He was quick to catch any allusions to his position, and a word or a glance was enough to bring the colour flooding into his cheeks. He fought many battles at school on this score, for he was hot tempered as well as proud, and for a year or two he was somewhat of an Ishmael, shunning his companions and hurrying home to the haven of Grimbal's Farm directly lessons were over.

Then the fates, who seemed to use the boy as a shuttlecock, brought him an unexpected turn of good fortune. A lady, who was a summer visitor at the farm, took an interest in him, and was much touched by the romance of his story. She was well off, and she offered to pay for his [83] education at a high-class school. So Bevis went as a boarder to Shelton College, where nobody knew anything about his antecedents, and he held his own among other boys, and only came back to Grimbal's Farm for holidays, and grew up so different from the fisher children of Chagmouth that he was less inclined than ever to make friends with them, and was a source of much gratification to Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock, who marvelled at his learning and his manners, and were as proud of him as a pair of robins who have hatched a young cuckoo.

Mrs. Martin, the lady who had provided for Bevis's education, threw out hints of Cambridge, and of training him for one of the professions, a goal which had spurred his ambition and caused him to work his hardest. He was making most satisfactory progress at Shelton College, and was already beginning to look forward to choosing a career, when fickle fate again interfered, and

toppled over all his castles in the air. Mrs. Martin died suddenly and left no will. Her heirs-at-law took over her estate, and paid any outstanding debts, but they saw no necessity for continuing her charities. Bevis's schooldays, therefore, came to a brief end, and he returned to Grimbal's Farm with no prospect of ever realizing the hopes that tantalizing Fortune had dangled before his longing eyes.

"I do say it's hard on him," finished Jessop, as she told the tale to Mavis and Merle in the pantry. "He's been educated a gentleman as much as young Williams at The Warren—and my [84] cousin, Mary, who saw her, sticks to it his mother was a lady born!—yet there he is, working on the farm like any labourer, and it's not his job. A head-piece like his was meant for book learning and college."

"Can't Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock send him back to school?" asked Mavis.

"No; the farm's not been doing over well lately. They want his help on the land, too, and, fair play to the lad, he's giving them of his best. It's a poor look-out for him, though, just to carry on at the farm. The doctor has been teaching him to dispense, but that's only a step towards medicine, and won't do much for him in the long run, I'm afraid. Some say it was foolish kindness of Mrs. Martin, and his schooling will have done him more harm than good, but you know how folks talk. They're all a bit jealous of him really, down Chagmouth way, if the truth be told. He's a fine lad, and he sticks to his foster-parents right loyally, but you've only to look at him to see he was made for something different from farm life, and if ever he gets the chance he'll be off and away, or I'm greatly mistaken. There, I've told you all about Bevis, and a little too much perhaps, though there's no harm in your knowing, that I can see."

"Thank you!" said Mavis. "We're so glad to know. It explains so very much that we thought queer about him. I understand it all now. Poor Bevis!"

"Yes, poor Bevis, indeed!" echoed Merle. "We'd no idea he had all that romantic story behind [85] him when we walked down the cliffs with him this afternoon. What you say is just right—he's different altogether from other people, and you wonder how it is until you really know the reason why."

CHAPTER VII

[86]

The Innovators

Mavis and Merle had been so tremendously interested in the romantic story of Bevis, as related by Jessop, that it had almost wiped from their minds the meeting with Gwen Williams and the rather unpleasant episode in the garden at The Warren. On the two occasions that they had encountered her she had made a very unfavourable impression upon them, so they were more surprised than pleased when on Tuesday morning she turned up at the French class. She walked into the room as if her presence were a favour, nodded to Opal Earnshaw, gave a half recognition to Edith and Maude Carey, but took no notice of anybody else, indeed she conspicuously turned her back on Aubrey Simpson and Muriel Burnitt.

"What's Miss Conceit doing here?" Merle whispered to Iva. "I hope she's not going to come every day."

"Gwen? Oh no! She and Babbie only come for French twice a week, and on dancing afternoons. They have a governess at home, and motor over here for special lessons. You don't like her? I don't think any of us do much, except Opal, who toadies to her most fearfully. She's always [87] fishing for invitations to The Warren."

"It's a matter of taste," replied Merle. "I'm sure I wouldn't want to go to The Warren if I was asked."

But at that moment Mademoiselle, who had entered the room and taken her seat, glared at Iva and Merle for silence, and the lesson commenced. The class lasted from 2.30 to 3.30, after which the Williams's car was supposed to be in waiting to bear them back to Chagmouth, and the girls at The Moorings were due at a hockey practice. To-day, however, fate interfered with both of these events. The chauffeur sent a message to Gwen and Babbie that the car was undergoing some necessary repairs at the garage in Durracombe and would not be ready for at least an hour, and pouring rain put a stop to all plans of hockey.

Boarders and day-girls alike collected disconsolately in the playroom. Miss Pollard had given orders that nobody was to go home until the heavy shower was over, so the whole school were temporary prisoners.

Mavis, sitting on one of the lockers, and listening to the general grousing going on around her, shook herself impatiently.

"What a set of stupids they are," she whispered to Merle. "Always down in the dumps about everything. Can't we wake them up somehow? I vote we get up an impromptu stunt. It would be more fun than sitting grumbling. Why shouldn't we do that scene we had at the Whinburn High last term? You remember? *Aunt Laetitia*, I mean. You take the aunt, and I'll take Adelaide, and [88] Iva and Nesta could be Dora and Marjorie. We'd explain their parts to them directly, there isn't much for them to do except back up Adelaide."

"Topping!" agreed Merle. "There'll be heaps of time. Here come Iva and Nesta. I'll take them into the cloakroom and coach them while you suggest the idea. It ought to catch on surely. I'll leave you to explain."

Merle secured Iva and Nesta and bore them off to give them a hasty outline of the sketch which they were to produce. Mavis meantime mounted a chair, and, clapping her hands to secure attention, made her proposal.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she started humorously. "I always begin 'Ladies and Gentlemen', even if there aren't any gentlemen present, because it's the proper thing to say and sounds nice. If you don't mind listening to me for a moment there's something I want to suggest to you. This rain is the absolute limit, and it's rather grizzly we can't go out to hockey. As we're all boxed up here, how would you like a ten minutes' stunt? Merle and I and two others can give you a short sketch if you care to listen. Anybody who wants to act audience, please squat on the floor."

BOTH MAVIS AND MERLE LET THEMSELVES GO

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The girls looked considerably astonished, but nevertheless seemed to welcome Mavis's proposal. They sat down as requested, most of them on the floor, but a few on chairs or lockers, seemingly prepared to listen to anything that was provided for them. They had not to wait long. [89] Mavis and Merle were adepts in arranging lightning changes of costume, and could assume a character in a moment by the addition of a hat, a coat, or a handkerchief. Acting came naturally to them, and they loved nothing better than impromptu performances. They walked in now, attired, the one as a straight-laced, elderly lady, and the other as her ultra-fashionable niece, and supported by Iva and Nesta, whose speeches consisted mostly of "Yes" and "No", commenced a brisk and most amusing dialogue, in which the aunt deplored the attitude of the modern girl, and contrasted her with the maiden of mid-Victorian days, while the niece held a brief for present-day

damsels, and gave a lively defence of their doings.

Both Mavis and Merle thoroughly let themselves go. They threw themselves entirely into their parts, and by speech, manner, and action reproduced the characters they represented, quite carrying the audience with them. When they stopped at the end of their little sketch they were greeted by a storm of clapping. The girls at The Moorings had never seen acting like that before and were most enthusiastic over it.

"It was ripping!" approved Opal. "I say, we must have some more of this sort of thing. I call it A1."

"I don't know however you did it!" exclaimed Babbie Williams. (She had been standing open-eyed during the performance and was now gazing at Mavis and Merle as if she considered them geniuses in disguise.) "I'm so glad our car wasn't ready. I wouldn't have missed this for anything, would you, Gwen?" (turning impulsively to her sister). [90]

Gwen, who had clapped with the rest, did not answer. She too was staring at Mavis and Merle, looking at them as if they were some strange new creatures whom she could not yet comprehend. Apparently they did not fit in with any of her preconceived standards. Meeting Merle's eyes, she turned hastily away. A boarder brought a message that their car was at the door, so, summoning Babbie, she made a hasty exit without bidding good-bye to anybody, even to Opal.

On the strength of the very favourable reception accorded to their first venture in the line of drama, Mavis and Merle held a long private confabulation, and decided to try and start a society to stir up the school.

"They've nothing," said Mavis, "absolutely nothing! And I see possibilities of *such* fun! We ought to get up sing-songs and plays, and ten dozen other things. I call it an opportunity."

"Yes, if Opal doesn't butt in and turn everything upside down. We shall have her to reckon with I expect."

"Oh, bother Opal! She's not the only girl in the school."

"No, but she thinks she is."

"Give her a decent part and she'll like it as much as anybody."

"She's not going to be top-dog all along the line, though." [91]

"Well, we can't leave her out of it. I suppose she'll have her turn just the same as other people, and we'll leave it at that."

Next day, therefore, the Ramsays went to school bristling with ideas, and, calling a mass meeting in the playroom, made their proposals. The girls, who were ready for anything in the way of variety, accepted the innovations with alacrity, and in the course of the quarter of an hour allotted to lunch they formed a society, the object of which was, as Mavis expressed it, "to stir things up a little and have acting and sing-songs and any other fun that comes along". They fixed Wednesday afternoon from 4 o'clock to 4.30 for their first meeting.

"Miss Pollard won't mind our staying half an hour after school when she knows what it's for," declared Opal. "We'll have our—what did you call it?—symposium, then, and I dare say she'll give us other times too if we want to rehearse for a play. It would be prime to get up something big for the end of the term, wouldn't it? Who's going to read papers on Wednesday? Hands up those who'll volunteer?"

"Not much time to write anything before then," grumbled Nesta.

"It needn't be original unless you like," put in Mavis. "For this first time you may recite some poetry if you want. It's just to get us all together and make a start."

"Are those kids going to be in it?" objected Muriel, with a baneful eye on the juniors. [92]

"There's no harm in their coming to listen. It's really more fun if there's an audience. In a thing like this it's a case of 'the more the merrier'. I vote the whole school turns up on Wednesday at four."

"Yes, yes! Don't leave us out of it!" squeaked the small fry, in much terror lest they should be excluded from the delightful ceremony.

"Will you promise to sit as mum as mice and not interrupt?"

"We'll be absolute mascots!"

Mavis and Merle, as originators of the innovations, felt a little anxious when Wednesday afternoon arrived. It is one thing to carry on old-established societies, where you can quote the traditions of years and the opinions of many past head-girls, and quite another to float them in a school where nothing of the sort has ever been formulated before. Opal's high-handed ways would probably be the main obstacle, but Mavis thought that with tact even Opal might be managed. As soon as ever afternoon classes were over every girl at The Moorings crowded into the playroom. There was a considerable amount of giggling and chattering, especially among the younger ones, but Merle, who was accustomed to public meetings, called out "Sh-sh!" in loud tones, and, mounting a locker, took advantage of the gap of silence to make an announcement.

"The first business of the meeting is to elect a chairwoman. Will one of you please nominate somebody and we'll put it to the vote?" [93]

The girls looked at one another, and out of sheer force of habit began to murmur "Opal", but Iva Westwood stood up, and, turning rather pink, proclaimed:

"I should like to nominate Mavis for the chair. She knows more about it than any of the rest of us; and she'll show us what we ought to do, and put us in the way of running the society properly."

"And I've much pleasure in seconding her," said Nesta eagerly. "Hands up all in favour of Mavis!"

The vote was unanimous. Even Opal held up her hand quite readily. She would yield place to Mavis, though she would not have transferred an ounce of authority to Merle. Mavis was hustled forward into the seat of honour and took her place amid applause.

She made a winsome little president, with her blue eyes and her dull-gold hair, and everybody looked at her in expectation.

"As this is our first symposium," she began, "I want to explain that it's a meeting partly to have fun and enjoy ourselves and partly to give all members an opportunity of showing what they can do. Did I hear somebody say 'showing-off?' That's a nasty way of putting it! We want everybody to do something to entertain the meeting. Of course there isn't time in one afternoon for you all to have turns, so I shall only call upon a few, and the rest must wait for another time. I'll now ask [94] Opal Earnshaw to read us her contribution."

It was tactful of Mavis to give Opal the first innings. She stood up at once, looking quite pleased. She had spent more than an hour the evening before writing a story, and was rather proud of her first-born literary bantling. Her tastes inclined towards melodrama, so she had chosen a scene allowing full scope for romance. She unrolled her manuscript, cleared her throat a trifle nervously, and began:

COUNT BERTINO'S BRIDE

It was a glorious moonlight night in the fair Island of Corsica. Outside in the garden the air was heavy with the scent of southern flowers, and nightingales warbled in a concert of joy. The lovely Lady Elvira, only daughter and heiress of the Duke of Alezzo, leaned over the marble balustrade of the piazza, pensively gazing at the beauty of the scene before her. A scarlet camellia adorned her dark tresses, and round her swan-like neck was wreathed a rope of priceless pearls. She sighed as she gazed at the calm and peaceful landscape, for red riot raged within her heart.

"Francesca!" she called to one of her maidens, "has Bernardo not yet returned? I pray you send a page in search of news. 'Tis seldom he tarries so late."

"I go, my lady!" and Francesca sped on her errand.

Left alone, Elvira paced the piazza with impatient footsteps. A dark figure moving among the flowers below was suddenly seen in the pale moonlight. The lady sprang to the balustrade.

"Bernardo! Bernardo! Is it thou?" she whispered in tones tremulous with [95] agitation. But her cheeks blanched, as instead of the longed-for features of her lover appeared the hated visage of her arch enemy Count Bertino.

"Ha, ha, lovely lady, at last I have found thee alone! Time allows me not to beat about the bush, and, rough warrior as I am, my suit must be brief. Too long hast thou trifled with me. Redeem thy promise and wed me!"

"Never!" moaned Elvira. "My heart is given to another!"

"And that other," triumphed the Count, "is now in my power. He lies in my darkest dungeon loaded with chains. Wed me, and he will be restored to liberty. Refuse, and by the tombs of my ancestors he dies the death!"

"Wretch!" panted Elvira, "you have trapped me! But have a care! I may yet escape from your toils. Swear, by all you hold sacred, that at the hour of our nuptials Bernardo will be released and sent with a safe convoy to Rome."

"I swear! Yet thou shalt not escape!"

Great were the preparations for the wedding of the powerful Count Bertino and the heiress Elvira, yet of all the gifts showered upon her the one treasured most by the bride was an emerald ring sent by Albaro, the Moorish alchemist. As she turned it upon her finger she murmured, "'Tis my gate to freedom".

Beautiful in her bridal jewels, but pale as a lily, she approached the altar, and uttered the fateful words which bound her to the Count, but as he turned to lift her veil and claim her as his wife—

"It is enough!" she cried, "I have freed him and I pass onward to my rest," and, falling backward to the ground, she expired. Her emerald ring was a poisoned one, and by pressing its points into her fair white hand she had placed herself for ever beyond the power of the cruel and revengeful Count Bertino. [96]

Opal sat down, out of breath but covered with glory. Quite a thrill passed round the room at so romantic a story.

"O-o-h! It ought to be put on the cinema," suggested Maude Carey. "I can see it all—the balustrade and the moonlight and the count coming, and then the wedding scene. How *did* you think of it?"

"Oh, it just came somehow," admitted Opal modestly.

"Well, it's ripping anyway."

"Only very sad," objected Muriel.

"Tales like that nearly always are sad," put in Mavis; "it wouldn't be so romantic somehow if it turned out happily."

"Couldn't the lovers have run away?"

"Of course not," said Opal sharply. "Bernardo wasn't to be released until the wedding was over."

"Did he get off after all, or did Bertino break his word?"

"Look here! you mustn't ask so many questions," interrupted Mavis. "If we don't hurry on we shall never finish our programme. Perhaps we'd better take a comic turn next. Merle, will you give us 'The Dandy Musician'?"

There was a piano in the playroom, and Merle moved forwards towards it. Her contribution was in the nature of a humorous entertainment. [97]

"I'm going to show you," she explained, "how Professor Vladimir Limpidimpidumpski gave a recital in the Town Hall of Gapeford before an audience of the most distinguished people in the neighbourhood."

Merle was a capital little actress, and she took off the ways of a conceited pianist in a most amusing fashion. She twirled the music-stool energetically, sat down with great pomp, threw back her hair, flung her hands in the air, touched the keys with much affectation, thumped a growling bass, and ran a finger up and down the treble, gazing meanwhile at the ceiling with an air of intense sentiment. Then she hunched up her shoulders and made a violent and wild onslaught on the instrument, banging chords furiously with the weight of her whole arms, and rolling her head as if in frenzy; a sudden pause was followed by a faint tinkle in the treble, then up went the arms again, her head went down in the middle, and she finished by a tremendous thump at either end of the piano, while her nose played the central C.

The tremendous bows which she returned in answer to the applause were part of the performance, and provoked more clapping. The girls clamoured for an encore, but at that she shook her head.

"Professor Vladimir Limpidimpidumpski never gives encores," she declared. "He says it takes it out of him, and he can only do it once."

"Poor, frail flower," laughed Nesta. "Send him to a nursing-home for a rest cure." [98]

"Right-o! And we'll have your contribution while he goes."

"Oh no!"

"Yes, yes! Don't be bashful! Come along!"

"It's your turn, Nesta, really," urged Mavis, as chairwoman of the proceedings.

So Nesta, protesting but rather pleased all the same, was pushed forward and volunteered to give a recitation. It was quite a good one too, spirited and amusing, and fortunately not too long to hold the engrossed attention of the listeners. They clapped it warmly, and Nesta bowed, but, following Merle's example, declined to give an encore.

"We'd better scoot on with the programme or we'll never get through till next week," she declared.

Maude had brought a piano solo, which the girls received politely but coldly, evidently considering it was not the sort of contribution they wanted. Muriel warbled a song in a rather weak, thin voice. Edith was known to have a manuscript in her pocket, but blushed scarlet and utterly refused to produce it, giving up her turn to Iva, who tried a recitation but broke down in the middle. Things were getting a little slack, and time was running on very fast, so Merle, who knew Mavis had prepared a literary contribution, called for an item from "The Chair".

"Yes, yes!" squealed everybody. "Go on, Mrs. Chairwoman. It's your turn now. We're not going [99]

home without your piece. Hurry up before Miss Fanny comes worrying in. She said we might have half an hour, but she should break up the meeting if we went on any longer than that. Chair, please!"

So Mavis, who had produced a manuscript the evening before, considerably at the cost of her preparation, and was secretly dying to read it, though she did not wish to push herself unduly, gave a hasty glance at her watch, reduced some giggling youngsters to silence, and commenced to read.

THE SPOOK HUNTERS
A TALE OF YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY

It had always been the ambition of Tom and Morris to see a good old-fashioned genuine specimen of a ghost or spectre; but though they had visited houses bearing a reputation of being haunted, and had hung about churchyards at midnight, and had even attended séances, their innocent and perfectly natural wish had never been gratified. They were beginning to come to the regretful conclusion that they were not psychic subjects, and therefore incapable of seeing spirits, when once more their hopes rose with a bound. They received an invitation to stay at Cawdor Castle, an ancient building which on really reliable evidence possessed no less than six resident family ghosts, and a few extra visiting spectres as well.

After begging for the most haunted of all the haunted rooms, Tom and Morris retired to bed with very reasonable expectations of at last obtaining a peep of a real old-world spook. For some time they tried to keep awake and on the look-out, but in spite of their efforts their eyes closed, and they slept and snored. The clock [100] was striking the hour of midnight when Tom suddenly awoke. The moonlight, in orthodox fashion, was streaming into the room, and by his bedside stood a queer, half-transparent old gentleman in a court costume.

"Hello! Who the dickens are you?" exclaimed Tom. "You don't mean to tell me you're actually one of the family ghosts?"

"The same—at your service!" replied the old gentleman with a stately bow. "I am Sir Rupert, the second of that name, who lived in the reign of Queen Anne, of blessed memory!"

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure!" replied Tom heartily. "Can you introduce me to any more of the family?"

"With pleasure, if you don't object to accompany me into the picture gallery. We are celebrating an anniversary to-night, and you would find us all at home."

"Right-o!" agreed Tom, jumping out of bed and following the ghost.

His spectre friend led him upstairs and into the big gallery of the castle, where quite an assemblage of spirits of various periods was collected, some in armour, some in silks and satins, and some in shrouds. On a dais sat a magnificent individual in a coat of mail, holding a shield emblazoned with the royal arms.

"King Edward I, the founder of the family!" explained Sir Rupert, taking Tom to be introduced. "Don't be frightened at his Plantagenet manners! He means no harm!"

"Thanks for the hint!" returned Tom, bowing politely towards the dais as he approached.

"What, Sirrah! Hast thou no knee for thy Prince?" exclaimed the King angrily. "Make thy obeisance instantly, or by the sprig of broom in my helmet I'll clap thee [101] in prison and torture thee!"

"Come, come, Edward my boy," murmured a fatherly-looking ghost at his elbow. "How often have I to tell you that these things really aren't done nowadays! You must adapt yourself and learn to march with the times. A court bow is really all that can be required from him, and if you——"

"Oh, please don't worry," interrupted Tom. "I'll adapt my manners to any period that pleases him if you'll kindly coach me as to exactly what he wants me to do. I take it he wishes me to kneel."

And down went Tom on his knees, anxious to oblige, but, to his great surprise, as he touched the floor he fell completely through, and found himself back in bed with the sun streaming through the window, and Morris, whom he had quite forgotten to introduce to the ghosts, snoring comfortably by his side.

Some of the girls sniggered at Mavis's story, a few timorous ones shuddered at the bare idea of ghosts, and some of the small fry asked if it were true; but just as Mavis was comforting them with the assurance that it was absolute fiction, Miss Fanny opened the door of the playroom and

brought the symposium to an end.

"You day girls must go home at once," she decreed. "I gave you half an hour, but I can't have you lingering here any longer. Iva, you ought to be practising. You little ones must go and wash your hands!" and, separating her flock like sheep and goats, she swept the boarders away to their various duties or occupations, and sent the rest to their several homes. [102]

"I don't think Miss Fanny altogether likes our society," ventured Merle, as the Ramsays walked down the High Street.

"She's afraid of anything new, that's evident," said Mavis. "She's lived in an out-of-the-way corner of the world and doesn't know what goes on in other schools. Well, we've made a beginning and had our symposium!"

"And a jolly good one too! The girls said it was topping, and they're just clamouring to have another."

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[103]

CHAPTER VIII

The Warren

Mavis and Merle went to Miss Crompton's class on Friday afternoon in their dainty best dresses, silk stockings, and dancing sandals. Their appearance was certainly very different from what it had been last week in their brown jerseys and school shoes. They noticed Gwen Williams look them up and down, but she did not speak to them or give them any sign of recognition. Beyond an occasional word with Opal, Iva, or the Careys, she would not be expansive with any of the girls at The Moorings, holding aloof in a rather obtrusive fashion, and giving them to understand that though she might attend their French and dancing classes she must not be regarded as a member of the school. Babbie, who was of a much more sociable disposition, would often try to linger to talk with companions of her own age, but Gwen invariably interfered, and would put a stop to the incipient friendships, giving her younger sister glances of very plain reproof.

"Why are those Williams girls so dreadfully conceited?" Merle asked her partner, as they practised a two-step. "I can't see that they're different from other people, but Gwen behaves as if she were a princess, and it was hardly etiquette for the rest of us to speak to her. It's perfectly absurd!" [104]

"Well, you see, the Glyn Williamses think themselves 'county' and won't visit with anybody else. They've a beautiful place at Chagmouth, The Warren."

"I know. I've seen it. But does it really belong to them? I somehow thought it didn't."

"Well, you're right, and I believe it's rather a sore point. The Glyn Williams only rent The Warren. They've plenty of money and they'd like to buy it, but General Talland, to whom it belongs, won't sell it at any price. It has been in his family for hundreds of years."

"Why doesn't he live at it himself, then?"

"He hasn't been home for years and years. He's governor of a place called San Benito in the West Indies. He left England after his only son died, and he has never been back since. I should think Chagmouth people have almost forgotten him. The Glyn Williams are everything there now, or think they are at any rate."

"That I can very easily believe," said Merle, with a glance at Gwen, who, apportioned by Miss Crompton to dance with Aubrey, was circling round without deigning to bestow a single word upon her unwelcome partner.

To Mavis and Merle, Chagmouth, where so far they had only spent a single day, had become the very hub of the universe. They wanted to see its quaint streets again, and to revisit the beach and to explore the woods. More than anything they wished to renew their brief acquaintance with Bevis. His personality had attracted them, and his romantic story appealed to their imaginations. They ventured to say something about him to Uncle David. [105]

"Bevis? Oh, he's a fine lad!" replied Dr. Tremayne. "He's rather out of his element on the farm, but there seems nothing else open to him at present. I wish I could see him doing something better. He'd make a splendid doctor. The way he has picked up dispensing is simply wonderful. I can trust him to make up prescriptions now, and it's the greatest help. He loves pottering about the surgery. It's far more in his line than hedging or ploughing. But he doesn't spare himself on the land; I'll say that for the lad. By the by, are you two coming with me to Chagmouth to-morrow? I believe the sea air did Mavis good. She's losing that transparent look, and getting a tinge of colour in her cheeks."

"I haven't had a cold since I came to Durracombe," boasted Mavis.

"Touch wood or you'll be catching one to-morrow," put in Merle hastily. "Uncle David, we'd go to Chagmouth every day if you'd take us."

"Oh, I dare say! And what would happen to your lessons, Miss Lazybones?" twinkled the doctor. "One holiday a week is quite enough for you."

The girls were growing to love Uncle David. He was so kind, and genial, and pleasant, and had always some little joke or funny story for them. Half of the pleasure of the day at Chagmouth [106] would be the drive there and back in his company. There was a broad restfulness about him that was like a mental tonic. It was as if he had learnt the secret of outliving all unnecessary cares and worries, and could radiate his peaceful atmosphere into the auras of others. Perhaps it was this quality of unconscious healing that gave him such skill and favour as a physician. Certainly patients would begin to brighten up when he merely stepped into the sickroom. "The dear old doctor", as he was generally called, was a figure in the country-side, and a source of moral as well as physical good in his practice.

It was with absolutely beaming faces that the girls set out with him in the little yellow Deemster car the following Saturday morning. They started earlier than the week before, for there were several visits to be paid at farms or cottages on the way, all of which took considerable time, but by exceeding the speed limit on level stretches of road the doctor reached Chagmouth at noon, to find the usual crowd of patients waiting at his rooms. Judging that he would be boxed up in the surgery for more than an hour, and that they would therefore have ample leisure for a stroll before lunch, the Ramsays decided to explore some of the fields that lay round Grimbal's Farm, and selected a path that seemed to lead in the direction of the cliffs and the sea. They looked about for Bevis in the stackyard, but he was nowhere to be seen. Probably [107] he was working on the land, or possibly he might even be at sea, for Mr. Penruddock was part owner of a trawler, and as much fisherman as farmer.

They walked across two meadows, went through a little spinney where hazel catkins were opening fast, and actually a few primroses were peeping through the carpet of dead leaves; then came to a stile which led down into a deep lane. Mavis went first, and was in the very act of stepping cautiously over, when suddenly through a hole in the opposite hedge dashed a fox terrier and seized her by the skirt. It was just enough to destroy her balance, and she fell forward on to her hands and knees. Merle, hurrying after her, attacked the dog with a stick she was carrying, and for about three moments there was a wild scrimmage, Mavis shrieking with fright, the fox terrier yapping and yelping, and Merle laying on blows. They had imagined themselves alone, but the country-side is more full of ears than we generally know, and at the same instant two people came running from opposite directions, one from the lane and the other from the fields. The first, a tall boy carrying a gun, was evidently the owner of the dog, for he called it angrily away, and after a final snarl it ran towards him, helped in its progress by a hearty kick from Bevis, who had jumped over the opposite hedge. Mavis picked herself up, and the four young people stood together in the deep lane. It was Merle, of course, who spoke first.

"Look what your brute's done!" she said indignantly, turning to the dog's owner, and pointing [108] to a rent in Mavis's skirt. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself to let him attack people like this. Why don't you muzzle him?"

The boy regarded Mavis and the damage to her apparel rather coolly.

"You must have done something to make him fly at you," he replied. "Of course he'll go for people if they throw stones at him."

"I didn't throw stones." Mavis's voice quivered with injured annoyance.

"Well, you're not much hurt anyway! If you'd keep to the roads instead of wandering about people's fields you wouldn't get into trouble."

"She's a perfect right in our fields," broke in Bevis hotly. "If she wants to go there why shouldn't she? It's no business of yours."

The boy lifted his eyebrows as if amazed at the outburst.

"Oh, certainly not! None at all!" he replied in supercilious tones. "Have anybody you like in your own fields. It doesn't concern me. What a fuss about nothing."

And, shouldering his gun, he turned back up the lane with the fox terrier at his heels.

"You might at least apologize," Merle shouted after him, but he took not the slightest notice and did not look behind. In another moment the hedge had hidden him from their view.

"What an absolute bounder!" fumed Merle. "He ought to have said he was sorry instead of [109] walking off like that. Who is he?"

Bevis was standing staring up the lane with a frown on his dark face.

"It's young Williams from The Warren," he replied. "He thinks himself cock-of-the-walk in Chagmouth, but he'd better not try on any of his airs with me. He might own the place by the way he behaves. If I catch him with that gun rabbitting in any of our fields I'll let him know."

"Does he go into your fields?"

"He goes anywhere he likes about Chagmouth, and I've heard many people grumble. He may take his own advice and keep to his own property. They've all the shooting on the moors above, and that ought to be enough for him! I've no patience with young sparks like he is."

Mavis was not really hurt by her adventure, but she had been frightened, and was still feeling upset and disinclined to continue their walk. With Bevis for protection the girls turned back towards the farm, where Mrs. Penruddock, who was loud in her indignation and sympathy, took out her thread-basket and hastily caught together the rent in Mavis's skirt.

"That'll keep for this afternoon, and Jessop can darn it properly when you get home," she declared. "Folks ought to pay for the damage their dogs do. And clothes at such a price now! It was a mercy you weren't bitten I'm sure. I'd have had something to say to young Williams if I'd [110] been there. I wouldn't have let him walk away as if it was nothing! He'll have to be taught a lesson some day, if I'm not mistaken. And serve him right too, with all his airs and his impudence."

In the short interval that remained before lunch the girls made a tour of the stackyard and farm buildings. They wanted to see the waterwheel again, and it was fun to climb up ladders and peep into lofts, to explore the dim recesses of barns, or inspect the poultry runs, where fussy hens, shut up inside coops, were clucking to adventurous little families of downy chicks or ducklings. But the crowning place of all was the shed where Bevis kept his carpenter's bench. The boy was very natty and clever at joinering, wood-carving, and mechanics. He had several model boats and a toy engine, which he had constructed himself, to show them, and he volunteered to make them a little grindstone upon which they could sharpen their penknives.

"How topping! We'll come and watch you while you do it," declared Merle.

"If you don't mind our looking on," added Mavis.

But alack! shortly after lunch a most untoward thing happened. Dr. Tremayne had brought the car round from the yard into the road opposite the front door of the farm, preparatory to paying his usual weekly visit to the Sanatorium. He was pottering about inspecting various valves and nuts, in the manner of motorists, and Mavis and Merle, who had constituted themselves assistant chauffeurs, were armed with dusters and were trying to clean the splashboards, which had been [111] much spattered with mud on the journey from Durracombe that morning. Uncle David prided himself upon a spick-and-span car, and liked to turn up at the Sanatorium with the little Deemster looking its best. Both girls were working away energetically, when round the corner from the village there suddenly appeared the whole of the Glyn Williams family, heading straight up the road towards Grimbal's Farm. Merle spied them first. She was on the side of the car nearest the house, and, with a presence of mind that amounted almost to instinct, she bolted inside the door like a rabbit into its burrow. Mavis, whose back was towards the village, was quite unaware that anyone was near till she heard Dr. Tremayne's greeting, and, turning round, found herself face to face with Gwen, Babbie, their mother, their brother, and the fox terrier. If she could, with any decency, have fled after Merle she would have done so, but there was no possibility of escape. She was already in their midst, and Uncle David—dear, tiresome man—was saying: "You know my niece?"

Mrs. Glyn Williams, a portly, rosy-faced lady, with a kind but rather patronizing manner, held out a white-gloved hand.

"Of course! You go to school at The Moorings, don't you? How nice for you to motor over to Chagmouth with your uncle on Saturdays. Are you going with him to the Sanatorium? What is it, Babbie, dear?" (for her younger daughter was whispering eagerly in her ear) "Oh yes, my [112] precious! Doctor, won't you leave your niece on your way, and we'll show her round The Warren and keep her for tea? You can pick her up as you drive back."

There are some invitations which it is utterly impossible to refuse. Mrs. Glyn Williams had, to use a sporting term, "caught her bird sitting". Mavis glanced at Uncle David with mute appeal in her blue eyes, but he quite mistook her dismay, and instantly accepted on her behalf.

"We're going straight home now, through the woods, so come as soon as you can," urged Babbie, following the family as they turned up the road.

Could anything have been more utterly and entirely aggravating?

"Oh, Uncle David! How *could* you?" exclaimed Mavis reproachfully. "I'm not dressed to go to tea at The Warren. I only came in my school skirt and jersey. We meant to scramble about the farm this afternoon."

Dr. Tremayne focused his eyeglasses on his niece's attire. Such an aspect of the visit had never occurred to his innocent masculine mind.

"Bless my life! You look very nice, both of you," he decided.

"Both of us? *I'm* not asked, thank goodness," declared Merle, who had overheard the interview and emerged from the sanctuary of the doorway now the coast was clear.

"It wouldn't matter, child. I'm sure Mrs. Glyn Williams would be pleased to see you. It was [113] stupid of me not to mention you were here too."

"I'm so *thankful* you didn't."

"Am *I* to be the solitary victim?" asked Mavis's plaintive voice in its most injured tone.

"Go with your sister, Merle," urged Dr. Tremayne, who felt rather in a quandary.

"No, Uncle David, dear," replied Merle firmly. "If I wasn't invited I wasn't, and it wouldn't be manners to turn up. I'll go with you to the Sanatorium if you'll take me," and she added privately to Mavis:

"If one of us had to be asked to tea at The Warren I'm glad it's you. Gwen can't bear me, and it was I who said the nasty things to that boy in the lane. What's his name? Tudor! He deserved them, of course, but it would make me shy to meet him again. You always get on much more pleasantly with people than I do."

"We shall have to tell Bevis we're off in the car," said Mavis disconsolately.

They found Bevis already at his bench in the tool-shed and evidently expecting them. His face fell at their news, and, though they both did their very best to explain the situation, he remained glum, and seemed to think they wished to avoid his company.

"Oh, it's quite all right!" he remarked, and that was all they could get out of him. He took up his mallet, and commenced to hammer so vigorously that they fled from the noise.

"He says it doesn't matter, but he's fearfully huffy and offended," whispered Merle. [114]

"Well, we can't help it. Everything has gone wrong to-day," sighed Mavis.

There was no time to put things right with Bevis, for Dr. Tremayne was hooting for them to start at once. He set Mavis down at the great gate of The Warren, and took Merle on with him to the Sanatorium. Mavis walked very solemnly up the laurel-bordered drive. She seldom went anywhere without her sister, and hated paying this stately visit alone. She rang the bell, feeling shy and frightened, and painfully conscious of the conspicuously darned rent in her skirt. She wondered if Tudor would have explained its origin.

The butler admitted her into a lovely conservatory, then through a large hall into the drawing-room. Certainly it was a beautiful house, and Mavis might have enjoyed herself if only Merle had been with her. Her greeting by the young people was far pleasanter than she had anticipated. Babbie was frankly cordial, Gwen unwontedly courteous, and Tudor went so far as to accompany his sisters when they took their guest for a stroll round the grounds. He walked a little behind, and made no attempt at conversation, but she could see him eyeing the darn in her skirt. Later on, while Gwen and Babbie were speaking to a gardener, and for the moment he was alone with Mavis, he mentioned their meeting in the lane.

"I say, you know," he began, "I'd no idea you were Dr. Tremayne's niece when I saw you this morning. Did Jim scare you? He's rather a young dog!" [115]

It was exactly the same excuse that Gwen had urged in defence of the rude reception she had given them in the garden. Mavis wondered privately whether the Williamses only kept their good manners for their friends, and meted out less civil treatment to strangers. But aloud she answered:

"He did rather frighten me, but I wasn't hurt."

"He bolted out of the hedge before I'd time to stop him. I say, you know, I'm sorry if he scared you. He's only a young dog and means no harm."

His tardy apology was evidently mainly due to the fact that she was Dr. Tremayne's niece, but Mavis had the grace to accept it politely, after which the atmosphere seemed to thaw, and Tudor exerted himself to entertain the visitor, offering to take her to the stables and show her the horses. Gwen expanded at this, being very proud of her own little cob, Taffy, and delighted to exhibit him to anybody who would appreciate him.

"Do you hunt?" she asked airily. "I'd live on horseback if I could. Cars are all very well in their way, and get you over the ground, but motoring's nothing to riding. Taffy nips over fences like a bird. I'd ride him to Durracombe when I come for the French class if it weren't for Babbie. It's too far for her pony, so we have to go in the car."

Gentle Mavis invariably made friends, and before her visit at The Warren was over she was on quite pleasant terms with Tudor, Gwen, and Babbie. [116]

"You must come again sometime," said Gwen graciously, accompanying her to the door, when Dr Tremayne called for her with the car.

Merle, who had been temporarily left at the bottom of the drive, was waiting for them, and took her place for the homeward journey.

"Well?" she asked eloquently.

"Better than I expected. Babbie's really rather sweet. Gwen showed me her horse, and Tudor actually apologized. I don't dislike him *quite* as much as I did this morning. He goes to Eton, but he's at home this term because he has been ill. He taught me to play bagatelle after tea, and was wonderfully decent—but, oh no! of course not *nearly* so nice as Bevis."

"And Bevis, to judge from the way he banged with that mallet, is in a thoroughly bad temper."

"Oh, surely he's got over it by this time?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid he thought us a couple of utter sneaks," grunted Merle.

CHAPTER IX

[117]

A Question of Honour

For the last five years Mr. Glyn Williams, a prominent London financier, had rented The Warren from General Talland. He liked the place, and would gladly have bought the whole property had it not been entailed. He still lived in hopes that it might ultimately become his own, and periodically made offers to the owner and heir to effect a settlement. Meantime, failing absolute possession, he posed to his city friends and to his neighbours in the county as the squire of Chagmouth. He was a well-disposed man, according to his lights, and in his own way he had done a good deal for the place. He had built a reading room and institute, had helped to renovate the church, had contributed largely to the war memorial, and headed the list of all local subscriptions. His wife was on numerous committees, had organized many charities, entertained the Sunday School children in her garden, got up concerts or tea-parties, attended mothers' meetings, opened bazaars, and distributed prizes.

Yet all the same Chagmouth was not as grateful as perhaps it ought to have been, and the family at The Warren were by no means favourites in the little town. The root of the trouble was [118] that Mr. and Mrs. Glyn Williams made the common mistake of thinking that because they rented the Hall, and dispensed large sums in subscriptions, they had the right to order the affairs of their less wealthy neighbours, and to have the first say in everything that was to be done in connection with the place. Chagmouth people greatly resented being patronized. They were born of the good old sturdy, self-reliant stock that furnished Drake and Raleigh and other half-forgotten heroes, and they had been accustomed in their slow independent fashion to manage their own business to their own satisfaction. For General Talland, whose family link with the parish dated from the time of the Armada, they had held a respect based partly on his birth and partly on personal appreciation, but they saw no reason to offer any undue deference to his tenant at The Warren. Money alone cannot purchase favour, and the unfortunate attitude of superiority and fashionable aloofness adopted by the whole of the Williams family had created a considerable atmosphere of prejudice against them. To many of the Chagmouth people they were a sore trial, and the haughty manners of the young people were voted insufferable in the village.

Dr. Tremayne, however, who had been medical adviser at The Warren for several years, always met with a happy reception. He was a favourite with rich and poor alike, for he gave equal attention to all his patients, whether their incomes were small or great. He held those wide views of life which estimate people at what they are and not at what they possess, and he always [119] seemed to have the happy knack of bringing out the best in those whom he met. Mrs. Glyn Williams had perhaps taught her daughters many foolish and unworthy lessons, but in the presence of the unworldly old doctor the little snobberies melted away and the higher standards prevailed.

It was for the sake of Dr. Tremayne that Gwen, when she next appeared at The Moorings, bestowed a grudging recognition on Merle and extended a rather patronizing friendship to Mavis. The latter was not specially attracted, though she received the advances politely. Most of the girls, however, seemed to think her only too lucky to be thus noticed. Opal worshipped openly at Gwen's shrine. She copied her frocks, her manners, and her style of hairdressing, and offered up much incense before the altar of fashion. The Ramsays, who were accustomed to the democratic atmosphere of a big high school, fretted at the narrowness of the outlook. They disliked the days when the Williamses attended the French class, for Opal always put on absurd airs and was particularly "high and mighty" and aggravating. She had not improved as the term went on. Indeed, a new and most unpleasant aspect of her had lately revealed itself. She was not altogether fair over her work. On several occasions Mavis and Merle suspected her of cheating. They could not absolutely convict her of it, but the circumstances seemed very incriminating. They mentioned the matter to Iva, who shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course Opal cheats when she gets a chance. We all know that. But how are you going to [120] stop it? If you told Miss Fanny she wouldn't believe you."

"I hate sneaking," said Mavis. "But couldn't we do something with Opal herself?"

"You'd have to catch her first."

"Yes, that's the difficulty."

It is not at all an easy matter to convict a girl who cheats on the sly. Several times Merle, who sat just behind, thought she saw Opal make hasty corrections as Mademoiselle revised the French dictation, but when she taxed her with it afterwards Opal denied flatly, and with huge

indignation.

"As if I should," she fumed.

"Seeing is believing," maintained Merle.

"Do you mean to accuse *me*—the head girl—of cheating! I wish you'd go and tell Miss Pollard or Miss Fanny. They know me too well to listen to a word you'd say. Why, I'm their own god-daughter!"

"Unfortunately that doesn't make you immaculate."

"Though it ought to, when they trust you so," added Mavis.

Discussing the matter between themselves, the Ramsays decided that in this very point lay all the trouble. The Misses Pollard, in their foolish fondness for Opal, were making a grave mistake. They deliberately shut their eyes where she was concerned, and were always biased in her favour.

"It's such an amateur little school," sighed Merle. "I don't mean the lessons, because those are [121] really rather good, but the discipline is horribly slack."

"Hardly exists," agreed Mavis. "Miss Fanny says easily, 'Now, get along, girls!', and a few try to work and the rest don't, and she never *makes* them. I hate a slack teacher, however clever she is."

"Everything is so casual," groused Merle. "There's no proper order even in answering questions. Opal raps out the answers if she knows them, and gets all the credit. It's most unfair. I should like to send Miss Fanny for a term to Whinburn High, and let her see how things are managed at other schools. It would be an eye-opener for her."

"And for Opal too, if she could go as well. It would just do her all the good in the world."

Evidently the only thing to be done was to keep a careful eye upon the delinquent, and bring her to book at the first opportunity that offered sufficient private evidence without taking the affair to the teacher's notice.

Now it happened that one afternoon Gwen Williams left her French dictionary behind her in the classroom and went home without it. It was found in due course by Muriel Burnitt, who flung it into the school "pound", a lost-property basket from which objects could be redeemed by the payment of a penny into the missionary box. Both Mavis and Merle witnessed the placing of the book in this receptacle, though they gave no particular thought to the matter at the time. On the next French day Gwen came fussing into the classroom asking for her missing dictionary, and [122] was much put out to find it was not forthcoming.

"I *know* I left it on the desk," she maintained.

"So you did, and I popped it into the pound," said Muriel. "Pay your penny and you'll get it out. It's perfectly simple."

But when Gwen walked over to the lost-property basket, and inspected its contents, she found an assortment of pencils, india-rubbers, and pen-holders, but certainly no dictionary. She was loud in her wrath, and the girls immediately round her began to offer comments and advice.

"It was there yesterday."

"I saw it myself."

"Opal redeemed a penknife this morning."

"You'd better ask her if she knows where it has gone."

"Here she comes!"

Yet at that exact moment Mademoiselle entered also, and the girls took their places. In the course of the lesson she gave her pupils a piece of unseen translation. It was a difficult passage, and to many of them an almost impossible one to render into English. Each had her closed dictionary placed on the desk in front of her, and cast longing looks at its covers, but to open it was, of course, not permitted. Now Merle was sitting just behind Opal, and she noticed the latter glancing constantly down on to her knee. Merle could not see the object of this close attention, but her suspicions were aroused. She dared not speak, but she scribbled a little note on a piece [123] of waste paper:

"Keep an eye on Opal's knee, and see if she hasn't got your dictionary."

This she addressed to Gwen and handed it surreptitiously along by Nesta and Iva.

Gwen read it, and gave a nod of comprehension while Mademoiselle was looking the other way. The moment the lesson was finished she stood up, moved along the desks, and made a sudden grab on to Opal's lap.

"Hello! What are you doing with my dictionary?" she asked.

Opal turned white and then scarlet, but she was ready with a plausible excuse.

"I—I found it," she stuttered. "I was going to give it back to you."

"Indeed!" Gwen's tone was scathing. "I happen to know it was put inside the pound. Why did you take it out? It's extremely kind of you to have put a brown paper cover on it. If you intended to give it back to me why didn't you hand it over before the class began?"

"There—there wasn't time!"

"Oh, good gracious, don't tell me any more fiblets! You meant to stick to it, and you were cribbing from it on your knee. Nice thing for a head girl to do, I must say. I've not much opinion of you here at The Moorings."

Opal protested, but Gwen would not listen to a word she had to say, and, pulling the paper [124] cover off the dictionary, stalked out of the room with the air of an offended queen. The girls sniggered openly.

It was so seldom Opal met her match. To have drawn down the wrath and displeasure of Gwen was a particular humiliation to her.

"Rather priceless, wasn't it?" chuckled Merle to Iva. "Hope it will teach her not to cheat in future."

"Don't flatter yourself. She will directly she gets the chance. She's done for herself with Gwen though for the present."

Iva's opinion of Opal was founded on experience. There was an unfortunate moral kink about the head girl that often involved her in very shady transactions. It was a deplorable thing for the school, as instead of upholding the tone she lowered it. Mavis often wondered how Miss Fanny could be so foolish and weak as not to see for herself that her favourite evaded rules. Out of sheer bravado Opal would often do forbidden things, and would boast that she could venture on them with impunity where others would surely get into trouble. One mean dishonesty above all others aroused the Ramsays' indignation.

The top form took arithmetic with Miss Fanny. It was a subject which Opal disliked, but for the last two or three lessons she had worked all her problems correctly. Miss Fanny, who ought to have known better, left her Key to the arithmetic on the mantelpiece of the classroom, and one morning Mavis, coming in early, caught Opal in the very act of copying the answers to the next [125] set of questions.

"Well!" she exploded. "Of all mean sneaks you're the biggest I've ever met. No wonder you get all your sums right if you write down the answers beforehand. How *can* you?"

Opal tried to laugh the matter off.

"Why don't you do it yourself, my dear?" she answered. "If Miss Fanny *will* leave her book about, of course we look at it. That's human nature!"

"It's not my way," said Mavis gravely. "And if Miss Fanny trusts us so much that she leaves her Key here, we ought to be worthy of her trust. It's shameful to deceive her."

"Oh, Jonathan! Go and tell her, then."

"You know I never tell tales."

That day, however, Opal was unexpectedly overtaken by Nemesis. Miss Fanny was suffering from a severe headache, and Miss Pollard came to take the arithmetic class in her stead. The girls told her the number of the exercise they had reached, and she wrote the questions upon the blackboard. For some reason of her own she reversed their order. When she called for the answers, Opal, with great assurance, read hers out, and, of course, as she had copied from the book, No. 6 came instead of No. 1, and vice versa. Miss Pollard stared at her in much amazement, and told her to come and work them upon the blackboard, a process of which she made a conspicuous bungle. Miss Pollard made no special remark, but possibly her suspicions may have [126] been aroused, for she carried away the Key, and it was never again left in the classroom. Whether her affection for Opal prevented her from making a closer inquiry, or whether the affair was merely a coincidence, and she still preserved her faith in the integrity of her pet pupil, it was impossible to tell.

"All the same I call it the limit for her to shut her eyes to things in the way she does," commented Mavis to Merle. "Both Miss Pollard and Miss Fanny are dears, but a teacher ought to know something of what goes on in a school, and not leave it just to luck. What are we to do? We can't go sneaking and telling, and yet I feel we ought to make a stand. It doesn't seem right to let Opal behave like this and do nothing. She hasn't the slightest idea of honour."

"That's what most of them need here," snorted straightforward Merle.

"I know. But what can you expect with such a slacker as head girl? If only Mother were here I'd ask her, but I'm so stupid at explaining properly in a letter it's no use to write."

"Not a bit. She wouldn't really understand. Seems to me there's nothing for it but just to worry on as best we can. They're a queer set, but we can't help it."

CHAPTER X

Among the Boarders

[127]

Mavis and Merle, being day girls at The Moorings, have occupied so much of our attention that we have somewhat neglected the boarders. In their own estimation, however, they were a very important part of the community. There were twelve of them altogether, and though, during classes, they mixed with the rest of the school, they were rather proud of the fact that, as far as possible, they "kept themselves to themselves". They had all sorts of little secrets that day girls might not share, signs and passwords and mysterious references, which gave them great satisfaction, and were calculated to provoke envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness in the breasts of those who did not understand the allusions, and whom they sternly refused to initiate.

Many of the boarders were the children of parents who were out in India. Some of them had been born there, and could remember burning skies and temples and native bazaars and elephants, and many other un-English things. Mamie and Jessie Drew could even speak Hindustani, a language which all the Indian-born children had talked in their infancy, though most of them had forgotten it in a very short time after landing in Britain. With the exception of Iva Westwood, Nesta Pitman, and Aubrey Simpson, the boarders were all juniors, and an uncommonly lively little crew, who sometimes led their seniors a dance, and were capable of a considerable amount of ragging among themselves.

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The two who were generally at the bottom of most of the mischief were Winnie Osborne and Joyce Coleman, nicknamed by Iva "the firebrands". Under Miss Pollard's gentle rule their escapades sometimes got rather out of bounds, but they had a wholesome respect for Miss Fanny, who did not often interfere with the management of the boarders out of school hours, but who dealt out discipline if she happened to catch anybody tripping.

Among the silliest of the boarders was Nita Howard, a child who was a born gossip, and who sometimes made trouble by repeating conversations or remarks which she had overheard, and which she had very much better have kept to herself. Nita had no discretion. Miss Pollard often told her her tongue was too long, and certainly on many occasions it got herself and her chums into scrapes. One evening, just after it grew dark, she came running into the recreation-room in a state of much excitement.

"I've got news for you, girls?" she chirped.

"No! What?" exclaimed Mamie and Alison, her particular friends, looking up with interest from the scrap-books that they were engaged in making.

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"Well, I'll tell you then," said Nita, sitting down by the table and lowering her voice. "The ghost has been seen again in Poplar Lane!"

"I say, shut up there, Nita," murmured Nesta, who was painting at the same table. "Do you want those kids in umpteen fits?"

Nita beckoned her chums away from the vicinity of the smaller children in question, so that she might continue her thrilling story in private.

"It has really!" she assured them in a whisper.

"O-o-h!" came in a horror-stricken chorus. "How do you know?"

"I've just heard Bella telling Cook. It's Bella's evening out, and she went down the back carriage drive into Poplar Lane to take a short cut to meet a friend, and just when she got under the shade of the trees she saw something all in white coming towards her. She shrieked and ran straight back to the house, and she says she daren't go out again, even though her own cousin is waiting for her at the other end of the lane."

"Bella's rather a goose," put in Nesta, who had moved to the end of the table so as to overhear. "I shouldn't believe a word she says."

"It's quite true though. She saw it with her own eyes."

"She certainly couldn't see it with anybody else's," retorted Nesta scornfully. "It was probably a white cow coming down the lane."

"No, it wasn't. It was really the ghost. Bella felt a most extraordinary feeling as if the blood was freezing in her veins. She says she never remembers anything like it since the night a dog howled under her window and her grandmother died. Her heart stood absolutely still for two whole minutes."

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"Bunkum! Bella hasn't had physiology lessons or she'd know that's impossible. Why she wouldn't be alive to tell the tale!" snorted Nesta. "How can you swallow such precious stuff, you little silly?"

"It's not stuff."

"Indeed it is."

"Then don't listen."

"I certainly shan't," and Nesta, moving her painting things along the table, went back to her original place.

Her curiosity, however, got the better of her. She had sharp ears and she caught most of what followed, losing a few details, for Nita was whispering and Nesta was too proud to move nearer. The other two put their heads very close to Nita's in order to hear the interesting particulars.

"I didn't know Poplar Lane was haunted," said Mamie.

"Yes, it is, by a woman in white. She appears quite suddenly standing near our gate. But she hasn't been seen for a long time."

"I thought only old houses had ghosts," ventured Alison. "The Moorings isn't so very old, is it?"

"It's quite old enough to have a ghost. There's a story about it—an *awful* story! Bella told it to me." [131]

"What is it?"

"I don't know whether I ought to tell it to you."

"Oh, go on!"

"Well, a gentleman used to live here once," began Nita, in tones of delighted importance. "His name was Mr. Morrison. Late one night—it was exactly at midnight—he happened to look out of the window, and he saw a white carriage with a pair of white horses drive up to the door, but it didn't make the least sound of wheels or hoofs. And, do you know, he died afterwards."

"Of course he died afterwards," was heard from Nesta's end of the table. "He couldn't very well die before, could he? Perhaps it was twenty years afterwards."

"I thought you weren't listening. No, it was quite soon afterwards. Wasn't it horrible?"

"What's the white lady got to do with the carriage?" asked Alison. "Was she sitting inside?"

"I'm coming to that presently. Mr. Morrison had a son called Meredith, who did all kinds of wicked things. When his father died this son was worse than ever, and spent both his mother's money and his own on gambling. He used to ride away on his horse at night and not come back till very, very late, and his mother used to go and stand in Poplar Lane to watch for him. She told him that when she died her spirit would stand there still. But he didn't care in the least what she said. On the night after her funeral he rode off on his horse just as usual, and when he came back, there was her ghost all in white, waiting by the gate for him. He gave a fearful cry, and fell from his horse—dead!" [132]

"O-o-o-h!" came from Mamie and Alison.

"Rubbish!" grunted Nesta from the other end of the table.

Nita felt she had scored a success. She could seldom get the girls to pay any attention to her, but they were certainly listening now. The four smaller ones, who were supposed not to overhear, had, of course, had their ears wide open as little pitchers always will. Doreen had turned quite white, Prue was clutching Elsbeth's hand, and Jessie, after a surreptitious glance at Nesta, had crept nearer and asked under her breath who had told Bella.

"I don't know," answered Nita, "but somebody who knew all about it. The house was to let for a long time before Miss Pollard took it. Bella says she'd never have come here if she'd known there was a ghost. She means to give notice and get another place as soon as she can."

"Does it ever come indoors?" gasped Elsbeth.

"I don't think so," replied Nita, keenly enjoying herself, "but, of course, you never can tell. When a place is haunted it's haunted, and you must be ready for anything."

"I shan't dare to go to bed," wailed Elsbeth.

"No more shall I," moaned Jessie. "I don't believe I shall even dare to practise in a room by myself. Suppose I saw it standing by the piano? What *should* I do?" [133]

"Ask it to sit down and play you a tune," said Nesta, shutting her paint-box. "Nita, how can you frighten them in this silly way with your precious ghost tales? You oughtn't to talk to the servants if Bella only tells you such whoppers. Doreen's eyes are nearly dropping out of her head. By the by, what's become of Winnie and Joyce?"

"I haven't seen them. I thought they were practising. Do they know?" asked Mamie.

"Not yet," replied Nita mysteriously, "but, of course, we shall have to tell them. Oh, here they are now!"

"What's the matter?" cried the pair in question, seating themselves at the table.

"The ghost has been seen in Poplar Lane!" exploded Jessie, before Nita had time to get the

words out herself.

A look of intelligence passed between Winnie and Joyce.

"Hold me up! When?"

"Where?"

"To-night. Just by the gate. Bella saw it herself."

"If Bella saw it herself it must have been there!" burbled Winnie.

"Or some other thingumbob very like it," piped Joyce, who seemed on the point of adding more, only Winnie trod on her toe, so she stopped short.

"And it *may* come inside the house," volunteered Doreen with a shiver.

"What a blossomy prospect! I should think it very probably will," said Winnie. [134]

"Ghosts generally like houses better than lanes," echoed Joyce.

"Isn't it dreadful, though?" said Nita, who felt that neither was sufficiently impressed, and was anxious to keep up the full horror of the situation.

When bedtime arrived the younger children were in a state bordering on panic. Mademoiselle could not understand why they insisted upon going upstairs so very close together, why they shot past the dark doorways of other dormitories, nor why Elsbeth begged her almost in tears not to turn the light out, and to leave the door open so that they could hear the elder girls come to bed. Mamie and Alison were in hardly better case. They had retailed all the ghost stories they had ever heard, and had worked themselves into a thoroughly nervous condition. At the return of daylight, however, they were inclined to laugh at their fears and agree with Nesta that it was silly nonsense.

"I don't think Winnie and Joyce minded in the least," ventured Alison.

"No, I couldn't quite make them out," replied Mamie. "They were so queer over it and kept looking at each other. Didn't you notice?"

"I never thought about it," said Nita. "They're always having private jokes. You can hardly say [135] anything without Joyce poking Winnie or Winnie nudging Joyce. I get sick to death of their precious secrets."

Everybody seemed ready that morning to make fun of the ghost, but when evening came again, superstitious terrors revived in full force. Jessie Drew spent a miserable half-hour practising with one eye on the window, having an uneasy sensation that the spectre would probably be gliding about the garden. She had not the strength of mind to draw down the blind, and so shut out the chance of the vision, and in consequence made such a peculiar rendering of her piece that Miss Fanny came in herself, scolded her sharply, and sat down by her side to insist upon her playing it properly.

"I didn't mind the scolding in the least," Jessie told her chums afterwards. "I was so thankful to see anybody I'd have been glad if she'd boxed my ears. I was so afraid she'd go away again I played wrong notes on purpose. She said she'd never known me so stupid."

"Miss Pollard sent me to her bedroom to fetch a book," said Nita. "I was simply shaking all over. That long passage is so dreadfully dark, and I saw something white at the end of it. It was only Bella's apron, though, that she'd hung over the banisters. The moonlight was coming in through the landing window, and, it looked so like ghosts I daren't go by, so I went down the back stairs and through the kitchen. I asked Bella if she'd seen anything more, and she said a big bird had flown against the window, and that's always a bad omen. Miss Pollard asked me why I'd been so long fetching the book, but I didn't dare tell her. I wonder what the bird was an omen of! I [136] forgot to ask Bella."

Evening preparation went on as usual, after which most of the boarders collected in their own recreation-room to read or paint or otherwise amuse themselves. Iva and Aubrey were practising, but Nesta was sitting with the juniors, of whom only Winnie and Joyce were missing. These two seemed to have mysteriously disappeared. Joyce came back after a short time, looking rather red and excited, but she made no remark, and taking a book began to read.

"I can't find my post-card album anywhere," complained Nita, hunting disconsolately round the room, "and I did so want to put in those extra cards I got last week. I'm sure I left it on the bookcase."

"I saw it in the cloakroom on the boot-rack," volunteered Joyce.

"However could it get there?"

"I don't know, but I saw it."

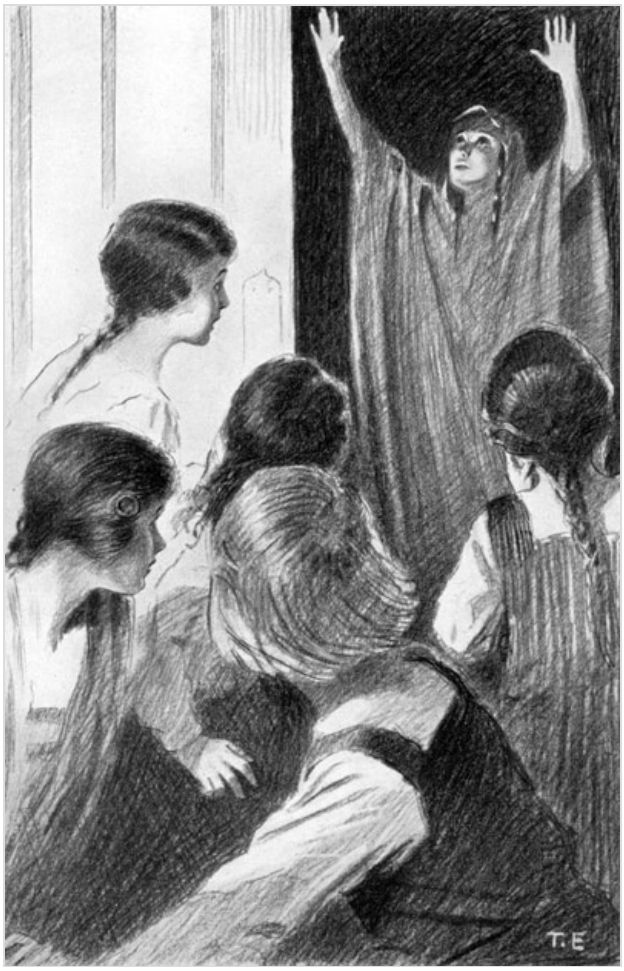
"Miau! I daren't go and fetch it. I simply daren't. The cloakroom will be quite dark. Won't somebody go with me? Alison, be a mascot!"

"No, thanks! You won't stir this child."

"I'll go," proclaimed Joyce, jumping up briskly. "I don't mind at all. Come along Nita!"

"Oh, you saintly girl!"

The two went out of the room, Nita clutching tightly to Joyce's arm and volunteering gasping little remarks.



IT CERTAINLY WAS A MOST ALARMING SPECTACLE

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"The others are piggy to-night!—Mother always says I'm so nervous!—I'm really afraid of the dark, even when there are no ghosts!" [137]

The rest of the boarders went on with their various occupations, but in a few moments they were interrupted by the sudden opening of the door, and Nita burst in with a white face.

"Girls! Oh, I say! I've seen the ghost! It's in the cloakroom! Oh, it's too awful! I'm ready to faint. Don't go, Nesta, don't!"

"Of course I'm going," said Nesta. "We've had enough of this nonsense, and it's time it was put a stop to. Come along, everybody. We'll take a look at this ghost."

She valiantly led the way, and the juniors followed more timorously, Elsbeth and Doreen, in the rear, giving squeals of terror, across the hall and past the dusky corner where the croquet-box was kept, then down the steps to the cloakroom door. They peeped in fearfully. At the sight they saw most of them backed with shrieks. The room was in complete darkness, but at the far side stood a figure which seemed to be shrouded in white, its face and uplifted hands shining with a brilliant light that gave it a most unearthly and uncanny appearance. It certainly was a most alarming spectacle, and enough to strike horror into any breast. Alison and Nita were almost in hysterics, and the rest would have run away if Nesta had not stopped them.

"Don't be a set of sillies," she commanded. "I'll soon show you who it is."

She dived into the cloakroom, and, after a sharp scuffle, came back hauling a kicking, struggling, protesting spectre that could evidently use both arms and legs in a particularly human fashion. [138]

"Winnie!" exclaimed the girls, as, in the light of the hall, Nesta pulled off the sheet and

disclosed the well-known blue-serge dress and short lank hair of the champion ragger of the school.

Everybody burst out laughing, even Nita and Elsbeth.

"You absolute blighter!"

"How priceless!"

"Win, you're the limit!"

"How did you manage to make your face and hands shine? They looked too awful."

"I wet them and rubbed them with matches. Look! If I hold up my hand in the dark it's all steaming and glowing with phosphorus yet."

"What a beastly trick."

"You did give us spasms."

"Come along and tell us about it."

"Where's Joyce?"

Joyce had been close by, enjoying the fun, and now joined with her chum in relating the story of their rag.

"Of course we were the ghosts all the time," began Winnie. "Last night Joyce and I went to the side door. It was lovely moonlight, and we dared each other to run down the back drive. We'd got as far as the gate when we heard somebody behind us. It was Bella, so we dodged out into the road and a few yards up Poplar Lane. We thought Bella was going the other way. She stood still a [139] minute and waited, then she turned and came straight towards us. I thought if she saw us she'd report us to Miss Fanny, so I whispered to Joyce, 'Get behind me and I'll act ghost!' and then I held my dress high above my head with both hands, and began to bow myself up and down and moan."

"Bella yelled," explained Joyce, taking up the tale. "She ran back up the drive as fast as she could, and rushed round to the kitchen door. We were going to tell you about it, but when we got in you were full of Bella's story of having seen the ghost in Poplar Lane. So we thought we might as well have some fun out of the thing, and play a rag on you."

"It was ever so difficult, though," continued Winnie. "We couldn't do it anywhere else except in the cloakroom, and we didn't know how to get you there. It was Joyce's idea to take Nita's post-card album away. Oh, how she and Alison screamed! I haven't got over it yet."

Winnie was still hinnying and dabbing her eyes with a rather phosphorousy pocket handkerchief.

"Look here, now," said Nesta, "we've had enough of this. You mustn't try any tricks on the maids."

"Oh, just on Bella! It would be such a stunt to stand in the housemaid's cupboard and let her find me when she goes upstairs."

"No!" decreed Nesta. "It's dangerous to frighten people. Bella may have a weak heart, and in any case she'd be certain to drop her jug of drinking-water. I'm a senior and you juniors have got [140] to do what I say. No, Winnie! It's no use pulling faces and nudging Joyce. I mean it. I'm no tell-tale, but if I find either of you trying on this rag again I shall just march straight off and fetch Miss Fanny. So you know what to expect. There!"

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CHAPTER XI

Round the Fire

Miss Pollard and Miss Fanny liked to have an individual knowledge of each of their pupils, and as they did not yet know the Ramsays very well they asked them to tea one day. So after school Mavis and Merle stayed behind and washed their hands, and went with the boarders into the dining-room, and ate scones and honey and home-baked cake, and felt rather shy and hardly spoke at all, although they were both sitting close to Miss Pollard, who made most noble efforts at conversation. When tea was over, those girls who were due to practise departed to the several pianos, and began a kind of musical combat of scales and studies. The others collected round the fire in the recreation-room. Preparation had been put off on account of the visitors, and Miss Pollard had announced that she and Miss Fanny were coming in for half an hour's chat or fun.

"You must decide what you'd like to do," she said. "Ask Mavis and Merle what are their favourite games. Do they know 'adverbs'? It must be something you can all play."

Standing in front of the fire everybody proposed something different, and nobody wanted anybody else's suggestion. Matters seemed likely to go rather lamely till Mamie had a really [142] sensible idea.

"Let's ask Miss Pollard to tell us a Devonshire story instead of playing games."

"Does she know any Devonshire stories?" said Merle quickly.

"Heaps and heaps. She says she learnt them from the old people about Durracombe, when she was a little girl, and her father was vicar. She's written most of them down. She has them in a manuscript book. We want her to get it published some day, because they're so topping. They're all about Devonshire pixies and witches and charms and things."

"I'd love to hear one."

"So would I," added Mavis, "I'd like it far better than playing a game, if you others don't mind."

"Oh, it's you visitors who are to choose."

So when Miss Pollard and Miss Fanny entered, and inquired what was to be the particular form of entertainment, Mamie voted for Devonshire stories, and all hands were held up in favour of her proposal.

"My little folk-tales!" exclaimed Miss Pollard, looking very pleased. "They're collected from the neighbourhood. The old people used to tell them years ago, but nowadays I don't think anybody in Durracombe cares about pixies. Most of them would have been forgotten if I hadn't written them down. I'll fetch the book. I'd rather read you one than try to remember it. I never can recollect the best points when I tell stories."

Miss Pollard returned presently with a small manuscript volume, the result of rather careful [143] work on her part, for she was interested in the old legends of the district. She settled herself in a wicker arm-chair, with Doreen on her lap, and Elsbeth squatting on the floor leaning against her knee, while Miss Fanny, on the opposite side of the hearth, gave similar petting to Jessie and Prue. It was a "home-y" little circle, not in the least like school. Mavis could not help thinking how sweet Miss Pollard looked, with the firelight shining on her silver hair, and an unwonted pink colour in her cheeks. Miss Fanny, too, was picturesque in the gloaming, and Prue's red-gold head made a bright spot of colour against her dull-green dress.

"They're dears, both of them," thought Mavis. "Absolute dears! Anybody more unlike school-mistresses I never met in my life. They ought to have been married. They must have been so pretty when they were young. I suppose they never met anybody in this out-of-the-way place. The school may be old-fashioned, and behind the age, and all the rest of it, but they give the boarders a good time at any rate. They're just mothers to those Indian children. I'm glad to have had a peep at them behind the scenes and seen this side of them. I believe I'm rather in love with them both."

But Miss Pollard had opened her manuscript book and, in her pleasant cultured voice, was beginning to read.

STOLEN BY THE PIXIES [144]

Nancy Gurney sat by the side of the driftwood fire, and her tears fell fast as she rocked the cradle of her sleeping child. The afternoon sun shone brightly through the narrow casement window, and lit up the earthen floor and the brown rafters with a warm yellow glow. From outside came the fresh smell of the sea, and the soft grinding of the pebbles, while the waves lapped gently over the beach, as if they had never lashed themselves into foaming breakers against the cliffs.

The red poppies which grew on the low-thatched roof raised up their heads, battered by yesterday's storms, the great flat fish, hung up to dry in the sun by the doorway, flapped in the light breeze, and from the shore came the shrill eager voices of children, who gathered the driftwood cast up by the gale. But the fishing-boats! The brown-sailed fishing-boats that ought to have beaten back so safely into the harbour with the turn of the tide, alas! there was never a sign nor a sail of them to be seen, and there was many an aching heart in Bulvertor that day.

"Maybe they've got safe off towards the Cornish coast," said Kitty Trefyre, who sat knitting in the inglenook.

"Nay," said Nancy sadly, "they'd have been round the head by now. It's only the stoutest of boats that could have weathered such a gale as blew last night, and *The Dolphin* was hardly seaworthy at best. No! They're gone! They're gone! We shall never see the brown sails again! The sea has taken my Peter as it has claimed all my dearest and best, and my poor boy is a fatherless babe."

She dropped her head on her hands, and sobbed till the tears fell into the

cradle over the sleeping child.

"Don't take it so hard!" said Kitty. "We won't give them up yet! And whisht, girl, whisht! Whatever you do don't weep over the boy! Have you never heard that if tears fall on a sleeping child the pixies have power to steal it away?" [145]

Nancy dashed the tears from her eyes, and walked to the doorway to take one long wistful look over the bay. The old woman laid aside her knitting and followed her.

"It's ill luck!" she muttered. "Ill luck to shed tears on sleeping babes, and I doubt me but evil will come of it. I'll gather some fern seed and drop it in the cradle. It's a well-known charm for keeping off pixies or witches, and 'tis better to be wise in time—wise in time!"

She hobbled out across the garden to where the ferns grew under the hedge, while Nancy turned sadly again to the fireside. She stooped over the cradle to kiss her sleeping child, but started back with a piercing, bitter cry. *The cradle was empty!*

The sound of her grief soon brought old Kitty hurrying to the cottage.

"My boy! My beautiful boy!" sobbed the despairing mother. "The pixies have stolen him away. Oh, that I had wept myself blind ere I let the tears fall over his cradle!"

She sat rocking herself to and fro in her sorrow, while the old woman threw the fern seed, picked, alas! too late, into the driftwood fire.

"There's one hope left," said Kitty, when the first wild burst of grief had worn itself away. "I am cunning and wise in the ways of the pixies, and I know that they dance each night in the moonlight on the ledge of rock where the sea-pinks bloom on the face of St. Morna's Cliff. If you hide yourself there, with a wreath of vervain round your hair, and could catch them unawares, my heart tells me you might force them to restore what they have stolen. But, alas! the plan is well-nigh impossible, for how could you tread safely over the crags where the boldest of our cliff climbers scarce dare to venture?" [146]

"Yet I will do it!" cried Nancy, as she rose up with a new light in her eyes. "Quick! weave me the wreath of vervain, and show me by what spell I may force the fairies to give me back my child."

"Nay, that I cannot tell you," said old Kitty. "Your own mother-wit must find out the way. Start when the twilight has fallen, and when seven stars are shining over the sea; tell none your errand, and cast three sprigs from your vervain wreath if a hare should cross your path. Turn your wedding ring round on your finger before you venture to climb down the cliff, and call on St. Morna to help you. Watch silently all that may happen till you see your opportunity arise—and may good luck and my blessing go with you!"

The dusk had fallen over the village, and the stars were beginning to shine in the darkening sky, when Nancy, with the wreath of vervain twined through her dark hair, crept softly past the last of the cottages, and took the little briary path which led through the low sandhills, and over the wind-swept hill-side up to St. Morna's Cliff.

Not a sound broke the silence, for the sea-gulls had vanished with the sunshine, and not even a fieldmouse stirred in the bracken. With hasty step she hurried along, for she must reach her post before moonrise. The path grew steeper, the bracken gave way to heather, and at length she found herself on the smooth grassy surface of St. Morna's Cliff. Down far below her she could see the wide rocky ledge where the sea-pinks were catching the last glow from the western sky. How steep the crag looked! The few tufts of grass and jutting-out pieces of rock offered her scarcely a foothold; should she make one false step she must be dashed to atoms upon the precipice beneath. She looked down and shivered; but the thought of her child sent a thrill of courage to her heart. Kneeling down on the short grass she prayed to St. Morna for help; then, turning her wedding ring round upon her finger, she swung herself over the edge of the cliff. [147]

Clutching at a root here, feeling with her feet for the slightest foothold, grasping the worn splinters of the crag, she let herself down the face of the rock, till with panting breath and bleeding fingers she fell among the sea-pinks on the ledge below. She lay there for a while, half-insensible, till the first rays of the rising moon began to shimmer over the sea. Then she rose hastily, and, hiding herself behind a huge boulder, waited for what should happen.

When the first faint moonbeams fell all silvery white upon the ledge, the sea-pinks lifted their pretty heads; they grew and grew till each had changed into a gorgeous tropical flower, then, leaving their places, they ranged themselves into a wide circle, and cast forth such a fragrance as might have stolen out of the open

gates of Paradise. Upon each hung a tiny silver bell, and as they nodded their heads the bells chimed out the sweetest fairy tunes. Little stars began to glitter among the leaves, some pink, some blue, some golden, and the short green grass inside the circle smoothed itself out into the most beautiful dancing-floor.

Then there was a great rushing sound in the sky, and from far and near there flew flocks of snow-white sea-gulls. As they reached the ledge their wings fell from them, and they turned into lovely little pixies, as light and transparent as gossamer. Joining hands, they stepped inside the circle of flowers and danced a [148] graceful, intricate measure, while the fairy bells rang out their sweetest tunes. On and on they danced, hour after hour; the moon rose slowly in the sky, but the pixies' feet seemed never to tire as they beat time to the enchanting music.

Hiding behind the boulder of rock Nancy had been quite unnoticed, but her eager eyes watched all that had been taking place. Stretching out her hand very gently she managed to steal a pair of the sea-birds' wings, and hide them away in her bosom.

The little bells still rang out their chimes, and the pixies tripped lightly over the grass, till at length the moon began to wane, and the first glimmer of approaching dawn showed in the eastern sky.

Then the tiny dancers stopped short in their merry pastime, and, taking their white wings again, they flew away over the sea like a cloud of foam flakes. The coloured stars and the silver bells had disappeared, the tropical flowers broke up their circle and changed once more into simple little sea-pinks, and the grass, where the pixies had danced, grew up fresher and greener than ever.

But one little pixie was left behind. She wandered round wringing her hands and seeking vainly for the sea-bird's wings that should have borne her away with the others. Tripping behind the great boulder of rock she came face to face with Nancy, who still crouched in its shadow.

"Mortal! cruel mortal!" cried the pixie, "you have stolen my wings! Give them back, I pray you, before the dawn breaks, for the first rays of sunshine will wither me up, and I shall turn into a little faded brown leaf."

"Pixie! cruel pixie!" cried Nancy, "you have stolen my child! Bring him back to [149] my arms, and then and not till then will I restore you your wings."

"How can I find you your child?" screamed the pixie. "Oh! give me my wings—my pretty white wings; let me fly safely away over the sea ere I turn for ever into a little withered brown leaf!" and she stamped her tiny foot in her helpless passion.

"You can and shall find me my child," said Nancy, "for I know that the pixies have stolen him away, and that only a pixie can bring him back to me. Look! the sky is reddening already, your time is short. Do my bidding speedily, and the wings are yours."

"The dawn! the dawn!" shrieked the pixie. "Mortal, I will grant you what you ask! Each of the sea-pinks which bloom on this green turf holds the soul of a child which we have stolen away from its cradle. For a moment each pretty flower shall wear its human face, then choose out your own child swiftly and let me be gone."

She clapped her hands, and each of the little sea-pinks turned to a smiling baby face. All the merry eyes and tiny curls were there that mothers had mourned for all over the country-side, and at her feet Nancy saw the sweet, laughing face of her stolen child. With a cry of joy she clasped him in her arms.

"The dawn! the dawn!" cried the pixie. "Mortal, give me my wings!"

Nancy drew them from her bosom, and gave them into the eager, entreating fingers. With a great rush of light the sun rose, his golden beams fell on the wide ledge of rock, lighting up a bed of simple little sea-pinks, while over the broad blue sea there flew a solitary sea-gull.

Folding her shawl about her child, Nancy slung him on to her back, and with slow steps and painful fingers she climbed up the face of the cliff. The larks were [150] rising out of the heather, the little blue butterflies were flitting over the yellow gorse, the dew-drops hung like jewels in the gossamer, and far away on the distant water she could see the brown sails of the missing fishing-boats as they beat safely over the bar into Bulvertor Harbour.

"The story was told me in Devonshire dialect when I was a little girl," said Miss Pollard, as she closed her book, "but I wrote it in ordinary English because the other is so hard to understand.

It's funny that in the accounts of fairies they always seem to speak the local languages. Irish fairies talk Erse, and Welsh fairies sing in Welsh. Have you pixies in the north, Mavis?"

"They're called 'boggarts' in our part of the world," laughed Mavis, "and I suppose they talk dialect. There's a north-country story about a boggart—a creature something like a brownie—that lived at a farm, and was such a bother that the people thought they'd remove to get rid of him. They put all their furniture on a cart, and started out. They met a neighbour, who said to them: 'So thee's flittin'!' and the boggart popped its ugly little head out of the churn and said: 'Aye, we's flittin'!'.

"The people were so disgusted to find that it intended to go with them to new quarters that they turned back to their old farm and decided to put up with the nuisance."

"Ayah used to tell us Indian fairy tales," said Mamie, "but they were about princes and devas and lovely ladies." [151]

"There are fairy tales all over the world," said Miss Pollard, "and if we go on telling them we shall never stop. It's time for preparation now. You little people must run away, and the others must fetch their books. Mavis and Merle must come some time to have tea with us again."

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CHAPTER XII

Pixie-led

Next morning Merle got out of bed on the wrong side. She did it deliberately and with intention. It was a rather awkward business to achieve, too, for the beds were placed close together with only a few inches between them, and to make her left-handed exit she was obliged to scramble over the recumbent form of Mavis, who protested sleepily.

"Don't care! Bags me first innings at the hot water," blustered Merle, bouncing down with a plump on to the rush mat in front of the wash-hand stand.

"Don't care came to a bad end," quoted a dormouse voice among the blankets.

"Right-o! I'm in for it."

After such a shameless tempting of fate it was not to be wondered at that matters immediately turned in the direction of bad luck.

Merle poured out a liberal half of the hot water which Jessop had brought, then seized up the toilet jug to add some cold. But either her hand was wet or she was careless, or some unseen imp actually intervened; anyhow, the handle slipped from her grasp, down fell the jug, breaking its [153] spout, and the contents spread themselves over the floor.

Anybody who has ever upset a bedroom jug must have been astonished at the enormous volume of water it contains. It seemed to Merle as if the bath had suddenly emptied itself. Streams and trickles were running everywhere, and the rush mat was a swamp. She stood staring at it in utter consternation.

"Mop it up, you Judkins!" shrieked Mavis, now thoroughly awakened. "Why can't you mop it up? Goody, what a mess!"

Mavis put one foot out of bed into the wet pool, and drew it back like a cat. She reached for her bedroom slippers, pulled them on, then set to work with a sponge to try and remedy the damage. For what seemed about five minutes the girls were mopping and dabbing, getting the bottoms of their nightdresses soaked in the process, and having to scramble under the beds to follow some of the streams. Jessop, hearing the commotion, came in and scolded.

"The new toilet jug! Whatever were you doing? What will your aunt say, I wonder? Girls are as careless as boys it seems to me! I used to make Master Cyril wash in the bathroom. We shall have to buy you enamel-ware if you break the china. Rivet it, did you say? No one could rivet these bits! Besides which, the old man who used to come round riveting things has never turned up since the war. The jug's done for and that's the long and short of it. There, get on with your dressing, or you'll be late for breakfast. I'll bring you some more water in a can. I suppose girls [154] will be girls, and the thing's done now, and past praying for, so there's an end of it."

It might be the end of the water jug, but unfortunately it was not the end of Merle's ill-luck. She must have been in a particularly awkward and maladroit mood, for at breakfast-time she actually managed to upset her cup of tea.

"Hello! What are we doing here?" asked Uncle David, peering round his newspaper at the puddle on the clean tablecloth.

"I don't know. I think the pixies nudged me. I'm fearfully sorry," apologized Merle, thanking her stars privately that Jessop was not in the dining-room, and hoping to escape to school before that already offended domestic deity came to clear away and discovered the tell-tale evidence.

"Ah yes! Put it all on to the pixies; they've broad shoulders," twinkled Uncle David, as he helped himself to more bacon.

"It's like the Mad Hatter's tea-party," grunted Mavis, moving farther down the table to avoid the wet patch, which had spread in her direction.

Certainly Merle seemed pixie-led, for everything went wrong. When she put on her boots she broke her boot-lace, and had to piece it with a big knot which ran into her instep and hurt her. She struggled into her coat, slammed on her hat, and tore out after Mavis, who had already started; but when she was half-way along the High Street she discovered that she had forgotten [155] one of her books and had to run back for it. It was in the summer-house, at the bottom of the garden, where she had left it the day before, and as she scurried up the steps she stumbled and fell, and grazed her knee. She picked herself up, looked ruefully at the injured limb, seized her book, and rushed away, limping slightly on one leg, and grousing hard. She was late for school, though, in spite of her best efforts, and only slipped into the big classroom just when Miss Pollard was closing the register.

"Where have you been, Merle?" inquired Miss Pollard in the most scholastic manner she knew how to adopt.

"I forgot my history and went back for it—I'm very sorry," gasped Merle, much out of breath with running.

Opal smiled, and counted over the books which she held on her lap with the air of one who is thinking to herself: "Other people don't forget their things!" Merle, by this time thoroughly cross, frowned at her darkly. There was something so aggravatingly smug about Opal; all her peccadilloes were well hidden, and never came under public and official notice. She took advantage of her position, too; for, as the girls filed out of the room, she stroked Miss Pollard's arm caressingly as she passed, a token of affection which Merle, who admired the head mistress after yesterday's tea-party, would have loved to bestow but did not dare.

The pixies would not let Merle alone that morning. They jerked her pen, so that she made blots [156] on her exercise, they whisked dates out of her memory, and put wrong figures into her sums. When it came to literature lesson they must have deliberately absconded with her copy of *Julius Cæsar*. She hunted for it in vain.

"I *know* I left it in my desk yesterday," she assured Miss Fanny, who was waiting to take the class and chafing at the delay.

"You ought to have your books ready. Be quick and look again. It's probably underneath something else," urged the mistress impatiently.

Merle seized a top layer of textbooks and essay paper and dumped them down on the floor, the more readily to burrow deeper into the rather mixed and miscellaneous collection in her desk.

"Merle Ramsay! Really, you forget yourself," chided Miss Fanny. "Pick those things up and put them back. A more disgracefully untidy performance I never saw. I won't have that litter on the floor. Is your *Julius Cæsar* there, or is it not?"

Apparently it was not, for Merle turned over her heap of confusion in vain; and in her agitation let the lid of the desk fall with an awful slam that echoed through the room. She sat up scarlet in the face.

"That will do!" said Miss Fanny icily. "You must look on with Mavis if you can't find your own."

"Please, Miss Fanny, I saw a *Julius Cæsar* in the pound this morning," volunteered Opal demurely. "I don't know whose it is."

The mistress turned to the lost-property basket, stooped down, drew out the missing book, and [157] handed it reproachfully to Merle.

"If you kept your desk in better order you wouldn't lose your things. See how you've delayed the whole form! You must bring a penny for the missionary box this afternoon."

Merle sat through the lesson with a face like thunder. She was absolutely certain that she had left the book inside her desk, and she strongly suspected Opal of having deliberately taken it out and placed it in the pound.

"Just like one of her disgusting tricks. She'd do anything mean. I'll have something to say to her after school," she mused gloomily.

She tackled Opal in the cloakroom when the latter was tying her shoe-laces.

"Look here, you blighter," she began, "what do you mean by cribbing my books and sticking them into the pound? It's the absolute limit."

Opal tied an elegant bow, and put out a foot to admire the result.

"I've never seen your books, my good girl," she yawned. "What are you setting on me for?"

"You have! You took it out of my desk and put it in the pound on purpose. I know you did!"

"I didn't!"

"What a whopper!"

"Look here, just stop talking!"

"I shan't! I'll say what I think. We used to play 'rags' at Whinburn High, but when one girl [158]
started that rag of hiding books we all 'booed' her out of our secret society as a sneak."

"How clever of you!" sneered Opal. "What you did at your precious high school is nothing to me, I'm sure."

"Well, my *Julius Cæsar* is at any rate. You took it away, and it's you who've got to put the penny in the missionary box for it."

"Don't count on me to pay your fines for you; I'm always stony broke," laughed Opal, as she put on her coat.

"Opal Earnshaw, I *shan't* pay that penny when it's your business."

"Dear, dear! What tempers we get ourselves into!

"'Little children should not let
Their angry passions rise!
Their little hands were never made
To scratch each other's eyes!'"

Opal spoke airily as she arranged her hat.

"It'll come to scratching in another moment!" exploded Merle. "You *know* it's all your fault."

"Merle, *darling*! *Don't!*" remonstrated Mavis, seizing her sister's arm and whispering "It's no use and it only makes Opal all the nastier. I've put the penny in the box for you already. I told Miss Fanny, and she said it was all right. It's a shame, I know, but we can't do anything."

"I'd like to spifflicate that girl," fumed Merle, looking after Opal, who was walking away [159]
giggling.

Poor Merle took life hardly. She went home still reviling Fate. Directly lunch was over she seized her writing-pad and scribbled the following letter as fast as her pen would go.

"Un-dear Opal,

"I think you're the horridest, meanest girl I have ever met in my life, and that's saying something. You think yourself very clever and pretty, and all the rest of it, but you're not. You may get Miss Pollard to shut her eyes to what you do, but some day she'll find you out and then there'll be squalls, and I for one shall dance for joy. If you want to know what I think about you, I call you a proud popinjay; it's the best name to suit you! I wish you were not at this school or else that I hadn't come to it!

"With the reverse of love,
"Yours unaffectionately,
"MERLE RAMSAY."

"There! That's done me good!" she declared, handing the letter to her sister.

Mavis read the effusion quite calmly, folded it, and placed it in the envelope addressed to Miss O. Earnshaw.

"Shall we put it in our usual post office?" she asked, then dropped it into the fire.

She understood Merle, who loved to relieve her feelings by writing violent letters, which fortunately never reached the people to whom they were directed. It was merely a form of letting [160]
off steam, and did nobody any harm. Mavis always took care, though, to make sure that the epistles were safely consigned to the flames. She had pulled Merle out of many scrapes, and knew just how to manage her hot-tempered sister.

"Opal's simply not worth thinking about," she consoled. "Let's forget this business. Uncle David says he's going to pay a visit at a farm on the moor this afternoon, and if we'll scurry home quick from school at four, he'll wait for us and take us with him."

"Oh, Jubilate!" rejoiced Merle, recovering her good spirits. "What fun! I was just pining for a jaunt in the car. Go? I should think we will, rather! We'll fly the very second Mademoiselle lets us off. Thank goodness, it will be something decent to think about all the afternoon. Opal Earnshaw may go to Hong-Kong if she likes. I don't care about her and her meannesses. We're wangling a drive with Uncle David. Cock-a-doodle-do!"

Merle got through her music lesson with moderate success, and did her drawing with tolerable

correctness, so, except for a lost button and breaking the hinge off her pencil-box, she had no more conspicuous mishaps. She nearly undid herself by catching up her drawing-board and rising to go the moment the clock began to strike four, which caused a glare from Mademoiselle, who added:

"Sit down till I dismiss the class. If you go too soon I shall make you stay behind all the others and wait."

"HERE WE ARE AT CROSS NUMBER TWO"

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Much terrified lest the teacher should keep her threat, Merle popped back into her place, and filed out in orderly fashion behind Maude Carey, fuming that the latter's movements were so dilatory and slow. She and Mavis hurried home almost at a run. [161]

After all they need not have been in such fearful haste, for they found Uncle David and Tom busy in the yard putting the spare wheel on the car.

"Just had a puncture," explained Dr. Tremayne. "A nasty bit of broken glass in the High Street. Fortunately I was almost home. No, Tom, I haven't time to stay now while you mend it. I must get off to see old Mr. Tracy at once. We must just trust the spare wheel won't puncture, that's all. People ought to be prosecuted for leaving broken glass about to cut tyres. It's a dastardly trick to play on motorists. If I were a magistrate I'd fine them for it. The amount of time I waste over punctures is perfectly disgusting."

The spare wheel was put on at last, in place of the one with the punctured tyre, and Uncle David and Mavis and Merle got into the car, and started off on to the moors. It had been quite clear in Durracombe, though not sunny, but directly they were up amongst the peat and heather great white clouds came rolling across the road, and in a few moments they were in the thickness of a white Devonshire mist. It was possible to see only for about a space of ten feet all round them. The doctor drove slowly, sounding his horn to warn anybody who might be approaching either in front or from behind.

"I didn't think we should have caught a mist to-day," he commented. "I'd have started earlier if I'd known it was going to be like this. Curious how these queer fogs come on. I suppose it's our nearness to the sea. It's a regular winding-sheet. No use turning on the lamps, for they don't help. What's that! G-r-r-r! Great Scott! I believe we've got another puncture!" [162]

The unmistakable jarring sensation that betrays mishap to a tyre brought Dr. Tremayne to a sudden standstill. He got out to inspect.

"Yes, it is! And the spare wheel, too! Of all the hard luck. I shall have to set to work and mend it. And here in the midst of all the fog. It might have kept up till we'd reached the farm. This is the second puncture this afternoon."

"I'm afraid I'm the Jonah," said Merle. "I've had a pixie day ever since I got up this morning. Every single thing has gone wrong. I believe in bad luck, especially if you start badly. You'd better throw me overboard."

"We must get started again before we can throw anybody overboard."

"Can we help you, Uncle?" asked Mavis.

"No, dear, not just at present. It's a question of finding the puncture. Ah! Here it is! And, would you believe it? another bit of broken glass! Some wretched tourist has been picnicking up here, I suppose, and smashed a ginger-beer bottle. Well, now I've found the spot, I can get to work."

[163] It was rather cold standing in the midst of the fog watching Uncle David. The girls began to walk up and down the road instead while they waited for him. They could see a patch of heather on either hand, and occasionally, looming through the mist, the dark body of a mountain pony or a bullock. Quite close to them, on the top of a small mound, was a little old, old worn cross, and they naturally stepped aside to look at it. Perhaps it marked some traveller's grave, or had been part of a shrine in long-ago times. Standing by its shaft they could make out through the fog another cross only a short distance away. It seemed a pity not to inspect this also. It was a far finer one than the first, and they walked all round it; then because they thought they spied a cromlech on the top of another mound they set off to inspect that too. It was not a cromlech after all, only a pile of boulders, so they turned back again.

"Here we are at cross number two," said Merle.

"Ye-e-s," agreed Mavis doubtfully. "It seems to have gone rather smaller, though. I don't remember that clump of ferns at the bottom."

"Well, there's the first cross at any rate. Come along."

But when they reached what they supposed to be the first cross they were more doubtful still. It was quite unfamiliar. Moreover, there was no road within sight of it.

"We—we've come wrong!" faltered Merle.

"There must be several of these crosses."

"Let's go back to that one over there, then perhaps we shall find our first one."

[164] But meanwhile the treacherous mist was rolling up thicker and thicker. The girls hurried back as fast as they could, but this time they missed the cross altogether. There is nothing so easy as to get lost in a fog on the moors. Thoroughly frightened, they called to Uncle David, but they could hear nothing in reply. They wandered on, hoping he would sound the hooter and so give them some clue to his whereabouts, but everything was deadly still. It seemed as if a great white wall had arisen and shut them up in some elfin castle on the moor.

"We're pixie-led. That's just all about it," said Merle. "I told you it was an unlucky day."

"Well, look here, we mustn't go too far! If we walk on like this we may be going straight away from the road, and might tramp miles or get into a bog. We'd better stay where we are and shout every now and then, and perhaps Uncle David will find us."

Two very forlorn girls, feeling extremely chilly and cold in the clammy fog, squatted down on the heather and took it in turns to call "Coo-e-ee!"

"What are we to do if we have to stop here all night?" asked Merle, nearly crying.

"I don't know!"

"How long do these mists last?"

"Oh, days and days sometimes I suppose!"

"Should we be dead before morning?"

"Oh, I hope not! Shout again!"

They both called together, but there was no response.

[165] "I'm going to count a hundred, and if we hear nothing by then I shall walk on somewhere. It's so bitterly cold sitting still," said Mavis, who was shivering.

She counted aloud, and at the end they gave a frantic shout. Not even a bird rustled in reply. "Well here goes, there's nothing for it but a plunge," said Mavis. "I've not the glimmer of an idea which way to take."

"I shall follow my nose," said Merle, setting off.

"Don't go too fast or you'll lose me. Let me take hold of your arm. We never came this way, I'm sure. We certainly didn't pass a little stream."

"Any way is better than no way," said Merle desperately. "Hello! why there's the road!"

The relief at finding themselves back upon the track of civilization was intense. They ran joyfully along, and in a few moments came upon Uncle David, just screwing on his last nuts and whistling to himself quite unconcernedly.

"Where have you two been?" he asked.

"Where!" answered Merle with dramatic unction. "Where? Why, getting lost like the babes in the wood! We thought we were going to perish upon the moors and never see home again! We wandered on for *hours*. Didn't you hear us shouting?"

"Exactly twenty-five minutes," corrected Dr. Tremayne, consulting his watch. "No, I never heard you shout. I should have hooted if I had. I wondered where you were. Better not run off too far another time. Well, I've mended this tyre, and been remarkably quick over it too, I think. I'm [166] rather proud of myself. It's a record."

Feeling a little small, the girls got into the car. It was humiliating that Uncle David did not seem to realize their terrific adventure, and was far more concerned over the tyre than over their possible loss and death from exposure and starvation.

"It's all the fault of the Devonshire pixies," whispered Mavis.

And Merle nodded emphatically.

"Rather! I consider we were absolutely and entirely pixie-led. I can almost hear the little wretches laughing about it over there. I'll do for them if I catch them! It's been a pixie day."

"Then for goodness sake do get out of bed to-morrow on the right side," implored Mavis.

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CHAPTER XIII

Blackthorn Bower

As a direct consequence of sitting on the damp moor in the mist Mavis caught one of her bad bronchial colds and was put to bed and cosseted by Aunt Nellie, and was fussed over by Jessop, and was visited by Uncle David, and had flowers sent her by Tom, and for a few days was the centre of the entire household. She was such a dear gentle little patient, and her blue eyes and dull-gold hair always looked so effective against the background of a pillow, that she invariably received much petting and spoiling when she was ill. Merle, who went through some stormy scenes when left to her own devices at school, declared that Mavis was "a lucker", and that it paid to be an invalid. She did her share of the spoiling, however; for though she might sometimes affect to be jealous, no one was more thoroughly devoted to her sister than herself. It was characteristic of Merle that she would not go to Chagmouth alone.

"I'll wait till Mavis is better and then we'll go together, thanks, Uncle David," she said decidedly, in response to all tempting offers of a run in the car.

[168] Mavis pulled round much faster at Durracombe than she would have done at Whinburn, and, though several weeks saw the doctor set off alone for Chagmouth, one Saturday arrived when he started with a pale and a rosy face beside him, and two wagging tongues keeping up an excited chatteration. The girls felt as if they had been away from the village for years. The short time of their absence had made changes, for the red pyrus japonica was in blossom on some of the houses, and daffodils and wallflowers were blooming instead of snowdrops and crocuses in the cottage gardens. It was a glorious heavenly day, one of those blue March days that are linked in our memories with young lambs and violets. They had caught the wind coming across the moor, but the Cove of Chagmouth was sheltered from it, and was calm and warm as summer.

"Just the very weather for Mavis to be out-of-doors," said Dr. Tremayne. "If Bevis can spare the time we'll ask him to take you for a walk. You ought to go and see Pixies' Cave—that's the place I was telling you about the other day, where the Antiquarian Society excavated and found so many prehistoric weapons. Bevis was there helping them. He's got one or two of the things, I believe. He must show them to you. It's only about a mile and a half to the cave if you go along the cliffs. You can manage that, Mavis?"

"Rather. I'm not a scrap ill now, and ready for anything."

[169] Bevis had completely forgiven the girls for deserting him on the former occasion. Moreover, he had kept his promise, and had made them a miniature grindstone upon which to sharpen their penknives. It turned with a handle, and was quite a neat little piece of workmanship. They

welcomed it with much admiration.

"It's absolutely dinky! How could you ever manage to do it?" they asked.

"Oh, it was quite easy!" replied Bevis airily, looking gratified all the same.

He agreed at once to escort them to the cave, and directly lunch was over they started forth. This time they went in the opposite direction to the sanatorium. They climbed above the village, and struck a footpath among woods that overhung the cliffs. On this sunny March day it was like a peep of fairyland. The trees were still bare, but between the network of branches showed the brilliant blue-green of the sea below; an aspect of the scene not possible in leafy summer. The ground was spangled with little tufts of primroses, peeping from among the grass and dead leaves, as the pre-Raphaelite artists so loved to paint them in their masterpieces. Mosses, lichens, and hardy Polypody ferns grew thickly on the trees, so that grey and green were mingled with the tones of brown and gold into one soft harmony of rich colour. The air was soft, and yet had an invigorating sparkle of spring in it. Everything seemed to hold the thrill of awakening life, and the magnetic atmosphere was that of an old-time folk-tale when the world was young and all [170] its objects were sources of wonder and worship.

The girls caught the spirit of the place and ran about like dryads in a rapture of delight, picking flowers, gazing up into the tracery of the bare branches, or peeping over edges of cliff at the waves dashing below. They were so enthralled with the wood that it was difficult to drag them any farther. Yet it was finer still when they had left the trees and walked out to the open headland. This was the grandest side of Chagmouth, and the view of steep jagged rocks and wide waters was sublime. There is a spiritual exaltation in being on the heights, else why have the greatest souls ever born ascended into mountains for their periods of meditation and transfiguration?

Bevis was a most satisfactory person to act guide, for he appreciated everything so much himself. He invariably stopped at exactly the right places and said, "There!" The boy was a keen naturalist, and was always watching the birds, poking about for nests, picking up snail shells, or making a dash after some insect specimen that he wanted. His pockets were generally full of miscellaneous objects, and he had a growing collection put by in boxes inside the tool-shed. He had been much with Mr. Barnes, the local antiquary, and had acquired a smattering of archæological lore, enough to make him take a wild interest in the excavations which were carried on by a learned society from Port Sennen. He had himself helped to dig and to sift the gravel, and had been lucky enough to light upon quite a good find. The best of his discoveries had [171] been sent to the County Institute, but a few objects had been private treasure trove, and lived in the museum of his pockets.

The point to which he was taking the girls was a little grassy plateau that jutted out from the sloping cliff. Nature must have designed it specially for her early children, as it was sheltered from the prevailing winds and faced the sun. Moreover, it was the outer courtyard of a large cave which shelved into the hill-side. Many thousands of years ago successive generations of the old prehistoric race, who once inhabited these islands, had lived there, and had hunted the mammoth and elk. No one would have known anything about them had they not left behind them their rude weapons and the bones that remained over from their feasts.

It was from these relics, buried under yards of gravel, that antiquarians had pieced together some idea of the life in those ancient times.

The cave was dark, and, so the girls declared, decidedly "spooky", but Bevis had brought a piece of candle and a box of matches; so they were able to explore its recesses. There was really not much to see except rugged bits of rock, and heaps of gravel, over which they stumbled in the dim flicker of their solitary candle. They were both extremely relieved when they stepped outside again into the sunshine.

"Ugh! Shouldn't have liked that for a home, thank you!" declared Merle. "I'd have lived outside [172] if I'd been a prehistoric woman."

"How about wild beasts catching you?" asked Bevis. "You'd have been glad to fence yourself safely into the cave at night."

He was turning out the miscellaneous collection in his pockets, and now proudly produced the specimens he had found in the cave—some flint arrow-heads, a skin-scraper, and two bone needles.

"I often wish they could talk," he said, "and tell me who owned them, and what animals they killed, and what hides they scraped and sewed together into clothes. They must have seemed such treasures to the people who first made them. Mr. Barnes is going to dig again here this summer. Perhaps we shall find something more. Last June I helped him to open a mound in the field over there."

"Did you find arrow-heads and bone needles?"

"No, it belonged to the Bronze Age, and a chief was buried there. His wife was lying by his side. The skeletons were quite perfect, and their hands were clasped together. She had a little baby in her other arm. There was a necklace round her throat, and a torque on his head. They must have been grand people when they were alive. I'll show you the mound if you like to come."

Of course the girls wanted to come, and they scrambled up a steep place on to a yet more beautiful part of the headland. The tumulus stood in the midst of a rough field, like the green grassy hillock of a fairy legend. Below, with a hedge between, lay a tiny quarry, where blackthorn [173] was breaking into blossom, and ivy trailed over the remains of an old wall. This seemed a suitable spot to sit down and eat the slices of home-baked cake that Mrs. Penruddock had sent with them. They settled themselves happily for their picnic. From the vantage-point of the wall they could see spread out before them the whole grand panorama of the Bay of Chagmouth. Away on the farther side of the harbour lay The Warren, half-hidden in woods, and higher up gleamed the slated roof and many windows of the Sanatorium.

"We're monarchs of all we survey here," laughed Merle.

"I should think this is No Man's Land on the top of the cliffs," said Mavis.

"As a matter of fact it's part of the estate that goes with The Warren," said Bevis. "Mr. Barnes had to get permission before he might excavate in the mound. And an absurd fuss they made about it, too, between Mr. Glyn Williams and the agent. They said at first he would have to write to General Talland in the West Indies."

"It seems funny to live in the West Indies when you've got all this beautiful place belonging to you here."

"Ah, I only wish it were mine! You bet I wouldn't be an absentee landlord," broke out Bevis bitterly. "It seems to me the limit that people should own things and care nothing about them. The old General hasn't been at Chagmouth for fifteen years. I don't suppose he remembers [174] there's such a beauty spot as this where we're sitting now, even if he ever saw it. He's turned the property over to the Glyn Williams, and all the value *they'd* put on this scrap of hill-side would be its worth for the shooting. It's hard that things should go so unequally. There's a lot of injustice in this world. The people who care for the things ought to own them."

"Don't you think in a sense they do?" Mavis spoke slowly and hesitatingly. "What I mean is that all beautiful things belong in a way to the people who love them: old castles, and pictures, and landscapes, and everything of that sort. If you appreciate them they're yours, and nothing can ever take them away from you. This little quarry, and the sloe blossom, and the primroses, and the view over the water, are ours. They can't belong to people who've never seen them. I'm going to call it 'Blackthorn Bower', and take possession. I feel as if we'd a right to it."

"Cheerio! Here are your title deeds, 'Lady of the Bower'!" laughed Bevis, peeling a piece of bark off a tree and handing it to her as if it had been a manuscript, "if there's any dispute with the old General we'll go to law about it, and prove that we're the lineal descendants of the mound dwellers or the cave folk, and have a prior claim on the property."

"The land for the people," quoted Merle. "This patch of land certainly. The Lady of the Bower has proved it's ours. She's a regular Portia at arguing, and there isn't a Shylock who could stand [175] against her."

"It's our joint estate then, and belongs to us three. We'll call ourselves The Triumvirate!" proclaimed Mavis. "Have you a penny in your pocket, Bevis? Merle, give me one too! Now, we'll bury these three pennies in the ground, like the Romans used to do before they began a building, and that'll mark the spot ours for ever more."

"I wish we *had* a building here," said Merle, producing her penny.

"Oh, so do I! A sort of ancient British hut, made of boughs and turf. Wouldn't it be priceless? We could almost imagine ourselves mound dwellers, and feel as if we were living in the Bronze Age."

"Would you really like it?" asked Bevis quickly.

"Rather!"

"Well, we'll see what can be done. No, I can't exactly promise anything; but look here! if you care to come here again next Saturday afternoon perhaps I might have a surprise ready for you. No, I shan't tell you anything about it, or it wouldn't be a surprise. You must wait and see!"

"Do whisper just a teeny-weeny hint," begged Mavis coaxingly, but Bevis was adamant.

"I don't know myself yet! Wait till next Saturday. Give me your pennies, and I'll dig a hole. Here's a foundation at any rate. Good luck to Blackthorn Bower."

Having solemnly interred the three coins, the young people regretfully remembered the time, [176] and turned away from the lovely spot to go back to Chagmouth. For the sake of variety they went by another path, which led over the top of the headland and down on to an inland road. In the deep sheltered green lane early violets were blooming, and presently, on the banks of a little pond, they spied the first kingcups of the year. They were growing in a rather swampy place, and it would have been prudent of the girls to have let Bevis gather them for them; instead of which they both insisted upon venturing on to some very spongy ground, with the result that Mavis made a false step and plunged suddenly, well over her knees, into water. She splashed out again immediately, but the damage was done. Here was a pretty business—Mavis, newly recovered from a bad attack of bronchitis, was wet through and shivering already.

"Oh, she'll get cold!" cried Merle. "What *are* we to do?"

"I feel like a dr-r-r-owned r-r-r-at!" said Mavis through her chattering teeth.

"Mrs. Jarvis lives close by. She'd dry her things," suggested Bevis.

"Oh, do let us go there at once then!"

Where Mavis's health was concerned, Merle, through sad experience, was an anxious little mother. The Triumvirate hurried off post-haste in the direction of a white-washed cottage whose chimney peeped above the hedge on the opposite side of the road.

[177] Mrs. Jarvis was a short, wizened, elderly widow woman, who had suffered badly in the battle of life and had come off with many scars. Fourteen years ago she had been the village nurse, and had been sent for on that tragic evening when poor Mrs. Hunter, helpless and speechless, lay gasping with fluttering breath on the sofa in the parlour of the King's Arms. It was Mrs. Jarvis who had performed the last offices, who had supplied what information she could to the doctor and the coroner, and had indeed been one of the principal witnesses at the inquest. It is said that misfortunes never come singly, and on the day when all Chagmouth had flocked to the churchyard to watch the stranger's funeral, Mrs. Jarvis had been overwhelmed with a trouble of her own. Her one child, a wilful headstrong lad of thirteen, had run away, and had taken with him the few savings that she had kept stored inside an old tea-pot in the cupboard. All search for him had been in vain, and it was generally supposed in the neighbourhood that he had walked to Port Sennen and gone to sea as a cabin boy in one of the many vessels that lay in the busy harbour. Certainly from that day to this his mother had had no further news of him. This grief had been the bitter culmination of many black years, and it had preyed on the poor woman's mind to such an extent that she was often strange in her manner, and indeed for a time had been an inmate of the County Asylum. She was perfectly harmless, and though she could no longer be trusted as a nurse, she fulfilled the duties of an extra postwoman and delivered letters at outlying farms. She [178] had one unreasoning obsession. She was certain that Jerry, her boy, might come back at any moment. A little table in her kitchen was always set out ready for him, with clean cloth, tea-pot, and knife and fork. Every evening at dusk she lighted a candle, and placed it in a window to guide him home by the short cut he had been wont to take over the cliffs from the village. She was brisk and cheerful, and would talk eagerly of the lad whom she daily expected, oblivious of the fact that nearly fifteen years must have changed him almost out of recognition. People humoured her on this point, and treated her with that kindly consideration which is often meted out in country places to those who are labelled "daft".

Amongst her other work Mrs. Jarvis went weekly to scrub floors at Grimbal's Farm, so Bevis knew her well, and had no hesitation in taking Mavis to be dried at her fire. The door of the small fuchsia-covered cottage was open, and the postwoman, still in her uniform, was newly returned from her upland tramp, and was blowing sticks into a blaze under her kettle. She took the advent of a drenched visitor with the utmost calm.

"Well, Bevis! Who'd have thought of seeing you. The young lady wet! Yes, yes! Nasty thing to be wet! Very nice fire! The kettle's just on the boil! Take her things off? Yes, missy. Come with me and I'll take wet clothes off. Very dangerous to sit in wet clothes."

[179] Poor Mrs. Jarvis might be half-crazy, but she collected her scattered wits sufficiently to usher Mavis into her tiny bedroom, to lend her some dry garments, and to make her a steaming cup of hot tea.

"I can't give her *his* place," she murmured, glancing in doubt at the table set ready for Jerry, and beginning to twist her hands in the nervous fashion that accompanied any distress in her mind.

"No, no! She's better here by the fire," said Bevis soothingly. "I'll go out and find you some fresh wood, and then you can make a regular blazer. Don't you begin to worry! I know you're glad to do anything for Dr. Tremayne's niece, aren't you?"

"Yes, indeed! A nice gentleman—Dr. Tremayne. Very kind always when my head's bad. A very nice gentleman and all!"

By the aid of a perfect bonfire of sticks and brushwood, which Bevis foraged out of the fields, Mavis's clothes were dried at last, and the little party were able to start off on their way back to Chagmouth. They hurried along, being afraid lest Uncle David should have returned from the Sanatorium and be waiting to set off in the car for Durracombe. As they clattered down the steep steps that led from the footpath into the village, they almost ran into Gwen and Babbie Williams, who, looking charming in white serge coats and little ermine caps, were going to post letters in the pillar-box. Gwen stood still and stared in utter amazement, first at Mavis's mud-stained garments and then at Bevis. The latter raised his cap, but Gwen did not acknowledge the [180] courtesy, and remained gazing as if absolutely petrified, while the Triumvirate, conscious of intense disapproval, scurried past in the direction of the farm.

"Why do we *always* happen to meet the Glyn Williams just when we're not tidy. It really *is* too bad," groaned Mavis.

"There's fate about it I think. I've only to lose my hair ribbon, or forget my gloves, or dirty my boots, and Gwen turns up round the corner as neat as if she'd stepped out of a bandbox. It's most fearfully aggravating. I wish to goodness they'd stay at The Warren instead of acting fashion

plates in the village. I'm thoroughly cross," grunted Merle.

Bevis said nothing, though he might have added that it was not pleasant to have your civility acknowledged only with a stare. There was a curious stubborn look on the lad's dark face, such as the girls had noticed there on that first afternoon when they had been obliged to put off their appointment with him in the tool-shed. He turned abruptly into the stackyard when they reached the farm, and though, afterwards, they hunted about for him to say good-bye, they could not find him anywhere.

CHAPTER XIV

[181]

Nicky Nan Night

Immediately after the lesson, on the next French day, Gwen Williams sauntered in the direction of the Ramsays.

"Do you go out for walks with that Penruddock boy from Grimbal's Farm?" she asked rather insolently.

"Do you mean Bevis Hunter?" Mavis's voice was iced politeness.

"Yes. I told Mother, and she *was* surprised! Does your uncle know?"

Merle was on the point of bursting out, "It's not your business!" but her more discreet sister gave her a hasty poke.

"It was Uncle David who sent us out with Bevis," answered Mavis with stately dignity. "He thinks very highly of him, and so do we. I've never met anybody who knows so much about natural history, or who can tell us more about excavations and prehistoric mounds and things. He was curator of the school museum when he was at Shelton College."

Gwen gazed at Mavis as if she were speaking an unknown language.

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"It's a matter of taste of course," she replied. "*I* shouldn't care to go about with the boy from the Penruddocks' Farm."

She walked away, leaving sad heart-burnings behind her. The Ramsays had been very simply brought up at home, and were accustomed to judge people merely by whether they liked them or not, and knew little of worldly standards. Bevis, with his jolly, merry ways, and his intense love of nature, seemed a far pleasanter companion than Gwen or her brother Tudor. Intellectually he was more than the equal of those who despised him, and his romantic story suggested many possibilities.

"Bevis might be *anybody*," ventured Mavis.

"I don't care who he is, he's our friend," fumed Merle stoutly.

"Rather, and we'll stick to him in spite of all the Glyn Williamses in the world. It really doesn't matter to us what Gwen thinks."

Fortunately for the Ramsays, Gwen only came to school twice a week, but to their sorrow Opal was there every day. Lately she had been growing more and more out of hand. She had begun to adopt a patronizing attitude towards Miss Pollard and Miss Fanny, called them "poor old dears", quizzed their clothes, their manners, and their methods of teaching, and voted them hopelessly slow and out of date. There is a certain phase in girls who are growing up at which they are fiercely critical of their elders. As a child Opal had immensely admired her two godmothers, and had been proud of their many accomplishments. Now, because she too had acquired a certain skill in music and painting, she rather looked down upon their talents. She thought her own superior, forgetting that though a well-taught girl may seem clever at sixteen, there is no guarantee that she will go on developing in the same ratio, and will therefore be a genius at the age of thirty-seven.

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The fact was that Opal ought long ago to have been sent away to a boarding-school, where she would have found her level among other girls of her own age, and have been thoroughly sat upon by elder ones. Her position of prime favourite at The Moorings was bad both for herself and for everybody else. The juniors, encouraged by her example, began to evade rules, and to do many things they had never dreamt of before. Miss Fanny, finding them unusually troublesome, puzzled over the reason. She decided there must be bad influence somewhere, but it never struck her to fix the blame upon Opal. She was always ready with an excuse where her god-daughter was concerned.

Among other subjects which Miss Fanny taught at The Moorings was the piano. She was a very good and correct musician, and had studied under an eminent master of her day. Perhaps her

fault as a teacher was that she concentrated too much on the technique to the exclusion of the artistic element. She would stop a pupil every few bars to correct errors in touch or the position of the hands, and was such a martinet over these details that the spirit of the piece was often entirely lost. Merle, who liked to dash away and get a general impression of a composition, [184] oblivious of a few wrong notes, chafed terribly under this severe régime.

"It knocks all the poetry out of the music," she complained. "I hardly know what tune I'm playing when Miss Fanny is watching my hands like a cat watching a mouse, and that abominable metronome is tick-tack-tick-tacking on the top of the piano! How I hate the beastly thing. I'd as soon recite Shakespeare to a metronome as play Chaminade. It would be just as sensible. Music, to my mind, is like reciting, you want to hurry up some phrases and to linger on others, not go pounding on like a pianola or a piece of clockwork! Tick-tack-tick-tack—Ugh! I hate it!"

Opal, who also suffered from the metronome, chimed in with her side of the grievance.

"My cousin learns from Mr. Jardine, the best teacher in Burchester, and she never uses one!"

"I don't see why we need. I wish somebody would break the wretched old thing, or lose it, or otherwise dispose of it. They'd have my blessing I'm sure."

The juniors, who had gathered round to listen, giggled at Merle's heroics. It was rather nice to hear elder girls grumbling.

"Why don't you do it yourself," piped Betty Marshall.

Merle, just for fun, seized the object of her invective from the top of the piano, and opening the window placed it outside upon the sill.

"It may stay there and tick-tack to the birds if it likes," she declared. "If I had my way it would [185] never come back again. Yes, I mean it."

The juniors laughed again as they ran from the room, and Merle, also laughing, lifted the unfortunate metronome inside and placed it back on the piano. She and Opal chased the smaller ones along the passage, and caught them, squealing with delight, in the cloakroom.

"You little pussies, I'll tickle you!" cried Merle, swinging Posie Andrews off her feet and tucking her under one arm, while she made a grab at Florrie Leach.

The children, wild with fun, danced about like so many imps.

"It's Nicky Nan Night to-night," twittered Betty as she jumped and pranced. "We're all Nicky Nans. Look at us!"

"Hooray! It's Nicky Nan Night," shouted the others.

"Heavens, so it is. I'd completely forgotten!" said Opal.

She stood for a moment as if thinking, then she suddenly ran back to the schoolroom. She was only gone a moment or two, but she returned to the cloakroom with a curious look of amusement on her face.

"What have you been up to?" asked Merle, eyeing her suspiciously.

"Ah! Wouldn't you just like to know?"

"You've been doing something!"

"Indeed! How clever we are all of a sudden. Are you clairvoyante may I ask?" [186]

"Not at all, but I know Opal Earnshaw. You're pluming yourself no end."

Opal broke into a fit of delighted giggling, but refused all explanations, and slamming on her hat rushed away home, leaving the juniors still dancing about the cloakroom like pixies and loudly proclaiming: "It's Nicky Nan Night. We're all Nicky Nans!"

"What on earth is Nicky Nan Night?" asked Merle rather crossly, but nobody troubled to answer, so she struggled into her coat and joined Mavis, who was waiting at the door, and forgot all about the matter directly.

Later on in the evening, however, she began to understand. Durracombe was a little old-world place, and had preserved many quaint and curious customs from ancient times. One of the most extraordinary of these was a kind of carnival held by the boys of the town at the beginning of the season of Lent. As soon as it was dusk they commenced to prowl about the streets wearing black paper masks and carrying turnip lanterns. They were supposed to represent imps of darkness, or perhaps will o' the wisps, and their chief sport was to ring door bells, or rat-tap with knockers, and then run away. Mavis and Merle, hearing repeated peals from the surgery bell, were amazed that Jessop did not answer it, till she explained it was merely a ruse of the Nicky Nans, and that nobody in Durracombe who knew their tricks would respond to such a summons. She offered [187] however to take the girls out for ten minutes to look at the fun; so they donned coats and scarves and issued into the dim High Street. It was a moonless night, which made things all the better for such a saturnalia. In the distance a cluster of lights began to dance about, and presently up ran half a dozen little urchins, disguised in masks and waving turnip lanterns pierced with holes for eyes and mouths, so that the candles shining through them gave them the appearance of

gruesome goblins. The children had indeed vied with one another as to which could produce the most horrible looking turnip head, and part of the sport was to hide in dark alleys and suddenly to exhibit the lanterns to unwary passers-by, to try to raise a scream. The small imps careered round and round, prancing and giving an occasional yell of "Nicky Nan". The girls laughed in much amusement, and Jessop, who had witnessed the custom from her youth up, felt in her pocket for some pennies, and threw them into the road to be scrambled for.

Presently came the noise of a tin-kettle band, and down the High Street marched a procession carrying "Jack o' Lent", a grotesque figure on the lines of a Guy Fawkes, stuffed with straw and wearing a mask and an old top hat. The Nicky Nans flew to join their fellows, showing their lanterns like the wise virgins in the parable, and the Guy was escorted by quite a crowd of leaping dancing will-o'-the-wisps, who added squeals and whistling to the din made on the old [188] tea-trays and pans. They crossed the bridge to a field on the farther side of the river, where a bonfire had been built. Upon this Jack o' Lent was carefully hoisted, and a match was put to the straw. The Ramsays, hurried indoors by Jessop lest Mavis should catch cold, watched the scene from Aunt Nellie's bedroom window, and had a fine view of the flames blazing up, and the Nicky Nans prancing round in a circle, waving their weird turnip lights.

On this one night in the year the town's children were veritable Devonshire pixies. By immemorial custom they were licensed to carry away brooms, pails, or any objects which people were so foolish as to leave unguarded outside their houses. These they pounced upon and bore off as booty, exhibiting them the next morning in the pound, whence they might be redeemed by their owners for a fee varying from a penny to sixpence, according to their value. As the proceeds went to their football club, the Nicky Nans were naturally anxious to pick up every trifle which they could possibly find lying about, and every house and garden in the town was visited for that purpose. The matron, who missed her scrubbing-brush or her bucket, knew what Pucks and Robin Goodfellows had been flitting round in the darkness, and made a visit to the pound to recover her lost property, paying the price with a good-natured remembrance of the fun of her own young days.

Mavis and Merle, on their way to school on the morning following the saturnalia, peeped into the pound, a walled enclosure intended for the detention of lost cows or strayed sheep, and saw [189] half a dozen of the boys, still wearing masks, guarding quite a collection of treasures and chaffing some of the owners over the gate. Evidently they had had a most successful evening, and the funds of their football club would be replenished.

"Little wretches. They're as light-fingered as elves," remarked Merle. "They've even taken the pots of geraniums off people's window-sills."

"I shall never forget them dancing in a mad circle round the bonfire," laughed Mavis, as the pair passed on.

When the pupils at The Moorings assembled that morning for call-over, Miss Fanny entered with a look upon her face which everybody at once mentally registered at stormy. Her "Good morning, girls!" was cold. She never noticed the vase full of flowers which the boarders had arranged upon her desk, and she took the names, as if she were reading a list of criminals, in a deep sad voice without an atom of her usual geniality. When this first preliminary was finished she turned to what was evidently the pressing business on her mind.

"Girls!" she began. "A very unpleasant thing has happened in the school. The metronome is missing from the piano. None of the boarders has interfered with it. Can any of you day girls tell what has become of it?"

A look of much astonishment passed round the assembled faces. On several it was even [190] mingled with relief. To get rid of the metronome did not seem an unmixed evil. Perhaps Miss Fanny noted the expression. She paused for a whole solemn minute, then spoke again in a yet sterner voice.

"I put every girl in this room on her honour to tell what she knows."

There was a stir among some of the younger children, a bending together of heads, and a faint whispering like the buzzing of bees, then Betty Marshall held up her hand.

"Please, Miss Fanny, there's a metronome just like ours in the pound. Posie and Florrie and I saw it as we came to school."

"In the pound!" Miss Fanny's voice quivered with amazed indignation.

"Yes, the Nicky Nans had taken it."

"But surely no boy would dare to venture into our schoolroom. It's outrageous! I shall have to complain to the schoolmaster if they go beyond bounds like this. To take it off the piano!"

Posie and Betty glanced doubtfully at one another as if uncertain whether to explain further. Then Posie held up a chubby hand.

"Please, Miss Fanny, it wasn't on the piano; it was outside on the window-sill."

"On the window-sill! Who put it there?" The teacher's voice had reached crescendo.

Posie wriggled and looked uncomfortably at Betty and then at Florrie, finally in a rather [191]

tremulous whisper she murmured:

"Merle Ramsay."

Merle stood up at once with flaming cheeks.

"I put the metronome outside the window for a minute, Miss Fanny, but I didn't leave it there. I put it back upon the piano."

Miss Fanny glared hard, first at Merle, and then with a kind of comprehensive sweeping glance over the whole school.

"Can any other girl volunteer any information?"

There was dead silence. Opal was rather ostentatiously sharpening the point of her pencil. The teacher's gaze came back to a focus on Merle.

"You had no business to interfere with the metronome at all. I certainly consider it your fault that it has been taken. In future I can't have you day girls staying in the schoolroom after four o'clock. You must leave directly you've put your books away. Go to your forms now, girls! We've wasted too much time already."

Merle stumped off, feeling extremely cross. She was absolutely certain that Opal, who had run back last thing into the schoolroom, must have put the metronome outside on the window-sill, knowing that the Nicky Nans would be sure to carry it off. At 'break' she taxed her with it. But Opal simply laughed, and went on eating biscuits.

"Don't set all the work of the Nicky Nans down to me," she declared. "It's a pity they didn't keep the metronome. Miss Fanny will trot down to the pound and pay her sixpence and get it [192] back, and it will be tick-tacking again on the piano as gaily as ever, unless some of those priceless kids have chanced to break it."

"But you put it outside for them?" persisted Merle.

"I? I never do naughty things!"

"Don't you? It strikes me you tell the biggest fibs of any girl I've ever yet come across. I call you the absolute limit," said indignant Merle as she flounced away.

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CHAPTER XV

The Squatters

On the next day but one after Nicky Nan Night, Mavis and Merle had returned from school, and were walking in the garden on the terraced path that overlooked the river. It was a vantage-point which gave them as good a view across the bridge and along the high road as any mediæval maidens might have had from a castle turret, and they gazed at all comers with interest not unmixed with curiosity. There were certainly no Sir Lancelots or Sir Percivales riding into the town clad in golden armour, and carrying silken banners, only modern motor-cars and bicycles, creaking country wagons and homely foot passengers. But presently there was a sound of hoofs, and a smart well-groomed little horse came trotting along from the south. Mavis put up her hand to shade her eyes from the sun, and took an inspection of the rider as he crossed the bridge. Something in the fair, rather delicate face seemed instantly familiar.

"I verily believe it's Tudor Williams," she said.

It was undoubtedly Tudor, and he was evidently coming to Bridge House. He rode round into the stable yard, called to Tom to take his horse, dismounted, and went to the surgery entrance. In [194] the course of a few minutes he came out again, walked briskly on to the terrace, and greeted the girls.

"Your aunt sent me to find you. She's asked me to stay for tea. I came to see Dr. Tremayne, but he's out at a case, so I'm going to wait till he comes back. I say! You've got a nice old garden here, haven't you? I've never been in it before. It's ripping overlooking the river."

Suddenly placed in the position of hostesses Mavis and Merle did the honours graciously. Tudor seemed in a very amiable frame of mind, and was inclined to make himself agreeable. He chatted about the neighbourhood, the weather, some theatres he had visited in town, told them one or two school episodes, and discussed the prospects of the new Durracombe golf club. Mavis, who had discovered his pleasanter side at The Warren, was soon talking quite eagerly, and even Merle, who had a deep prejudice against him, put in a remark now and then. Tea was quite a jovial affair. Aunt Nelly liked to be amused by young people, so they all made jokes and related adventures, and sat on enjoying the fun till the car returned and they heard Uncle David's

footstep in the hall. While the Doctor interviewed his patient the two girls ran out to the stable to look at "Armorelle", the lovely satin-coated little horse that snuggled a soft nose against Merle's shoulder, and ate sugar from Mavis's hand. They stood by in much approval of her beauty as Tom led her forth for her master to mount. [195]

"I'd change all the cars in the world for her, sir," said Tom, stroking the glossy neck caressingly. "You don't know what it's been to me to lose my horses. It was like losing children. It's been a pleasure to have her in the stable, sir. It's minded me of old times."

"She's a spoilt darling, and she ate three lumps of sugar," said Mavis. "What a glorious ride you'll have home. I love that road to Chagmouth."

"You must come and see us again at The Warren! And you too" (nodding to Merle). "Are you keen on tennis? So am I. We've a cinder court that we play on in spring. Just drop in some Saturday when you're over with your uncle. Mother and the girls will be pleased to see you, I'm sure. We're generally, some of us, about the place."

Tudor rode away, leaving a much more favourable impression behind him than the girls would have believed possible on their first encounter in the lane above Grimbal's Farm. That unpleasant episode was beginning to fade from their memories. Jim, the fox terrier, ran up to them now in friendly fashion if they chanced to meet him in Chagmouth, though Mavis's skirt, beautifully darned by Jessop, still retained traces of his teeth. It is no use keeping up ill-will against boy or animal, and the Ramsays were quite ready to let bygones be bygones. They even began to decide that they rather liked Tudor, though of course not nearly so much as Bevis. When they went to Grimbal's Farm as usual on Saturday they could not help pouring out to their friend an account of this reconciliation. [196]

"Tom let me climb on Armorelle's back in the stable. Oh, how I'd love to ride her!"

"There's a topping cinder court at The Warren. We're going to bring our rackets with us sometime. Mrs. Glyn Williams has sent a message to Aunt Nellie to say we must go there whenever we like and play tennis."

Bevis was sitting on a hurdle in the stackyard, untwisting a piece of rope while he listened. He bent his head down over his work. They could not see his face at all.

"You won't want to come walks with *me* now you've made friends at The Warren," he said in a low, strained voice. "I quite understand. I never thought you'd care to go about with a fellow like me. It wasn't to be expected. It's all right!"

When Bevis, in that strangled tone, said "it's all right", it was invariably a sign that matters were all wrong. The girls, aghast at their own lack of tact, hastened to set things straight, and to reassure him that they would not miss their walk with him that afternoon for worlds.

"You promised us a surprise at Blackthorn Bower!"

"We've been looking forward to it the whole week, and counting the days."

"It's really nothing worth taking you up there for." (Bevis's voice was still gloomy.) "If you'd rather go to The Warren, please go. It's all right." [197]

"Look here, don't be absurd," urged Merle. "We want to see the Bower again, and we're going there this afternoon. You can please yourself whether you come with us or not."

"But I don't think we *quite* remember the way," added Mavis artfully. "It would be so very tiresome if we were to lose ourselves."

Of course that settled it. Bevis was bound to offer himself as guide, and by the time they started he appeared to be in a smoother temper. He whistled quite cheerily as he slung a shooting-bag over his back. He gave the girls three guesses each as to its contents, but would not tell them whether they were right or wrong.

"You'll see when you get there," he replied, and went on whistling softly to himself.

By mutual but unacknowledged consent they walked by an upper way across the fields. It was a little longer, but it avoided all possibility of meeting the Glyn Williams anywhere in the village. To run up against them would have been most embarrassing. As it was, nobody mentioned even their names. The girls, having once "put their foot in it", were cautious, and avoided all reference to The Warren.

Fortunately their backs were turned in that direction, as they walked towards the headland.

When they reached Blackthorn Bower they found an immense surprise awaiting them. Bevis must have been very busy during the time which had intervened since their last visit. He had taken some of the stones from the old wall, and some sods and some branches, and had constructed a kind of beehive hut, such as must have been used by the primitive dwellers in these islands. [198]

"It's just the sort of thing they lived in in the Bronze Age," he explained. "I borrowed one of Mr. Barnes's books, *Antiquities of Devonshire*, and it gave a fancy picture of what some of the prehistoric villages probably looked like. The only bit I altered was the doorway. I made it big, so that we could see out of it; and of course they had low holes that they crawled through, and

blocked with a stone."

Mavis and Merle were delighted with the structure raised in their honour. They had been keen on history at Whinburn High School, and had studied the Stone and Bronze Ages under an interesting teacher, so that it was particularly fascinating to find what seemed as good as a real live specimen of a house of the period actually before their eyes. They went inside at once and took possession. There were some logs for seats, and a big stone for a table placed in the middle of the hut. While they were examining these, Bevis slung his shooting-bag carefully from his shoulder and began to unpack it. Then he produced what he evidently considered his masterpiece.

There was a small quarry near Chagmouth whence China clay was shipped. He had begged a big lump of this, kneaded it and moulded it into handleless cups, and had baked them in the oven [199] at the farm. They were, of course, roughly made, but they much resembled prehistoric pottery, even to the willow-withe markings which he had put on them. They were stained on the outside, one red, one blue, and one yellow.

"So that we shall each know our own," he explained, handing the blue to Mavis and the red to Merle.

It was undoubtedly an anachronism that Bevis had brought a thermos flask in his shooting-bag, and offered his friends tea in their home-baked cups, but they were not disposed to quarrel with such a mixture of ancient and modern. They sat on their log seats, eating cake and sipping the modern beverage in defiance of historic accuracy.

"I feel as if the Bronze Age people who were buried in the mound ought to rise up and come and turn us out and say it was their shanty," laughed Merle.

"What did they do with the skeletons that were found there?" asked Mavis suddenly.

"Took them to the County Museum," answered Bevis. "I didn't like the idea myself. I think it was hateful to put the poor things' bones in a glass case. They ought to have left them where they were buried, with their hands still clasped and the little baby in the woman's arm. They must have been fond of each other thousands of years ago."

"Perhaps he built her a hut like this and made her clay pottery," speculated Mavis.

"I've no doubt he did." [200]

"But she didn't drink tea out of it anyway," snorted Merle. "Don't be sentimental over the Bronze Age people, you two. I'd rather call the tumulus a pixie mound, and imagine the wee folk coming tumbling out of it some moonlight night, and dancing on the grass. Don't Chagmouth people tell any stories about pixies?"

"They wouldn't be Devon folk unless they did. Yes, there are heaps of pixie tales. They say an old man from Groves Cottage was once pixie-led on the moor. He wandered round and round in a circle, and couldn't find his way home till he turned his coat inside out, and that broke the spell. There was an old woman over by Tangoran who used to tell a wonderful tale about a fairy."

"Oh, what was that?"

"It's a weird sort of story. There was once a lad named Will Killigarth, who lived at Horndon, up on the moor. There was a witch in the village, and she told him that if he would go on Hallowe'en and dig inside one of the ancient stone circles that he would find treasure, only he must go at midnight, and go alone. He was rather frightened of the business, but he took his father's spade and went. It was heavy work digging, but at last he struck something, and drew out a bowl of rough pottery, all full of gold pieces. He was just picking this up when he heard a cry, and in the moonlight he saw a most lovely girl with streaming yellow hair stretching out her hands imploringly to him. She said she was the guardian of the gold, and begged him to bury it again [201] where it was in the circle. He said he would do so if she would marry him, and after thinking awhile she said yes. So he buried the treasure and took the girl home to the village and married her. She lived with him just a year, and then on the next Hallowe'en she vanished, and he never saw her again. He hunted for the stone circle where he had dug before, but he never could find the right one again. There are so many of them up on the moor. So he lost both the treasure and the girl."

"Did they actually *believe* these stories?" asked Mavis, knitting her brows.

"Oh yes, in the old days they believed them, just as they believed in witches and charms and all the rest of it. Mr. Barnes calls all the old tales folk-history. He says the pixies were the prehistoric Stone Age or Bronze Age people who lived on into historic times, and hid themselves in the mounds or caves or wild places on the moor. The stories of the pixies' habits and haunts read just like accounts of very primitive people. Bronze Age or Stone Age folk would be sure to come at night and steal things from the Celtic tribes who had settled in Devon, and they would bury their treasures inside their huts. The stone circles on the moor are the ruined walls of their huts."

"But surely the Stone Age folk didn't go living on till about the seventeenth century?" asked Mavis, still puzzled.

"No, but you know how people like to bring a story up to date. They often tell you a thing [202]

happened to themselves when you know it must have happened to their great-grandfather. The old Celtic accounts of the little men on the moor would keep being handed down, and each generation would fit the story with fresh names, and a few extra details."

"Miss Donald told us a lot about that at Whinburn High. She said the dragons of old folk-tales were probably prehistoric animals that had lingered on in lonely places—very likely pterodactyls."

"I dare say they were. To judge from the fossils that have been found the old monsters must have been pretty common in Devon. You should ask Mr. Barnes. He's great on all this kind of thing, always poking about and digging, and measuring hut circles and all the rest of it."

"It's awfully fascinating," said Mavis.

"Ye-es, but just a trifle spooky," admitted Merle. "Honestly I shouldn't like to spend a night up here camping out in this shanty. I'd be scared to death of the mound dwellers. What are we to do with our prehistoric cups, Bevis? Leave them here or take them back?"

It was decided to wash the cups in a pool of water close by, and leave them inside the hut to be ready for some future picnic. That domestic duty finished, the Triumvirate wended their way back in the direction of Chagmouth. This time they climbed by a pathway down the cliffs on to the beach, in order to go home along the shore. It was low tide, so they could walk on the firm sands [203] at the edge of the high-water mark. Little gentle waves were rippling in over the rocks, cormorants were diving for fish, and the inevitable seagulls were wheeling and screaming, or settling down in the pools to hunt for tit-bits. At the corner of the cove, built on the solid rock barely above the level of winter storms, stood the little old, old church of St. Gervan's, disused now, except for an annual service. Before the building of Chagmouth church in the eighteenth century it had served a wide district, and there were tales that its bell had often proved a signal for ships in a fog, and had warned them off the rocks. There were other and wilder stories, of smugglers who had hidden their contraband goods inside the pews, of the press-gang who had waylaid the fishermen as they returned from service and had carried them off to serve in His Majesty's navy, and of a wicked parson, foremost among a gang of wreckers, whose uneasy ghost still haunted the beach on moonlight nights.

Bevis, who knew all the legends of the village, poured out these tales for the girls' benefit, and of course they naturally wanted to take a look at the place. So they climbed the eighty-seven rough stone steps that led up from the shore, and scrambled over the wall into the little churchyard. It was a neglected spot, but all the more picturesque on that account. Long grass grew over the graves, and moss had almost obliterated the names on the fallen stones, the framework of the doorway had sunk at one end, and the tower had lost some of its coping in the [204] last gale. The great pieces lay strewn about the path. The windows looked cobwebby, but one of them was open, and, with some difficulty, Bevis hoisted the girls up to peep inside. The poor little church, flung aside now like a cast-off ecclesiastical garment, nevertheless showed signs of its former glories, when worshippers had given of their best to deck it forth. Its pre-reformation rood-screen, one of the very few to escape the commissioners' hatchets or Puritan whitewash, was carved with quaint figures of saints, and still showed traces of colouring in red and blue and gold. The oak benches, grey for want of oil or polish, were also carved, and in the chancel there was a splendid pew with a wooden canopy embossed and painted like the rood-screen, though plainly of a later date. The whole was mouldy and ill-kept, but at least had been saved from the ruthless hand of that foe to all antiquarian lore, the nineteenth-century restorer, who would probably have stripped it of rood-screen and carved benches, and have replaced them with pitch pine.

"I'd like to sit in that gorgeous pew," said Mavis, dropping down from her perch, and examining her grazed hands tenderly.

"That belongs to the Tallands. It goes with The Warren. There's an old monument down the nave to some of the family. You couldn't see it properly from that window," explained Bevis.

"Don't they ever clean the place up?" asked Merle.

"They do once a year, before the festival." [205]

"When is the festival?"

"Late in May. They always have kept it at Chagmouth, and they make much more of it now because they have the war-memorial service at the same time, and everybody goes to that. The cross is up there, just at the top of the churchyard."

The people from the several places which the tiny church had originally served had joined together in erecting a memorial to their brave boys who had fallen in the Great War—a plain Celtic cross of granite, placed on a platform of rock above the church, where it could be very plainly seen by all the vessels that passed by in or out of the harbour. It was a magnificent situation for it, far more romantic than any in the town, and to judge from the wreaths and bunches of flowers laid at its foot, it was the goal of an easy walk along the cliffs on Sundays. Mavis, who stopped to read the roll of honour, took the violets from her button-hole and laid them with the rest of the floral tributes.

"I like this wee church much better than St. John's," she remarked. "Although it's so dirty and cobwebby and dilapidated, it seems to have more of the old spirit of Chagmouth about it

somehow. It takes one back to Drake and Raleigh, almost to the days of King Arthur. I'm so glad Merle and I are Devon folk on Mother's side at any rate. We're tremendously proud of it."

[206] Bevis was looking beyond the ancient walls to where the little town lay alongside its harbour at the edge of the grey sea.

"The boys over there have always taunted me that I don't belong to Chagmouth, but I've got the spirit of the place in me all the same," he said. "I don't believe there's one of them that cares for it like I do. As for the Glyn Williamses they'd modernize it to-morrow if they were allowed. I hope to goodness General Talland will never sell them the property, or they'd sweep away every picturesque corner in it, and widen the street so as to bring cars down. They've not a scrap of taste. That new Institute may be all right for lectures and theatricals and the rest of it, but I should think they chose the most hideous plan that the architects submitted. It's a perfect eyesore standing just where it does. You should hear Mr. Barnes hold forth about it. He got his way at any rate about the war memorial though, and insisted on a Celtic cross. Mr. Glyn Williams wanted a sort of 'Cleopatra's needle' and nearly carried the committee. Think of planting an ancient Egyptian monument on the cliff here. It would have been ridiculous. The Glyn Williamses may look down upon me and call me a 'nobody', but I've better taste than they have, and know more about old things too. I can't see that having pots of money gives people the right to ride rough-shod over the whole town."

The boy spoke hotly, almost furiously. Evidently the subject was a sore one.

"You're not called a nobody," said Mavis.

[207] "I *am* a nobody, and no one knows that better than myself. If I'd even the slightest clue, I'd be off and away to hunt out my own relations. I wouldn't stay here only I'm needed so on the farm. I sometimes think I'll——" but here Bevis stopped and looked rather ashamed.

"Don't take any notice of me," he continued more quietly. "I don't often break out like this. Why should I bother you with my troubles? They're nothing to you!"

"Yes they are," said Mavis gently. "We're very interested indeed."

"And very sorry," added Merle.

They had the good sense, however, to change the subject, and Bevis, though at first his answers were rather short, gradually recovered himself. By the time they reached the farm he was chatting just as usual, and telling more stories of Devonshire pixies. He went into the surgery and helped Dr. Tremayne to dispense some medicines, and as the girls were starting home in the car they saw him in the orchard cutting down an apple tree, chopping away with most terrific energy.

"I guess he's working off steam," said Merle waving her hand.

"Yes, I didn't know what a volcano he was covering up till he let some of it bubble out this afternoon. Uncle David! What's going to become of Bevis? Will he always stay on the farm? He's so clever!"

[208] "Yes, poor lad, he's worthy of better things, and would make a name for himself some day if he got the chance. He ought to be back at school. It's hard luck on him to have his education broken off just when he was beginning to do so brilliantly. A nice lad too—a very nice lad—one of the nicest lads I know," muttered the old doctor, half to himself, as the car sped up the hill, and the sound of Bevis's blows on the apple tree grew fainter and fainter, then died away behind them.

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[209]

CHAPTER XVI

Trotman's Circus

One morning, towards the end of March, as the day girls were walking home from school, they came across a bill-sticker pasting a flaming red poster upon a hoarding. Naturally they stopped to look. The advertisement was headed:

"Trotman's Circus & Menagerie", and set forth that on Monday next the famous show would visit Durracombe for one day only, and would give two performances, at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m., introducing the latest novelties and sensational displays. Here was an excitement for the sleepy little town. It was years since any travelling circus had come that way, and very few of the children had seen elephants, performing sea-lions, trick-horses, gymnasts, North American Indian riders, or any of the marvels set down in the programme. Of course all the juvenile population was a-thrill at the prospect. The day girls at The Moorings carried the news to the boarders, and the arrival of the wonderful show at once became the most important date in the school calendar. Trotman's Circus had rather a bad reputation for missing its appointments, and,

as it had once before advertised its advent but had failed to turn up, people declared they would not believe in it until they actually saw the procession marching into the town. [210]

"You'll take us if it really comes, won't you?" begged the boarders at The Moorings.

Miss Pollard would not commit herself.

"I must hear something about it first," she said guardedly. "These travelling shows aren't always very select."

"It's a wonderful programme," urged Iva, who had seen the posters.

"That doesn't guarantee it from being extremely vulgar," returned Miss Pollard.

On Sunday afternoon, just as the scholars were pouring out of Sunday-schools, there came the rumble of wheels along the road, and presently down the High Street passed a remarkable procession of gilded caravans, horses, and elephants. The men who led them, and the women who peeped from the little curtained windows, were a tired-looking crew who deserved a Sunday's rest; but directly they had crossed the bridge, and arrived in the meadows at the opposite side of the river, they began to work hard at erecting tents, stabling their horses, and setting their temporary camp in order. Nearly all the children in Durracombe stood on the bridge and watched them. It is not every day you can see elephants or a camel or a troupe of tiny piebald ponies. To most of the small folk it was the opportunity of their lives.

Mavis and Merle, from the vantage-ground of the terraced walk by the river, had a splendid [211] view of the settlement. They were almost too near, indeed, for they were much disturbed during the night by weird noises, the roaring of lions in cages and the trumpeting of elephants. They dressed next morning, feeling as if they had slept in a jungle or in an African forest. They found all the girls at school in a state of flaming excitement. Miss Pollard had not yet decided whether the circus was a sufficiently refined entertainment to justify her in taking her boarders. She was old-fashioned in her notions, and very particular about what was suitable and proper for children. She hesitated and vacillated, and even wrote a note to the vicar to ask for his opinion, and was more embarrassed still when she found he had gone out on his motor-cycle, and might not be back until the evening. She and Miss Fanny had discussed the matter threadbare in private, but could not make up their minds in the least. Meantime a whole school full of fluttering girls centred the circus as the one event of the term.

"Of course we're to have a half-holiday this afternoon," began Opal.

"There's no 'of course' about it," returned Miss Pollard, eyeing her god-daughter gravely. She did not like Opal's tone, which was both uncompromising and truculent.

"Oh, but we've simply *got* to have a holiday! We can't miss this circus. All of us day girls have been promised at home that we may go, and we *shall*."

Miss Pollard was long-suffering where her pet pupil was concerned, but it is possible for even a [212] prime favourite to go too far.

"That's not the way to speak to me," she rebuked. "Your parents may make any arrangements they wish for taking you to the evening performance, but you will all attend school this afternoon. Do you thoroughly understand me, girls? I give *no* half-holiday, and I expect you all to be present here as usual at 2.30. You may take that message home with you."

Miss Pollard, very much on her dignity, glared first at Opal, and then round the entire room. She did not intend to be dictated to or forced to give her consent against her better judgment. She was Principal of The Moorings, and as such meant to maintain discipline over her pupils.

Her announcement caused them all to look very sulky, and produced much grousing during 'break', but nobody thought of disputing it. The day girls consoled themselves by hopes of attending the evening performance. The less fortunate boarders said it was just like their luck. Everybody was more or less in a bad temper, but resigned. Mavis and Merle, walking back from Bridge House about 2.15, passed the corner of the Earnshaws' garden, and saw Opal's face peeping over the paling.

"Hello! Going to school like two good little girls," she jeered.

"Why! Aren't you?"

"I! Rather not! I call it the limit! I say, will you give a message for me to Miss Pollard?"

"What do you want us to say?" [213]

"Tell her I've got a fearful headache, and I'm going to lie down."

"We'll do nothing of the sort," snapped Merle.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Mavis.

Opal only grinned.

"What nice good little girls," she repeated mockingly. "You'll give me the trouble of sending a note, that's all."

"What does your mother say?"

"She's gone to Port Sennen to-day, so I can't ask her. Look here, people are saying in the town that there's not going to be any evening performance. Trotmans want to pack up the show and start early, so as to travel at night. They've had a bother with the police about those vans blocking the roads in daytime. They held up a whole row of motors in Blagden, and no one could pass them for half an hour. Do you think I'm going to miss that circus and toddle up to school to write exercises and have a music lesson? Hardly! If you'll take my advice you'll scoot back home and do the same. I shouldn't be surprised to find an epidemic of headaches this afternoon."

"If I stopped away, at least I wouldn't tell fibs about it," said Merle.

Both the Ramsays agreed that it was very unsporting of Miss Pollard to refuse the holiday, and decided to get up a sort of eleventh-hour petition amongst the girls to ask her to grant it. They hurried on to school, therefore, not without hopes, though a little trembling as to how she would [214] receive the appeal. They arrived at The Moorings to find the hive in a delighted ferment. The Vicar, Mr. Carey, had returned home to lunch, and had read Miss Pollard's note, and had sent a reply by his daughters to the effect that in his opinion the circus was a most harmless and innocent form of entertainment, and that it would be a pity for the girls to miss it. He suggested, indeed, that the whole school should visit the show *en bloc*. The Misses Pollard, being themselves daughters of the late clergyman, set a high value on clerical sanction. The Vicar's letter settled the matter.

"If Mr. Carey approves, it must be perfectly right," fluttered Miss Fanny.

"I'm so glad to know what he thinks about it," agreed her sister.

The poor ladies were really anxious to give their boarders a treat, and as the day girls were already assembled, and time was flying, they decided to adopt the suggestion, and march the whole school in an orderly crocodile to the tent. Just before they started, a small village boy came running up the lane and delivered a note. Miss Pollard tore it open hastily.

"Dear me! How unfortunate," she exclaimed. "Opal ill with a bad headache. The child was perfectly all right this morning. Thank you, there's no answer. Now, girls, take your partners and form into double line. Quietly, quietly! Not so much talking! Iva and Nesta first. Where's Mademoiselle? Has Mamie brought her scarf? Those tents are sometimes very draughty. Betty, if [215] you can't behave you'll be left behind! Are you ready? Then quick march!"

It was very exciting indeed to file along the High Street and across the bridge on to the meadow, and more thrillsome still to enter the big circular tent with its green canvas roof flapping in the breeze. The seats were only wooden planks covered with red baize, and swayed about when people sat upon them, but Durracombe audiences were not accustomed to luxuries, and the juvenile portion would have cheerfully sat anywhere to watch the show. A caravan drawn up by the entrance acted as pay desk, and a big, fat gipsy-looking woman took the money and said, 'Thank you very much' to those who bought the more expensive tickets. The school secured a block of reserved seats all to itself, and the girls settled themselves with little ones in front, and big ones behind. In the middle of the tent was a large circle strewn with sawdust, and the spectators were ranged round this as in a Roman amphitheatre. Through the open door opposite might be caught a glimpse of horses standing outside. A very large part of the audience was composed of children. Most of them had been waiting in a queue for a long while before entering, and they were over-excited and tired. They were all impatience for the performance to begin, and the hum of their little voices sounded like the buzzing of bees. Through the gaps between the walls and the roof of the tent long shafts of sunlight streamed like Jacob's ladders over the heads [216] of the children, and into the sawdust circle. One almost expected elves and fairies to slide down them and perform on the magic ring. One tiny boy, tired of waiting, strayed from his place, and stood a moment under one of these shafts of light like a fair-haired cherub. The spectators cheered him as if he were part of the programme.

The contingent from The Moorings were sitting close to the main entrance, and as their united glances strayed round the tent they presently began to nudge each other and focus their gaze in one particular direction. Miss Pollard, aware of the undercurrent, looked also. What she saw caused her to take out her lorgnettes and stare amazedly through them to satisfy herself that failing eyesight had not produced an illusion. On the other side of the tent, exactly opposite to their party, sitting on a red-baize-covered reserved seat, was Opal—Opal who was supposed to be lying on her bed prostrate with headache, and whom she had pitied for missing the treat. Miss Fanny had also just made the same discovery. The sisters glanced at one another, and drew their own conclusions. If Opal had turned rather white at the entrance of the school party, she had apparently recovered from the shock, and was bluffing the matter out. She was sitting with some friends, girls much older than herself, and was laughing and chatting as if in thorough enjoyment.

And now at last, after much tiresome delay and waiting, the show began. Through the far door was seen a vision of men in gay costumes, and the strains of a band were heard. [217]

"O-o-o-oh!" came from the children all round, as the procession streamed into the tent. It was headed by the band, then followed piebald horses with riders in gorgeous velvet costumes or spangled dresses; there were Roman chariots, and a drove of tiny ponies, and an Eastern lady on a camel, and several funny men who bounced about like india-rubber balls, and three stately elephants, and some wild-looking Red Indians in war-paint and feathers. These all paraded round the ring to allow the audience to have a good view of them, then went off again, so that the

programme might proceed in its separate items.

It really was a capital show. There was no mistake about that. First entered the gymnasts, wonderful people who jumped easily on to one another's shoulders, and swung head downwards from trapezes, and made themselves into a human pyramid, and performed other amazing and marvellous feats. Then came the horses, which ambled round the circle in pairs, with riders who stood astride two of them, one foot on each, marvels of equilibrium, and ladies in gauzy dresses who jumped lightly from horse to horse as if on wings. When these had cantered off the scenes appeared "Queenie", a beautiful Arabian trick horse with her playfellow "Pixie", a tiny piebald pony. The manager, a gorgeous individual in evening dress, stood in the centre cracking a whip, while Queenie and Pixie ran in contrary circles, reared, knelt, and lay down to music, and finally [218] did a dying scene together, with Pixie's head resting sentimentally on Queenie's back.

"I want that 'ickle pony," called out a small voice from the audience, at which remark even the manager smiled.

Then it was the turn of the clown, a funny man in baggy white pants and a red patch on each of his cheeks. He kicked up six hats in succession, and caught them all, one on the top of the other, on his head in a pyramid, and had a comical fight with somebody who was dressed up as a lion and tried to pounce upon him.

"Here we are again. No harm done this time," he kept saying, after somersaults and jumps that made some of the audience tremble for his safety.

Next a tight-rope was fixed, and two lady gymnasts in spangled garments and holding parasols walked across it, and even danced upon it, shaking bells on their ankles as they moved. The funny man pretended to be envious and begged to be allowed to try; so he climbed up too and at first made the tight-rope wobble in the most alarming fashion, but finally performed a jig upon it, holding aloft a big black umbrella.

"No harm done this time," he proclaimed laughingly.

An Eastern lady, who arrived veiled on a camel, did a marvellous turn with Queenie, the trick horse. Slow music was played, and when the lady danced Queenie moved her fore-feet as if dancing also. Then the lady skipped, and the horse also skipped over a rope held by the manager [219] and the clown, a performance which called forth cheer after cheer from the spectators. When Queenie ran out of the ring two elephants took her place. They saluted by trumpeting, a form of greeting which rather scared most of the children, and even brought squeals from some of them. The elephants with their slow heavy gait were favourites, however, and quite captured the house when one of them acted nurse to a rag baby, placed it inside a cradle, and rocked it gently to sleep.

The Red Indians, with their wild, spirited horses, performed most daring feats, careered round the ring clinging to the tails of their steeds, jumped from one horse to another when in full gallop, and had a most exciting battle in which a little girl was bound to a stake by one party and rescued by another. Then one of the elephants came in again, and played skittles with the clown, who kept calling out "Cheat fair, old girl," though he always let her win in the end, and rewarded her by drinks from a bottle which he produced out of his big hat. The funny man was indeed the very heart and soul of the circus and worked hard to keep the audience amused. When the elephant had finished her tricks he brought in a pair of seals who flapped into the ring on their fins, roaring and snorting as they came. Their feats were, if anything, even more clever than those of the elephants: they balanced cups on their noses, played football with the clown, and flapped their fins or roared in answer to his questions. They played a game of hide-and-seek, and finally posed on either side of their human friend apparently whispering into his ear. [220]

A Roman chariot race followed, as a variety, and afterwards some trick riding by ladies accompanied by a jazz band to which the elephant played the drum. It was all clever and amusing, yet everybody smiled when the funny man, after a short interval for rest, made his reappearance in the circle. He seemed indefatigable, and his limbs might have been made of india-rubber by the way he jumped and bounced and pranced about. This time he was to give a performance on the trapeze, and he ran up the ladder as easily as a monkey, cracking out many jokes. He swung on the trapeze, and turned somersaults, and hung by his heels and did other hair-raising experiments, always ending with his usual "no harm done this time".

Then he commenced to swing himself backwards and forwards for an enormous leap on to another trapeze. He accomplished it safely, and turned to make the bound back again. But either the rope was faulty, or for once his nerve deserted him, or he miscalculated his distance, for, instead of landing lightly upon the pole, he missed it, and fell down, down on to the edge of the net, and off again on to the ground below.

For an instant the audience thought it was part of the performance, and that he would bounce up with one of his merry jokes. But this time there was harm done. Instead of springing to his feet he lay limp and quiet among the sawdust in the ring. There was a buzz of horror from the [221] spectators as two of the gymnasts ran in with a stretcher and hastily removed him. Many could not bear to look at any more and left the tent, though the manager made a short speech and begged people to remain for the rest of the programme, bringing on the ponies, and causing them to run and jump round the circle.

Miss Pollard and her girls felt they had seen enough, and withdrew quietly, very much upset at

the horrible accident. Mavis and Merle, running home with the news, found Dr. Tremayne just starting for the cottage hospital, whither the unfortunate clown had been carried from the circus. Jessop was helping to hunt out splints, bandages, &c., and hastily packing them into the car.

"Here's a pretty business," said Uncle David. "I hear the poor chap's badly hurt. I've an urgent call to Bragdon—man in an epileptic fit—but he'll have to wait till I've attended to this case first. It's a mercy I hadn't started. Jessop, where's the chloroform bottle? Put it here in my bag, please! If I want anything else I'll send someone over with a message. You know where the other splints are? Good! Telephone to Mrs. Goodwin that I can't possibly see her till to-morrow, but she must go on taking the medicine, and if Johnson's boy comes with a message, keep him till I get back."

And Dr. Tremayne, having collected all the various things he considered he was likely to need, jumped into his car, and departed to the cottage hospital on his errand of help, a very real angel of mercy though clad in twentieth-century garments. [222]

"Will the poor fellow die?" the girls asked with awestruck faces.

Jessop shook her head enigmatically.

"It depends how much damage is done. You never can tell in a case like this till the Doctor has seen him. You may be sure your uncle will do the best that human skill can."

"That goes without saying," said Mavis as she and Merle went gravely upstairs to wash their hands for tea.

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CHAPTER XVII

The Sick Clown

Opal turned up at school next morning in one of her most defiant and reckless moods. She marched into the cloakroom with a jaunty "don't care" air, and immediately began to talk about the circus.

"I was caught neatly, wasn't I!" she proclaimed. "Never got such a surprise in my life as when you all came parading in like a flock of lambkins. Miss Pollard had rather spasms to judge from her face."

"*You'll* get spasms later on if I'm not mistaken," said Merle.

"Oh, I can always fix up the poor old dears. They've a blind eye where I'm concerned."

"How about that note you wrote?"

"Well, I *had* a headache, only it got better in time for the circus. I'm a wonderful person at getting well when I make up my mind to it. Will power I suppose. There's nothing neurotic about me!"

"You're the biggest fibber I know!"

"What *are* fibs?" asked Opal flippantly. "I only make a little picturesque variation sometimes instead of telling the brutal truth. It's what's called diplomacy, and finesse, and all the rest of it. In a matter of expediency I hedge the question." [224]

"Use the plain Anglo-Saxon word 'lie' and I understand you," retorted Merle, turning disgustedly away.

Opal laughed, and some of the younger children, who had been standing like little pitchers listening with all their ears, laughed too.

"Look here, you kids," said Merle, facing round again. "You may think all this is very clever and funny, but I tell you it's most dishonourable. You've some queer notions in this school. I wouldn't give anything for a head girl who can't speak the truth. She's not worth her salt. Yes, I mean it. All this underhand work isn't done in decent schools, and the sooner you get that into your silly little noddles the better. Fibbers were 'sent to Coventry' at Whinburn High."

"Were they indeed," mocked Opal. "What an extremely superior place it must have been. I wonder you condescend to stay at The Moorings among such a set as ourselves. We're evidently not good enough for you."

Merle took no further notice but walked away, and Opal followed her, giggling, into the classroom. She thought matters would be passed over by the Principal as they had always been condoned before. Her boast that she could do what she liked with her godmothers had hitherto been justified. She had, however, gone a step too far. Miss Pollard's eyes had at last been opened, and in the light of yesterday she suddenly began to remember very many sinister [225]

incidents which might easily be set down to the head girl's influence.

"I'm afraid, my dear, we have been utterly mistaken in Opal," she confided to her sister, and Miss Fanny, who had also had her doubts, regretfully agreed with her.

Miss Pollard took the call-over that morning, but when she had closed the register she paused.

"There's a matter I wish to set straight," she said impressively. "Opal, I received a note from you yesterday afternoon telling me you were in bed with a headache. Will you kindly explain how it was that we saw you at the circus?"

"My head was better, thanks, and I felt well enough to go," replied Opal perkily. She was lolling on her seat, and sharpening a pencil as she spoke.

"Sit up, and put that penknife in your pocket," commanded Miss Pollard, in a stricter tone than she had ever used before to her favourite. "Now answer me. Do you consider that you have been behaving in an honourable fashion? Your letter was sent with the intention to deceive me! What have you to say for yourself?"

Instead of doing as she was told, Opal went on sharpening her pencil rather ostentatiously. There was a sullen look on her face. She was trying her strength against Miss Pollard's. She had won before in minor battles, and she hoped to score in this. A faint giggle from one of her satellites among the juniors spurred her on. She would show the girls that she at any rate was [226] not afraid of the head mistress. She leaned back in her seat and yawned.

"If you ask me, I think it's a case of much ado about nothing," she replied. "I've explained that I felt better, and I can't say any more."

This was the limit even for The Moorings. The girls looked at Opal in amazement. As for Miss Pollard she stared for a moment as if absolutely mesmerized with horror. Then, with a gasp, she recovered her presence of mind, and, summoning all her dignity as Principal, delivered her ultimatum.

"If that's the view you take of your deceit and falsehood the sooner you leave this school the better. Get up and go home at once. You can tell your mother the reason I have sent you, and say I will call and see her this afternoon at five o'clock. Now go immediately!"

Opal, still with the sullen and defiant look on her face, rose slowly and gave a glance of triumph round the room, which, however, met with no response. Then she walked jauntily out and slammed the door after her.

What happened at her own home nobody ever knew. Miss Pollard called and had a long talk with Mrs. Earnshaw, the result of which was that Opal was sent away for a few weeks to stay with an aunt, and arrangements were made at once to place her at a boarding-school after Easter. In justice to her it must be chronicled that she apologized to her godmothers, and said [227] she was really sorry, but they were wise enough not to try the risky experiment of letting her return to The Moorings. She was too old for so small a school, and needed strict discipline, and the pressure of a high moral standard among girls of her own age. At Brackenfield College she would not find her "fiblets", as she called them, applauded or tolerated, and she would have to be straight and honest if she wanted to win golden opinions. In spite of her many lapses from the code of honour, there were elements of good in Opal, and under the influence of straightforward girls such as Dona Anderson and Ailsa Donald, who were at present leading spirits at Brackenfield, she was likely to make a fresh start and retrieve her past.

The Moorings, freed from the shadow of her bad example, seemed a different school. Iva Westwood was appointed head girl, and filled the office conscientiously. The juniors, who took their colour from their elders, soon dropped certain unpleasant practices, and were square in their work. Miss Pollard and Miss Fanny also, feeling they had been too slack and trustful, kept a tighter hand over things, so that cheating and shirking were no longer possible as of yore. In respect of favouritism they had learnt their lesson, and became strictly impartial.

"It hardly pays to be a boarder nowadays," mourned Aubrey Simpson. "We're all treated so exactly alike."

"And a good business too," snapped Edith Carey. "I always said it was time we had a turn. I like things to be fair all round, without anybody getting special privileges. The school's been nicer [228] this last fortnight than it has ever since I came here. I used to detest Miss Fanny, but I'm beginning almost to like her now."

"Though she *is* making a horrible crusade about punctuality," groaned Maude, who, as usual, was late for everything. "Just fancy! She actually made me go to drawing-class without my pencils because I couldn't find them."

"Poor old sport! Buck up! Buy a pencil with a ring at the end and cable it on to you so that you won't lose it. You could wear it round your neck like a baby's comforter."

"It wouldn't be much use at drawing when I want an 'H.B.', a 'B', and a 'B.B.'," grumbled Maude, who had small sense of humour and rarely saw a joke.

But we must return to the day after the circus. The unfortunate clown had been carried after his accident straight to the Cottage Hospital, where his injuries were attended to by Dr.

Tremayne. He was badly hurt, and, though there was a possibility of his recovery, it would be months, if ever, before he could resume his profession. The manager and the ringmaster, and several other people from the show, came to the hospital to inquire about him, but the circus was due at another town, and they were obliged to move on at once. So that very evening the vans were packed, and the great rumbling cavalcade, with all its horses, and ponies, and elephants, and camels, jolted along the High Street, and turned up the north road in the direction of [229] Warebury.

The piece of wreckage whom they left behind them lay very still and quiet in the clean, white bed, at the Cottage Hospital, and made no more jokes. His leg was in splints and his head was bandaged, and his right arm was held in a sling. Dr. Tremayne, going to see him for the third time on the following day, took Mavis and Merle, in the hope that visitors might distract his thoughts. They went rather shyly into the ward. It was strange to see "the funny man" lying flat on his pillow, with hollow, sleepless eyes, and lines of pain round his poor mouth. They offered him the flowers they had brought, and began to talk about the circus. He brightened up a little at that. Evidently he was proud of his reputation as a gymnast.

"It was the rope that failed. It wasn't my fault," he said. "I've done that trick thousands of times, and never missed before. And I'd do it again."

"You must make haste and get well then," said the sister-in-charge kindly. "When we get your splints off you shall give us a special performance in the ward if you like. We'll ask these young ladies to come and see it, won't we?"

The ghost of a smile flickered round his lips for a moment.

"I can't say 'no harm done this time'," he whispered.

It was the first attempt he had made at a joke. Sister said visitors had done him good, and though she sent Mavis and Merle away then, she asked them to come again. So every day they [230] ran into the hospital for a few minutes on their way to school, and again at lunch-time and after tea. They never stopped long enough to tire the patient, but they brought him flowers or newspapers or some little thing from the outside world to help to cheer him up. They chatted to him and asked him what towns he knew, and he told them he had travelled over most of England and Scotland with the circus, and had even been to America.

"I've seen a-many beautiful places! But there's none to beat Devon in my opinion."

"That's what we always say," cried Mavis. "Devonshire is the loveliest county in England, and Chagmouth is the most beautiful little place in all Devonshire."

"Chagmouth! Do you know Chagmouth?" asked the clown quickly.

"We motor over every Saturday with our uncle when he goes to take surgery. Do *you* know it?"

"I used to when I was a boy. I haven't seen it now though for a matter of fourteen year or so. I dare say it's changed."

"I don't believe it has much. People say it's just the same as it always was. You must make haste and get well, and we'll ask Uncle to take you there for a drive when you're able to get out of hospital."

"Ah—when?" echoed the clown, closing his eyes.

He was restless, and seemed in much pain. Dr. Tremayne came in later and examined him, and gave him morphia. Sister's report the next morning was unfavourable. His temperature was very [231] high, and his pulse was fluttering.

"I'm sorry I shan't be about to-day," said Dr. Tremayne. "I'm obliged to go over to Halford to perform some eye operations at the hospital. I don't suppose I shall be back till nine o'clock. I'll leave the hypodermic syringe and if he needs it give him another dose of morphia. We've done the best we can, but it's an anxious case all the same."

Mavis and Merle were detained after tea that day, and could not go round to the hospital until about six o'clock. Sister greeted them with relief.

"I've kept expecting you, and was going to send you a message if you didn't come," she said. "He keeps asking for you all the time. He's gone downhill rapidly to-day, poor fellow. He's sinking fast, and I don't believe he'll ever see the night through. He's wandering a little in his head, and he says you two know Chagmouth, and he wants to speak to you. I'll tell him you've come."

Very gently the girls entered the ward where the patient was lying. The signs of a great approaching change were on him. The hands that little more than a week ago had grasped the trapeze so strongly now lay white and frail on the counterpane. His face was shrunken, and his eyes held the far-away look of one who is beginning to sight things beyond our earthly plane of vision. He smiled feebly at Mavis and Merle, and tried to raise his head. Sister lifted him a little and propped him up with an extra pillow.

"You know Chagmouth?" he whispered. [232]

"Yes! Yes!" Mavis was stooping down beside his bed.

"Is Mrs. Jarvis still living there—the nurse?"

"Yes, we sometimes see her. She's postwoman now."

"Could you fetch her here? To-night?"

"We'll try!"

"Tell her it's Jerry as wants her—her boy Jerry! She'll understand!"

"We'll bring her somehow, don't you worry," said Merle.

"I'm slipping west, and I'd like a word with her afore I go. You've been so kind—I thought I might ask you to do that for me."

His breath came in gasps. His face was drawn with a spasm of pain.

Sister took the girls quietly aside.

"If there's anything you can do for him, you'd better do it," she said. "I don't think he'll last the night."

Mavis and Merle saw for themselves that if mother and son were to meet again on earth they must fetch Mrs. Jarvis quickly. How could they get her to Durracombe in the shortest possible time? Outside the hospital door they held a whispered consultation. Uncle David and the little Deemster car were fifteen miles away, at Halford. They must find some other means of conveyance. They went, therefore, to the Swan Hotel, where motors were to be hired, and explained the urgency of their errand. The manageress shook her head. [233]

"YOU KNOW CHAGMOUTH?" HE WHISPERED

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"Mr. Johnson's out himself with the four-seater, and Bates has gone to the station with the little car to meet a lady and take her to Rushton. There's only the old Ford left, and no one to drive it."

"A Ford! May I look at it?" said Merle eagerly.

"You can if you like."

The car was standing in the yard, rather a shabby specimen, but in workable order. Merle examined it carefully.

"It's exactly like Daddy's at home," she said. "I've often driven that. Will you let me try this?"

"Oh, I don't know whether I dare!" gasped the manageress.

But Merle got inside the car and showed such a working knowledge of its various levers and begged so hard to be allowed to take it out that at last Mrs. Johnson relented.

"If it weren't a matter of life and death, as you might say, I wouldn't let you for a minute. It seems almost like murder to trust you two alone, and those hills and all. Still you do seem to know how to drive. Be very careful of the brakes, and don't go tearing along too fast. I shan't know a moment's peace till I see you safe back again. Little George will give you a start. He knows how to do that, though he can't drive yet."

George, a small boy of twelve, turned the starting-handle, and soon the engine was humming. Merle took off the brake, put in the low gear, waved a good-bye to Mrs. Johnson, and with Mavis [234] by her side steered successfully through the gate-posts of the garage yard into the High Street. The girls devoutly hoped that neither Aunt Nellie nor Jessop would be looking out of the windows as they crossed the bridge. The risky ride must be ventured, but they preferred to spare the feelings of those at home.

To Merle it was a gorgeous opportunity. She was not in the least afraid and perfectly confident that she could manage the car. She had always wanted to go for a drive entirely on her own. Mavis, rather nervous but ready to stick to her sister through all perils, kept an anxious eye on the road, in case a motor-lorry should suddenly whisk round a corner, or a flock of sheep emerge from a field.

"May Providence sweep all nails and bits of broken glass out of our path. I don't know what we should do if we got a puncture," she murmured.

"Run on the rim," returned Merle. "As long as the old car can keep going I'll make her go. She's really doing very decently considering she's rather a ramshackle concern. I'll get some pace out of her, you'll see, when the road's clear ahead. I wonder if the speedometer is working?"

"Oh, do be careful!" implored Mavis. "There's something coming now. Sound your hooter! It's one of those wretched furniture vans, and they never leave proper room."

"I'm glad we haven't to pass the circus at any rate," said Merle, squeezing the bulb of the [235] hooter, and lurching dangerously as she did so, but regaining the left side of the road before they met the van.

Mavis was thankful when they were out of the deep Devonshire lanes and up on the comparatively safe level of the moors, where there were no high hedges to conceal approaching vehicles, and the road could be seen stretching like a long ribbon in front of them.

"Shan't find any police trap here," chuckled Merle, increasing the speed till the rattling old car seemed to be flying. "That speedometer isn't working, but I dare say we're going at thirty miles an hour. I believe she'd do forty."

"Merle, *don't*" squealed Mavis. "For goodness sake slow down or you'll be upsetting the whole business into the ditch."

The hooting of a motor-cycle that wanted to pass them stopped Merle in her mad career, and reminded her that she was occupying the middle of the road. She steered to the left, and proceeded more soberly.

"We must be half-way there already," she triumphed. "We've simply bounded along like a house on fire. Who says I can't drive? I shall tell Daddy about this. It'll be a score for me, won't it."

"I hope we shan't meet a policeman anywhere who'll ask for your licence."

"Don't care if I do. I just shan't stop, however much he waves his white gloves at me. He can take the number of the car, and prosecute me afterwards if he likes. I'd rather enjoy going before the bench of magistrates. I'd tell the reason, and say the end justified the means." [236]

"You'll make an end of us if you go bumping so fast over this lumpy road. The holes are enough to upset a tank. What a sharp wind there is up here! I wish we'd got our thick coats."

"You ought to have brought a wrap!" Merle's voice was self-reproachful. "Turn up the collar of your jersey. Oh, I'm all right, thanks. It's hot work to drive, I can tell you. There's Gundry Tor. We really *are* getting on. We shall soon be at Chagmouth now."

What Mavis was dreading most was the tremendous hill that ran down the ravine into the little town. It was a very steep gradient, and was marked with a danger signal. She hoped the brakes of the rickety old car would be equal to their duty. The road was unfenced, and had several awkward bends, where an unskilled motorist, losing control, might dash over the edge, and down into the woods. How she longed for Dr. Tremayne's firm steady hand on the driving-wheel! It is always far more anxious work to sit and watch a novice than to do a thing yourself. Merle, in her girlish confidence, felt no alarm. She was ready to venture anything in the way of a descent.

Fortunately for the safety of the sisters, her powers had no need to be tested. While they were still on the level road at the top of the hill they saw, walking briskly along in front of them, a little stumpy figure in a navy-blue uniform, and with a leather bag slung over her back.

"Mrs. Jarvis, by all that's wonderful," exclaimed Mavis, in much relief. [237]

The postwoman was coming back from collecting letters at a pillar-box in a neighbouring village. It was the merest luck that they had overtaken her at that particular spot. Merle stopped the car, and the girls explained their errand.

"You must come with us at once," said Mavis. "Never mind the letters. We can hand them in at the post-office at Durracombe instead. It will be all right."

Poor Mrs. Jarvis did not need any urging. As soon as her clouded brain understood who wanted her, she was ready to throw her post-bag to the winds. She jumped into the back part of the car and took her seat, trembling with excitement and eagerness.

"Jerry! My own boy Jerry!" she kept repeating. "Bless him! The little table's all spread out in the kitchen ready for his tea. I knew he'd come back to me some day. Bless his heart."

Merle with much difficulty managed to restart the old Ford, and to turn it with its bonnet in the direction of Durracombe; then they set off again at a rather reckless pace. Every minute seemed of importance now, and Mavis did not remonstrate though they bumped over holes, tore round corners, or flew across the moor at thirty miles an hour. Perhaps her nerves were getting used to it. She gave a sigh of satisfaction, however, when at last they came in sight of their destination, and motored back across the bridge into the High Street. Merle drove straight to the hospital, [238] where the girls took Mrs. Jarvis inside and asked for Sister.

"Will you come into the ward, please," said the nurse who returned with the message. "You've brought her just in time!"

Mavis and Merle stood aside to give precedence to Mrs. Jarvis. They had warned the poor mother that it was no lad of thirteen whom she must expect to see, that long years had passed away, and had changed him possibly past recognition. There was little resemblance between the round cheeks she used to kiss, and the sunken face on the pillow. But mother hearts cannot forget, even though the brains may be blurred. She knew him instantly as she stepped to his bedside.

"Jerry! My own boy, Jerry! Come back at last!"

Then Nurse put a screen round the bed, and mother and son were left alone, for there are some scenes too sacred for even the kindest friends to witness.

Mavis and Merle returned an hour later to inquire, having taken back the car, delivered the post-bag to the authorities, and reassured Aunt Nellie of their whereabouts. They met Sister in the corridor of the hospital. They looked at her in mute interrogation, and she shook her head.

"I knew it was hopeless this afternoon, but it's been quicker than I thought. He didn't suffer much, and he was so glad to have his mother with him. Will you please tell Dr. Tremayne."

Very softly the girls went out of the hospital door. It was dark, and bright stars were shining [239] overhead, but there was still a faint streak of red where the sun had set. They looked at it for a moment or two without speaking, then:

"It will rise over there," gulped Mavis, pointing eastward, and Merle understood her meaning.

All the jokes and tricks of the funny man were over now, and his poor hurt body was lying quiet and still, but he himself had "gone west", and though the tea-table was spread in vain in the little cottage, somewhere, in the light of the eternal dawn, mother and son would meet and know one another again.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Greek meets Greek

On the last Saturday in March, by special invitation from Mrs. Glyn Williams, the Ramsays spent the day at The Warren. They went in their best dresses and took their tennis rackets with them. They were not at all sure whether they wished to go, but it was one of those coercive visits which society demands, and which there is no evading, so they set forth, Mavis in one of her quiet moods, and Merle, with an awkward remembrance of past skirmishes, on her very best behaviour. There is no better fence than good manners, and it is really impossible to squabble with a person who preserves a studied politeness. To-day, however, the Glyn Williams did not wish for quarrels. They might have their faults, but they could be pleasant enough hosts and

hostesses when they liked, and they really made an effort to entertain their guests. When their shyness thawed, Mavis and Merle began to enjoy themselves. The cinder court was in excellent order, and it was rather delightful to have a game of tennis. Tudor and Merle played Gwen and Mavis, and beat them in two sets, a score which caused them much triumph.

"I say, you know, you're a jolly good player," said Tudor to his partner. "Those swift serves of yours are A1!" [241]

"We had cinder courts at school in Whinburn," replied Merle. "It makes a difference if you're used to them."

She might have added that she had been one of the champions, and had helped to win a tournament, but she was not given to boasting. It is pleasant, though, to be congratulated on present prowess, even if you feel too modest to mention your past successes. She began to relent a little towards Tudor. He was so obviously doing his best to give her a good time. According to his own lights he tried to be amusing.

"The cinder court is my last stronghold," he assured her. "Just when we get the grass courts into decent order in the summer the Mater always insists on having half Chagmouth up to trample over them—wheezy old women who drink tea till you think they'll never stop, and awful children who stuff themselves with buns, and run races for bags of sweets. You don't know what I suffer. And the Mater says: '*Do* come and speak to them'! Speak to them! What the Dickens am I to say? I'm longing to tell them that I wish the whole lot of them were at Jericho rather than messing about our garden. Why can't they drink tea and run races down in the town? The Mater says we *must* know our neighbours, but I say bother our neighbours. If she likes to do the Lady Bountiful business I wish she'd leave me out of it."

"Chagmouth is a lovely place," ventured Merle. [242]

"Oh yes, but they're a cantankerous set of people. Never satisfied whatever you do for them. The shooting here isn't really up to much either, nor the fishing. I stayed with a friend of mine once in Herefordshire. His father has a splendid place there. I can tell you we had some sport. The woods here haven't been half preserved. Every Dick, Tom, and Harry from Chagmouth thinks he may go into them, and the same on the headland. They pretend there's a right of way along the cliffs, and it's nothing on earth but an excuse for poaching. They go rabbiting up there. I've found lots of traps, and flung them over the cliffs into the sea. Beastly cheek, setting traps on our land. I tell Dad he ought to put up a fence and dispute that right of way along the headland. I believe he's going to too. You must stand up for your rights with these people, or they'll take advantage of you at every end and give you no thanks either."

After lunch, Tudor, a large part of whose interests centred round the stables, offered to show the horses, and all the young people went to admire and pet beautiful "Armorelle", Gwen's pretty cob "Taffy", and Babbie's little pony "Nixie". Merle would have liked to beg to mount Armorelle, but good manners prevailed, and she only stroked the soft nose instead.

"Do you ride?" asked Gwen rather grandly.

"A little," said Merle, not liking to confess that her equestrian experiences were mostly confined to donkeys on the beach at the sea-side.

"Brought your habit with you?" [243]

"No," answered Merle, who did not possess a riding-habit at all.

"What a pity! But of course your uncle has sold all his horses. He always goes about in that little yellow car now, doesn't he? Motoring's well enough—one must have a car naturally—but give me a horse."

"Yes, give me a horse, too, for choice," echoed Tudor. "I simply couldn't live without horses."

On the whole the Ramsays spent a pleasant day at The Warren. Gwen and Tudor might be rather patronizing, and too fond of showing off their possessions, and "talking large", but these were their obvious failings, the direct result of their early training and upbringing, and they were not without pleasanter traits. Everybody is a mixture of perfect and imperfect, in greater or lesser degree. The young Glyn Williamses might have false standards of life, and would perhaps have to suffer many hard knocks before they learnt to revise them, yet in their own way they certainly meant to be kind. Gwen gave Mavis several foreign stamps, and was liberal in handing round chocolates. Little Babbie waxed really affectionate. She had liked the Ramsays from the first, and had begged her mother to invite them. In the drawing-room, after tea, she asked them to repeat the dialogue which they had given at The Moorings on the wet afternoon when the day girls waited for the storm to clear.

"I've never forgotten how you two acted," she urged. "It was splendid! Just like going to the theatre. *Please* do it again! *Please!* Mother and Tudor haven't heard it." [244]

"We want two other characters," objected Merle.

"Oh, never mind! We'll imagine the other two, and you can say their parts for them. Give the funny piece where the aunt says what she thinks about the modern girl. You did it so well."

"May we dress up a little?" asked Mavis.

"As much as you like. Come upstairs and take what you want."

So after a time the visitors returned duly costumed for the piece, Merle as an elderly spinster with white cotton-wool hair and a black veil tied over a toque, and Mavis in a sporting coat and rakish hat belonging to Gwen. They played up to the best of their ability, and delivered the amusing little sketch with much vigour. Merle, as the maiden aunt, was inimitable, and quiet Mavis astounded everybody in her pose of the up-to-date damsel. Tudor stared as if he had not suspected she had so much in her. The audience of four clapped tremendously at the close of the performance.

"It's really very clever. You're quite actresses," commented Mrs. Glyn Williams. "Have you ever performed in public? No! Why, when you leave school I should think you'll be tremendously in request for dramatic performances in aid of charities."

"We ought to get up something here in the Institute," said Tudor. "It would be topping fun, and astonish the natives no end. I should think everybody's sick to death of their eternal concerts. It's [245] always the same old business—part song by the choir, timid warble by village soprano about spring or roses, seafaring song roared by the bass, ambitious operatic air attempted by tenor, who makes a hash of it, strains on a violin badly out of tune, temperance speech by the Vicar, who, of course, wants to butt in with a word on 'Prohibition', action song by kids from the school, then votes of thanks till everybody has thanked everybody else all round, and said how clever they all are. Then 'God Save the King', and thank goodness one may go home."

"Tudor's a naughty boy," laughed Mrs. Glyn Williams. "I never *can* get him to take an interest in Chagmouth."

"Well, I hate being trotted out to these functions," declared her son.

When Mavis and Merle, brushing their hair as they went to bed that night, compared notes on their experiences at The Warren, both decided they had had a very enjoyable time there. Merle had revised her first opinion of Tudor.

"He's quite jolly in his own way," she admitted. "I rather like him."

"But of course he's nothing to Bevis."

"They're in a different running altogether."

The two boys were certainly an utter contrast, in circumstances, disposition, and attainments. Tudor was fond of sport, but not at all intellectual. From various hints the girls had gathered that his school career was not unchequered; indeed they strongly suspected, from a foolish remark of [246] Babbie's, that ill-health was not the sole reason for his passing this term at home, and that for some episode, carefully hushed up, he had been temporarily suspended by the authorities. Tudor's accomplishments all seemed to stand on a foundation of wealth. Take away his horses, his gun, his woods, his visits to town to see theatres, and he would have no resources left. His pleasures were inseparable from the spending of money, and though they were well enough in their way, and kept him amused, they were not cultivating the highest part of him. The citizen side, which seeks to be of some use to the community, was conspicuously absent. He posed, indeed, as deliberately scorning the masses, and laughed at his mother for her well-meant efforts at trying to entertain her neighbours. Human souls are surely at different stages of evolution, and his was an undeveloped one that had not yet progressed beyond the period of self-serving. Sometimes a rough lesson is needed to clear the soul's vision, and teach it what things are really worth while; and Fate, who jolts us about much to our own indignation, had her special plan for his education, which in the fulness of her time she meant to bring about.

Bevis, reared up from babyhood at Grimbal's Farm, had learnt to shoot and to ride as well as Tudor, though he had not so good a gun nor so fine a mount. He was a splendid swimmer, and he had brought back many medals from school gained at athletic sports. He could almost do a man's [247] work in the fields now, and while he hated farm labour it had made him physically very fit. He rejoiced in his young strength, with something of the pure gladness of the old Greeks merged with the Christian ideal. Mavis, looking at him as his muscular arms chopped with an axe in the spinney, or his long legs came jumping over a fence, always thought of some lines that she had copied for her "pet quotation" in the High School calendar at Whinburn.

"God who created me
Nimble and light of limb,
In three elements free
To run, ride, or swim.
Not when the sense is dim,
But now from the heart of joy
I would remember Him—
Take the thanks of a boy."

Bevis's brain capacity fully balanced his bodily strength. He liked to read the newspapers, and think out all the problems of the times, and the country's needs. He relished a mental tussle with the same keen zest as he enjoyed a football match or a vaulting contest. Whoever his father and mother might have been the boy was innately refined, and at school had caught up all the culture that his foster parents—kind homely people—unfortunately lacked.

It was a matter of amazement to Mrs. Glyn Williams that Mavis and Merle were allowed to go for walks with Bevis, and she blamed the Doctor for slackness in the care of his nieces, but Dr. Tremayne knew the boy thoroughly, and was perfectly satisfied that he was a fit companion for them. [248]

The girls themselves thought him a most delightful comrade. He was so well versed in all country lore, and he could make so many things, and he was so jolly and humorous and full of fun and jokes. They looked forward to their weekly excursions, and felt they could not have explored Chagmouth half so thoroughly without Bevis as guide. Saturday at the beginning of April saw the three once more setting off for Blackthorn Bower. It was a showery day, but they had their mackintoshes, and did not mind the light rain. Mavis was so wonderfully better that she could now do with impunity what before might have been risky. She had grown, and seemed altogether stronger, though she still looked more ethereal than Merle. That, however, was partly a matter of temperament. The months in Durracombe had been an immense delight to both girls. After the severe winters of Whinburn they had seemed like perpetual spring, and they called Devon "the Garden of Eden". To-day, as they went up the lanes towards the headland, there were many excitements. Bevis, who seemed to have a kind of second-sight for discovering birds' nests, found a hedge-sparrow's, a robin's, and a thrush's, full of eggs, and showed them where a tit-lark was beginning to build. Then they actually saw the first swallow, an early arrival which had come before the cuckoo, but whirled past with unmistakable forked tail and white breast. The [249] primroses were a dream, and Mavis gathered a bunch of wild hyacinths and some purple ground ivy, and Merle thought she saw a snake, but was not perfectly sure about the matter. They were following a footpath which led through the field where the tumulus lay, on to the headland. When they reached the usual point where they had always passed through a gap in the hedge to get down to the tiny quarry they found their way barred. A strong fence had been erected, with prickly gorse placed upon the top of it. The girls halted in much dismay.

"Who's been stopping the path?" asked Merle blankly.

"Some of those keepers, I expect," answered Bevis. "They've no right to do it. It's been a public way for years and years. People come across the hill, and go along the headland, and down to the beach. They always have done, and they always will. There was a bother once before about a right of way through the woods, and Mr. Glyn Williams went to law about it, but he lost his case."

"What are we going to do now?"

"Take down the fence, that's all. It's easily done."

Bevis set calmly to work, and pulled away first the gorse, and then enough of the fence to enable his companions to scramble across. He laughed as he handed them over.

"Those keepers will be jolly vexed when they find their work spoilt, but it serves them right. [250] They shouldn't try to stop a public footpath."

The girls had an uneasy remembrance that last Saturday Tudor had spoken of this very matter of a right of way along the headland, and had said that he had urged his father to dispute it. They had not mentioned to Tudor that they knew the spot, though they had guessed where it was from his description. They did not care for him to know about Blackthorn Bower, or the cups of rough pottery, and their picnics and talks about the prehistoric people. They felt instinctively that he would not understand or sympathize in the least, and would only sneer at it all as nonsense. They did not say anything about Tudor to Bevis now, because the subject always seemed a sore one, and their friend was in such a particularly jolly mood that they did not want to bring the cloud that sometimes settled over his face. They took his word for it that they were not trespassing but pursuing a perfectly legitimate path, and climbed down the bank to the little quarry.

Here a horrible surprise awaited them. Their beautiful bower, put up with so much skill and trouble, had been completely pulled to pieces. The staves of its roof were stacked in a pile, and the sods had been thrown down the cliff. For a ghastly moment they stared as if hardly able to believe the evidence of their own eyes. Then their indignation found vent.

"What an abominable shame!" exploded Merle.

"Oh, it's *too* bad! Our *lovely* hut!" quavered Mavis, practically in tears. [251]

Bevis said nothing. He gazed round the ruin, then stooped and picked something up from the ground. It was a fragment of the blue pottery cup smashed to atoms. He looked at it with somewhat the same consternation with which a hedge-sparrow might regard her torn and robbed nest and broken eggs.

"I'll make somebody pay for this!" he muttered.

The girls were still exclaiming in much wrath and annoyance. At first they were so busy bemoaning the hut that they never heard sounds on the bank behind, then becoming aware of voices they walked out from the quarry to find Tudor, and two of the keepers standing by the fence.

"Hello!" cried Tudor, springing down and greeting them joyously.

But at that moment Bevis stepped from the ruins of Blackthorn Bower and faced him.

"Is this your doing?" he asked abruptly.

The two boys glared at one another with looks that suggested clashing of steel.

"Certainly it's by my orders," returned Tudor in his most lofty and insolent tone. "What business had you building a hut on my property? A regular squatter! I won't have you fellows from the village coming poaching up here. I'll throw every rabbit trap I find down the cliffs, so I give you warning. I could prosecute you for breaking down that fence."

"Oh, Tudor! Bevis *doesn't* poach," interposed Merle. [252]

"He built the hut for *us*," put in Mavis.

Unfortunately the girls' remarks only made matters worse.

"A nice fellow you are to take young ladies about!" continued Tudor tauntingly. "I wonder they'll condescend to walk with you. A nobody like you, who doesn't know where he comes from! You may fancy yourself no end——"

But here Bevis, whose dark face held a "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy" expression, sprang at him in an anger too deep and furious for words.

Both the boys were wrestlers. For one wild minute they held each other, and swayed to and fro as they struggled, while the girls shrieked in alarm, and the keepers, standing by the fence, gaped too utterly amazed to interfere. Then Bevis, by far the fitter and stronger of the two, gained the mastery, and seizing Tudor, flung him violently away. He fell, and rolled over and over nearly twenty feet down the side of the cliff. Then the keepers recovered from their frozen paralysis, and rushed to the rescue of their young employer.

Fortunately Tudor had landed upon a platform of rock, but he lay there quite quiet and still, and did not stir when the men carried him up. His eyes were closed, and his head hung loosely as they laid him down beside the ruined bower. One of them fetched water in a hat and bathed his temples, and the other rubbed his hands. The girls looked on in pitiful distress. Bevis was still [253] standing on the patch of grass that was the scene of their combat. He stared at Tudor's prostrate form with wild, horror-stricken eyes.

"I've murdered him," he gasped to Mavis and Merle. "It's murder! Yes, that's what it is! I'm going away, and you'll never see me any more! I'm not fit to say good-bye to you!"

And without another look he turned and began scrambling recklessly down the cliff, not following a path, but dropping anyhow over the rocks as if he did not care what happened to him. For a moment or two he was visible, and then he vanished.

After more water and vigorous rubbing Tudor at last revived and opened his eyes. He was stiff and much shaken, but there seemed no bones broken, and with the help of the two keepers he was able to walk home. Mavis and Merle fled back to Grimbal's Farm with the disastrous news. They poured out the story to Mrs. Penruddock as she was feeding the fowls. She dropped her pan of Indian corn on to the ground.

"There now! I always said it would come to that," she bemoaned. "Bevis flown at young Williams and run away. What will his father say? The lad's so hasty, and he flares up when he's roused. Don't you cry! You say there's not much harm done after all, and I dare say Bevis will come creeping back at dark when things are quiet. It's not the first time he's run off, and turned up again when he felt hungry."

"He said we'd never see him any more," sobbed Mavis, much upset by the whole affair. [254]

"He'd say anything, but he doesn't mean it. I'm sorry it's happened because it will make fine trouble with The Warren, and we've trouble enough as it is, goodness knows! But I'm not afraid for Bevis. He'd never go off without fetching some of his things at any rate. He loses his temper and there's a flash, and then it's all over. I know Bevis! He'll come back all right, don't you fear!"

CHAPTER XIX [255]

At Half-mast

For once Mrs. Penruddock was mistaken in her calculations. Bevis did not come back. His supper waited in the oven, and his room over the kitchen was ready, but the potatoes were spoilt, and his bed was never slept in. Nobody in Chagmouth had seen anything of him, and all inquiries were in vain. Day after day passed without bringing news of the truant. When Mavis and Merle motored over with Dr. Tremayne on the following Saturday they found sad trouble at Grimbal's Farm.

"It's not like Bevis," proclaimed Mrs. Penruddock. "He's never treated us in this way before. To run off without a word when he'd know well enough we'd take his part even if there was a little

trouble with The Warren. We thought he might have gone to his school, and we telegraphed to the headmaster, but they'd seen nothing of him. We're afraid the silly lad must have tramped to Port Sennen, and got on some vessel there. If that's so goodness knows where he may be by now, or when we shall have a letter from him. If we could only be sure he was all right we shouldn't [256] mind so much. It's this waiting that wears one out. Young folks don't think of all it means to their elders when they do these things. I can't sleep at nights for worrying. The place doesn't seem the same without Bevis. Such a good lad he's always been too."

Mrs. Penruddock's pleasant face looked quite puckered, and there was a choke in her voice which she had to cough away. She was busier than usual, and hurried off into the dairy to serve customers who came for their Saturday portions of scalded cream. (Chagmouth people could not eat their Sunday tea without jam and cream on their bread.) She missed her foster-son's help with the poultry, and in many other matters. He had never shirked work on the farm, and had always been ready to lend a strong hand when she needed it.

Mavis and Merle, strolling round the stackyard, agreed with her. The place was certainly not the same without Bevis. It seemed very slack and slow indeed now he was gone. To kill time before lunch, while Dr. Tremayne saw his patients in the surgery, the girls took a walk down the town towards the beach. Midway in the quaint steep street there was a spot railed off where people could sit on benches and look out over the sea. It was a favourite lounge, and two or three old fishermen were generally there discussing catches and tides, or the village invalids were sunning themselves and collecting local news. In the middle stood a flagstaff where the Union Jack was kept flying. To-day as the Ramsays passed this observation point they noticed that the [257] flag was at half-mast.

"I wonder what's the matter?" said Merle.

"I don't know. Somebody dead, I suppose, and we haven't heard yet. I hope it's not the King! Shall I ask?"

"Yes, do. Ask that old man!"

"Oh, I daren't! You do!"

Merle, having more courage with strangers, made the necessary inquiry. The blue-jerseyed individual whom she addressed pulled his pipe from his mouth and grunted a reply:

"It's General Talland as is gone. There was a telegram come this morning from the West Indies. He was only sixty-one. He ought to a' been good for another ten year or more."

"They do say the climate is awful over there," chimed one of the loungers, quite willing to discuss the event.

"Ay! He should a' stayed in his native air!"

Other listeners had strolled up and began to give their opinions.

"I don't hold with foreign parts myself."

"Not to live, though it's nice to see them."

"There's always fever about in those hot places."

"He'll be buried out there!"

"And his son was buried in India!"

"It seems as if the luck was against the family."

"Mr. Glyn Williams will be for buying the property now!"

"If he can get hold of it." [258]

"It's what he's been after ever since he came here."

"Well, I suppose he'd make a better landlord than some."

Mavis and Merle were not remarkably interested in General Talland, so they said "Thank you" for the information they had received, and walked down to the shore, where they amused themselves till it was time to return for lunch. When they got back to Grimbal's Farm, however, they found Mrs. Penruddock full of the news, which she had learnt from some of her customers.

"It seems trouble on trouble," she declared. "Everybody is saying that Mr. Glyn Williams will be sure to get hold of the estate now, and with our lease just falling in, and this business between Bevis and young Williams which they'll likely not forgive, we may be turned out of the farm for all I know. I came here when I was married twenty-five years ago, and Mr. Penruddock was born here. It would break our hearts to have to go anywhere else."

"Oh, I hope it won't be as bad as that!" said Mavis consolingly.

At lunch-time the girls told Uncle David about the matter.

"Will Mr. Glyn Williams really buy the property?" asked Mavis.

"I don't think he can," replied Dr. Tremayne; "the estate's entailed."

"What's 'entailed'?" said Merle, looking puzzled. [259]

"It's a legal term, which means that a property cannot be sold, but must always pass to the next heir in the male line, so that the owner really only has a life interest in it."

"And who is the heir then?"

"A distant cousin of General Talland's, Mr. George Talland, a most unsuitable man from all accounts. I believe he spends most of his time gaming at Monte Carlo. Very probably he will make the same arrangement as before with Mr. Glyn Williams, and will let him the The Warren and the shooting. There's a possibility, though, that Mr. George Talland and his son might 'cut the entail'. If owner and heir both agree to sell a property they can legally do so, and they might care to have the ready money and settle up their debts rather than only the income of the estate."

"Pity General Talland hadn't a son to leave it to."

"Yes, poor Austin. He died in India. It must be fifteen years ago now. There was a persistent rumour at the time that he'd been privately married out there, and had a son of his own, but no wife and child ever turned up to claim his heritage, which they would most certainly have done if they had existed. It was all gossip and hearsay. People love to invent these stories, but when you come to sift them there's no truth in them. I'm sorry the estate will go to the George Tallands. The son—also a George—has six daughters, but no son, so the male line comes to an end in that [260] direction. That's why I fancy they may cut the entail—to get a little money for the girls. It seems a sad pity for an old family to die out absolutely. There have been Tallands at Chagmouth from time immemorial. After the younger George goes, the name will become quite extinct. Many of the old Devon families have died away like that for want of heirs."

The troubles of the Tallands seemed to Mavis and Merle quite a minor business, however, compared with the overwhelming misfortune of Bevis's running away. They did not quite know what to do with themselves after lunch. They would have gone with Uncle David to the Sanatorium, but he wished to drive a patient up there, and had no room for them in the car. They might of course have gone to The Warren, where they had a general invitation to play tennis, but they hesitated, partly because they felt a delicacy in going without being definitely asked and certain of welcome, and partly because after what had happened the week before they were not very keen to meet Tudor. They could not forget the way he had taunted Bevis, and they had not yet forgiven him for it.

"Gwen would be sure to say something nasty about last Saturday," ventured Merle, who had carefully avoided the Williamses at school on French days.

"I vote we go a walk by ourselves," decided Mavis.

So they set off, and instinctively their steps turned in the direction of their dismantled bower. They did not, however, choose the upper road to it, which would have led them over the [261] forbidden fence, but went the same way as on their first visit, taking the footpath among the woods. Spring had come since they were there before, and had brought out the leaves, so that the sea was seen through a screen of greenery. The primroses were nearly over, but hyacinths were opening like a blue cloud, and great purple orchises were shooting up. In clumps at the edges of the cliff bloomed the pink thrift and white sea-campion, and patches of the yellow lady's-fingers. Merle thought she heard the cuckoo, though Mavis was certain it was only a little boy who was anticipating the well-known call. They lingered and loitered for a long time in the wood, picking flowers and hunting about for birds' nests, and wishing Bevis were there to find them for them. At last they left the trees behind, and coming out on to the headland reached the grassy plateau that jutted out from the sloping cliff.

The cave looked very dark and particularly "spooky" to-day. Merle peeped timorously inside, and turned away shuddering. Mavis, more deeply interested, ventured farther. She had neither matches nor candle, and could only trust to the faint twilight that reigned within. It seemed to her as if in a dark corner a heap of something was lying. She did not think it had been there on their former visit. Wild thoughts of smugglers and contraband goods flashed into her mind. Were there smugglers nowadays? Was it a bale of silk or a case of champagne that was being stored there for safety? With rather a fluttering feeling she crept nearer. It was no case of wine or bale [262] of silk; in the darkness it looked more like a tumbled bundle of clothing. What could it be? She was frightened, and almost turned to go; but some attraction greater far than curiosity seemed to draw her on. She was quite close to it now. Her eyes had grown accustomed to the dim light, and she could just distinguish the sleeping figure of a boy, covered with a mackintosh coat.

"Bevis!" she whispered. "Oh, Bevis!"

He roused at her voice, and sprang to his feet with a cry, turning to her such a white, haunted face that she scarcely knew him. Merle ran forward from the entrance, and seeing both the girls he came slowly towards them.

"It's you, is it?" he said. "Have you brought the police with you?"

"Police! Why no, Bevis, of course not!"

"Why should we?"

He put his hand wearily to his head. His face was very pale, and his eyes were bright and big

with dark rings round them.

"No, you wouldn't bring them, I know, but they'll come all the same! I'm wanted. Wanted by the police. They're after me!"

"Oh, Bevis, don't talk like this! No police want you. Why don't you go home?"

"Go home! Go to Chagmouth! His ghost would stop me! Tell me, where have they buried him?"

"Buried whom?"

"Why, Tudor Williams of course—the poor boy that I murdered." [263]

"But Tudor's all right. He wasn't really much hurt. He walked home."

Bevis stared searchingly at Mavis, then shook his head.

"I *know* he's dead. It's no use telling me he isn't. I murdered him. Haven't I heard the bell tolling for his funeral? It never stops. I tell you it never stops. I hear it night and day, and I feel like Cain!"

The girls glanced at one another. Bevis was plainly very ill. He looked ghastly, and his knees trembled so greatly that he had to lean against the wall of the cave.

"Where have you been all this week?" Mavis asked him.

"I don't know. Here mostly, I think. I thought I'd walk to Port Sennen and try to get on board a ship, but somehow I feel weak. Perhaps I could get off to-night if I tried."

"Come home, Bevis," persuaded Merle.

But he sank down again on to the bed of leaves which he had made, and drew the mackintosh coat over him.

"It's so cold," he shivered. "First I'm burning hot and then I'm cold. It's the curse of Cain!"

Mavis took Merle's arm, and drew her outside the cave.

"He's in a high fever, and simply raving," she whispered. "He's not fit to walk home even if we [264] could get him to try. You go back to the farm and tell Mrs. Penruddock, and I'll stay here. We mustn't both leave him or he might wander off somewhere on to the cliffs. Be as quick as you can."

"I shall run all the way," declared Merle. "Oh, the *poor* boy. Think of staying here by himself the whole week."

Mavis went back into the cave, and kneeling down by Bevis tried to soothe him. She had been ill so often herself that she could sympathize as he shuddered and shivered. His hands were burning hot, and his great dark eyes shone like fires in his white face. She told him over and over again that Tudor was safe; but he scarcely seemed to understand, and kept moaning that he had murdered him.

"I'm not fit for any one to speak to. It's the curse of Cain," he repeated.

Meantime Merle, who was swift of foot and had won many long-distance races at school sports, flew back to Chagmouth with record speed, and carried her news to Grimbal's Farm. Mrs. Penruddock was in the kitchen. She ran at once and called her husband from where he was working in the orchard.

"I'll put the horse in the trap," he said briefly. "We'll go by the upper road, and then slip across the fields to the cave. Best take his overcoat and a rug."

Merle went with them, not that she could be of any special use, but because she simply could not stop behind, and after all she was able to render a service, for she held the horse while Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock hurried down the fields to the cave. They came back after a short time half- [265] carrying Bevis along, with Mavis, looking extremely grave, walking beside them. They lifted him into the trap, and drove him home, meeting Dr. Tremayne on the very doorstep.

The Doctor shook his head when he heard of the nights in the damp cave.

"Get him to bed, and we'll do our best," was his verdict. "He has youth and strength on his side at any rate. Please God we'll pull him round again. I've seen people worse than he is, Mrs. Penruddock, so keep your heart up. While there's life there's hope, remember. That's a proverb I always tell my patients, and one of the best that was ever invented."

"I know, Doctor," gulped poor Mrs. Penruddock. "I know if anybody can pull him through, you will. But it's hard to see him looking like this all the same—Bevis, who's hardly had a day's illness in his life before."

CHAPTER XX

A Confession

[266]

All the next week Bevis lay desperately ill, and in the gravest danger. Every morning Dr. Tremayne motored over to Grimbal's Farm to see him, and arrived back with the same unsatisfactory report. Mavis and Merle, who waited anxiously for the daily bulletin, would run in from school at lunch-time hoping for better news. When Saturday came round again they begged to be allowed to go to Chagmouth as usual.

"We wouldn't be a scrap of bother to Mrs. Penruddock," said Mavis. "If Jessop may give us some lunch we could eat it on the cliffs or in the woods."

"That's a great idea," declared Uncle David. "I'll do the same to-day. Jessop shall make us up a lunch basket, and we'll all have a picnic meal together somewhere before I go up to the Sanatorium. It will certainly save them trouble at the farm. Mrs. Penruddock won't want to do any cooking for us, I'm sure, when she's so busy nursing."

As they motored along towards Chagmouth, the girls felt strongly, what had sometimes struck them before, that it was good to belong to a Doctor's family, and to be taking skilled help where it was so greatly needed. They had the utmost confidence in Uncle David, and knew that he would [267] give every service that human aid could render or his long experience could suggest. He came down that morning from his patient's room with no better report:

"He's still very ill. I can't get his temperature down. But I'm trying different treatment, and we must see what that will do. I'm glad I shall be about the place to-day. They know where to find me if they want me."

Dr. Tremayne went into his surgery to attend to the string of other patients who were waiting for him, and Mavis and Merle sat in the little front garden, on the green bench under the fuchsia tree outside the French window. They had not the heart to go for a walk. Mrs. Penruddock, kind as usual, but overwhelmed with trouble, had greeted them, and taken them upstairs for one brief peep at the invalid. They had not gone inside the room, but from the doorway they had seen Bevis lying in bed with ice on his head, so thin and changed and hollow-eyed, that he scarcely looked like their old friend. As they sat in the garden, talking in undertones, the gate clicked, and Tudor Williams came up the path to the door—such a subdued Tudor, without any of his former jauntiness and gay flippancy of manner. When he saw the girls he crossed the grass and shook hands with them.

"I've come to ask about the poor chap," he said quietly. "Mother sent down a message to Dr. Tremayne to say that if there's anything we can do we'll be very glad. We'd send Jones for ice or [268] anything of that sort, you know. He'd take out the car directly and get what was wanted."

"Thanks very much, we'll tell Uncle David. Oh, there's Mrs. Penruddock! Perhaps you'd better speak to her and give her the message. There might be something wanted at once."

Mrs. Penruddock had come into the parlour, and now walked to the French window to meet Tudor, who inquired about Bevis, and explained his errand. She mopped her eyes as she thanked him.

"I'm sure people have all been so kind," she gulped. "Everything that can be done has been done. But there he lies rolling his head on his pillow, and talking for ever about the 'curse of Cain'. He can't get it out of his mind but what he's murdered you. It seems no use telling him. He just listens, and goes on again how he knows you're lying dead on the cliff. I wonder if he saw you if it would put that right? Could I ask you to step up to his bedroom for a minute, and let him have a look at you, and see for himself that you're alive?"

"Oh, may I?" said Tudor, passing through the French window into the parlour, and following Mrs. Penruddock upstairs.

He came down again after perhaps five minutes, and, big manly boy though he was, his eyes were red, and his voice was choking.

"I'd no idea the poor chap was in such a state," he burst out to Mavis and Merle. "It's awful to see him with his hollow eyes and his white hands. He asked me to forgive him! Forgive him! It's I [269] who ought to ask for forgiveness. It was all my fault! Mine entirely! I was an utter vulgar brute and beast! I never thought—" But seeing somebody coming to the gate, and boy-like not wanting to give an exhibition of his feelings, Tudor bolted back into the parlour, and going out by the side door into the stackyard, crossed the orchard, and went home over the fields to The Warren.

Mavis and Merle were rather glad that they were not having lunch to-day at the farm. Mrs. Penruddock was busy and upset, and though many neighbours had come in to help her, nobody seemed to know exactly what to do, and they sat in the kitchen talking and shaking their heads.

"Just like a set of old crows. As if that could do Bevis any good!" exclaimed Mavis rather impatiently.

"They're telling each other all sorts of tales about early deaths and funerals. Nice cheerful kind of conversation for a sick-house," agreed Merle.

Of course as they were in a hurry to get away, Dr. Tremayne had more patients than usual, and was detained a long time in the surgery. They waited for him in the garden, where the lilac bush under Bevis's window was already breaking into blossom, and swallows were darting past. To-morrow would be Palm Sunday, and next week was Easter week, and Father and Mother would be coming down to Durracombe for a brief holiday. It was three months since they had seen [270] them, and to-day, in the midst of all the sadness around them, the girls felt rather home-sick, and were longing for a peep at their "ain folk".

"Are they going to take us back with them to Whinburn?" speculated Merle.

"I don't know! I've asked Mother in almost every letter, and she's not answered my question."

"I'm torn in two!"

"So am I. I want Dad and Mother, and yet I don't want to leave dear Devonshire."

"Or Uncle David?"

"No. I've got real right-down fond of Uncle David. He's a darling! There's nobody else in the world exactly like him."

Dr. Tremayne worked through his list of waiting patients at last, and went round to the stackyard to fetch his car. Mavis and Merle jumped joyfully in, and they drove away up the hill. They went in the opposite direction to the Sanatorium because the Doctor had a visit to pay at a farm, and he wished to combine with it a call on Mrs. Jarvis, whose cottage would be close by his destination. The manager of Trotman's Circus had sent some few possessions which had belonged to her son Jerry, and they had brought the parcel with them in the car.

"We'll have our lunch first," decreed Uncle David, "then we'll go and see the poor old body afterwards. I want something to eat before I interview any more patients."

They chose a quiet spot at the edge of a wood, and drawing up the car on a patch of grass by [271] the roadside, they took their basket among the trees and spread forth their picnic. Jessop had provided handsomely for them, and they immensely enjoyed the meal in the open air.

"If I'd only time, I'd go skirmishing all over Devonshire. It's my ideal of a holiday, to motor just where you like, and not have to think of your surgery," admitted Dr. Tremayne, throwing pine cones at the girls, and behaving quite boyishly in spite of his sixty-five years.

"Can't Daddy take surgery for you while he's over and give you a rest?" suggested Merle. "I'm sure he'd help if he could."

"It's rather a brain wave. Perhaps he might," said Dr. Tremayne thoughtfully. "I'm growing a little tired of being perpetually in harness. When a man gets to my age he begins to crave for some leisure. I've been trying for the last three years to write a book on 'The Treatment of Tuberculosis', but I can't find the time to do it. Directly I begin somebody rings up and wants me to go and see them."

"I should smash the horrid old telephone and then they couldn't ring you up," laughed Merle.

"That's all right, little Pussie, but they'd send a messenger to fetch me instead, so it would come to just the same thing in the end."

"Why do doctors always go?"

"Because people can't do without us, I suppose. Of course we don't make unnecessary journeys, [272] but when a case is serious we turn out whatever the weather or however late it is."

"I know; that's what Daddy always says," put in Mavis. "He comes in tired to death, and goes out again in a snowstorm because the case is serious. I think doctors are just the best and kindest men in all the world."

They were quite sorry to leave the wood and go back to the car, but time was creeping on fast. Dr. Tremayne paid his visit at Clavedon Farm, then drove on to Mrs. Jarvis's cottage, which was close by. The girls took the parcel between them, and they all three walked together up the little garden to the open door. They found Mrs. Jarvis sitting in her kitchen with a neighbour to keep her company. Since the death of her son the postwoman had failed greatly, and for the last week she had not undertaken her duties in connection with the pillar-box. To-day she seemed hysterical and excited. She sprang up at the sight of Dr. Tremayne, and began a loud complaint of pains in her head, mixed up with lamentations on the death of General Talland.

"She's been like this all the week, Doctor," explained the neighbour. "She's not fit to be left alone. Ever since she heard the news about General Talland, she's been going on with this wild talk. We take no notice of her. He's nothing to her. It's just one of those queer fancies she gets sometimes. She'll perhaps calm down again."

SHE REACHED DOWN INTO SOME DARK RECEPTACLE AND DREW UP A BROWN-PAPER PARCEL

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"Can you bear to look at some of Jerry's things, Mrs. Jarvis?" asked the Doctor. [273]

At the mention of her son the poor woman's excitable mood changed; instead of shouting she spoke more quietly, and her eyes filled with tears as she turned over the trifles that had been sent to her.

"Jerry! My boy Jerry!" she murmured. "I always said he'd come back. He oughtn't to have gone and left me—ought he? And he took—I never told anyone what he took! He was a bad son to me."

"Never mind that now he's dead and gone," put in the neighbour.

"Ay, he's dead and gone, and so is General Talland, so is General Talland."

"She's off again on that point," groaned the neighbour.

But Mrs. Jarvis was looking at Dr. Tremayne with a curious craftiness in her eyes.

"General Talland's gone," she repeated. "And I hear they've to go a long way to find an heir to the property. What if there was an heir close at hand—here in Chagmouth?"

"What do you mean?" asked the Doctor.

"Ay, what do I mean? I'm not so demented as some folks think me. There's something that I could tell if I liked. I wouldn't have said a word if *he'd* a-lived, but he's dead and gone, so it makes no difference to him now if I speak. Sit you down, Doctor, and the young ladies too! I may as well tell it to plenty of witnesses while I'm about it. Do you remember, Doctor, when I was village [274] nurse over fourteen year ago? I was called in all of a sudden one day to attend Mrs. Hunter, the lady who'd been taken ill at the King's Arms."

"I remember," nodded Dr. Tremayne.

"Well, I swore at the inquest that she died without saying a word, but I swore false. I was left alone with her for just one minute in the parlour while Mrs. Tingcomb fetched more brandy, and Mr. Tingcomb sent Bob hurrying on his bicycle to Durracombe with a message for you. In that minute she got her breath. She knew that she was going fast, and she gasped out that she'd come to Chagmouth to find General Talland, that she'd been married secret to his son, and that the child was the heir. 'I've all the papers', says she, but then the faintness took her again, and

though Mrs. Tingcomb ran in and gave her brandy she never come round."

"But I thought at the inquest it was distinctly said there were no papers. I remember that point of the evidence particularly," said the Doctor.

"There were none in her handbag or in her portmanteau. She had them all in a hanging pocket slung round her waist under her dress skirt. I found them when I was laying her out. I put them by, and said nothing about it just then. I meant to give folks a big surprise at the inquest. I took them home and looked them over. There was forty pounds in notes amongst them. My poor boy Jerry was lying in bed asleep, as I thought, but he must have been watching me, for he up and [275] away as soon as it was light, and took the notes and my bits of savings too out of the old tea-pot. Why didn't I tell at the inquest? They'd have issued a warrant against Jerry! I wasn't going to put my own boy in prison! No one knew about the pocket, and the safest thing was to keep my mouth shut. I wouldn't have told now if my poor boy had been alive. Oh! he broke his mother's heart!"

"This is a most extraordinary story," said Dr. Tremayne. "If it's true have you anything to prove your words? Where are these papers you speak of?"

"Those that hide can find! May I trouble you to shift your chair, Doctor?"

Mrs. Jarvis moved away several pieces of furniture, and lifted first the hearthrug, and then part of the oilcloth that covered the floor. There was a loose board underneath; she raised it, reached down into some dark receptacle, and drew up a brown-paper parcel. She unwrapped this and revealed a small case made of linen, with tapes attached to it. Inside were a number of papers which she handed to Dr. Tremayne.

"They're all as she said, Doctor. There's her wedding certificate and the birth certificate, and letters from her husband too. You'll find them all right. She'd everything in order, poor thing. They'd have made a stir at the inquest, wouldn't they, if I could only 'a told about them?"

Dr. Tremayne was looking rapidly through the contents of the old linen case.

"These are indeed most valuable papers," he remarked. "I shall take them to the lawyers who [276] manage the Talland estate, and they'll no doubt prepare a statement which you will be required to sign to show how they came into your possession. Oh, Mrs. Jarvis! how *could* you keep them back for all these years, when you knew how much was involved?"

"Better late than never, Doctor. I was in two minds whether to burn them and have done with it. Oh, my poor boy Jerry! It's ill raking up matters against them that's gone. If he'd been alive, I'd have kept my mouth shut, and never have said a word."

Mrs. Jarvis was rocking herself to and fro in a state of great excitement. She was sane enough where a recollection of the events at the King's Arms was concerned, but her clouded brain revolved round the pivot of her son's death. She moaned, and twitched her mouth with nervous jerks.

"I'll make her up a bottle of bromide mixture when I get back to the surgery," said Dr. Tremayne to the neighbour. "Can you send one of your boys down for it about six o'clock? She oughtn't to be left alone."

"No, Doctor. I'll do what I can. She's in a bad way, poor soul. There's a lot of trouble in the world, isn't there?"

"There is indeed! Now I must hurry off, for I'm due at the Sanatorium, and I'm very late. Give her the mixture, and I'll call and see her again next week."

Dr. Tremayne put the linen case inside his safest inner pocket, and took his departure. As they drove down the hill towards the ravine all the little town and its neighbouring cliffs and woods lay [277] stretched out before them.

"Uncle David," asked Mavis, "if those papers are proved does it mean that The Warren and the whole of Chagmouth will belong to Bevis? Is he the grandson of General Talland?"

"There seems very little doubt about it. It was evidence that ought to have been given at the inquest fourteen years ago. Poor lad! Poor lad! If we'd only known sooner."

"But why did his mother call herself Mrs. Hunter?"

"Probably she wouldn't care to give her true name at the hotel until she had been to see General Talland. The marriage had been kept secret, and nobody in Chagmouth knew about it. No doubt she had intended to go to The Warren and show her child to its grandfather. But General Talland had started for the West Indies. It was perhaps the news of his absence, and the consequent failure of her errand, that brought on the heart attack that caused her sudden collapse."

"So Chagmouth belongs to Bevis," repeated Merle wonderingly. "The house, and the grounds, and the woods, and the shooting, and the farms, and the town are Bevis's. It's like a fairy tale!"

But the heir to all the Talland Estate lay between life and death.

CHAPTER XXI

The Floral Festival

[278]

Bevis pulled round after all. As Dr. Tremayne had said, he had youth and a strong constitution on his side. The new method of treatment seemed a miracle, and perhaps also the interview with Tudor, by settling the disturbance in his mind, allowed the medicines to have a fair chance. Nature reasserted herself, drove out baneful microbes, and set that wonderful instrument of hers, the human body, once more in working order. As soon as the fever left him Bevis picked up very fast. There was so much to get well for. The papers, hidden away so long in Mrs. Jarvis's cottage, established without a doubt his claim to the Talland property, and when the necessary formalities could be gone through he would become its legal owner. Naturally the affair was the talk of Chagmouth, and Bevis would have been overwhelmed with visitors and congratulations had not Mrs. Penruddock acted dragon, and kept away all callers except those who had a special permit from the Doctor. Under her excellent nursing he gained strength rapidly, and by the time St. Gervan's Day came round he looked almost his old self again. The floral festival held every year in honour of the patron saint of Chagmouth was an extremely ancient custom dating back [279] probably to dim ages before the dawn of history. The antiquarians of the neighbourhood said it was either a survival from the Romans, or more likely still a relic of Druidism and sun worship. Christianity, finding pagan rites had always heralded the beginning of the summer, had adopted the feast and dedicated it to St. Gervan, an obscure Cornish missionary whose very legend was forgotten. Nothing is so persistent, however, as the survival of an old village fête, and for hundreds of years Chagmouth people, when the anniversary occurred, had decked their boats with flowers, and rowed across the harbour, and round the point to the little old church on the rock. Ages ago Druids had no doubt invoked the heavens to send favourable harvests, in mediæval times the parish priest had probably blessed the fishing boats according to the custom which still obtains at a few places in Brittany, but these points in the old ceremony were now lost, and it had simply become a village holiday. It is likely enough that in these modern times, when few are given to sentiment, the whole thing would have fallen into disuse, had not the Vicar had the happy idea of combining with it a memorial service for those who had "passed on" in the Great War. Chagmouth people might smile at saints' days, and ask who St. Gervan had been, but they remembered their own boys, and would take wreaths to lay round the Celtic cross that had been erected in the little churchyard.

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Mavis and Merle were very anxious to see the floral festival, and though the Easter vacation was over, and school had begun again at The Moorings, they were allowed a special holiday for the purpose. That was Mother's doing. She had come to Durracombe with Father for Easter, and had stayed on for some weeks because Aunt Nellie was not very well, and needed extra care. On St. Gervan's day she hired a car from the hotel, and drove over to Chagmouth with the girls in order that they might all see the interesting ceremony. It was years since Mrs. Ramsay had been in the little town, and she was delighted to renew her acquaintance with it. To-day it was entirely *en fête*. Everybody was down by the quay side, where rowing boats of every description were ready in the harbour. The veriest old cockleshells had been patched up for the occasion, and there were also some motor-launches, and a small pleasure steamer which had made the trip from Port Sennen. All local boats were beautifully decorated with flags and with boughs of lilac or branches of pink hawthorn, and garlands of all kinds of gay cottage blossoms, May tulips, wallflowers, pansies, forget-me-nots, double daisies, pinks, or campanulas. There was great competition in the decorations. The school children had special boats to themselves, and proudly held up banners and little staves upon which were tied round bunches of flowers and flying ribbons. The Provident Societies also had their boats and their banners, and their members wore nosegays in their button-holes.

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The Ramsays had been offered places in Mr. Penruddock's boat, and they walked along the quay side to where she was moored. It was really a beautiful and very quaint scene, the harbour with its green, lapping water looking for once like a field of flowers, and the flocks of seagulls wheeling overhead and screaming at the unwonted sight. *The Dinah*, an old tub that belonged to Grimbal's Farm, had been made unwontedly smart for the occasion with a coat of fresh paint. Boughs of white lilac, wreaths of early roses, forget-me-nots, globe flowers, and starry clematis had fashioned it into quite a bower, the Union Jack fluttered in the stern, and rugs were spread over the seats.

The bell in the little church of St. Gervan's was clanging loudly, and people were beginning to get into their various craft, and push away across the harbour. Merle was carrying her camera, and was busy taking snap-shots of the interesting scene. Mavis, who had leanings towards art, had brought her sketch-book and jotted down impressions in black-lead pencil. For the sake of everybody it was a mercy that the weather, which had been behaving badly of late, held up and gave bursts of brilliant sunshine. It was only a short row from the quay to the old church. The congregation disembarked at a jetty, moored their boats, and climbed the eighty-seven stone steps that led steeply upward. To-day the usually neglected place had been made to look wonderfully spick and span. The grass had been mown between the graves and round the [282] soldiers' monument, where people were already piling up wreaths, floral crosses, and bunches of blossoms. The tower still lacked its coping, and the doorway had sunk yet more, but the windows

had been cleaned, and all cobwebs were swept away. Inside the church was decked with beautiful flowers, arum lilies, and roses, and pale-pink peonies and bush lupins, and many lovely half-exotic plants from the gardens of The Warren and the Vicarage. People were taking their places on the old oak benches. The Ramsays went into a seat half-way down the nave, exactly behind the Glyn Williamses, who had arrived in a body, governess and all. Bevis was about to follow when the Vicar came up to him, and after a short whispered conversation motioned him into the Talland family pew. It was Bevis's first visit to church since his illness, and to the whole congregation the Vicar's act seemed a public acknowledgment of the boy's new position in Chagmouth. He flushed scarlet, hesitated a moment, then stepped forward and took his place with a quiet dignity which became both himself and the occasion.

The short service was very simple, partly a thanksgiving, and partly a memorial to those who had given their lives for their country.

Through the open door came the sound of the lap of waves and the screaming of gulls.

"They that go down to the sea in ships," ran the Vicar's text, "that do business in great waters: these see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep."

To Mavis the sunlight and the scent of the flowers and the prayers all seemed blended together [283] into one beautiful picturesque whole, that joined ancient and modern and the living and the dead, and united those who worshipped with their rough forefathers who had carved those quaint bench ends, or those figures of the saints with the colourings of red, and blue, and gold.

As Bevis left the cool, flower-decked church, and stepped through the doorway into the sunshine, the very first person to greet him was Tudor Williams. The two boys gripped hands heartily, and without a trace of any former resentment.

"I believe they'll be friends now," said Mavis, as she talked the matter over with Merle afterwards. "I was afraid the Glyn Williamses would be bitterly disappointed at the prospect of having to give up The Warren some day to Bevis, but Tudor never cared much for Chagmouth, and what do you think Gwen told me just as we were starting back in our boat? Why, that her father had the offer of Godoran Hall, and all the property and shooting, and he means to buy it, and go and live there. It will be more convenient for them close to Port Sennen, and it's a lovely place."

"Oh, hooray! Perhaps they'll ask us to go and see them there sometimes. I hated them at one time, but I'd be sorry now if I never saw them again. Funny how one turns round, isn't it?"

"I never believe much in your violent hatreds," laughed Mavis. "You generally like people in the [284] end."

"Well, I liked Bevis in the beginning."

"So did I. I've always felt what Jessop said about him was true, he's a 'gentleman-born'! I don't mean that he's better than other people just because he's a Talland and owns the estate, but always, when he was quite poor and people jeered at him and called him a nobody, he behaved like a true gentleman. He stuck to Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock and helped them, though he hated the work on the farm, and he never spoke roughly and rudely like some of the boys about Chagmouth. He loves books and natural history and all those nice kinds of things, and he wanted to go on studying, and yet he didn't shirk a scrap at ploughing, and cutting hedges, and feeding the poultry. I'm sure if any one in this world deserves his good luck it's Bevis."

The girls had been uncertain whether they were to go home with Father and Mother to Whinburn after Easter or stay in Devon, but Dr. Ramsay had declared that the improvement in Mavis's health was so marvellous that the experiment was worth continuing.

"You look a different child," he said. "We'll leave you at Durracombe for another term at any rate."

"And what about the next term after that?" asked Mavis. "It will be autumn then, and very cold at Whinburn."

"That's a problem that needs carefully thinking out," answered Dr. Ramsay diplomatically.

He would say nothing further at the time, but later on, before she returned north, Mrs. Ramsay [285] had a secret to tell to Mavis and Merle.

"How would you like to live always at Durracombe?" she asked them.

"Always? Oh, Mummie! I'd adore it, if only it weren't for you and Daddy."

"We've missed you loads, Muvvie darling!"

"But suppose we were here, too?"

"Here! All the time?"

Then Mother, very proudly, revealed her great piece of news.

"Father is going to help with the practice. Uncle David has too much work, and wants somebody to take part of it off his hands. He and Father will go into partnership as soon as we can sell the practice at Whinburn. We shall all live here at Bridge House. It's a splendid

arrangement, because then I can take care of Aunt Nellie. She's such an invalid now that she needs constant nursing. Jessop wants to leave and keep house for a brother, who is a widower, and Aunt Nellie would be lost without Jessop, unless she had me to look after her instead. Don't you think it's a lovely plan?"

"Lovely! It's absolutely splendiferous!"

"And if Daddy brings the Ford car down here I can drive it for him," sparkled Merle.

"We'll see about that; you wouldn't have had that wild motoring expedition if I had been on the spot, you young madcap!"

"But I fetched Mrs. Jarvis, and if I hadn't she might never have known it was her own son at the [286] hospital, and then she wouldn't have told about the papers, and Bevis would never have got the Talland property. It's like the story of the old woman and her pig: the fire began to burn the stick, and the stick began to beat the dog, and the dog began to bite the pig, and the pig jumped over the stile, and she got home at last. We did Bevis a good turn when we tore over to Chagmouth that evening, didn't we, Mavis?"

"Rather! Though we didn't guess it at the time."

"So 'Whinburn High' will know us no more. Well, we've settled down quite comfortably at The Moorings. It's rather a decent school now Opal has gone."

"I hope it will improve very much," said Mrs. Ramsay. "Miss Pollard tells me that in September she's going to have a first-class English teacher, a B.A. with plenty of experience, who will run the school on new lines. Funnily enough, it happens to be Eve Mitchell, who was educated at St. Cyprian's College, Cousin Sheila's old school. I've often heard her talk about Eve. *She*'ll soon reorganize The Moorings. They have such a splendid record at St. Cyprian's for games and musical societies, and literary clubs, and nature-study unions, and all the rest of it. It was a school in a thousand, according to Sheila. Miss Pollard has the promise of ever so many fresh boarders, elder girls, not little ones. The climate of Durracombe is getting quite a reputation, I hear, and specially suits anyone who has been born in India. If the numbers increase so much, [287] particularly in the upper forms, it will give the school a far better opportunity in every way, especially in games."

"Hooray," exulted Merle joyfully. "That's the one thing where The Moorings has been really slack. We could do nothing with only that crowd of kids. But with girls of our own age, and a mistress from St. Cyprian's, we ought to forge ahead now, and have topping times. I'm looking forward to the September term."

"And yet I loved the last one," said Mavis. "I feel nothing will ever quite come up to my first peep at Devonshire, and those Saturdays at Chagmouth. It was like seeing a new world. It's been a first impression, a fresh experience, a gorgeous spring, an idyllic few months—what else can I call it?"

"Call it a very fortunate term," finished Merle.

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Transcriber's Note:

Punctuation has been made consistent.

The use of "The Glyn Williams" and "The Glyn Williamses", and spelling and hyphenation have been retained as they appear in the original publication except as follows:

Page 168
to take you a walk *changed to*
to take you for a walk

Page 199
had brought a thermos flash *changed to* had brought a thermos flask

Page numbers in the list of illustrations have been retained as they appear in the original publication although they don't match the page numbers in the body of the book.

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