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# Girls of Highland Hall

**Carroll Watson Rankin**

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A twin baby carriage containing weary infants, propelled by a perspiring young person, was coming in the gate

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CARROLL W. RANKIN

The Adopting of Rosa Marie
The Castaways of Pete’s Patch
The Cinder Pond
The Girls of Gardenville
Dandelion Cottage
Girls of Highland Hall

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GIRLS OF HIGHLAND HALL

Further Adventures of the Dandelion Cottagers

BY CARROLL WATSON RANKIN

Author of “Dandelion Cottage,” “The Girls of Gardenville,” “The Cinder Pond,” Etc.

New York
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1921

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TO
MRS. CELIA K. NORTHROP

To whom I am indebted for
much friendly encouragement.

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THE PERSONS OF THE STORY

| | |
|---|---|
| Bettie Tucker<br>Jean Mapes<br>Marjory Vale | Once of Dandelion Cottage,<br>now of Highland Hall. |

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|---|---|
| Mabel Bennett | |
| Henrietta Bedford | Their Best Friend. |
| Peter Black | Bettie’s Best Friend. |
| The Rhodes Family | Of Highland Hall. |
| Miss Woodruff | A Stern Teacher. |
| Maude Wilder | Her Most Incorrigible Pupil. |
| Miss Blossom | A Timely Flower. |
| Madame Bolande | Who Bathed in Perfume. |
| Gladys de Milligan | The Daughter of a Foolish Mother. |
| Abbie | A Sad Example to All Boarding School Orphans. |
| Sallie Dickinson | A Boarding School Orphan. |
| Elisabeth Wilson<br>Eleanor Pratt<br>Beatrice Holmes | The Lofty Seniors. |
| Victoria Webster | A Brave Maiden. |
| Isabelle Carew | Who Is Sentimental. |
| Augusta Lemon | A Timid Girl. |
| Cora Doyle | A Growing Girl. |

Various Teachers, Girls and Fathers—Especially Fathers.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS



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# GIRLS OF HIGHLAND HALL

## CHAPTER I—ON THE WAY

The time was almost noon of a warm September day. The place was State Street, Chicago. The persons were six, and four of them were seeing Chicago for the first time. They walked two by two in a little procession. There were other persons in State Street too, probably somewhere between a thousand and a million; but we don’t need to worry a great deal about those others, though of course if they hadn’t been there there would have been more room for our friends.

This small procession was headed by a well-dressed, moderately stout, smooth-shaven gentleman with touches of white in his black hair and a kindly, benevolent expression in his dark eyes and about his fine mouth. A handsome man and a good man, as any one could see.

His companion was a little girl of perhaps thirteen years of age. She, too, had big dark eyes with long lashes; and a nicely shaped mouth. Her complexion was just exactly right and her short hair curled crisply about the unusually pleasing countenance. Her name was Bettie and it seemed to be a very good fit.

The second couple followed close at the heels of the first, presenting a curious contrast. One of them, whose name was Jean, was instantly attractive because of the serene loveliness of her expression. One knew at a glance that she was a person to be trusted. The girl beside her, all of two years younger, was very much smaller; a little sprite of a girl, with bright, gray eyes and quantities of fluffy golden hair. She, also, was a pretty child. Her small features were shapely and she looked, as indeed she was, an unusually bright child. She was quick and graceful in her movements and nothing in the shop windows escaped the eager, birdlike glance of little Marjory Vale.

The third couple was erratic in its movements. Sometimes it damaged the heels of Jean and Marjory by crowding too close. Sometimes it lagged so far behind—the windows were *most* attractive—that it had to run to catch up. One of this couple, Mabel Bennett, was not built for running. Mabel was the youngest and the broadest of the sextette; but her undeniable plumpness did not detract from her looks. One couldn’t help liking her honest blue eyes, the wholesome red and white of her fine complexion, her sturdy, childlike figure, her dependable legs and the rich bronze of her abundant hair. It was braided this morning in a thick, uneven braid; from which numerous tendrils that curled in large, loose, rather becoming rings escaped untidily. One guessed that inexperienced Mabel had been her own decidedly unskilful hairdresser that morning. Mabel’s partner in the procession was a girl of about fifteen, so unusual in appearance

that strangers turned to look at her. Dark as a gipsy, with glowing crimson cheeks, bright black eyes with curling lashes, soft black hair that grew naturally in pleasing curls neatly tied back with a broad black ribbon; a shapely, graceful figure possessing to an unusual degree an atmosphere of style. The girls were all well dressed, mostly in blue serge, but this fifth young person, Henrietta Bedford, wore *her* clothes with a different air. One realized that the serge in her smartly cut frock was a degree finer than that in Mabel's rumpled middy or in Marjory's very brief skirt. Also Henrietta's scarlet silken tie was broader, more brilliant and of a heavier texture than those of the other girls. One could easily see that there were wealth and generations of cultivation back of Henrietta—and adventures ahead of her.

One of the adventures was about to begin, but the kindly man who led the procession was far from suspecting it. It was Mabel who started this one.

"If I see another window just bursting with candy I'll *die*," said Mabel. "I never *saw* such windows. I wish I hadn't left my money in my suitcase."

"Mr. Black has mine," said Henrietta. "All but a dime that happened to be loose in my pocket. But I tell you what. We'll dart into the next candy place and spend that—we can easily catch up. Here, come on in here."

The clerk, not realizing that the two girls were in a hurry, finished leisurely with another customer before attending to Henrietta who was impatiently tapping the counter with her dime.

"What's all the rush," drawled the young man, carefully weighing the pink and white buttercups that Henrietta had chosen. "Catching a train?"

"Yes," snapped Henrietta. "Don't bother to tie it up. Come on, Mabel, we must run, now, to catch up. That horrid clerk was dreadfully slow."

They ran. They caught up with and passed a large number of persons but not with Jean, nor Marjory of the yellow hair, nor Bettie with the bobbing curls nor Mr. Black, who had innocently imagined himself perfectly capable of introducing Chicago to five small maidens from the wilds of Northern Michigan.

He had now lost two of them. He had missed them almost immediately and had turned back to look for them, expecting to find them with their noses against some fascinating window. And now they were well ahead of him, screened from his view by hundreds of busy shoppers and running with might and main.

## CHAPTER II—PREPARATIONS

And now, of course, you will want to know why a round half dozen of Lakeville's most precious inhabitants should be discovered parading the streets of Chicago and incidentally losing themselves and each other by the wayside.

It was this way. The Lakeville schoolhouse had burned down, nobody could decide where to build a new one and the places used as temporary substitutes were unsatisfactory to many of the parents. Moreover, Mabel's father, the village doctor, had long wanted to go to Germany in order to study certain branches of surgery—this was before the war, of course. His wife wanted to go with him but she didn't wish to take Mabel.

Miss Jane Higgins, otherwise Aunty Jane, had been intrusted with money to be devoted to the education of her orphaned niece, little Marjory Vale. Aunty Jane possessed a conscience that would not rest until that money was spent for that particular purpose. Then there were accomplishments that Mrs. Mapes desired for her daughter Jean and that Mrs. Slater wanted for her granddaughter Henrietta that were not, at that time, procurable in Lakeville. The solution to all these problems was boarding school, since the girls were much too young for college.

Of course Bettie Tucker, their inseparable companion, wished to go too. But her father, a clergyman with a large family and a small salary, could see no way to afford what seemed to him an unnecessary outlay; until Mr. Black, an elderly widower with a young heart and a warm affection for all children and especially for Bettie, offered generously to pay all expenses connected with Bettie's education.

Of course the selecting of a proper school had proved a matter of much importance and thought. The mothers and Aunty Jane had sent for and received vast numbers of catalogues, each more fascinating than the last. Aunty Jane was in favor of something near Boston. Mrs. Bennett preferred Philadelphia, while Mrs. Mapes showed a partiality for Ohio.

"I think," said Mrs. Tucker, "that we'd better be guided by Mrs. Slater. She has traveled a great deal and I'm sure she must have a great many friends whose daughters have been to boarding school. Let's talk to Mrs. Slater about it."

"I agree with you," said all the other parents and Aunty Jane.

Mrs. Slater had, indeed, a great many friends who had had boarding school daughters. Also, she

too had a tall stack of catalogues. Also she had, in her own mind, already selected a school for Henrietta.

“In the first place,” said she, when her guests were seated in her handsome house, “we don’t want our little girls too far away from us, so I am in favor of something near Chicago. In the second place I am greatly inclined toward the school founded by my old friend Doctor Rhodes in Hiltonburg. A very fine old gentleman, my dears, with high ideals and beautiful manners. Highland Hall is perhaps rather an old fashioned school; but the catalogue states that there is a new gymnasium and new, up-to-date dormitories. The most charming young woman of my acquaintance attended that school—Ruth Belding, her name was. Dr. Rhodes, I assure you, is a wonderful man, splendidly educated, highly cultured and charming in every way. His teachers are chosen with the greatest care and only really nice girls are admitted to his school. There are more expensive schools and some cheaper ones—I had been thinking of consulting you about this very matter.”

“It sounds all right to me,” said Mrs. Bennett.

“I *had* thought of that Painesville place,” said Mrs. Mapes, “but Hiltonburg is certainly nearer home—though any place is far enough from Northern Michigan.”

“Of course there’s no place like Boston,” said Aunty Jane, who had been born in the East, “but Marjory *could* get home from this Hiltonburg place for her Christmas vacation.”

“I haven’t any particular choice,” said Mrs. Tucker. “Anything that meets with Mr. Black’s approval will be all right for Bettie.”

“Then,” said Mrs. Slater, “we’d better write at once to Doctor Rhodes. He may not have room.”

Doctor Rhodes replied very promptly. There *was* room and he would be very glad indeed to enroll five new pupils from Lakeville. The mothers and Aunty Jane were glad to have the matter settled. It did not occur to any of them, least of all to Mrs. Slater, that charming Ruth Belding was no longer a very young woman and that considerable time had elapsed since she had been graduated from Hiltonburg.

The five girls had spent a wonderful summer camping in the woods with Mr. Black and his good old sister, Mrs. Crane. On their return, all the dressmakers in the village had been kept busy for a bewildering fortnight outfitting the lively youngsters with suitable garments for school. From a mountain of catalogues, the busy parents selected and studied long lists of articles needed by prospective pupils at various schools. Then they bought trunks and filled them. Jean, Mabel, Marjory and Henrietta began to prattle of clothes.

“My silk stockings have come,” said Henrietta. “Two pairs for very best and Grandmother has sent to New York for my hat.”

“I have my first silk petticoat,” said Jean. “Mother ordered it from Chicago.”

“I have two new middy blouses from Detroit,” confided Mabel. “The Chicago ones were not big enough.”

“Aunty Jane sent to Boston for my coat,” said Marjory. “It’s all lined with satin.”

Bettie said never a word.

“Say, Bettie,” demanded Mabel, “how’s *your* trunk coming?”

“It isn’t,” returned Bettie, soberly. “The baby has been sick and Mother hasn’t been able to do a thing. I’ve darned two pairs of stockings and taken the hem out of an old petticoat—and that’s all. I’m—I’m getting worried.”

Suddenly Bettie’s lip quivered and Jean noticed it. Now, Jean was thoughtful beyond her years and she knew that the Tuckers had very little money to spend for clothes. When she reached home, still wondering where Bettie’s wardrobe was to come from, she found her mother entertaining Mr. Black’s stout middle-aged sister, Mrs. Crane.

“Well, Jeanie girl,” said Mrs. Crane, “I’ve been admiring your new silk petticoat. I suppose you are all just about ready for school.”

“Bettie isn’t,” returned Jean, soberly. “I’ve been thinking about it all the way home. Mrs. Tucker never *was* very smart about Bettie’s clothes, you know, and of course they haven’t any money. The things that come out of missionary boxes never do seem to be just right. I don’t see where Bettie’s outfit is coming from.”

“Bless my soul!” cried Mrs. Crane, “I’m just an old idiot. And so is Peter. Here is this blessed old goose of a brother of mine sending Bettie off to school for a year and neither of us thinking that she’d need clothes. What ought she to have, Mrs. Mapes? You make out the list and I’ll get the things. Why! I’d just *love* to do it.”

Left to herself, it is to be feared that Mrs. Crane would have done fearful things. Her mind ran to

gay plaids with red predominating; and at first she talked much of materials for pinafores—a species of garment in vogue in her own remote youth; but with much sound advice from Mrs. Mapes it was not long before Bettie's wardrobe compared very well with Jean's.

Mrs. Crane, however, indulged in a few wild purchases that satisfied her love for color and greatly amused Henrietta. There was a gay plaid dress with brass buttons, a pair of bright blue stockings, some red mittens, a wonderful knitted scarf of many hues, a purple workbag and at least four strings of gaudy beads. Fortunately, there were plenty of garments without these and Bettie declared that Mrs. Crane's queer purchases made the dark depths of her big trunk quite bright and cheerful.

"As for my trunk," laughed happy Bettie, "it's big enough to live in and it's all mine forever and ever."

## CHAPTER III—LOST

But it is high time we were returning to Chicago to look after the lost Lakeville children.

"I think they might have waited for us," panted Mabel, no longer able to run. "They might have known we'd get lost."

"It wasn't their fault," said Henrietta. "I should have asked them to wait. But that's just like me. I'm always doing things on the spur of the moment and then wishing I hadn't."

"If we only knew where they were going to eat—"

"But we don't. Mr. Black said that as long as our train was late getting in and we had missed our connection with the Hiltonburg train that we'd just check our baggage to the other station and walk about until time for lunch. After that we'd go some place to look at something—I've forgotten just what—and leave for Hiltonburg at three o'clock."

"I wish I had my lunch right now," wailed Mabel, dragging her hat into place and stuffing loose locks under it. "I'm hungry and I'm thirsty and my new shoes hurt my feet. It's awfully noisy here and I don't like being lost. I don't *like* it—"

"Mabel," warned Henrietta, "if you cry, I'll run away and leave you here and then you'll be a lot more lost than you are now. I'm just as much lost as you are, even if I *have* been in Chicago before. We'll go along until we see a restaurant with ladies eating in it and *we'll* go in and eat—"

"But we haven't any money," objected Mabel, dismally.

"If I remember rightly," said Henrietta, after a moment's deep thought, "they don't ask for your money until *after* you've eaten. I think I know of a way to fix it. Wait a minute until I tidy you up a little. There are three dabs of soot on your face and your hair is all over the place. Of course we want to look as if we *had* money."

"You always do," said Mabel, "but I don't."

"Still," consoled Henrietta, "you always look as if you'd had meals—as many as four or five a day."

"But," questioned Mabel, "are you *sure* it's all right?"

"Of course. I told you I knew a way to fix it. Here's a place right here—not very big but the folks look all right. Stand up straight and don't look so scared. There, that's better."

They were inside. The waiter held up two fingers and escorted them to a table. They sat down and Henrietta leisurely removed her gloves. Mabel's had been removed—and lost—for some hours.

"We might as well have a *good* meal," remarked Henrietta, studying the *menu*. "Of course, if Mr. Black were paying for it I'd leave the choice to him; but as long as he isn't we'll choose what we like. Let's begin with cream of celery soup. Then how would you like chicken *à la king* and shrimp salad, creamed cauliflower, French fried potatoes—and ice cream for dessert?"

"That's all right for me," agreed Mabel, visibly cheering up, "only I like the looks of the green corn that man is eating over there; and the waiter just went by with a big tray of fluffy things—"

"French pastry. We can have some of that, too."

They enjoyed their meal. Being lost wasn't half bad when the salad was so delicious, the chicken so tender, the rolls so delightfully crisp, the corn so sweet, the service so excellent. Besides her ice cream, Mabel ate two varieties of French pastry and was sorry that Henrietta didn't urge her to try more when there were so many kinds. But Henrietta was putting on her gloves.

Henrietta picked up the slip, carried it to the cashier's desk and remarked, calmly: "Charge it, please, to Mrs. Howard Slater."

“But, my dear girl,” objected the cashier, “we don’t charge meals. This is a cash place.”

“Oh, is it?” said Henrietta, flushing slightly. “I’m sorry for that. You see, we *haven’t* any cash. But if you will send the bill to my grandmother, of course she will pay it.”

“It’s a pretty big bill,” remarked the young woman with suspicion. “I think I’d better call the manager. Mr. Hobbs—Oh, Mr. Hobbs! Step here a moment please.”

Mr. Hobbs “stepped here.” The young woman explained.

“Mrs. Slater of this city?” he asked.

“No,” returned Henrietta; “of Lakeville, Michigan.”

“How do I know she’ll pay this?”

“Oh, she will,” exclaimed both girls at once. “She always does.”

“Well, you look as if she did,” said the man, who had taken in all the details of Henrietta’s well made costume. “If you’ll give me her address and write a little note to go with the bill, I’ll let you go this time. This—this isn’t a regular performance, is it?”

“Oh, no,” assured Henrietta. “We just happened to get separated from our friends and they had all the money; but I knew it would be all right.”

“I hope it is,” said the manager, a little later, as he addressed an envelope to Mrs. Slater. “Those children certainly ate a square meal.”

In the meantime, perplexed Mr. Black gathered what remained of his flock as close to him as possible, looked anxiously up and down the street and wondered what to do.

“If we stay right here,” said Jean, “they may catch up.”

“If we go back for a couple of blocks,” said Marjory, “we may find them.”

“Perhaps,” suggested Bettie, “they passed us when we stopped to look at those clocks.”

“It’s time we were having our lunch,” said Mr. Black. “Suppose we walk back and forth the length of this block—we *must* find those girls.”

“Couldn’t we ask that policeman if he had seen two girls, one fat and one very dark?” asked Marjory.

They could and they did, but the policeman hadn’t. He looked indeed as if he had never condescended to see anything below the level of his own lofty chin.

“Now what,” asked worried Mr. Black, taking off his hat and mopping his forehead, “would *you* do, girls, if *you* were lost?”

“I’d die,” said Marjory.

“I’d telegraph my father,” said Bettie.

“I’d remember that I was going to Hiltonburg on the three o’clock train,” said Jean, “and I’d ask a policeman how to get to the station.”

“Good,” said Mr. Black. “Would either of those girls think of that?”

“Mabel wouldn’t,” replied Jean, “but Henrietta might. She has traveled a lot you know. She’s been in London, New York, Paris, San Francisco, Washington, Boston and even in Chicago—but not for very long. Still, she knows a lot more about cities than *we* do. She has stayed in hotels—perhaps she’ll go to one.”

“But—had she any money? Had Mabel?”

“Mabel’s mother didn’t give her very much,” said Jean. “She always loses it. What she had she packed in her suitcase.”

“And I have Henrietta’s,” mourned Mr. Black. “Poor girls! They are frightened half to death and hungry too. They had an early breakfast, poor things. I should have kept an eye on them every moment.”

“Just one eye wouldn’t have been enough for Henrietta,” remarked Bettie. “She darts about like a humming bird. There’s one thing certain. They’re not in this block.”

“We’ll walk back and forth for twenty minutes longer,” said Mr. Black. “Then we’ll get something to eat. After that we’ll go to the station.”

Owing to very slow service, it was almost two o’clock before they finished their meal. There was

another delay when they tried to find a taxicab. After that they were held up twice by congested traffic and the anxious girls began to fear that they might be late for the three o'clock train; but they were not.

Mr. Black was quite pale and haggard from anxiety when at last they reached the station. He gave an audible sigh of relief when two girls seated just inside the waiting room door, hopped up and grabbed his coat tails to halt his rapid stride through the station.

"Oh, Mr. Black," squealed Mabel. "We're here. We walked all the way and we asked a policeman on every corner to make sure we were getting to the right place. I used to think I ought to run if I saw a policeman but I guess they're pretty useful if you're good—only I wasn't. It was all my fault. I went into a store to buy candy."

"It was mine, too," said Henrietta. "I should have known better. I just didn't think—I never do. I'm awfully sorry."

"Well, well," returned Mr. Black, "I'm certainly glad you were capable enough to get to the right station. Now take hold of hands, all of you, and Bettie, you hold on to my coat like grim death. We must buy our tickets, re-check our baggage and get aboard our train."

## CHAPTER IV—FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Even a very unobserving person would have been able to see at a glance that Highland Hall had begun life as a private residence. Originally a big square house built of cream colored brick and generously supplied with large windows and many balconies, it was perched in solitary grandeur at the top of a broad, grassy knoll; but when it became a school red brick additions, four stories high, extended toward the north and west. An enormous and very ugly veranda stretched along the entire length of one of these additions. From it a broad flight of twelve wide steps led to the ground.

Doctor Rhodes and his family lived in part of the old mansion. His office was there on the ground floor in a room that had once been the dining room. The original parlor, a huge oblong room with a very high ceiling, and the dark and rather dingy library back of it were still unchanged.

Most of the second, third and fourth floors of the large modern wings contained bedrooms. The school rooms, music rooms and studio occupied the ground floor. New pupils always complained that there were miles and miles of dark hallways and corridors in which to get lost.

The kitchen, dining hall and laundry were in the basement.

There were no houses visible from three sides of the school building. From the fourth side, however, one could see the dark roofs of other ancient houses falling into decay, each with its huge yard, its overgrown hedge, its unkempt shrubbery. Beyond that, nearly a mile distant, the red town of Hiltonburg glistened in the sunshine.

Somewhere between five and six o'clock that September afternoon, the station hack stopped on the curved driveway in front of Highland Hall. Mr. Black and his five charges alighted. This spectacle afforded much interest to some three dozen maidens clustered in pairs and groups on the front steps and on the wide veranda. To the embarrassed newcomers these girls seemed to be all eyes. Never had the children from Lakeville encountered so many curious eyes. There *couldn't* have been more than seventy-two but it seemed more like seventy-two thousand, Bettie said afterwards.

Mr. Black addressed one of the nearest groups. "Can you direct me," he asked, "to Doctor Rhodes?"

"Yes, Sir," said a little girl with smooth, brown hair, rising promptly and leading the way inside. "He's probably in the office, but if he isn't I'll find him for you."

"Ah," said Doctor Rhodes, who *was* in his office, rising from his chair, "the five young ladies from Lakeville, I take it?"

"Yes," returned Mr. Black.

"Most of our flock arrived day before yesterday," said Doctor Rhodes, shaking hands all around, "but you are still in very good season. And what is better, you are just in time for dinner. If Miss—Ah, I don't remember your name—"

"Jane," supplied the little girl.

"Ah, yes, Miss Jane. If you will inform Mrs. Rhodes she will show the young ladies their rooms so they can—er—wash up a little if necessary. You, Mr. Black, may come with me."

Mrs. Rhodes appeared presently and the girls were introduced. They didn't like Mrs. Rhodes. She was a tall, very slender, very upright old woman in an unnatural state of tidiness, with evenly-waved white hair parted exactly in the middle, a wrinkled white skin and glittering black eyes set

in narrow slits. Her unsmiling mouth, too, was a narrow slit. Her expression was severe. She was really rather a frosty and blood-curdling old lady to look at but on this occasion she proved a good guide, surprisingly nimble for her years. She led them to the second floor, through a wide arch that led to a long corridor. There were doors down each side of this and a window at the end. Here she paused to consult a note book that she had taken from her pocket.

“Number twenty. Miss Vale, Miss Bedford in here. Miss Tucker, Miss Mapes in twenty-two. Miss Bennett in twenty-four with Miss Isabelle Carew.”

“Oh!” gasped Mabel, “couldn’t I stay with the others?”

“No,” returned Mrs. Rhodes. “I have arranged for you to room with Miss Carew of Kentucky. I’m quite sure you will like her.”

Half an hour later, the five girls were led to the dining room and seated at one of several long tables. Mr. Black they perceived at a distance—a tremendous distance it seemed—at Doctor Rhodes’s own table.

“There’s custard pie, tonight,” whispered the girl next to Henrietta. Not a pretty girl, but her face was alive with mischief and Henrietta liked her at once. “I saw pies and pies cooling in the basement window when I crawled under the veranda to see what they kept in there. Grand place to hide. What’s your name? Mine’s Maude Wilder and I live in Chicago. My room’s in the West Dormitory too, so you’ll see a lot of me.”

“I’m glad of that,” said Henrietta.

“The three girls over there with the fancy hair are Seniors. The other big girls at that table are Juniors. They don’t mix very much with the rest of us.”

“Won’t you have a biscuit?” asked a gentle voice at Bettie’s right. “I’m Sarah Dickinson—Sallie for short.”

Bettie looked at Sallie. She saw a slender girl of about fifteen, with dark blue, rather sad eyes, light brown hair and a pale skin. Her shoulders drooped a little and there was something rather pathetic about her smile. The blue collar of her middy blouse was very much faded. This was very noticeable because, just at the beginning of the term as it was, nearly all the garments in sight were brand new.

“Are you a new girl?” asked Bettie.

“I’m the *oldest* girl,” returned Sallie. “I’ve been here, vacations and all, for five years. I haven’t any home of my own.”

Later, Bettie learned more about Sallie. Her mother had died when Sallie was about nine years old. For a time she had lived alone with her father but he had decided that she would be better off in a girls’ school. An old man, her grandfather, perhaps, had brought her to Highland Hall, paying her tuition for one year in advance. Something had happened to her father. When the school year was finished it was discovered that Sallie had no home to go to, her relatives having somehow disappeared. Anne Blodgett, a last year’s girl who told Bettie about it, was not very sure of her facts. Anyway, the housekeeper had allowed her to stay because the little girl seemed likely to prove useful—there were many errands to do in a house like that.

She was still staying and still proving useful; but the kindly housekeeper had departed and stern Mrs. Rhodes had apparently taken the housekeeper’s place. Sallie was kept busier than ever. She sometimes seemed a bit dazed and bewildered and just a little bit down-hearted; but at first she had very little to say about herself.

Mr. Black departed very soon after dinner. The girls were permitted to walk to the last corner of the school premises with him. There they clung to him tearfully and begged him to make a great many business trips to Chicago in order to visit them at Highland Hall.

“I know,” sobbed Bettie, “that we’re going to be homesick. I’m homesick *now*. It’s so *different*. All those strange girls and that awful Mrs. Rhodes.”

“And me with a strange roommate,” wailed Mabel, also in tears. “And I don’t even know what she looks like.”

“You’ll be so busy studying that you won’t have time to miss Lakeville,” assured Mr. Black. “Now run back like good girls so I can catch my train. I’ll send you a great big box of candy from Chicago tomorrow and new friends will flock about you like flies.”

Before many hours had passed, Mabel discovered that a strange roommate was not so bad after all because Isabelle Carew of Kentucky had arrived two days earlier and knew when to go to bed, when to get up, where to find the class rooms and most important of all, the dining room. Mabel thoroughly enjoyed imparting her new knowledge to her Lakeville friends.

Each day, they discovered, was divided into sections of forty minutes each, and each section was filled to the brim. A bell rang every forty minutes—Sallie had to ring it.

“And my goodness!” said weary Mabel, during visiting hour, when the five friends were stretched at length across Henrietta’s narrow bed, “it’s just awful to jump up and do something different every time that bell rings.”

“Never mind,” soothed Henrietta, “we don’t have to do a single thing from three in the afternoon until six, except on walking days. We don’t have to go to gym from two to three unless we want to. We don’t have to study evenings unless we like but except on dancing nights we have to stay in our own rooms and keep quiet in case anybody *does* want to study.”

“Or rest,” groaned Mabel.

“There’s kind of a woodsy grove over that way—south, I guess,” said Jean. “We can go as far as the road, Cora says. She’s that thin girl with freckles—an old girl. Sometimes you can find nuts; and, in the spring, there are lots of wild flowers.”

“Spring will never get here,” groaned Marjory.

“We aren’t allowed to go to town at all,” said Jean, “except sometimes to lectures and concerts at the Theological Seminary, and there’s a regular shopping day sometimes. Cora says it isn’t a bit like it was here last year—a great many things have been changed. All the teachers, for one thing. There’s a secret. Something happened, but she says that Doctor Rhodes took all the old girls into his office as soon as they came and made them promise not to tell the new girls—or anybody.”

“The teachers,” said Henrietta, “are a bunch of freaks and as near as I can make out most of them are related to Doctor Rhodes. I had physical geography from his poor old cousin, Emily Rhodes; and a music lesson from his daughter, Julia Rhodes.”

“His daughter-in-law, Mrs. Henry Rhodes, teaches painting and needlework,” said Jean. “She’s rather pleasant, *I* think.”

“Anyway,” said Mabel, “that French teacher isn’t related. And I don’t think Miss Woodruff is.”

Marjory sat up suddenly and giggled.

“What’s the joke?” demanded Henrietta.

“Mabel made friends with Miss Woodruff this morning in mathematics. She is just about the tallest and stoutest person you ever did see. Mabel asked her if she hadn’t been teaching a great many years. Miss Woodruff said, ‘Why, no; how old do you think I am?’ Mabel looked her up and down carefully and said: ‘About seventy-five.’”

“Oh, Mabel!”

“Well,” confessed Mabel, “I honestly didn’t see how anybody *could* grow to such a size in *less* than seventy-five years. Why! She’s the very biggest woman I *ever* saw.”

“She’ll have it in for you,” laughed Henrietta.

“I like Sallie Dickinson,” said Bettie. “But I’m sort of sorry for her, too. She has to give out all the mail because she’s the only person who never gets any and she has to help in the kitchen sometimes, cleaning silver and things like that. And ringing that horrid bell. It isn’t any wonder her legs are so thin—always running up and down stairs and through all those long halls.”

“I like Maude Wilder,” said Jean. “She’s full of fun and she throws stones just like a boy.”

“I don’t care about Isabelle,” confessed Mabel. “She says she’s *engaged*.”

“Engaged!” squealed Marjory. “How old is she?”

“About fifteen. She says southern girls are *always* engaged. She talked about nothing but boys last night and she says she’s afraid she’s falling in love with the history teacher—Mr. James Carter.”

“I saw him,” said Henrietta. “I should think if *any* man were perfectly safe from being fallen in love with, he *was*. He’s an ugly, near-sighted little brute with black whiskers and shabby shoes—another relative of Doctor Rhodes, Maude says. I guess Isabelle is just naturally sentimental like a silly maid Grandmother had once. She’ll have a sweet time getting sympathy out of Mabel, won’t she?”

“She’s writing sort of a continued letter to her Clarence,” laughed unsentimental Mabel. “He’s a silly looking thing, too. I saw his picture in her locket. She wears it night and day.”

“I suppose,” teased Henrietta, “you’re going to write to Laddie Lombard?”

“Of course I am, but that’s different. He’s just a regular boy—not a *beau*.”

“It’s time we were dressing for dinner,” said Jean, prodding her lazy companions. “We should

have been outdoors all this time."

"I'm worried about dinner," confessed Mabel. "Sallie says that beginning with tonight we have to ask for everything in French and I don't know enough French to ask for a stewed prune."

"You don't have to," laughed Bettie, "we have those for breakfast."

"It's all right anyway," said Marjory. "Cora says that the girls at our table have a secret code—Maude invented it as soon as she heard about the French. This is it. You punch your next door neighbor once for bread, twice for butter, three times for pickles, four times for potatoes. One pinch means sugar and two pinches for cream. We never get any more meat anyway so there isn't anything for that. Of course you mustn't get your pinches and punches mixed up. But isn't that a grand scheme for beginners in French?"

"Ye-es," admitted Mabel, doubtfully, "but you see, I sit next to Miss Woodruff. What if I forget and punch her?"

## CHAPTER V—NEW ACQUAINTANCES

The French teacher, Madame Celeste Bolande, was easily the most interesting of all the teachers. She afforded the girls a vast deal of amusement as well as much annoyance. As a topic of conversation she was inexhaustible. She was truly wonderful to look at but the snapshots that the Miller girls took of her failed to do her justice.

"Doctor Rhodes must have ordered her by mail," said Cora Doyle, after her first French lesson with the new teacher. "Phew! I'm glad to get outdoors. She was fairly drenched with perfume."

"Yes," agreed Debbie Clark. "Doctor Rhodes couldn't have seen her first or he never would have taken her. What's that stuff about a pig in a poke? Well, that's how he got her. I'm sure *she* isn't a relative, even by marriage."

Madame Bolande was really amazing to look at and if the girls spoke of her disrespectfully it was not surprising. No properly brought up little girl *could* have respected that astonishing lady. Nature had been kind to her; she might have been entirely pleasing to the eye, but for several reasons she was not. She had quantities of black hair, apparently all her own, but it was always greasy and untidy as if it were never washed or brushed or combed. It hung about her face in oily loops that had a way of breaking loose at odd moments, at which times Madame would pin them carelessly in place and go on with the lesson.

Sometimes she wore so-called laced shoes, sometimes buttoned ones. However, most of the time they were neither laced nor buttoned. Whether she wore black stockings with large holes in them or soiled white ones, they were constantly coming down. It was a perpetual joy to the girls to see her reach down, casually, to haul the slipping stocking back into place. As Madame sat at a small table in the center of the class room, with the girls on a long bench against the wall, this amusing operation, though it took place beneath the table, was always plainly visible.

Buttons were missing from her tight-fitting black frock, showing many hued undergarments not supposed to be seen. Bits of ragged petticoats always dangled below the bottom of her skirt. Her neck, her ears and her finger nails were visibly dirty.

Madame's face, however, was quite a different matter. Her shapely countenance, from ear to ear, from brow to chin, was carefully plastered with powder, her cheeks and lips were rouged and a dab of blue decorated each eyelid. But, with the exception of her rather handsome face, her whole person was woefully neglected.

As a horrible example, Madame proved decidedly useful. No girl *could* look upon that lady and fail to bathe. No girl *could* note that lady's dangling petticoats of green or cerise silk or soiled white cotton with torn lace and fail to fasten her own neat underskirt securely into place. Even Mabel, it was noticed, began at once to take pains to braid her own troublesome locks more tidily.

"It isn't because she's *poor*," said Henrietta. "I've seen lots of poor people right in France and most of them are just as neat as wax; and so clever about making the most of what they have. And it isn't because she doesn't have *time* to mend her clothes or to bathe or wash her hair. She has all her afternoons and evenings, except when she has papers to correct—*that* doesn't take so very much of her time."

"She's just naturally that way," said Anne Blodgett, sagely.

"She bathes in perfume," explained Sallie.

"It's the one thing she does bathe in," breathed Anne.

"Well," laughed Sallie, "she has enough to fill a *small* bathtub. There are ten bottles on her dresser and you know how horribly she smells of the stuff. Isn't she just awful! She never makes her bed or hangs up her clothes and she smokes cigarettes—they're all over the place. She

doesn’t even do that like a lady.”

“Oh, she *isn’t* a lady,” said Henrietta. “Was she here last year?”

“No,” returned Sallie, “she’s as new as you are.”

Henrietta and the French teacher were enemies from the beginning. Henrietta, having lived in France and having had an excellent French governess for a number of years, could chatter in French like a little magpie. Madame chattered too and Henrietta made a discovery. Madame’s French was ungrammatical. Madame was distinctly uneducated and decidedly lower class—no fit instructor for a girls’ school. Yet at first Madame behaved circumspectly; although she told fascinating tales of life in Paris, there was much that she did not tell. She barely hinted at romantic incidents in her own life. Her husband had been a milliner. They had come to the States where after two years death had descended upon her so noble Alphonse, and it had become necessary for Madame to teach “in some pig of a school” in order to earn money so that she might in time return to her so beautiful France.

Madame Bolande knew that Henrietta was aware of all her shortcomings as a teacher; for Henrietta frequently pointed out Madame’s sometimes laughable errors. Naturally, the Frenchwoman both hated and feared “That so bad Mees Henrietta,” and that young person was quite unable to respect her teacher; so there were lively sessions in class when mocking Henrietta goaded Madame so nearly to frenzy that Madame fairly shrieked with rage. All this resulted in exceedingly bad marks for Henrietta, who really deserved good ones for her French and very bad ones for her conduct; but Madame did not discriminate. She gave her the very blackest marks she could fish from the depths of her ink bottle.

Miss Woodruff, on the other hand, bathed frequently in real water, wore her smooth hair in the neatest of knobs and was undoubtedly a well educated woman; and, in some ways, an excellent teacher. She taught English and mathematics, for instance, in a way to inspire respect for her deep knowledge; but her manner of doing it was frequently unpleasant. The girls frankly hated her at times because she heaped ridicule upon them when they failed. She was often cold and cuttingly sarcastic when a little sympathy would perhaps have accomplished more.

Day after day, Bettie, who was stupid anyway in mathematics, quailed under the large lady’s biting sarcasm and grew more and more confused as to numbers; until, as she put it afterwards, she didn’t know whether she was shingling a ceiling or plastering a roof with nineteen quarts of ice cream picked from twenty-seven apple trees, at three cents a yard.

Maude Wilder, who liked Bettie, and who had suffered considerably on her own account, eyed Miss Woodruff balefully and plotted revenge.

The girls loved Maude. She wasn’t a pretty girl, but her pale brown eyes with amber lights in them twinkled delightfully and the corners of her mouth crinkled easily into whimsical smiles. Almost anything amused Maude and she was quite apt to become amused at the wrong moment. Also she was able to amuse other persons.

The pupils at Highland Hall were supposed to respond to roll call each morning with a French phrase—a different one each day. Miss Woodruff stood at her desk on the platform, listening intently; while all the pupils sat demurely at *their* desks, also listening.

Maude had one phrase—and *only* one. She made it do the work of a great many. With a twinkle in her eye, day after day, Maude folded her hands demurely and responded blandly: “*Nous avons des raisins blancs et noirs mais pas de cerises.*” (We have white and black grapes but no cherries.)

“But, Maude,” Miss Woodruff would say, “that is very good but I shall expect a different phrase tomorrow. You’ve used that one long enough.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Maude would reply, meekly.

But the next morning, to the unfailing delight of all the pupils, this incorrigible young imp would respond seriously and even more blandly with the same timeworn and utterly foolish phrase.

If Maude ever learned another word of French no one ever discovered it. Indeed, Maude was so busy being funny that she had little time for study.

It was Maude, too, who daily stole a pie from the pantry window sill under the front porch. Maude having discovered a hole in the lattice work near the steps, crawled in one day to investigate. She found numerous pies cooling on the broad sill. She ate one hurriedly and it made her ill. One pie, a large pie at that, was plainly too much for one girl. After that she always took a companion under the porch with her and generously divided the stolen pie. Sometimes the companion was Henrietta; sometimes it was Marjory, once it was Bettie—but Bettie’s conscience troubled her and she wouldn’t go again. Unhappily, the only time that one could be sure of capturing a pie was during the morning recess, a matter of only fifteen minutes. As the pies were always red hot at that time it required courage to bolt them. The mince pies were especially trying, for there is nothing much hotter than a hot raisin.

Maude never was discovered; but long afterwards the girls wondered if she hadn't made some secret arrangement with the cook. She was quite capable of it for Maude was nothing if not resourceful. And the cook was a good natured person.

## CHAPTER VI—GETTING SETTLED

After the first busy and exciting weeks when everything was new and a little terrifying, the girls settled down to regular work and, at times to a rather dull life, so sometimes very small events loomed quite large to their young eyes. Of course there were letters from home. And there was no more thrilling moment in the day than that in which Sallie Dickinson appeared on the school platform, at the close of the two o'clock session, with the old brown mail bag under her arm.

Sallie's blouses were old and faded and her skirt had seen better days but little Jane Pool declared that the post-girl always looked just like an angel when she stepped in through the doorway with that dingy bag.

And of course the girls wrote letters, large numbers of them, to the persons on their writing lists. Some of them liked to write letters and wrote very fat ones. Some of them, like Mabel for instance, hated to write letters and wrote very thin ones. One rainy afternoon, the freckled girl, Cora Doyle, regaled her friends with a distressing tale.

"Do you know," said she, from her perch on Jean's window sill, "I believe Dr. Rhodes *reads* our letters before he sends them. Mine are always late getting to my folks and I've seen heaps of letters stacked up in his office for days at a time. And one evening I went in to ask for a piece of courtplaster for Ruth Dennis's thumb and all those Rhodes people were around a table doing something to a lot of mail."

"Perhaps," said Jean, who knew that Cora was apt to make mountains out of molehills, "they were just looking to see if they were stamped or properly addressed. You know they have to bring them back to us sometimes for reasons like that."

"I don't know," returned Cora. "Things are queer and different this year. I'd like to, but I can't tell you why."

"*Do* tell us," begged Henrietta.

"No, I can't. I promised not to."

"There's one thing," said Jean, "that surprises me. Doctor Rhodes isn't a bit like a school teacher. And when he talks to us in the school room as he sometimes does when he has anything to announce like new rules or a lecture or a concert in the village, he often uses the wrong word or mispronounces a word, as if—well, as if he weren't used to making speeches in very good English."

"I think he gets rattled," said little Jane Pool, sagely.

"Somehow," said Marjory, "I don't exactly like Doctor Rhodes. I don't exactly *believe* in him."

"I don't quite like him, either," declared Henrietta, who had washed her wonderful mop of hair and was drying it with a large bathtowel. "I'm surprised at my Grandmother for saying such nice things about him. When there are visitors he seems so oily and so smooth; and it seems to me that he is extra polite to those Miller girls—all the world uses their father's soap, you know—but when he asks Sallie to do errands he doesn't even say please. And Mrs. Rhodes is always gliding about like the ghost of Hamlet's Father. She looks as if she were listening with all her features. But she never *says* a thing to us, even when she catches us slipping around through the corridors after lights are out."

"I'm glad she doesn't," said Marjory. "She *looks* all the things she doesn't say."

"After all," said Jean, sagely, "they might be a lot worse."

The next day was Sunday and Sundays were quite different from all the other days. In the morning the girls always marched two by two to church a long mile away, where they sat in the front pews with their eyes fixed upon the clergyman. This often proved a trying ordeal for that gentleman because this particular church had no regular rector. Instead, each Sunday, a student from the Theological Seminary just north of the village offered up home made prayers and stammered forth his first sermon before the long suffering members of that little church. Each successive student, it seemed, was more bashful than the last; and if any one of those blushing young preachers had ever learned to deliver a sermon, he promptly forgot all he knew, when, for the first time, he faced a congregation. There was one thing, however, that all these stuttering young men *could* do and that was to perspire copiously and continuously. No matter how many impressive gestures the preacher might have practised at home beforehand, he used only one while he occupied that pulpit. With handkerchief clutched firmly in his shaking right hand, he mopped and mopped and mopped his dripping brow.

While the girls couldn't help being amused, they were always sorry for the tortured youths.

“You wouldn’t think,” said Cora, after one of these painful ordeals, “that they’d be afraid to face thirty or forty girls but they always are. Just as soon as their eyes light on those ten pews full of Highland Hall girls, their carefully prepared words take flight, and I guess *they’d* like to, too.”

“They seem to find it almost as hard to pass the plate,” laughed Henrietta. “When they get to us their knees begin to wobble.”

“It’s because we stare at those poor creatures so unmercifully,” said Jean. “Even a real minister would be embarrassed, I should think.”

“I’m sorry for them, too,” said Bettie, “but they *are* funny. Of course they have to learn to preach if they’re going to be ministers, but it seems cruel to make them do it that way.”

“Just like dumping puppies into cold water to teach them to swim,” said Marjory.

“It isn’t very much like our kind of church,” complained Bettie. “It’s too entertaining. We’re Episcopalians and *our* ministers don’t *have* to learn how to make their own prayers—the folks that make them know how.”

“Yes,” said Jean, “we’re all getting lonesome for our own kind of services. That’s one thing we miss.”

“Well, then,” said Sallie Dickinson, “I have some good news for you. In about four weeks more the new Episcopal Church will be ready for use and you can go there. Miss Woodruff and Mrs. Henry Rhodes are Episcopalians, so perhaps we’ll *all* go. We used to go to the old church before it was torn down.”

“I think,” said Henrietta, demurely, “we ought to come back to this church once in a while just to keep those poor Theologs perspiring. Miss Woodruff says perspiring is necessary to good health.”

The Sunday dinners were apt to be rather good; there was usually chicken.

“But,” complained Mabel, after one of these chicken dinners, “I don’t see why I have to get all the lizzers and gizzers.”

“What!” gasped Maude.

“Givers and lizzers; no, gizzers and lizards,” sputtered Mabel. “I *always* get them.”

“She means livers and gizzards,” explained Jean.

Sunday afternoons dragged. The girls could walk within bounds but that was not particularly exciting. On week days they usually gathered nuts in the grove—if one threw enough sticks it was possible to knock down a hickory nut or two most any day; or explored an ancient garden in which there were old apple trees. But in Sunday frocks and Sunday shoes it was wiser to stick to the sidewalks, so the girls strolled about and gossiped. It was truly surprising how much they found to talk about.

Sometimes on rainy Sunday afternoons, Henrietta gathered a flock of the younger girls about her on the wide front staircase, a dim, spooky, black walnutty place with a vast dark space overhead, and told thrilling tales. That was one thing that Henrietta could do to perfection.

But Sunday evenings at Highland Hall were almost invariably harrowing. The girls gathered about the piano in the big, chilly drawing room and sang familiar hymns and wept.

Sallie Dickinson wept because she hadn’t any home. The rest of them wept because they had. Still, Sunday after Sunday evening they sang the same sorrowful hymns because it seemed the proper thing to do, and then retired sniffling and snuffling to their narrow, single beds.

“They *like* it,” declared Mrs. Henry Rhodes. “Boarding school girls always do it, and they wouldn’t do it if they didn’t enjoy it.”

There was one Sunday evening, however, when the gloom was somewhat lightened; and when giggles supplanted sobs. Stout Miss Woodruff, clad in her smooth gray serge gown, with its white vest for Sunday use only, usually sat in a large arm-chair at the end of the room, in order to lend dignity to the meeting. But on this occasion she was absent and had asked Abbie to take her place. Poor scatter-brained Abbie had forgotten all about it so the chair was vacant. But not for long.

The chief ornament of the high mantel shelf was a large stuffed bird—a penguin. When it became evident to the waiting girls that no one was coming to occupy that vacant chair, Maude Wilder, always resourceful, climbed upon a chair, seized the stately penguin and placed him in the chair. With his dignity, his mildly disapproving eye and his smooth gray and white plumage, his resemblance to stern Miss Woodruff—vest and all—was so striking and so amusing that the astonished girls burst forth with a chorus of giggles instead of words when Mrs. Henry Rhodes, at the piano, played the opening notes of the first hymn.

Of course Mrs. Henry turned around to see what caused this most unusual hilarity. When she saw

the solemn penguin doing his birdlike best to be human and succeeding so admirably in filling Miss Woodruff's place, Mrs. Henry not only giggled but laughed outright; and all the pupils, including the lofty Seniors, joined in. For the rest of the evening, even the saddest hymns failed to bring on a single case of homesickness.

"But," warned Mrs. Henry, restoring the bird to his lofty perch when the singing was finished, "we must never do this again. We've all been very bad."

"I love that lady," said Maude, on the way upstairs. "If *she* were my teacher I'd be good all the time."

"I hope," giggled Sallie Dickinson, "I won't forget and call Miss Woodruff 'Miss Penguin.' I shall never be able to dust that bird again without thinking of her."

## CHAPTER VII—AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

One morning, late in October, there was great excitement at Highland Hall. It was just at recess time and all the girls (except Maude Wilder and Debbie Clark who were under the porch foraging for pie) were on the veranda or the graveled walk. Two new pupils were arriving. They were not together for they came in separate hacks. The first was a large girl of fourteen who, followed by a small, meek father, marched fearlessly up the steps and looked each girl straight in the eye until she reached Sallie Dickinson, who stood in the doorway, smiling a welcome.

"I'm Victoria Webster of Iowa," said she, "and I've come here to school. Where's Doctor What d'ye-callum? I've come here after an education and I want it right away."

And then Victoria deliberately turned and winked at the Miller girls; a real wink, with one bold blue eye wide open, the other shut. Victoria, the surprised girls perceived, was as fresh as a breeze from her own prairie, and they were instantly prepared to enjoy her.

The other hack disgorged its contents. An overdressed woman in ridiculous shoes stepped out; an overdressed girl in even more ridiculous shoes followed her. The girl, fair-haired and exceedingly fluffy was almost as violently perfumed as Madame Bolande herself.

Jean, Marjory, Bettie and Mabel glanced casually at this second young person and suddenly gasped. They had received a jolt. Then they looked inquiringly at one another and back again at the girl. They couldn't quite believe their eyes.

"What's her name?" demanded Marjory, when Sallie, who had escorted the last newcomers inside returned to the porch.

"Gladys de Milligan, of Milwaukee," returned Sallie, holding her nose. "Her father must be a perfume factory."

The Lakeville girls looked at one another again.

"Gladys de Milligan," breathed Marjory.

"Laura Milligan!" gasped Mabel. "Of all things, Laura Milligan!"

"Hush," warned Jean, a finger on her lips. "Come down on the lawn. We'll have to talk this over by ourselves."

"It's Laura all right," said Bettie. "Her hair's a lot lighter than it used to be and she's taller and much more elegant; but it's the same turned up nose and the same twisty shoulders and the same small eyes, too close together."

"And the same horrid mother," said Mabel. "What shall we do?"

"Let's not do anything," counseled wise Jean. "Let's wait and see if she recognizes us."

"Perhaps anybody as grand as that," offered Marjory, hopefully, "wouldn't *want* to know plain blue serge folks like us. Of course we wouldn't exactly want the Highland Hall girls to think she was an old friend of ours—"

"She *wasn't*," said Mabel, emphatically.

"Well," argued Jean, "perhaps Laura has changed—certainly she has changed her name. It wouldn't be quite fair or kind for us to tell the other girls the things we know about her. We can wait until we have her by herself before we seem to recognize her. And maybe she has improved —"

"She needed to," said Marjory, sagely. "Shan't we even tell Henrietta?"

"I don't believe we need to," returned Jean. "Henrietta won't like her anyway. She's too—well, too cheap. She isn't Henrietta's kind, you know."

“The Milligans must have made money,” said Marjory. “They hadn’t any such clothes in Lakeville.”

“Lakeville would have dropped dead if they had,” giggled Bettie.

At first “Gladys” pretended not to recognize the little girls with whom she had once played in Lakeville; but, needing some one to show her the way to a class room, she waylaid Marjory in the hall and called her by name.

“Now, listen,” warned Gladys, shifting her gum to the other side of her mouth. “Don’t let anybody hear you calling me Laura. It isn’t my name any more. I always hated that name and Milligan, too. Mother calls me Gladys—Gladys Evelyn de Milligan.”

“What’s the ‘D’ for,” asked honest Marjory.

“That’s French,” explained Laura. “It’s d e, *de*.”

“But Milligan isn’t French.”

“It’s more elegant that way,” explained Laura, shifting her gum again. “We’re society people now. It looks better in print when Mother’s ‘Among those present.’ Now listen. Now that you know my name, see that you remember it. And tell those other Lakeville girls they can do the same thing.”

Although the Miller girls’ father supplied the world with soap, although three continents ate the breakfast food that Hazel Benton’s uncle manufactured, no one at Highland Hall paraded her wealth and her so-called “Social standing” as vulgar little Gladys de Milligan paraded hers. She was always painted and powdered and overdressed; she was reckless with her spending money, snobbish and artificial to the very final degree; yet, fortunately for gum-chewing Laura, there were girls who seemed to like her.

Most of the girls, however, liked Victoria Webster much better. To be sure Victoria had her faults, but they were pleasanter faults than Laura’s. Every one of the youngsters admired and tried to imitate Victoria’s marvelously perfect wink. Maude came the nearest to achieving success; and little Lillian Thwaite failed the most dismally.

“Don’t try it on a cold day,” warned Victoria, “you might freeze that way, Lillian, with your mouth half way up your cheek and your nose in a knot.”

It was a joy to see Victoria and Maude play ball. They went at it precisely like a pair of boys. And Victoria shared Maude’s affection for pie.

Madame Bolande liked Gladys Evelyn de Milligan but sarcastic Miss Woodruff did not. When she called upon that young person in class, she frequently pretended that she had forgotten her name, so that one day, to the great amusement of her classmates, Laura would be called Ambrosia Nectarine and the next Miss Woodruff would address her as Verbena Heliotrope, Gladiolus Violet or Lucretia Calliopsis or something else equally ridiculous; but a new one for every occasion. This, of course, wasn’t exactly kind or even quite courteous; but it is safe to say that Gladys Evelyn began to regret having changed and embellished her plain if not beautiful name. Perhaps, before Miss Woodruff had entirely exhausted her supply of fancy names, poor Gladys Evelyn may have envied little Jane Pool. No one ever forgot or pretended to forget Jane’s very brief and very plain name, except Doctor Rhodes, who forgot everybody’s.

Jane was a small girl with a very bright, eager face, smooth brown hair and a great deal of character. Just about everybody liked Jane.

“Are you related to those grand Chicago Pools?” asked Gladys Evelyn one day, as she peeled a fresh stick of gum.

“Mercy, no,” returned Jane, who had listened for a weary half hour to Laura’s tales about her own wonderful people. “There’s nothing grand about *us*—we’re just plain Pools—little common Pools like mud puddles. No limousines, no diamonds, no ancestors. Just three meals a day and a bed at night. We’re just folks—the commonest kind.”

And Gladys, not noticing the twinkle in Jane’s bright black eye, believed the little rascal, only to learn later that Jane’s father was accounted one of the wealthiest men in the state of Wisconsin. But you never would have known it from Jane.

“I wish,” complained Henrietta, one day, “we hadn’t been two days late in getting to this school. All the girls engaged their walking partners before we came. I like to walk with Victoria—she steps right off like a man—but Gladys Evelyn de Milligan—phew! With all those heels and that tight skirt she *can’t* walk. But I’ll say one thing for Gladys. She *can* chew gum.”

“We didn’t mean to leave you out when we four paired off,” assured Jean. “But Marjory asked me and Mabel asked Bettie—why, of course we can switch off sometimes. The *old* girls engaged their partners last year.”

These walks occurred three times a week. On Sundays, when the entire school walked two by two to church. On Tuesday, when the girls were taken, again in twos, to the village to shop; and on

Fridays when they went to the cemetery. The only reason they went to the cemetery was because a walk of a mile and a half straight west ended there.

Sallie Dickinson usually walked with poor old Abbie Smith, the chaperon. Abbie was a forlorn creature, neither old nor young. She had a long red nose, a retreating chin, drooping shoulders and a rounded back. Colorless, straggling hair and pale eyes. A spineless, unpleasant person. Like Sallie Dickinson, she was an orphan. Like Sallie, poor old Abbie had been left penniless at Highland Hall, but at an earlier date. It was said that Abbie's stepfather had deliberately abandoned her; and, looking at Abbie, it seemed not unlikely. One would have supposed that twenty years of school life would have *educated* Abbie but they hadn't. Abbie was incapable of acquiring an education.

"When I look at Abbie," confided Sallie, one day, as she laid an armful of freshly laundered garments on Jean's bed, "it makes me just sick. Am *I* going to be like that twenty years from now?"

"Of course you're not," consoled Jean, "You're ever so bright in school and you—why, Sallie! It's all in your own hands. If you learn every blessed thing you can, some day you'll be smart enough to teach. And then, probably, they'd be glad enough to have you teach right here. And if they wouldn't, you could go some place else. Don't ever *think* that you have to stay here and be a stupid, downtrodden servant like poor old Abbie."

"Well, do you know," said Sallie, visibly brightening, "I *did* think just exactly that. I wake up nights and worry about it. Oh, Jean! I do wish you'd poke me up once in awhile, whenever you see me losing my backbone or looking like Abbie—"

"You *don't* look like Abbie—you *couldn't*. Abbie never was pretty or bright and you *are*. Wait, I want to give you these history notes I dug up—I know they kept you busy all study hour sorting the clean clothes so of course you didn't have time to look anything up. You'll just *have* to have splendid marks from now on."

"You're a darling!" cried Sallie, rubbing her cheek against Jean's. "I wish you'd reached Hiltonburg a whole lot sooner. I *needed* you."

## CHAPTER VIII—BRAVE VICTORIA

Almost at once, there was one very curious and amusing result of Madame Bolande's friendship for "Gladys de Milligan." Madame, who apparently took no interest in her own hair, professed great admiration for that of the new pupil and offered to teach her a new and even fancier way of arranging it.

One night, to that end, Madame mixed an exceedingly sticky something in a cup—quince seed and water, Laura explained afterwards—and applied it to Laura's pale yellow locks. After plastering them down in large wet rings all over Laura's foolish head, Madame fished the remnant of an old green veil from her untidy bureau drawer and tied it firmly over the slippery mass. Her intentions were perfectly good but the result was surprising.

By morning, the quince seed was dry and it was possible to brush the stuff, in a powdery shower of white particles, from the mass of loose curls. But alas! A shocking thing had happened. The dye in the green veil had proved anything but permanent. It had spent the night *running*. Poor Gladys Evelyn appeared late for breakfast with red eyes and bright green hair. It was at least a month before her tangled locks lost their verdant hue.

"Never mind, Gladys," soothed Grace Allen. "Mermaids have green hair and you know how beautiful *they* are."

Oddly enough, this curious mishap made several new friends for Gladys among the girls, whose ready sympathy was aroused for an unfortunate maiden who had to go about with pale green hair. Augusta Lemon was one of those tender hearted young persons, Lillian Thwaite another. About this time, too, Grace Allen began to wander about, arm in arm, with Gladys.

Cora Doyle, to whom the Lakeville girls were greatly indebted for much of the past history of Highland Hall, proved a likeable girl, after one learned not to believe all that she said. Cora just naturally exaggerated. When she was cold she was absolutely frozen. When she was warm, she was positively boiled. If she possessed one black and blue spot she *knew* she had ten thousand and if she were slightly indisposed she was positive she was dying. In short, she called "Wolf, Wolf," when the wolf was conspicuously absent.

This trait of Cora's was beginning to lead to embarrassing consequences. Cora's wild statements in school were always taken with a grain of salt. Worse than that, her own people wouldn't believe her. Even when she outgrew her shoes and wrote home for larger ones, they were sure she only meant more stylish ones; so poor Cora limped about in short shoes and acquired a corn. And now she had a new trouble. Whether it was basketball or the extra pie that she ate under the porch with Maude, no one knew, but Cora began suddenly to grow very rapidly. Her sleeves and her skirts were visibly retreating and she was showing more wrist and more stocking than was

considered becoming.

“My folks won’t *believe* me,” wailed Cora, reading her letter from home. “I’ve *told* them that my knees show and my sleeves are up to my elbows and they won’t *believe* me.”

“But your skirts *aren’t* up to your knees,” laughed Marjory.

“Anyway, they’re getting there and I have to stay up nights letting out hems.”

“Never mind,” consoled Jean, “your folks will see for themselves, when you go home for Christmas. Of course you may have to go in a paper bag—”

“That’s just the trouble. I *don’t* go home for Christmas—I live too far away. I’m going to visit Maude in Chicago—and it’s *her* folks that will see for themselves how many miles of legs and wrists I’m showing.”

“That’s what you get for stretching things,” laughed Henrietta. “Your arms and legs have caught it.”

“*I* didn’t get any letter at all,” grumbled Mabel. “Anybody gets more than I do.”

“Cheer up,” said Jean. “Perhaps you’ll have two tomorrow. In the meantime you can read mine—there’s quite a lot of Lakeville news in it.”

“Wait a minute, girls,” called Helen Miller, climbing up on the platform beside Sallie. “Have any of you seen my amethyst pendant? I *thought* I left it in a little box on my dresser, but I *may* have worn it out and dropped it. Anyway, if you find one, it’s mine.”

Several of the girls looked at one another significantly.

Queer things were happening at Highland Hall. There were mysterious disappearances; but whether they were due to carelessness or whether they were due to theft, no one could say. The fact remained. Various things of more or less value had vanished; and their owners were both puzzled and distressed. Hazel Benton had somehow lost her wrist watch, Ruth Dennis mourned a gold pencil that usually dangled from a ribbon about her neck, Mabel’s sentimental roommate, Isabelle, could not find the large gold locket containing Clarence’s picture—*that* vanished, Isabelle declared, while she was taking a bath, the *only* time she didn’t have it on.

Then, one morning, there was a scene in the dining room, where the girls and the teachers were eating their breakfast rolls and the two neat maids were passing the coffee. Madame Bolande, all excitement, and with her black dress face-powdered from collar to hem and her hair even wilder than usual, rushed into the dining room and declared volubly that two ten dollar bills had disappeared from the stocking under her bed.

“And,” declared Madame, balefully, “eet ees zat Mees Henrietta zat have taken zem. She ees the most baddest Mademoiselle zat I have een my class.”

At this point, just when things were getting really interesting, Doctor and Mrs. Rhodes rose hastily from their chairs, seized Madame by the elbows and escorted her quite neatly from the public gaze. The girls would have been glad to hear more.

Fortunately no one believed Madame’s accusation of Henrietta because all the girls knew how little love was lost between that lively girl and the untidy French woman. Madame always blamed Henrietta for anything that happened. Occasionally she was right, because Henrietta was a young bundle of mischief, with no respect whatsoever for Madame Bolande; but the girls knew that Henrietta was no thief. And Henrietta, far from appearing downcast at Madame’s outrageous words, giggled cheerfully and considered it a joke.

And then something else happened that turned even Madame’s unjust suspicion away from Henrietta. There was a burglar scare, a *real* burglar scare, in Hiltonburg. It lasted three weeks, during which time suddenly intimidated householders locked *all* their doors instead of just a few, bought catches for every one of their windows and caused themselves agonies of discomfort by putting their valuables away in supposedly burglar-proof spots overnight. Whether or not there really was a burglar at the bottom of this alarm nobody was able to discover; but the scare was certainly big enough and genuine enough while it lasted to upset the entire community. It started in the heart of the village, worked itself gradually along the State road, and, by the time it was a week or ten days old, crept through the hedge that surrounded Highland Hall and right into the house itself.

For days the girls talked of nothing else. Of course the different girls were affected in different ways. The three Seniors moved into one room and slept three in a bed, with their valuables under the mattress. Little Lillian Thwaite couldn’t think of the burglar without turning faint. Alice Bailey’s big black eyes grew so much bigger and blacker at mention of him that the sight always sent Augusta Lemon, who was particularly sympathetic, into spasms of fear. Bettie refused to walk through the corridors alone, even by broad daylight.

Victoria Webster was of different fiber. “Victoria,” as everybody knows, means “A Conqueror.” It

certainly seemed as if this particular bearer of the name had conquered fear. At any rate she was not afraid. Moreover, she was not only courageous but she bragged about it until the other girls were just a little tired of it.

“I’d like to see the burglar I’d be afraid of,” boasted Victoria. “See here, Lillian, if you and Augusta and Bettie are afraid, I’ll move into the West Dormitory and take care of you.”

“I wish to goodness you would,” declared Lillian. “Bettie’s all right, but Augusta and I are all alone in number twenty-six.”

“Do move in today,” pleaded Augusta. “There’s a vacant bed—really, that’s one reason why the room is so scary. It’s bad enough to have to look under one’s own bed without having that extra one—we’ve been taking turns. Let’s go and ask Miss Woodruff to let you come—she’s the matron in our corridor, you know.”

“I was about to suggest that very thing,” replied Miss Woodruff, regarding burglar-proof Victoria with a quizzical eye. “If this brave Victoria can instill some of her surplus courage into this quaking Lillian and this shuddering Augusta, by all means let her do it.”

“Victoria is really almost too courageous,” remarked Mrs. Henry Rhodes, when the girls had left the school room. “She just bristles with bravery. I’d like to frighten her just once. She’d have made a fine boy, wouldn’t she, with those broad, sturdy shoulders!”

“She’d have made a blustering one. I suspect that if she *had* been one, every other boy that knew her would have been tempted to put her bravery to the test. I don’t think that boys take as kindly to braggarts as girls do.”

But even the girls, with the exception of timid Lillian and terrified Augusta, began to grow tired of Victoria’s boasting; for, braced by the admiring devotion of her roommates, Victoria could talk of nothing but her own bravery.

“If a burglar came,” Victoria would brag, “I’d look him straight in the eye and say: ‘See here, Mr. Burglar, I want to talk to you as man to man. I take it you’re a man of sense. Your time is valuable. You’re wasting it here. We’ve only thirty cents a week pocket money. If you were mean enough to take it all you wouldn’t get much. Our jewels came from the five and ten cent store; so just run along to a place where they really *have* money.’”

“Would you *really*?” demanded Augusta.

“Yes, I would. I’ve never seen the time yet when I’ve really been afraid of anything.”

“They say,” quavered Lillian, “that they found footsteps—yes, Marjory, I meant foot-prints—under the Browns’ dining room window last Friday—only three houses from this one. Oh, I’m so scared I can’t eat my meals.”

“Don’t be alarmed,” said Victoria. “You have *me*.”

Victoria had bragged all day. She was still bragging when she climbed into bed, with Lillian’s cot at her left, Augusta’s at her right.

An hour later, the west corridor was wrapped in silence; or it would have been if nine girls had not assembled in Henrietta’s room to whisper excitedly in one another’s ears. Inadvertently, they whispered too in Miss Woodruff’s, as she stood listening just outside the door. Miss Woodruff was not a prying person. She was merely assuring herself that the noises that she couldn’t help hearing were made by girls, not burglars.

“Good!” whispered the pleased teacher as she gathered the gist of this animated buzzing. “It’s a thing I’d love to do myself. Victoria had it coming to her. I shall aid and abet those merry plotters by staying very sound asleep for the next hour.”

Whereupon Miss Woodruff very gently closed her own door and to all appearances had finished her matronly duties for the night.

Ten minutes later, a small white scout slipped noiselessly down the dark corridor toward the room in which Victoria was sleeping. Presently she slipped back into Henrietta’s.

“All three are sound asleep,” reported Jane. “You could stick pins into Victoria and she wouldn’t know it. Now’s the time for action. Don’t waste a minute. She’ll never be sounder asleep than she is now.”

“Jane,” whispered Henrietta, “you and Marjory must get into those two empty beds in the room directly across the hall from Victoria’s and *stay* in them long enough to get them warmed up, so we can move those other two girls into them. We’ll wait fifteen minutes longer. But if Lillian and Augusta *should* wake up, we’ll just have to whisk them into a closet and clap our hands over their mouths.”

For perhaps three quarters of an hour that night, Miss Woodruff heard the light patter of bare feet on the corridor matting, the subdued whisperings of girlish voices, the quickly hushed

clattering of wood against wood, of metal against crockery, the dragging of bulky objects through narrow doorways. These sounds were punctuated by little gusts of stifled laughter, followed each time by brief periods of absolute silence.

“I do hope,” she whispered, “they’ll succeed. Victoria certainly needs taking down. Dear me, how Marjory giggles! She was never designed for a career of successful burglary.”

After a time the slight brushing of exploring hands and fluttering garments against the corridor walls, told of the otherwise silent flight of nine girlish forms down the long, dark hallway. Then Henrietta’s door closed with a tiny click and for fully fifteen minutes afterwards sounds of suppressed mirth sifted back to Miss Woodruff’s patient but approving ears.

The house was silent when the great clock in the lower hall boomed “One.” Victoria, who had been dreaming in an entirely unprecedented manner, suddenly awoke, to experience a curious sense of physical discomfort. Something was wrong. She groped for the bedclothes. They were gone. She stretched out both hands and her groping fingers came in contact with a firm, level, cold surface not unlike hardwood floor. She moved her fingers—it *was* floor. No other polished surface had those regularly recurring cracks, Victoria, much alarmed, crept on hands and knees, about the empty room. The window was open, the door closed. With a little gasp of relief, she opened it.

“Thank goodness!” breathed tremulous Victoria, groping about in the hallway, “I’m not locked in. But where in the world am I? Here’s another door.”

It opened. Here, window shades were up and puzzled Victoria made out the outlines of three beds. Her bare toes touched the big fur rug that she knew belonged to Anne Blodgett, her opposite neighbor. The feel of a familiar object in this world of uncertainties was a comforting sensation.

“Anne!” gasped chattering Victoria, plunging bodily into Anne’s bed. “I’m frightened to pieces! If that was my room that I’ve just come out of there isn’t a thing left in it. My bed—even Lillian and Augusta have been stolen. Burglars—or something—carried off every single thing but me. I suppose I was too heavy. I found the window open.”

Anne giggled. There were giggles from the other beds. Victoria guessed the truth. Then having much good sense back of her shortcomings she giggled too.

“Well,” she laughed, “that was a great joke on me, all right. I might be brave enough if I happened to be awake; but what’s the use of courage when a burglar with any enterprise at all could carry me right off to the next county without waking me up.”

“Did you *really* think it was a sure enough burglar?” asked Anne.

“Yes, I did,” returned honest Victoria, snuggling closer to Anne’s warm body, “and I was simply scared pink. When I found that window wide open instead of just a few inches I was *sure* somebody had climbed in and carried off everything but *me*—and I wasn’t sure he *hadn’t* taken me as well. I could just *see* a great big black burglar going up and down a long ladder, with bundles on his back, and a partner down below to help him with the heavy ones.”

“We didn’t mean to scare you as much as *that*,” said Anne, “but you certainly are a fine sleeper. We pulled you around a lot.”

“My mother always said I could outsleep the sleepiest of the ‘Seven Sleepers’ and I guess she was right. But I’m not the *only* one, Where’s Miss Woodruff all this time? I thought she *never* slept.”

“Well, she did tonight,” said Anne, supposing she was telling the truth. “And it’s lucky for us that she did.”

“But how did you ever move Lillian and Augusta without waking them?”

“We *didn’t*. Lillian jumped up the minute we touched her but Jane told her what we were doing so she pitched right in and helped. But Augusta woke right up in the middle of the corridor and began to bleat like the lost sheep of Israel so Henrietta stuffed a stocking in her mouth—one of your thick woolen ones—and jammed her into the clothes press. We had quite a time explaining that we were *not* the burglar. We handed her Jane’s flashlight so she could *see* it was us; but she turned it on herself and that frightened her more than ever. She shivered and made queer noises, so Maude had to sit beside her on a lot of shoes and hold her hand for the longest time—and you know Maude hates to hold hands; but Augusta’s all right now. Now move over, Vicky, and take another of your famous naps. You’re welcome to half of my bed as long as you don’t take your half out of the middle.”

The burglar scare subsided gradually and Victoria returned to her own corridor to room with Gladys de Milligan.

“I wouldn’t have picked *her* out,” sighed Victoria, “but Gladys *wanted* me—I’m sure I can’t see why.”

"*I* should have thought," said Marjory, "she'd like a more wide awake roommate so she could *talk* all night. Gladys does love to talk."

"Not at night," returned Victoria. "She lets me go to sleep at nine o'clock sharp and that's the last I hear of her until morning."

## CHAPTER IX—STRANGE DISAPPEARANCES

The very next day after that Maude Wilder's weekly allowance of thirty cents was missing from the purse that she had carelessly left on her table and Ruth Dennis's gold beads were nowhere to be found.

And now the opinion of the school was divided. The more excitable girls were convinced that the burglar had actually gotten in, but there were other girls who were quite as certain that some one inside the house was the thief. But who?

The servants seemed trustworthy; Nora, the fat, good natured cook, Annie and Mary, the two neat maids, the two middle aged laundresses who came in from outside, several days a week; and Charles, the man servant who might be seen each evening walking out with Annie and Mary beside him. It was said that Charles divided his attentions so equally between the two neat maids that if he *had* been the thief, he would have been obliged to steal everything in pairs in order to divide them with absolute fairness between his two friends; so, of course, that let Charles out. Besides, except when there were trunks to be carried up, Charles never entered the upstairs rooms.

"Of course it isn't old Abbie," said Maude, who was under the front porch with Henrietta, bolting hot apple pie. "She's too much of a rabbit. It's true she hasn't any money; but she wouldn't have gumption enough to steal pennies from a baby's bank."

"Do you think it might be Madame Bolande?" asked Henrietta. "She's so fearfully untruthful and so—so unwashed."

"I wouldn't put it past her," said Maude. "Her room is stuffed with clothes and things; and you know Helen Miller has lost her pleated skirt."

"Oh, *Cora* took that last Sunday. She said she just wouldn't go to church in her short one. Besides, she had ripped the hem out and hadn't had time to put in a new one. The Miller girls had gone downstairs and Cora was late, so she just rushed in, grabbed up Helen's skirt and scrambled into it. I'll tell her to put it back—she's just forgotten it."

At the same moment Gladys Evelyn de Milligan and Augusta were marching up and down the long porch over Maude's head and Gladys was saying:

"I used to know Marjory Vale in Michigan and I can tell you one thing. She was a horrid little girl, always telling fibs and taking things that didn't belong to her—her aunt couldn't keep a thing in her ice box. And Mabel wasn't anybody at all in Lakeville. And goodness knows how the Tuckers got money enough to send Bettie to school. They're as poor as church mice and have ragged little boys running all over the place."

"I wonder that you ever knew such people," said Augusta, always a little dazzled by Gladys's magnificence.

"Oh, I didn't," denied Gladys, hastily. "I—well, we used to give our old clothes to the Tuckers."

This was not true, but as Augusta always believed anything she heard, she now believed this and many more of Gladys's unpleasant tales about the little girls from Upper Michigan and passed them on to her own particular friends; so, in the course of time, Jean, Mabel, Marjory, Bettie; and even Henrietta, whom Gladys had *not* known in Lakeville, were puzzled and grieved by the odd, unfriendly ways of some of their once cordial schoolmates.

Isabelle Carew, for instance, snubbed Mabel quite heartlessly at times. Attractive little Grace Allen no longer spent her leisure moments with her classmate Marjory; but chummed instead with Ruth Dennis. Alice Bailey no longer wept on Jean's shoulder during the Sunday night hymns but transferred her tears to Hazel Benton's convenient collar bone.

As for Augusta Lemon, convinced that the Lakeville girls were no fit associates for any really *nice* girl, she avoided them as much as possible and became more and more friendly with gum-chewing Gladys. And, as usual, Lillian Thwaite always followed as closely as possible in Augusta's footsteps.

Losing Augusta and Lillian was not exactly a calamity. Augusta was rather an insipid maiden, with no sense of humor, and the bright little girls from Lakeville had considered her something of a bore. And Lillian was just a silly little person of no great consequence. Still, it was disconcerting and not quite pleasant to be dropped so suddenly, as Marjory said, "even by a sheep like Augusta or a goose like Lillian."

Fortunately, Sallie Dickinson, Maude Wilder, Cora Doyle, Victoria Webster and little Jane Pool, none of whom admired Gladys, were still friendly; and there were others.

Just now, too, one of the Lakeville girls was having another trouble. As you know, mail time for Sallie Dickinson was always rather a trying time. If Charles returned from the post-office early enough, Sallie opened the bag in the school room and read aloud the name on each envelope as she passed it down to its owner. If Charles happened to be late, Sallie delivered the letters at the girls' doors.

In either case, there were no letters for Sallie, no little packages from home—because she had no home—no little surprises like those that brought delighted squeals from her more fortunate schoolmates. Many of the more selfish older girls seemed to take Sallie's letterless condition very much for granted but the Lakeville girls were decidedly sorry for her. At times, indeed, their tender hearts quite ached for Sallie.

But now Sallie was not the only sufferer for lack of mail. For weeks and weeks and weeks—eight of them to be exact—Mabel had had no letter from her father and mother who were in Germany. There had been postals from along the way and one announcing their arrival in Berlin and that was all.

Mabel possessed a dangerous imagination. It was now hard at work. She looked at poor old Abbie and at Sallie of the wistful eyes and shuddered. Was she, too, in danger of becoming a boarding school orphan? Would she have to wear faded old garments discarded and left behind by departed schoolmates? Would *she* grow to look just like Abbie—bent and hopeless—with a retreating chin and scant, hay-colored hair and a whining voice?

She asked these harrowing questions and many others of her sympathizing friends.

"Don't worry," soothed Henrietta. "It's a good four months since I've heard a single word from *my* father. If he isn't lost on one of his exploring expeditions in the heart of India or Africa or Asia, he's been arrested for digging up somebody's old tomb. That's why I live with my grandmother, you know. Whenever Father hears of anything interesting to dig, no matter where it is, he just rushes off to dig it. And of course he couldn't do that if he had me tied to his—his suspenders."

"But you have your grandmother and so much money of your own that you wouldn't *need* to be a school orphan like—like Abbie."

"Mabel, before I'd let you be like Abbie—and you'd have to shrink an awful lot to do it and change color besides—I'd adopt you myself. It's a promise. If anything *should* happen to your people, I'll adopt you, so there! But don't worry. Nothing *is* going to happen."

While these assurances were cheering, Mabel still looked disconsolately at Abbie and at Sallie.

## CHAPTER X—MABEL FINDS A FAMILY

Mabel, with a long afternoon before her and tempted by the pleasant day, decided to take a walk in the grove. Perhaps she could find a hickory nut. On the veranda she overtook little Lillian Thwaite, obviously waiting for some one to walk with.

"Come on, Lill," said Mabel. "Let's go down to the grove."

"Can't," returned Lillian, shrugging her small shoulders. "I'm going in to practise my duet."

"Then why did you put your things on?" demanded Mabel, suspiciously.

"Just for instance," returned Lillian, pertly.

Mabel discovered Grace Allen poking among the leaves in the grove.

"Hello, Grace!" said she, hopefully. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. I'm going back to the house in a minute."

"Come along with me—it's nice out."

"Don't care to," returned Grace, snippishly.

Mabel found the deserted grove rather gloomy and uninteresting. Beyond it the sunny prairie stretched for miles and miles with just one visible break—a small house with a tumble-down fence far off toward the south. It was out of bounds of course. Still, the girls *had* wandered out on the prairie and not one of the Rhodes family had said a word. It looked like an entirely safe and harmless place. Mabel looked speculatively at the faraway little house.

"I wonder if I couldn't walk there and back before it gets dark. I'd have something to tell the girls. It would be fun to peek over that fence. Perhaps there are nuts under those trees by the gate. I wish Marjory and Bettie were here, but they had letters to read and this is Jean's day at

the gym. Maude's too. Anyhow, I'm going a *little* way."

It proved a splendid day for walking. Mabel's brown eyes brightened, a fine color glowed in her cheeks and, for the moment, all her troubles evaporated. She even forgot her danger of becoming a boarding school orphan. Presently she looked back and was pleased to find herself quite a distance from Highland Hall. The school looked quite imposing, on top of its own little hill.

"I can get to that cottage quite easily," said Mabel, trudging along cheerfully. "Perhaps there are chickens and things in the yard—I hope there isn't a goat. Too bad the ground is all brown. There isn't anything left to pick."

The trees, when Mabel reached them, were apple trees; but all the apples were gone except a withered one. There *were* chickens in the yard; and a woman who was peering anxiously down the road that began at her gateway and wandered off toward the southwest.

"Say," said she, catching sight of Mabel. "Would you mind coming in and staying with my children until Lizzie McCall gets here? She's due any minute and I've got to get over to the trolley—I'm late now. I have a job cleaning cars over at the Centerville Station, this time every day, and Lizzie always stays with the kids—they'd tear the house down if I left them alone."

"If you're sure Lizzie is coming—"

"Oh, yes, she's never missed yet. Just go in and see that they don't meddle with the fire. Lizzie'll be right along."

The woman hastened away. She looked what she was, an honest working woman with many family cares. Mabel went inside. Four small children stared at Mabel, as she entered. A boy of four, two small girls evidently twins, aged three, and a toddling baby of perhaps a year and a half. A delightful family to take care of for ten minutes but certainly not the kind of family to leave for very long to its own devices; for the twins were reaching for the sugar bowl and the boy had already discovered the poker and was poking the fire.

"Let's all watch out the window for Lizzie," suggested Mabel. "Stand on these two chairs."

Watching for Lizzie proved more of an occupation than Mabel had counted on. They watched and watched with all their eyes but no Lizzie appeared. Ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes. No Lizzie.

"Does Lizzie *always* come?" queried Mabel, now decidedly uneasy.

"Sure," replied the small boy.

"Where is your father?"

"Haven't any. Him all gone on choo choo cars. Far away."

"Does your mother come home to supper?"

"No. Lizzie makes our supper. Lizzie puts Tommy to bed and Susy to bed and Sairy to bed and Jackie to bed."

"Well," remarked Mabel, crossly, "I wish she'd come right now and *do* it. I ought to be a mile from here this very minute. I shouldn't have come in. And now I don't know *what* to do. It isn't right for you to be left by yourselves and it isn't right for me to stay. Now what does *anybody* do in a case like that? I must be back by six o'clock; but I'd be wicked if I went away—and it's awfully wrong of me not to go."

"*Don't* go," wheedled Tommy. "You is nicer than Lizzie."

"Nicer 'an 'Izzie," echoed Susy.

"Nicer 'an 'Izzie," echoed Sairy.

Mabel peered anxiously down the road. The days were short and already it was growing darker. For another half hour Mabel, pressing closer and closer to the window, watched the road. By that time it was really dark. There was a lamp with oil in it on the kitchen table; Mabel discovered matches on the shelf and managed to light it.

"What do you have for supper?" asked Mabel. "I suppose I'll have to feed you."

"Oatmeal," said Tommy. "It's in the kettle on the stove. And milk—in the cupboard. And bread."

"What do you have for breakfast?"

"Oatmeal and milk and bread."

"Where do you get them?"

"My muvver cooks 'em."

“Hum,” said Mabel, investigating the cupboard, “there’s just about enough bread for two meals so I guess I’d better not eat very much if I have to stay to supper; but I hope I don’t.”

But she did. Lizzie still remained mysteriously absent; and before long the children began to beg for food. Mabel arranged their simple supper under Tommy’s directions and the friendly infants appeared pleased with their new nurse.

It was lonely in the solitary little house; but Mabel didn’t mind that as long as the children were awake. But very soon after supper they began to nod. Tommy, very sweet and drowsy himself, showed Mabel where the other little people were to sleep. The baby was fretful; he had eaten very little supper and now his heavy head felt hot against Mabel’s cheek as she rocked him to quiet his complaining little cry. Presently he was asleep, so she tucked him very tenderly into the old clothes-basket that Tommy assured her was the baby’s bed. Then the chubby, yawning twins were tucked into their crib, for which they were a tight fit; and in two minutes, *they* were asleep. After that, Tommy removed all his clothes except his shirt and climbed into the double bed.

“You can sleep by me,” invited Tommy, “until my muvver comes. Lizzie does sometimes, after she washes the dishes.”

That at least was something for a worried and lonely young person to do. Mabel washed the tin spoons and thick saucers and put them neatly away. By this time it was exceedingly dark outside.

“Even if Lizzie were to come,” said Mabel, “I’d be afraid to go home alone. Dear me, I suppose I’ll have to stay all night. By this time everybody will know I’ve been out of bounds and goodness only knows what Doctor Rhodes will say to me. But I’ll skip home as soon as it’s daylight and ask that nice fat cook to let me in at the kitchen door.”

The bed was not particularly inviting but at last Mabel locked the outer door and climbed in beside Tommy, who was fast asleep. She hoped that the baby was all right; he seemed restless and made little moaning noises and tossed uneasily in his basket. She was sure that she herself wouldn’t be able to sleep for a moment in that strange place, so far away from her own friends; but presently she was slumbering quite peacefully. It was broad daylight when she awoke.

And still no Lizzie.

“Tommy,” demanded Mabel, sitting up in bed, “when does your mother get home? Who cooks your breakfast every day?”

“My muvver does. Where is my muvver?”

“Well, that’s what I’d like to know. I suppose I *could* take you all over to the school—no, I couldn’t carry that heavy baby all that way even if the twins could manage to walk so far. If it was just *you*, Tommy, I know we could do it. And I *don’t* like that baby’s looks.”

“He’s getting another toof,” said Tommy, wisely.

The baby was sick, there was no doubt about that. There was barely enough food for breakfast, there was no doubt about that, either. To be sure there were potatoes, turnips and cabbages in the cellar. Thanks to her play-housekeeping in Dandelion Cottage, Mabel knew how to boil potatoes but she also knew that potatoes were hardly a proper food for a sick infant.

By noon the children were hungry so Mabel fed them potatoes and gave the baby a drink of water; but the supply of wood was getting low and Mabel could see no way of replenishing it.

“I suppose,” said she, bitterly, “that woman just wanted to get rid of all these children; and here I am! Four of them on my hands and nothing to eat. One of them sick and getting teeth! It’s just my luck. I’ll keep away from strange houses after this. I don’t believe there ever *was* a Lizzie. But we must have a fire—perhaps there’s something in that shed that will fit that stove.”

There wasn’t, but there *was* a large and clumsy baby carriage.

Mabel examined it hopefully.

Two hours later, at least half of the inmates of Highland Hall, greatly exercised over Mabel’s mysterious disappearance, beheld a strange sight. A twin baby carriage, containing three infants and propelled by a plump, sturdy and perspiring young person, was rolling up the broad walk toward the school. A small boy trudged along behind.

“It’s Mabel!” gasped Jean.

“It’s Mabel!” shrieked Marjory.

“Mabel, Mabel, Mabel,” cried Bettie, Maude and Jane Pool. Mabel’s friends rushed down to greet her. The girls who were not her friends and who had been saying unkind things about her hung back; but they looked and listened.

“We might have known,” said Bettie, “that she’d bring *something* home with her—she always does.”

“But this time,” laughed Jean, “she’s outdone herself.”

Doctor Rhodes, stern and disapproving, eyed Mabel, coldly. To say the least it was unusual for a pupil to vanish for twenty-four hours and then turn up unexpectedly with a family of four. It certainly needed explaining.

Mabel, however, was too much out of breath to do any explaining. She beamed at the girls—it *was* pleasant to see them again after that long, anxious absence—and then glanced at Doctor Rhodes.

Horrors! How was anybody to explain things to a man who glared like that! Mabel stood still, her smile frozen on her plump, perspiring countenance.

“Leave those children right where they are,” said Doctor Rhodes, sternly, “and go into my office. I want to know what this conduct means.”

“Ye—yes, Sir,” faltered Mabel, toiling up the steps. Marjory skipped along beside her, to impart a bit of news.

“We missed you at supper time,” breathed Marjory, in an undertone; “but Doctor Rhodes didn’t know until about an hour ago that you were lost. We knew *you* so we were sure you’d do some queer thing like this and would get home all right if we just gave you a chance, so we kept still. If you’d only come just a little sooner we could have kept the secret. Miss Woodruff got after us and found out. I must skip, now—he’s coming.”

“Now,” demanded Doctor Rhodes, “where have you been?”

“I went for a walk,” said Mabel, dropping into the chair that was reserved for culprits. “I—I’ve always had the habit of bringing things home with me—cats, dogs and once an Indian baby. But—but this is the worst I’ve done yet.”

Doctor Rhodes turned suddenly to look out the window. The disappearance of a pupil from the school was a serious matter; but there was something about Mabel’s rueful countenance, her dejected attitude and her apologetic tone that was provocative of laughter.

“There was a woman,” pursued Mabel, earnestly, “and she *said* there was a Lizzie. I believed her at first but now I don’t. She asked me to stay with her children until Lizzie came and Lizzie *didn’t* come. I *had* to stay. It wasn’t safe to leave them with a fire in the stove. Today there wasn’t any fresh milk for the baby and I couldn’t split the wood. But there *was* a twin baby carriage and it’s taken us more than two hours to get here.”

“Where was that house? In the village?”

“Oh, no,” returned Mabel, wearily, waving her hand toward the south. “Way over that way across the prairie.”

“What! that small house that we can just see from the upper veranda? What were you doing away over there?”

“Just taking a walk—I thought I’d be back by six. I knew I was going pretty far; but my feet just kept going.”

“And what do you propose doing with all those children?”

“I thought we’d feed them,” said Mabel, “and then find somebody that knows them. There’s a vacant room across from mine. I’ll take care of them for the night. The baby is getting a tooth.”

“A teething baby!”

“And twins!” added Mabel. “And a boy named Tommy. But I got them all here alive and that was something.”

“Of course I shall have to punish you for going out of bounds. But the rest of your—your behavior is so unusual that I don’t know just how to meet it. I’ll have to think about it awhile. Now take those children to the room you mentioned and I’ll have one of the maids send up some supper—”

“Milk and oatmeal and bread,” pleaded Mabel, wearily.

An hour later, the mother of the forsaken children appeared at the kitchen door. She had followed the wheels of the baby carriage all the way to Highland Hall.

Charles was peeling potatoes, the two neat maids were helping him. At sight of the woman in the doorway, Charles rose suddenly to his feet, dropped his pan of potatoes and turned as if to flee. But the visitor rushed across the room and threw her arms about his neck.

And then tall, lanky Charles, with a sheepish glance at the two astonished maids, returned her kiss.

“He’s my husband,” said the woman. “I thought he’d gone to Detroit to get work. And here he is, not three miles from home!”

Charles explained blushingly that he had temporarily deserted his wife because he found it so pleasant to be considered a bachelor.

“The ladies,” said Charles, waving a hand toward the fat cook and the two neat maids “make so much of a single man. And I *like* being made much of—any man does.”

“And where,” demanded Mrs. Charles, “are my children?”

The neat maid who had carried the milk upstairs was able to lead her to her family; and Mabel learned that Lizzie had sent a note explaining that she couldn’t come; but the messenger had failed to deliver the note. Mrs. Charles had been later than usual in starting her cleaning work on the train and the train had started, carrying her to Chicago.

“And I thought,” said she, “I might as well make the most of a free ride while I was about it; so I went all the way, bought my provisions in town and got the noon train back.”

Charles hitched the school horse to the school wagon. With his sharp elbows sticking out and his sandy hair on end, he perched on the front seat and drove his family home that evening. He remained in the employ of Doctor Rhodes, but the two neat maids no longer “made much of him.” As for the fat cook, she told him exactly what she thought of a man who deserted a good wife and four fine children for the sake of flattering attentions from other ladies. And crestfallen Charles promised to mend his ways.

## CHAPTER XI—MABEL STAYS HOME

The girls teased Mabel considerably for the next few days. One afternoon she went to her room and was decidedly startled to find a dozen almost human objects seated on the floor, their backs braced against the wall. They were pillows stuffed into middy blouses. A large placard held forth by two stuffed sleeves read: “We are orphans. Please stay with us until Lizzie comes.”

A night or two afterwards she found her bed occupied by four more almost human middy blouse orphans, and one morning a lovely picture of a very stout young person pushing a wide baby carriage full of plump infants appeared on the assembly room blackboard. Under it was printed “Missing: One Lizzie.”

Mabel suspected that Henrietta and Maude Wilder were at the bottom of these outrages; and her suspicions were probably correct. But there were other offenders. Whenever little Jane Pool met her in the corridor she would cock a wicked black eye at her and say: “Hello, Lizzie,” or “How’s Lizzie today?”

Even one of the lofty seniors condescended to notice her long enough to ask: “Found any more orphans to adopt yet?”

Even tender hearted Bettie could not refrain sometimes from saying: “Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anybody coming?”

Mabel, who was feeling a bit doleful these days, took all this teasing in good part. Indeed, she was glad to be amused. After days of suspense her punishment for going out of bounds had been meted out to her; and she felt that she was indeed being punished. On Wednesday evening there was to be a concert at the Theological Seminary, with ice cream afterwards. Now, the students might and did scramble their prayers and make hash of their sermons; but they *could* sing, so it was always a joy to hear them. And “Ice cream afterwards” sounded wonderfully good to Mabel. But for Mabel there was to be no music and no ice cream. She was to stay at home with poor old Abbie. It was not until Wednesday afternoon that Mabel learned that Maude also was to stay at home.

“Miss Woodruff did it,” explained Maude, her amber eyes twinkling merrily. “Just after ‘Lights out’ last night I thought I’d like to drop a cold wet washcloth down Dorothy Miller’s neck. It’s a long way over to the North corridor, you know, and the hall doors all squeak; but I thought I could get away with it. Well, what did I do but run slap bang into Miss Woodruff!”

“Goodness!” gasped Mabel. “What *did* you do?”

“Well,” continued Maude, “I never said a word. I just stared straight ahead with my eyes wide open and pretended I was walking in my sleep, with that silly washcloth dripping from my outstretched hand. And I had her fooled. But just as I reached my own door I just absent-mindedly turned around and stuck my tongue out at her—you know I always *do* stick my tongue out at her when she isn’t looking—but this time I got caught. Mean old thing! She switched the light on just in time to get full benefit, so it was all up with little Maude.”

“What did she do then?”

“Oh, she said a lot of awfully cutting things. She’s a good teacher and I *do* respect her for that;

but she doesn't have to be so sarcastic when folks—well, stick out their tongues. I think it's a mean shame to make me lose that concert and all that ice cream just for a little thing like that. Cora says they sing *funny* songs and there's always cake with the ice cream. I'm going to get even with Miss Woodruff, see if I don't. Well, cheer up, Mabel. I'll see you later."

Evening found the two girls with their noses pressed against their bedroom windows watching the long procession of girls and teachers out of sight down the moonlit road. As usual, the Seniors led and the younger girls brought up the rear. Mabel looked at the place beside Marjory that should have been hers and sighed. She thought of that ice cream and a large tear rolled down her cheek.

Maude, wasting no tears, tiptoed to a room on the fourth floor. A key clicked in a lock and in two minutes more, naughty Maude was bouncing gleefully on Mabel's bed.

"I've locked poor old Abbie in her bedroom," announced Maude. "And now look at this!"

Maude hurled a large scarlet bundle at Mabel's head. Fortunately, it was a soft bundle.

"Spread it out on the floor," directed Maude. "It's Miss Woodruff's nightgown. Somebody told her that red flannel was a sure cure for rheumatism, so she *wears* that thing. It's perfectly enormous—it would have to be or it wouldn't fit. Now, let's look in all the Lakeville girls' sewing baskets for large white buttons and white tape—they won't mind. We'll just embellish that nightie with a few nice pictures and tack it up on Miss Woodruff's door—the girls will love it. We'll sew those buttons on tight, too."

Against the brilliant background, the naughty pair outlined grinning faces with the white tape, making eyes and other features with the large white buttons. A blazing sun adorned each wide front and Maude accomplished a daring caricature of Miss Woodruff herself in the very center of the broad scarlet back. Ordinarily, both Maude and Mabel hated to sew on buttons; but now they fell upon the task with glee.

"I've thought of something else," announced Maude, when this task was finished. "Miss Woodruff hates tobacco smoke. There are several packages of horrible cigarettes in Madame Bolande's room. You get the tin pail that stands on the back porch. After awhile I'll build a tiny fire in that and burn a bunch of those cigarettes just inside Miss Woodruff's door."

"Oh Maude—"

"We've been so bad now that we might as well keep on," said Maude, recklessly. "There's one thing sure; the next time they punish us they won't leave us home—they won't *dare*. We'll have to keep Abbie locked in until the very last minute so she won't undo any of our work. Now I'll get a pitcher of water so we can keep the fire in our pail from doing any harm; and anyway a little dampness will make that tobacco smell worse."

Maude and Mabel were in their beds and very sound asleep when the school returned. Miss Woodruff went to the library to find a book before ascending to her room; so most of the West Corridor girls had a fine chance to see the strange and ludicrous object nailed to the poor lady's door. Such a shout of laughter went up that Mrs. Rhodes hurried to the corridor and Doctor Rhodes, startled at the unusual sound, followed after. Poor Miss Woodruff arrived a moment later to find even Doctor Rhodes convulsed with mirth.

In one of his brief speeches to the school, Doctor Rhodes had once said "Incapatiated" when he meant "Incapacitated." Perhaps he was remembering the superior manner in which Miss Woodruff had corrected him. At any rate, he now seemed able to enjoy a joke on that rather severe lady.

Maude spent the next day in solitary confinement in the big lonely room at the end of the North Corridor, far away from all her friends. She was to stay there until she apologized. For some reason, Doctor Rhodes failed to connect Mabel with the wicked doings of the previous night; it is possible that Maude had shouldered all the blame; but when the second day dawned, with Maude still obdurate, Mabel, without consulting any of her friends, marched down to Doctor Rhodes's office.

"Doctor Rhodes," said she, "I think you ought to know—that is, I think I ought to *tell* you—that *I* sewed just as many buttons on that red nightgown as Maude did; and I ought to be punished just as much."

"Did *you* take Miss Woodruff's silver cardcase?"

"Why, no!" returned Mabel, indignantly. "Of *course* I didn't."

"Or Madame's cigarettes?"

"No."

"Or five dollars out of Madame's everyday hat?"

"Oh, *no*. And Maude didn't touch the money or the card case. I'm sure of that."

“What about the cigarettes?”

“She did take those and we both took the buttons and the tape; but nothing else.”

“And you think you ought to be punished?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Perhaps you could suggest a suitable penalty?”

“You might put me in solitary confinement in that room with Maude.”

Doctor Rhodes laughed and Mabel wondered why.

“You’d better look up the meaning of the word ‘Solitary,’” said he. “I fear there are other reasons why your plan wouldn’t work. You and Maude are a pretty lively team. I think,”—with a shrewd glance at Mabel’s plump figure—“that this is a better punishment for you. No dessert for dinner for a whole week.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Mabel, looking as if a week seemed a pretty long time.

“And you must apologize to Miss Woodruff.”

“I don’t mind that,” said Mabel. “I’m always having to apologize to somebody, so I’ve had lots of practice.”

“That’s an honest youngster,” said Doctor Rhodes to himself when the door had closed behind Mabel. “I’m sure she didn’t take either that cardcase or that money. And I don’t believe that naughty Wilder girl did either. Mabel is just a cheerful blunderer and Maude is just frankly willful. They’re both honest. But I’d give something to know who it is that isn’t—with all this smoke there must be *some* fire.”

After Maude had spent two long days in the North Corridor bedroom, Miss Woodruff thinking it was time for repentance to set in, tapped at the door. Maude, supposing it was Annie or Mary with her supper tray, hopped into the large black walnut wardrobe that stood against the wall and drew the door shut, meaning to spring forth at the right moment and say “Boo!”—but not until the tray was safe on the table.

The room was dimly lighted. Miss Woodruff, thinking that the dark shadow in the corner was Maude, stepped into the room and said, with dignity: “Maude, I am ready to accept your apology.”

This, of course, was rather sudden. The culprit had no apology at her tongue’s end. Still, she had *something*—irrepressible Maude was never *entirely* at a loss. She opened the wardrobe door, smiled sweetly at Miss Woodruff and said:

“*Nous avons les raisins blancs et noirs mais pas de cerises.*”

Apparently Miss Woodruff didn’t care whether there were cherries or not. She went out and slammed the door.

## CHAPTER XII—A GROWING GIRL

After her third day of solitary confinement, Maude promised to apologize properly to Miss Woodruff the next morning, immediately after prayers.

“Miss Woodruff,” said Maude, standing very slim and straight at her own desk in the Assembly room, “I apologize for the things I did to your—your *clothes* the other night. I’m sorry it was necessary to do them.”

“That will do,” said Dr. Rhodes, raising his hand, hastily—for there was no knowing how far irrepressible Maude might go, with all those other girls ready to applaud. “I’m sure Miss Woodruff accepts your apology.”

“I do,” replied Miss Woodruff, coldly, “but I should also like to have my silver cardcase returned at once. I have always kept it on the right hand side of my dresser, exactly six inches from my pincushion.”

“*Sacré bleu! Quel précision!*” breathed untidy Madame Bolande.

“When I went to your closet to get that red—well, that red *garment*,” replied Maude, “I noticed that the top of your dresser was perfectly neat and tidy. But I *didn’t* see any cardcase. It might have *been* there but I didn’t notice it. I certainly didn’t take it.”

“Very well,” said Miss Woodruff. “You may now be seated. Classes please.”

Mabel, the other culprit, was now behaving very well indeed. She was learning her lessons, and,

under the patient tuition of Miss Emily Rhodes, was improving her naturally untidy penmanship. She was also meekly, conscientiously and courageously going without dessert; and never—it seemed to always hungry Mabel—had there been so very many entrancing varieties of pie, so many choice puddings; and, of all weeks of the year, that was the one that the fat cook chose for the introduction of a brand new custardy affair that every one of the girls declared “simply scrumptious.”

Usually, there was much swapping of food at meal time. Grace Allen didn’t like butter but Ruth Dennis did; and was glad to give her tapioca pudding to Grace in exchange for Grace’s daily butter. Augusta disliked celery but adored pickles so she and Cora carried on an equally gratifying exchange. Mabel always traded her lima beans for Alice Bailey’s cocoanut pie—Alice hated cocoanut—and of course, during that dessertless week Mabel was obliged to refuse not only her own pie but Alice’s. But everybody liked the new custard.

“Taste mine,” tempted little Jane Pool. “It’s just licking good. Come on, nobody’s looking.”

“No,” sighed Mabel, “it wouldn’t be honest. I *said* I’d go without so I’ll go all the way—one week can’t last forever.”

“Never mind, Mabel,” comforted Maude, “I’ll ask Nora to make this kind *often* next week and I’ll give you my share just once so you can catch up. Besides, I owe you that much—I led you into this scrape, you know.”

Going without dessert, however, was a small trouble compared with mysteriously losing two full grown parents. Mabel’s were still missing. As she had no address except Berlin, she wasn’t at all sure that her own letters were reaching *them*. She and each of the other Lakeville girls had had several brief, boyish letters from their friend and fellow-camper, Laddie Lombard, the shipwrecked boy they had rescued at Pete’s Patch; but from her parents, not a word for so many weeks that it made Mabel shiver to count them.

Her thoughts, nowadays, were gloomy ones. What if she had to stay at Highland Hall until she was faded and forty like poor old Abbie. What if her skirts kept getting shorter and shorter (or what was more likely, narrower and narrower) like Cora’s. What if her middy blouses faded and frayed like Sallie’s, with no prospects of new ones. And what if she *never* saw her dear parents again—that was the worst thought of all. Her plump easy-going mother, her kind, pleasant father.

Yes, that was the worst thought of all. It weighed Mabel down. No matter what else she might be doing at the moment, Mabel couldn’t quite escape from the steadily increasing weight of that puzzling trouble.

“I’d give all four of my letters from Laddie,” said Mabel, wistfully, “for just a postal card with one little word on it from my mother.”

“Well,” declared Gladys de Milligan, who also was watching the mail bag, expectantly, “if I had a daughter as clumsy as you are I’d chuck her into a boarding school and leave her there *forever*. I’d be *glad* to forget about her.”

“Anyhow,” declared Mabel, crossly, “you don’t need to chew gum in my ear, even if you *would* be that kind of a mother.”

The Lakeville girls tried to cheer troubled Mabel but she could see that they, too, were becoming anxious. Indeed, Bettie had secretly written to Mr. Black about it. Mr. Black, Bettie firmly believed, could fix *anything*.

“My goodness!” said Cora, one evening, when the girls were waiting for Henrietta to come and tell them ghost stories on the spooky front stairs, “here are the Christmas holidays coming right along and I don’t know what I’m ever going to *do*. I’ve written and written to my people about the way I’m growing—told ’em I was seven feet tall if I was an inch—and they won’t *believe* me. They think I’m *exaggerating*! Here I am, growing a mile a minute; but my clothes, alas! are standing still. I’m going home with Maude, to visit her perfectly scrumptious family, and I haven’t one single dud that’s big enough either lengthwise or sidewise.”

“Didn’t the photographs work?” asked Helen Miller. For the Miller girls, at Cora’s request, had taken a number of snapshots of the growing girl to be sent to her doubting parents. Perhaps Cora had grown a little at the very moment in which she was snapped. At any rate the pictures were slightly hazy as to outline; yet, to the girls, they looked convincingly like Cora.

“No,” returned Cora, mournfully. “They didn’t believe that it *was* a picture of me.”

“What are you going to try next?” asked little Jane Pool.

“Nothing. I’ve given up. I’ve half a mind to stay right here for the holidays.”

“Nonsense!” said Maude. “You can wear *my* clothes—I’ve several things that are too big for me—that new navy blue taffeta, for instance.”

“I *couldn’t* do that,” said Cora, blushing until her freckles disappeared. “Your people would know

they were yours. I'd feel ashamed."

"Yes, that wouldn't do," agreed Jean.

"I know what to do," said Henrietta, who had arrived and was perched on the substantial newel post. "We'll *all* lend you things. You can take that new white blouse of mine—it will have to shrink before *I* can wear it."

"I'll lend you my pleated skirt," said Helen Miller, "you have it most of the time, anyway."

"I have a petticoat that would go with it," said Dorothy.

"Please—please take my new umbrella," pleaded little Jane Pool, earnestly. "I want to lend you *something* and that's the only thing I have that's big enough."

"You're a bunch of darlings," said Cora, hugging them all by turns, "and I'll be *glad* to borrow your things."

"Of course it's too late to be of any use for vacation," said Jean, "but I have an idea. Why don't you ask Doctor Rhodes to write to your people and tell them the horrible truth about your inches. Have Mrs. Henry Rhodes measure you. Figures, you know, never—well, exaggerate. They may believe Doctor Rhodes."

"Angel child!" cried Cora, "I'll do just that. You've found the answer."

Perhaps Jean had, for Doctor Rhodes, both amused and impressed by Cora's remarkable plight, *did* write to her people and the response was a large box that arrived soon after Cora returned from Maude's.

"And my goodness!" said exaggerating Cora, "there are tucks a mile wide and hems a mile deep and a whole acre of cloth in *everything*."

Three days after the evening on the stairs, the girls were all in the school room when Sallie, a little late, came in with the mail bag. There was a pleasing plumpness about the bag that day; and, as usual, all the girls crowded into the space just below the rostrum, so that Sallie, the post girl, looked down upon a small sea of eager, upturned faces.

Sallie reached into the bag, as was her habit, and pulled out a letter.

"Miss Eleanor Pratt," she read. One of the Seniors accepted it, calmly.

"Miss Anne Blodgett, Miss Isabelle Carew, Miss Ruth Dennis, Miss Debbie Clark, Miss Hazel Benton, Miss Gladys de Milligan, Miss Bettie Tucker, Miss Augusta Lemon, Miss Beatrice Holmes —" Another Senior strolled leisurely forward and condescended to accept a letter. Really, those older girls were annoying; they were so *blasé* about their mail.

"Miss Mabel Bennett," called Sallie, in her clear, strong voice.

Mabel seized her letter and waved it, gleefully. "It's from *Mother*!" she cried. "Hip, Hip, Hooray!" (There was nothing *blasé* about Mabel.)

Sallie, beaming sympathetically, pulled another letter from the bag.

"Miss Mabel Bennett," she announced.

"It's from Mother," Mabel shrieked again.

But when the third letter proved to be Mabel's, too, Mabel was too breathless with excitement to do more than gasp. When she had received five letters and four postal cards and a package containing thick, remarkably substantial German handkerchiefs, one for herself and one for each of her Lakeville friends, it was almost a relief to hear Sallie read a different name; for even the lofty Seniors were staring at her in astonishment.

"It wasn't my *people* that were lost," explained Mabel, after she had read all this accumulation of mail. "For quite a long time Mother mailed her letters in an old post-box that wasn't used any more for that purpose. She didn't understand enough German when somebody told her that wasn't the right one. But Father found out about it; and, after a long time, they succeeded in getting the German postmaster to open the old box and send her letters. So I'm not an orphan after all. And this week I'm going to buy something lovely with every penny of my thirty cents for Sallie, because she is."

## CHAPTER XIII—MANY SMALL MYSTERIES

Shortly before Christmas, Jean's father, Mr. Mapes, turned up just in time to whisk the Lakeville youngsters aboard their train. The girls were so glad to see a friend from home that they all but wept tears of joy. Quiet Mr. Mapes was quite pleased and embarrassed at their rapturous greeting—even Henrietta having surprised him with a kiss.

“We’d be glad to see even a beggar from *home*,” explained Mabel earnestly and with her usual frankness—and wondered why Mr. Mapes laughed.

Mabel was to visit among her friends for the holidays. All the other Highland Hall girls except homeless Sallie, Virginia Mason (a quiet girl from far away Oregon) and poor old Abbie, who wasn’t exactly a girl, departed to their homes for a two weeks’ vacation.

It wouldn’t be possible to describe *all* the Christmas gifts that the happy Lakeville girls received; but some of the more unusual ones deserve mention. From Germany, Mrs. Bennett sent to each of the five girls a lovely little Dresden pin of exquisite enamel. Mrs. Lombard, the grateful mother of Laddie, the rescued castaway, presented to each a beautiful gold locket containing a pleasing picture of her attractive boy. Mrs. Slater had selected an interesting book for each of Henrietta’s chums; and from Mr. Black, each girl received a beautiful leather writing case “with a place for stamps and everything,” as Bettie said joyfully. Mrs. Crane gave each girl a five dollar gold piece. But Henrietta’s father had sent nothing to his family. This was both puzzling and alarming. He had never before failed to send wonderful gifts at Christmas time.

Of course the Lakeville girls had dispatched parcels to Sallie and had written to her; so for once the post-girl had been able to deliver much pleasant mail to herself.

There was only one trouble with that vacation. It didn’t last long enough.

“Dear me!” said Henrietta, when Mr. Black had returned them all safely to Highland Hall, “those were the shortest two weeks that ever happened.”

This second coming to Highland Hall, however, was quite different from the first; and much pleasanter. The early arrivals greeted the late comers warmly and there was much hugging and kissing in the corridors. With one exception, all the girls and all the teachers had returned. The exception was Madame Bolande.

“I’m pretty sure she was fired,” confided Sallie, inelegantly. “She was in a furious temper when she packed her trunk the day after you left. And I wish you could have seen her room afterwards. Dust and powder and rouge all over the place—I had to help Abbie clean up. She wore her stockings until the feet were gone and then threw them under the bed.”

“I knew she was too awful to last,” said Hazel Benton. “But I did think they’d be obliged to keep her for a whole year. I’m so glad they didn’t.”

At first there was no regular French teacher. Elisabeth Wilson, one of the Seniors, attempted to carry on the classes; but found it difficult to undo Madame’s faulty work. Then one of the Theological students was engaged temporarily; but so many extra girls among the day pupils decided suddenly to take French that the young Theologian fell ill from overwork. Then Henrietta offered to tide the classes over until Doctor Rhodes should hear from the agency that was to supply the new teacher.

The three Seniors were regarded by the rest of the pupils with considerable awe, and it is time that you were hearing more about them. In the first place they were quite old—sixteen or perhaps as much as seventeen; but as Seniors sometimes do, they kept their ages a dark secret. The other girls were permitted to spend only thirty cents a week for candy and other eatables. Not so the Seniors. They could spend all the money they liked, provided their parents supplied it, and they did. They could even send to Chicago for large boxes of candy or cream puffs or Angel’s food cake and eat these delectable things at any hour of the day or night, without interference. In the matter of clothes they were not restricted to middies. They could wear what they liked and they did, Eleanor Pratt was exceedingly dressy. Elisabeth Wilson was a walking fashion plate and Beatrice Holmes of Indiana, managed to out-dress them both. Occasionally, one or another of these superior young persons would condescend to pass her box of chocolates to some of the younger girls; but, for the most part, the proud and lofty Seniors, as Sallie said, flocked by themselves and were not always polite when some thoughtless young person from the lower forms “butted in.”

Their rooms were in the older part of the house and were much grander than those of the other pupils. It meant a great deal to be a Senior—you always spelled it with a very large S—at Highland Hall.

But being a Senior did not exempt Miss Pratt, Miss Wilson or Miss Holmes—never did any other pupil venture to address them as Eleanor, Elisabeth or Beatrice—from losing certain, small belongings.

Two weeks after the holidays, Miss Wilson reported the loss of a small crescent pin, set with diamonds. Miss Holmes had searched her room in vain for a valuable bracelet and Miss Pratt had broken a ten dollar bill in order to buy a quarter’s worth of stamps—and the change had vanished from her purse. Yes, she *had* been careless to leave it in the pocket of her coat in the cloak room; but that was no reason why any one should have taken it.

“Anyway,” said Sallie, “we know now that it isn’t Madame Bolande who is doing it; and that’s something.”

“Of course,” ventured Henrietta, “it couldn’t be one of the Rhodes family. I know there is some sort of a mystery about them. They all have sort of a queer, shifty look about them; and they all shut right up like clams when you ask questions. You can’t even pry into poor old Miss Emily’s past without frightening her. This is an old school; but except for Miss Julia I can’t believe that the Rhodes people have been here very long. Now *have* they, Sallie?”

“I can’t tell you a thing,” declared Sallie. “I promised not to and I can’t. There *is* a sort of secret. It isn’t anything *very* bad. It’s just something that Doctor Rhodes thinks might make a difference in the attendance if it were known—Goodness! I’ve told you more now than I meant to. Please don’t talk about it, Henrietta.”

“Of course I won’t,” promised Henrietta, “but I’m just as curious as I can be and I’m going to pump poor old Abbie.”

But poor old Abbie showed unexpected strength of mind; she put her fingers into her ears and refused to listen to Henrietta’s blandishments.

“It ain’t for me,” said Abbie, “livin’ here like I be, to be givin’ things away to prying young persons like you and that Jane Pool child that’s always pesterin’ me about my past. I know what I know but you ain’t goin’ to. What you don’t know can’t hurt you.”

Every week, some time between three and five o’clock on Saturday afternoon, every pupil, not excepting even the lofty Seniors, was expected to visit the huge attic above the older portion of Highland Hall. Here, arranged in a neat border all around the big room, were the girls’ trunks. Only on Saturdays were the girls permitted to visit them—it seemed, Bettie said, almost like getting back home to see them again each week.

Near the windows were benches and numerous brushes and boxes of blacking. It was here that the girls blacked their shoes, or whitened them, according to their needs. Saturday, likewise, was the day for that.

The third Saturday after Christmas, Mabel, always a little awkward, lost her balance and fell backward into an open trunk. In her efforts to save herself she clutched things as she crashed through the flimsy tray. She came up with a ribbon belt in her hand. There was an odd buckle on the belt. Mabel looked at it curiously. Bettie, polishing one of her best black shoes glanced at it too. Then she looked at Mabel and lifted an inquiring eyebrow. Then both girls stooped to look at the name on the trunk. It was there in plain letters, “Gladys E. De Milligan.”

And then Gladys herself appeared suddenly at the top of the stairs with a second armful of clothing to store in her trunk. She flew at surprised Mabel like a small whirlwind and snatched the belt from her hand.

“What do you mean,” she stormed, “prying in my trunk! And taking my things. I caught you doing it—I’ll tell all the girls.”

“I *didn’t* pry in your trunk,” protested Mabel. “I just *fell* in. Goodness knows I didn’t *want* to skin my shoulder on your old trunk; and that belt is just what I got when I grabbed.”

“That’s the truth,” added Bettie.

Gladys locked her trunk ostentatiously, pocketed the key and marched downstairs. Mabel looked at Bettie, Bettie looked at Mabel.

“The buckle on that belt looks a lot like the one that Helen Miller made such a fuss about last fall,” said Mabel.

“I know it does.”

“Do you think we’d better say anything about it to the girls?”

“Let’s ask Jean.”

Now Jean was the kindest soul imaginable. Although she had known many things to Gladys’s disadvantage, she had kept silence herself and had influenced her little friends to keep silence likewise.

“Gladys may have found that buckle,” said Jean, “and of course it’s possible that she and Helen had buckles just alike. I don’t *like* Laura—I mean Gladys—but I don’t believe we’d better say anything against her to the other girls.”

“She says things against us,” said Mabel. “She told Sallie that my father was just a corn doctor and that all Bettie’s clothes came out of missionary boxes and that Marjory’s Aunty Jane took in washing—and I shan’t tell you what she said about *your* folks but it was just awful.”

“Well, let’s not worry about it. The girls that we like best aren’t going back on us for anything Gladys can tell them and we don’t have to be mean just because *she* is.”

“I suppose it is hard luck,” said Bettie, “to be born the kind of person Laura is. I agree with Jean.

Let's forget her and think of pleasant things."

Laura was a clever girl in many ways. Naturally bright, she learned easily. Naturally rather a forward child, not easily embarrassed, she recited readily—in spite of her gum—and acquired good marks. She broke very few rules. Even that rule that *every* boarding school girl breaks—the one about remaining in one's own bed from the time the bell rings for "Lights Out" until it rings again for rising, even that rule was seemingly unbroken by Laura. At any rate, no one ever caught her breaking it. She was rooming now with Victoria Webster in the North Corridor, Victoria having returned thither after the burglar scare was over.

Mrs. Henry Rhodes was matron of the North Corridor, where the Miller girls, Ruth Dennis, Alice Bailey, Hazel Benton, quiet Virginia Mason and some of the older girls roomed. Mrs. Henry, as the girls called her, was easily the most attractive member of the Rhodes family. Quite a young woman, she was both pretty and stylish in a quiet, very pleasing way. Her abundant light brown hair was coiled neatly and becomingly about her small head—she was slender—and not very tall —and Hazel Benton said that she had an aristocratic nose. Most of the girls liked and admired her.

She was not particularly severe or exacting in her duties as matron—Miss Cassandra Woodruff was made of much sterner stuff, as the West Corridor girls knew to their sorrow. Mrs. Henry had once been a boarding school girl herself, likewise a college girl, and her sympathies were with her charges. It was suspected that she didn't consider it a crime for Dorothy Miller to slip across the hall into Ruth Dennis's bed to giggle over some joke, or for Hazel Benton to slide into Alice Bailey's room for a cough drop, or even for half a dozen of the girls to assemble in Dora Burl's room for a smuggled in, midnight spread of cream puffs; so it is possible that Mrs. Henry didn't listen, very hard when her charges prowled about at night.

In addition to being a popular matron, she had proved an excellent drawing teacher. Also her needlework classes were turning out good work. She had been married only a short time when her husband died; and, as Cora put it, looked more like a young lady than a widow.

"I wish," groaned Maude, the day after Miss Woodruff had caught her after "Lights Out" on her way to Cora's room with a large box of cream puffs under her arm, "that we could swap matrons with the North Corridor. Mrs. Henry *knows* that cream puffs have to be eaten fresh."

"Yes," agreed Cora, "it was certainly a crime about those cream puffs. Four dozen of them at sixty cents, besides what we gave Charles for smuggling them in. Eight of us chipped in with our whole week's allowance. And what did old Woodsy do but keep them in her warm room all night, and then, after every last one of them had soured beyond hope, she ordered them served for the whole school for lunch."

## CHAPTER XIV—UNPOPULAR MARJORY

Twice a week, from half past seven to nine, there was dancing in the dining room. The tables were pushed back and the floor waxed. Sallie Dickinson had to help with that, so, though she loved to dance, she was usually too tired to do it. Miss Julia Rhodes and the three Seniors took turns at the piano. Miss Julia played "The Blue Danube," and other sentimental waltzes left over from her own rather remote girlhood. The Seniors were much more modern. They played Sousa's rousing marches with so much vigor that even Mabel, who had never really learned to dance, felt simply compelled to get up and two-step. And when *two* of the Seniors, at separate pianos, pounded out "The Washington Post," stout Miss Woodruff, who had been brought up to believe that it was wicked to dance, kept time so vigorously with her feet that (in spite of her hectic nightwear) she always suffered next day from rheumatism in her plump ankles.

Mabel's sense of rhythm was good and, for a heavy child, she proved surprisingly light on her feet. At the same time she was clumsy and was continually bumping into other dancers or getting in their way and being bumped. Jean and Bettie danced only moderately well. Inexperienced Jean was a trifle stiff as to knees and elbows and Bettie was not stiff enough. Marjory was like a bit of thistledown, here, there and everywhere, so that Jane Pool and little Lillian Thwaite were the only persons sufficiently nimble to keep step with her.

Henrietta danced very well indeed. She had had several terms of dancing lessons and was, besides, naturally graceful. As a partner, Henrietta was in great demand. In the early months of the school year, all five of the Lakeville girls had been fairly popular, but now, since soon after the Christmas holidays, something was wrong. Except for the girls from her own town, no one but Sallie, Maude Wilder and Jane Pool asked Marjory to dance. Little Lillian Thwaite had even gone so far as to refuse Marjory's invitations.

"I'm engaged for *all* the dances," fibbed Lillian, glibly.

Marjory might have believed her if she had not later heard Lillian asking Gladys for the next two-step. For some reason Marjory was becoming more and more unpopular and the little girl was quite troubled about it. Any little girl *would* have been.

Gladys danced almost as well as Henrietta did; but Henrietta was the pleasanter dancer to look

at. She carried herself prettily, her clothes seemed always just exactly right and Henrietta herself, with her sparkling eyes, her vivid coloring, her dark, becoming curls, was always an attractive sight. Gladys was invariably overdressed for these occasions. Her hair was over-done and her complexion entirely unnatural. She arched her back in an artificial way, crooked her elbows at curious angles and managed to stick her left little finger out in a most peculiar and quite ridiculous manner. Added to this, she invariably chewed gum quite as industriously as she danced.

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” commented Mrs. Henry Rhodes, viewing this spectacle with amusement, “if Gladys chewed in time to the music; but she doesn’t.”

Even the frozen countenance of the older Mrs. Rhodes thawed into something like a smile when Gladys danced and chewed. Still, apparently many of the girls liked to dance with Gladys; but those who did held aloof from the four Lakeville girls and more particularly from Marjory and Mabel.

“I know what I think,” said Marjory, confiding in Mabel one evening when they were the only girls who had not been asked by some one else to waltz. “Laura Milligan has been saying things about us again, and more and more of the girls are believing what she says. It gets a little worse every dancing night. It’s terrible to be *unpopular*.”

“I know it,” agreed Mabel. “The only friends we have in this school now are the girls that won’t associate with Laura. Maude just hates her and so does Sallie. Jane Pool does, too. And I don’t think Victoria Webster likes her any too well, even if she *does* room with her.”

“The Seniors make fun of her,” said Marjory; “I’ve seen them do it. Miss Wilson imitates the way she chews gum and Miss Pratt sticks her little finger out the way Laura does. If Augusta wasn’t just a silly goose herself she’d never waste a minute on Laura. And the Miller girls and Isabelle haven’t as many brains in their three heads as little Jane Pool has in her one—I heard Miss Woodruff tell them that in school yesterday. And Grace Allen hasn’t any mind of her own at all. She just thinks what Laura *wants* her to think, and then passes it on.”

“The friends we have are *nice* girls,” returned Mabel. “Maude, Cora, Sallie and the others. Just the same it makes me just mad to be snubbed and cold shouldered and left out by *anybody*.”

“Me too,” said Marjory. “I know you can’t waltz, but let’s get up and do it anyway. We don’t need to *look* like wallflowers even if we are.”

There was another evidence of Marjory’s growing unpopularity. Once in two weeks there was a general spell down in the Assembly room. Some of the girls loved it, some of them hated it, according to their ability to spell; but they all quivered with excitement while it was going on.

Two of the Seniors marched importantly to the far corners of the room from which point, turn and turn about, they chose sides; and of course it was considered an honor to be among the first called—and a disgrace to be among the last.

Jean and Marjory spelled very well indeed and were usually among the first to be chosen. Mabel spelled just about as badly as anybody could and was always the last. She *expected* to be. She had grown accustomed to her place at the end of the line and felt as if it belonged to her. Bettie, Grace Allen, Augusta Lemon and Cora were easily downed; but sometimes survived the first word. Isabelle Carew could spell if she kept her mind on it, but once Miss Woodruff had given her the word “Claritude,” and she had gone to dreaming in the middle of it. She spelled it “Clar_ence_.” Of course, after that, everybody knew that Isabelle could not be considered a dependable speller.

But Marjory was. Her ears were keen and she liked to spell. It was a difficult matter to spell her down. Sometimes *both* Seniors, in their eagerness to get her, called her name in the same breath and then squabbled just like ordinary girls over which should have her. But now, for some undiscoverable reason, Marjory was being left with Mabel until the very last moment—until every other possible girl had been chosen. And this dreadful thing had happened *twice*.

The first time this happened, Marjory was so disconcerted that she almost forgot how to spell the very easy word that fell to her lot. The second time she was glad to hide behind tall Isabelle, who stood beside her; for there was a large lump in her throat, tears in her gray eyes and a tell-tale pink flush dyeing her small fair face from brow to chin.

Truly it was a terrible thing to be an unpopular person. Marjory wished she could sink through the floor, even if she landed, as she thought she *might*, in the laundry tubs beneath.

## CHAPTER XV—A SURPRISING FESTIVAL

It was a dark afternoon outside and in. Sallie and the Lakeville girls were darning stockings in Henrietta’s room and the light was really too poor for so gloomy an occupation. They were glad when Maude dropped in, swept the stockings from the table and seated herself thereon. A few moments later Cora and little Jane Pool strolled in, followed shortly by Debbie Clark.

“Come on in, girls,” said Maude. “‘*Nous avons les raisins blancs et noirs mais pas de cerises.*’ In other words, there are no chairs but help yourselves to the floor. You’re just in time. Here’s Mabel cross as two sticks, Marjory terribly doleful for some unknown reason and Henrietta sulking every day at mail time and for hours afterwards. Such a grouchy bunch! What shall I do to cheer you up?”

“It is rather dark just now,” admitted Jean, “but you know we’re all going to the ice cream festival in the basement of the Baptist church tonight. That ought to cheer most anybody.”

“Except Augusta Lemon,” said Cora.

“Why?” asked Henrietta. “Because we have to go early and get away from there before the Theologs arrive on the scene at eight thirty?”

“No, but she’s torn a great jagged hole in the front of her best dress and spilled ink on her second best frock. Since she’s been going with Gladys, she feels as if she *had* to be dressy.”

“We ought to help her out,” said kind-hearted Jean.

“So we ought,” said Maude, a wicked light beginning to dance in her golden brown eyes. “I have a beautiful idea. I think we ought to help her out a whole lot.”

“How?” asked Marjory.

“Well, you know what a goose she is—how easy it is to make her do what you want her to do—”

“Yes,” said Cora, “she hasn’t any backbone.”

“Not a particle,” agreed Sallie.

“Well, then, I’ll persuade her to let me dress her up for tonight. Let’s borrow the very gayest things we can find. Let’s see how far we can go. Let’s make her look perfectly awful.”

“Oh, no,” pleaded Jean.

“Now be good, Jean, and don’t spoil our fun,” begged Maude. “We just want to cheer these gloomy children up. I know Augusta will be a cheerful sight when we get her all dolled up.”

“I’ll do her hair,” laughed Cora. “I’ll *curl* it.”

“You *couldn’t*,” declared Marjory. “It’s the straightest hair that ever grew.”

“I’ll try, anyway. But where are the gay clothes coming from?”

“There’s that fearful sport skirt of Hazel Benton’s,” suggested Sallie. “The one with the very wide green and white stripes. You might borrow that, Maude.”

“And my bright pink sweater,” offered Debbie Clark.

“Dorothy Miller has a pair of awfully pink silk stockings,” said little Jane Pool. “And Augusta herself has a pair of those silly high heeled pumps like Gladys’s. Wouldn’t it be fun to put pink bows on them!”

“Ruth Dennis has some on her lamp shade,” offered Sallie. “And her curtains are tied back with pink ribbons. They’d do for her hair.”

“Good,” laughed Maude. “Now there ought to be a blouse—who has the gayest one?”

“Isabelle has,” said Mabel. “That robin’s egg blue one.”

“Good,” said Maude. “Now I’ll go and gather in all those duds and dump them in here. And then Cora and I will call on Augusta. After we get her talked over, you can help dress her, Henrietta. The rest of you giggle too easily—you’d give the show away. But you can peek in one at a time through the transom if you’re very careful.”

“I can provide a gorgeous string of bright red beads,” offered Henrietta. “And I know where I can get a pair of earrings. She’ll be a perfect scream.”

Augusta was not at all a pretty girl. She had a large, rather stupid face (Henrietta said she looked like a sheep) a meager amount of very stiff and very straight taffy colored hair, her complexion was pale and pasty and her figure was bad; mostly because she was not careful to stand nicely. She proved as easily led as Maude had predicted. She accepted the girls’ offer of assistance with alacrity.

“You’d be lovely with curls,” persuaded Cora, wickedly. “I happen to have a curling iron and an alcohol lamp in my pocket right now. I was just carrying them around—well, just carrying them around, you know. Matches too. Well now, we’ll just light up the little lamp—like that—and we’ll try a little curl—like this. Sit still so I won’t burn your ears—they stick out a good deal so I have to be careful. Here’s Henrietta—she’ll tell us a lovely story while I curl. You’re going to be so

beautiful that nobody will know which is you and which is the ice cream."

"Here's this adorable skirt," said Maude, returning with a gay armful of garments. "But you ought to have a bath."

"I had one last night," said Augusta.

"Then I'll dress your feet," said Henrietta, grabbing the pink silk stockings and flopping down on the floor.

"But they're *pink*," objected Augusta,

"They are Dorothy Miller's very newest ones," persuaded Maude, not disclosing the fact that a color-blind aunt had given them to Dorothy for Christmas. "She got them because—because her aunt read in 'The Well Dressed Woman' that pink silk stockings should always be worn to ice cream festivals."

"Did she really?" demanded round-eyed Augusta.

"Pink and green," declared Maude, hastily holding up the starched skirt to hide her own smiling countenance, "are complementary colors, Mrs. Henry says. You wear them together. The pink brings out the green and the green brings out the pink. And robin's egg blue—that's your soul color, Augusta."

"It doesn't match the skirt," objected Augusta.

"It matches your *eyes*," said Maude. "Oh, Henrietta! Her feet are beautiful! Yes, I *like* the bows on her pumps."

"Ouch!" gasped Augusta, "you *did* burn my ear."

"I'll be more careful," promised Cora, whose shoulders were shaking. "Just two more lovely curls and I'll be done—you never saw such adorable curls. *Much* nicer than Gladys's."

"Now the pink sweater," said Henrietta.

Suddenly there was a crash outside the door, a sound of giggling and of swift scurrying. It was Mabel's turn at the transom; and the chair had tipped over. Her friends hustled her across the hall along with the chair and examined them both. There were bruises but nothing broken.

"What was that?" gasped Augusta. "Something hit my door."

"Nothing there," said Cora, peering into the hall. "The corridor's perfectly empty. It was probably Miss Woodruff rising from her nap."

"Wouldn't it be better," suggested Maude, thoughtfully eying gorgeous Augusta, "if she were to wear her everyday dress over these things when she goes down to dinner!"

"Yes, indeed," agreed Henrietta. "I'll tell you what, Augusta. Let's keep this a lovely surprise for the girls tonight. Not the curls. We'll just slick those down a bit with a wide black ribbon. But we'll pull some black stockings over the pink ones and cover your skirt and blouse. The first minute after dinner we'll rush right up and peel you and put on the pink bows and beads and things. *This* is just sort of a dress rehearsal."

"The Highland Hall girls simply won't know you when they see you at the festival," assured Maude, when Augusta had agreed to keep the secret until her arrival at the church parlors. Poor Augusta was not accustomed to so much attention from Maude, Henrietta and Cora, all of whom she had admired from a distance, and it pleased her. And, in their hilarious state over the success of their joke, the three naughty girls failed to realize that in making a laughing stock of poor silly Augusta they were not playing fair.

It is true that they suffered a few twinges during dinner time when pleased Augusta beamed at them with a new friendliness and insisted on dividing her dessert among them; but when the proper time came, they peeled her remorselessly, bedecked her with the ridiculous pink bows and smuggled her into the procession without giving the secret away.

The girls not in the secret *were* surprised; but after all, it was the plotters themselves who were the most completely astonished.

Augusta in all her pinkness—not to mention her blueness and greenness—was a conspicuous object; she was visible from any place in the big room. Now, the Theological students were not to arrive until much later; but the younger boys from Hiltonburg were there in full force. There was an expectant flutter among the Highland Hall girls. On a similar occasion, introduced by some of the day pupils, these same boys had treated several of them to ice cream. Perhaps they'd do it now. Extra ice cream would be very welcome for they had all spent their weekly pocket money and Doctor Rhodes felt that he was sufficiently generous when he provided one helping apiece for his large flock.

But now, with one accord, all the boys at the festival, attracted by Augusta's brilliant attire and not yet of an age to be critical, were seized with a yearning to treat gorgeous Augusta to ice cream. They begged to be introduced. They begged to be allowed to offer Augusta ice cream and yet more ice cream. And cake and yet more cake.

The wondering girls, staring at blushing Augusta, were amazed to see that she was actually pretty, in spite of her outrageous clothes, for her curled hair fell tenderly and becomingly about her glowing face, her eyes were like stars and she fairly radiated happiness as she ate dish after dish of ice cream. There seemed to be no limit to her capacity.

"And here *we* are," breathed Henrietta, "sitting in a long row like so many sheep—"

"And only one dish apiece," groaned Maude. "Next time I'll pin all the pink bows on *myself*."

## CHAPTER XVI—MORE MYSTERIOUS HAPPENINGS

Very soon after this surprising occasion, there was another social event and another surprise for our young friends; but not a *pleasant* surprise for anybody. A disgraceful thing happened. Miss Julia Rhodes's music pupils gave a public concert in the Assembly room. It was not the concert that was disgraceful; though, owing to the embarrassment of most of the performers, the music was bad enough; and Hazel and Cora felt that they had completely wrecked the occasion when, in stooping to draw out the bench on which they were to sit while playing their duet, they unexpectedly bumped heads, much to the amusement of the audience and to the detriment of their duet.

No, bad as it was, it wasn't the concert but what happened while it was going on, that publicly disgraced Highland Hall. A number of the village people were invited to the concert and the day pupils, of whom there were perhaps a score, had been asked to bring their parents and friends.

All these guests had hung their wraps in the lower hall, where ordinarily the day pupils hung theirs. Several of the women had carelessly left their purses in their pockets. When they attempted to pay their carfare on the way home, not one of them had a single penny. Some pilfering person had taken every scrap of cash from every purse, and in some cases even the purses were missing.

The principal losers wrote indignant notes to Doctor Rhodes, who naturally was anything but pleased.

Right after prayers the next morning, Doctor Rhodes called the school to order. His face was sterner than usual and his voice was unusually harsh. He told the girls what had occurred, and what a disgrace it was to any school to have such very unpleasant things happen to its trusting guests.

"Moreover," said he, "many losses of jewelry and money by the pupils in our own dormitories have been reported to me from time to time; and, while it would have been possible, night before last, for a thief to have slipped into that lower hall from outside, I have a feeling that there is some one right in our own school who isn't—well, to put it plainly—quite as honest as she might be. I don't like to say this or to think it. I am sorry for the necessity.

"It has been suggested that the person taking these various things might save herself trouble if she were to leave them on the table in the library some time during the day. That room is never occupied during school hours; so the repentant thief would be entirely safe from observation. I am giving some one a very good chance to get out of an unpleasant predicament. I hope she will take advantage of it and mend her ways from this time forward."

Of course after that, even a very stupid person could have guessed the topic of conversation wherever little groups of girls gathered together. Oh, how their tongues did wag! Oh, how they whispered and nodded their heads! And oh, how many more young persons had lost things that they hadn't hitherto mentioned. Of course they wondered all day long what was happening in the library. But the day passed and the library table was still empty. Nothing had been returned.

Jean and Bettie were dressing for dinner the next night when Sallie, in a most unusual state of excitement, burst into their room, and flung herself upon Jean's bed.

"I'm—I'm so mad I could scream," sobbed Sallie, thumping the pillow with her clenched fist and lashing the air with her feet. "I could kill all that Rhodes family. I—I—I—"

But now Sallie's words were drowned in sobs.

"Goodness, Sallie, don't cry so," said Jean. "You're in an awful state."

"Who *wouldn't* be in an awful state if—if—" More sobs.

"There, there," comforted Jean, patting the heaving shoulders. "Get a glass of water for her, Bettie. That's right. Now take a little drink, Sallie."

“If—if it were anybody but you,” said Sallie, suddenly jerking herself upright, “I’d throw that water straight in your face! I’m so *mad*!”

But Sallie clawed the wet hair from her own face, drank the water and handed the glass to Bettie.

“There, now,” said she. “I guess I can talk. You know where I room up on the top floor with Abbie? Well, *you* know and everybody else knows that Abbie has no money; and that I have just about as much as Abbie has which is just none at all. We are the only people in this school who have *no* spending money. The other Doctor Rhodes used to give—”

“The *other* Doctor Rhodes,” gasped Bettie.

“I didn’t mean to say that,” returned Sallie, quickly. “What I mean is just this. I have no money and everybody knows it. Very well, then. I’m the very person that would steal money. And jewelry. I—or poor old Abbie.”

“But you wouldn’t,” soothed Jean.

“But—but some folks *think* I would. Now, a real paying pupil would get mad and go home if Mrs. Rhodes searched her bureau drawers, wouldn’t she?”

“I should say so,” agreed Jean.

“Well, Mrs. Rhodes and Mrs. Henry Rhodes searched mine and Abbie’s.”

“But they didn’t *find* anything,” comforted Bettie, “so you don’t need to care.”

“But they *did*. There was a pocketbook under the pin cushion. Mrs. Drayton’s calling cards were in it. She lost hers here the other night, you know—and that wasn’t the worst. There was money in it—more than two dollars.”

“Were you right in the room all the time?” queried horrified Bettie.

“No, I happened to go upstairs quietly and there they were looking in all our bureau drawers and under our mattresses and even in the pockets of our clothes. They had already found the purse.”

“Was Abbie there?”

“No, she was down in the kitchen. Doctor Rhodes sent for me and for Abbie to go to the office. He asked us which of us took that pocketbook and I could see that poor old Abbie was just as surprised as I was—you know you can always see just what she thinks. And, oh! Abbie thought *I* took it. She gave me *such* a suspicious look.

“And then, Doctor Rhodes asked her if she had ever known of my stealing anything before that. Oh, *think* of him asking that! And Abbie—well, you know Abbie is never very positive about anything. She said ‘I don’t know. I don’t guess I ever did.’ But I could just see that she thought I *had* taken that miserable purse. She’s so simple minded that she believes anything you tell her. She could see that those Rhodes people were accusing me, so she believes, of course, they were right.”

“But *we* don’t,” Jean and Bettie assured her.

“But other people will. I don’t know what to do. I’d run away if I had any place to run to.”

“If you ran away,” said Jean, wisely, “they’d be *sure* you had done it. It’s braver to stay right here and go on just as usual. *We* know you didn’t do it—why, we *know* you didn’t. And tomorrow when I have my drawing lesson I’ll tell Mrs. Henry Rhodes that you told me all about it and I’ll let her see that Bettie and I believe in you. And she’ll tell Doctor and Mrs. Rhodes—I’ll ask her to. Mrs. Henry understands girls; and she always helps us when we ask her to.”

“Don’t worry,” comforted Bettie. “It’ll come out all right—I know it will. Things always do if you just wait long enough.”

“I wonder,” said Isabelle’s fretful voice in the hall, “what’s happened to dinner—it’s ten minutes past the time.”

“My goodness!” cried Sallie, “I forgot all about that bell.”

“I wish,” said Jean, after Sallie had scurried away down the corridor, “that Sallie wasn’t a boarding school orphan. She’s much too nice. I like her ever so much.”

“Yes,” agreed Bettie, “she’s one of the sweetest girls in this school even if she hasn’t any clothes or pocket money or anything. And I’d believe in her even if they found a bushel of strange purses under her pin cushion.”

## CHAPTER XVII—HENRIETTA IS WORRIED

“I used to think I *liked* to get letters,” said Henrietta, walking up and down the long veranda, arm in arm with Hazel Benton and Jean, “but now I don’t. My sweet old grandmother doesn’t say much but I can see that she’s worried to death because she doesn’t hear from my father—she always asks if *I’ve* heard. We haven’t either of us had a word since last June. Of course, often it is two or three months between letters because he gets into such unget-at-able places; and when there, gets so interested in what he is doing that he doesn’t realize how the time is getting away, and quite often there are no postoffices that he can possibly reach. But he does try to write often enough to keep us from worrying. Then there are some people in England who look after his money and other business matters for him. Well, grandmother says *they* haven’t heard from him; and she thought perhaps I’d brought my last letter from him with me—it had the name of a place that he *might* have gone to in it. But I left it in Lakeville—I think I can tell her just where to look for it—in one of those lovely little boxes that he sent me from India.”

“It must be lovely,” breathed Hazel, “to get presents from India.”

“It is—when I’m getting them. But now I don’t like any of Grandmother’s letters. I just hate to open them. She’s trying not to frighten me and at the same time she’s just scaring me to pieces. I didn’t think much about it before I left home last fall, but when I didn’t get a single thing from him at Christmas time (he *always* sends me things for Christmas) I was sure there was something wrong. And then, of course, I began to think of all the things that *might* happen to a man that looks at a map and then plunges right into it, whether it’s wet or dry, the way Daddy does. And goodness! It’s a wonder there’s a man left on this earth. I can imagine such *awful* things. I wake up in the night and worry for hours.”

“What does your father do for a living?” asked Hazel.

“He doesn’t do anything for a *living*,” explained Henrietta, who for some time had been wearing a worried expression that was new to her. “He just does what he does because he’s perfectly crazy about digging up things—like tombs and buried cities and old marble statues. He’d rather find the nick that came out of a prehistoric platter than to own a brand new set of dishes.”

“He must be quite handy with a shovel by this time,” said Hazel.

“Oh, he doesn’t do the digging *himself*,” explained Henrietta. “He hires folks—natives mostly. They do the actual digging but he is always right there to make sure that they work carefully. Otherwise they’d smash valuable finds and that would be worse than not digging them up at all. He knows a wonderful lot about pottery and old metals and marbles and—just loads of things. He’s an archæologist.”

“No wonder you were able to spell the whole school down on that word, yesterday,” said Hazel. “It must be wonderful to have a father like that.”

“It would be,” returned Henrietta, soberly, “if he didn’t have to take such dreadful risks.”

“He has been lost several times,” comforted Jean, “and he has always turned up again all right.”

“Yes, but once he was sick and almost died of a horrible fever; and another time some Arabs robbed him and kept him for three months in a perfectly dreadful prison, and another time his guides got frightened and deserted him and he had to buy himself back from the folks that captured him.”

“No wonder you can tell us stories on the front stairs,” exclaimed Hazel. “But isn’t there any way to search for him?”

“Well, there’s this about it. If Mr. Henshaw, in London, gets really worried, he’ll send a relief expedition to hunt him up. They did it once before.”

“Well,” said Hazel, “I hope they’ll find him. And that reminds me—speaking of lost things and things that you dig up—my precious lapis lazuli beads are gone. I wore them to church two Sundays ago; and I *know* I put them back in their case, in my bureau drawer. When I opened it this morning, the case was empty. I reported it to Doctor Rhodes at once and it’s on the bulletin board right now. Those beads don’t look like so very much but they cost a young fortune. They’re *good*. You see, I have a daughterless aunt who gives me lovely things—except when she goes alone to pick them out as she did those pink stockings; she’s color-blind, unfortunately. Never anything useful, you know, just luxuries. Mother says Aunt Annabel hasn’t a sensible idea in her head.”

Jean laughed suddenly. Then she explained the cause of her mirth.

“I had a funny thought,” said she. “If Hazel’s aunt and Marjory’s Aunty Jane were shaken up in a bag, it might make two average aunts, mightn’t it, Henrietta? Marjory’s aunt doesn’t believe in luxuries—”

“Then,” interrupted Hazel, with an odd, searching look at Jean, “Marjory doesn’t have very many?”

“None at all,” returned Jean. “She’s really an abused child. But I’m sure her aunt thinks all the

world of her.”

“Marjory was crazy about those blue beads of mine,” said Hazel. “I let her wear them once in awhile before Christmas.”

“That’s so,” said Henrietta. “You and Marjory were quite chummy for awhile, weren’t you? Why aren’t you chummy now, if a lady may ask?”

“I don’t know,” returned Hazel, evasively. “That is, I don’t care to say. We just aren’t friends.”

“If it’s anything that Gladys de Milligan has said,” offered Henrietta, “you don’t need to believe it. That girl has tried to say mean things to me about every girl in this school. She’s a wretched little beast and I detest her.”

“I don’t *like* her,” said Hazel, “and I don’t listen to her when I can help it, but some of the things she’s said have been *true*.”

“That’s the worst of Gladys,” said Jean. “She always manages to mix a little truth in with her yarns; and that makes people believe them.”

“Mercy!” whispered Henrietta, a few minutes later. “How long have Gladys and Grace been walking just behind us? How much do you suppose they heard?”

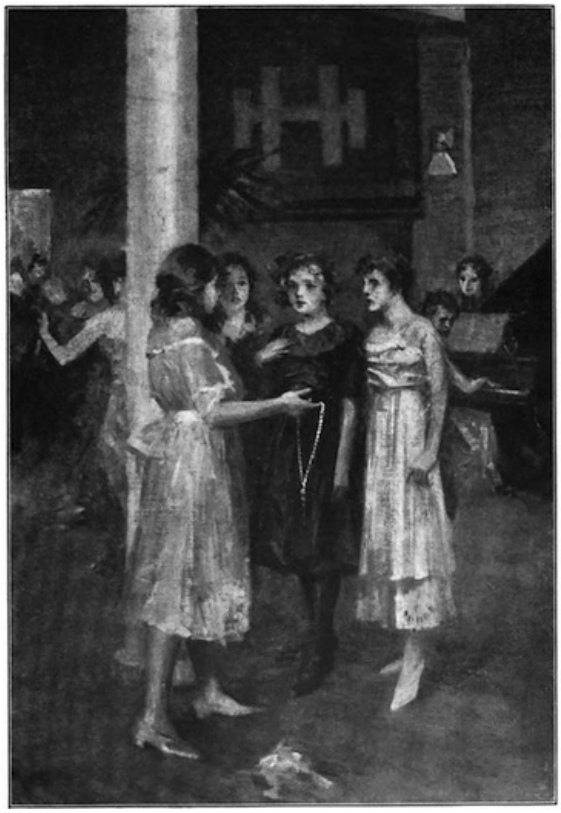
## CHAPTER XVIII—A STRING OF BLUE BEADS

That very night, during the dancing hour, Marjory Vale was one of a group of girls clustered about Henrietta, who was demonstrating a new dance, that later became exceedingly popular.

Marjory, in the middle of the floor, was plainly visible when she pulled her handkerchief from her pocket. Something came with it—a long string of dull blue beads. The metal clasp had been caught in the hemstitching of the handkerchief but now came loose, allowing the heavy beads to land noisily on the hardwood floor. Marjory gazed at them for a long moment.

“For goodness’ sakes!” gasped Marjory, genuinely surprised. “How did I do that?”

“My beads!” shrieked Hazel, springing from her chair and pouncing on the necklace. “Marjory Vale! *You* took those beads out of my drawer.”



“My beads!” shrieked Hazel, pouncing on the necklace

“I never did,” said astonished Marjory, turning crimson and looking the very picture of guilt. “I noticed those beads on your neck the night of the ice cream festival—I haven’t seen them from that moment to this. I don’t know how they got in my pocket. Just before dinner time I rushed up and got into this dress—I always dance in this one, you know, and had laid it out on my bed before I went to walk. We were late getting back and I had to hurry into my clothes. And this is the first time I’ve taken my handkerchief out tonight.”

“I suppose it *is* your handkerchief,” said Hazel, rather unpleasantly.

“Why, no,” said Marjory, “it isn’t. It has Dorothy Miller’s name on it.”

“Then you couldn’t have gotten it by accident,” said Hazel. “The North Corridor washing comes up on a different day from yours.”

“I don’t *know* how I got it,” said Marjory, two large tears rolling down her cheeks. “But I—I think you’re just *mean* to me, Hazel. And I *liked* you.”

“Come and sit down,” said Sallie, slipping an arm about Marjory. “I know just how you feel.”

A curious thing had happened just after those heavy beads crashed to the floor. The older Mrs. Rhodes, seated near the wall to watch the dancing, turned her glittering black eyes toward Mrs. Henry Rhodes and the two women exchanged a most peculiar look. Then, with one accord, they rose and left the room.

Five minutes later, Mrs. Henry had taken a curious bundle from the very back corner of Marjory’s bureau drawer. She placed it on the bed and the two women proceeded to untie a large handkerchief, such as most of the girls wore with their middies.

The bundle contained two of the purses lost on the night of the concert but they were now empty, a ring that Mrs. Rhodes herself had lost, a wrist watch belonging to one of the Seniors, a number of handkerchiefs marked with other girls’ names, a silk sweater that belonged unmistakably to Augusta and various other small but incriminating objects. Nearly everything still bore its former owner’s name.

“So it’s Marjory Vale!” said Mrs. Rhodes.

“It looks that way,” said Mrs. Henry, “but—”

“Tell Doctor Rhodes to come right up here,” ordered the older woman. “Then you tell the Vale girl that she’s wanted in her room.”

Marjory found the Rhodes family standing beside her bed and pointing accusingly at the opened bundle.

“What have you to say to this?” demanded Doctor Rhodes.

“What *is* it?” asked Marjory.

“Don’t try to brazen it out,” said Mrs. Rhodes, in her most terrible manner. “You know very well what it is. We found this bundle in your bureau drawer hidden under your clothes. Whose sweater is this?”

“It looks very much like Augusta’s,” returned Marjory.

“Whose watch is that?”

“I don’t know. It isn’t mine.”

“Is this your ring?”

“Not any of those things are mine. Those handkerchiefs seem to be Miss Wilson’s. There’s a name on them.”

“Where is the money that was in these pocketbooks? Mrs. Bryan lost seven dollars and Mrs. Brown lost five—their cards are still in their purses.”

“I’m sure I don’t know. I’ve had my thirty cents a week and that’s all. If you really found those things in my drawer, somebody else must have put them there. I didn’t.”

The Rhodes family didn’t know exactly what to think. Marjory was sometimes thoughtlessly just a little bit impertinent, sometimes inclined to giggle when the occasion demanded sobriety, sometimes fidgety when quietness would have seemed more fitting; but Mrs. Henry Rhodes who, of the three, knew her best, had never known her to attempt to lie. If anything, indeed, she could recall times when Marjory had seemed almost too truthful.

“I think,” said Mrs. Henry, with a kind hand on Marjory’s shoulder, “we had better let this matter rest a little until something else comes up. There is something very queer about it. That pocketbook in Sallie’s room and now this. And everything so clearly marked.”

“But I don’t *want* this matter to rest,” protested Marjory. “I want it cleared up right away tonight. My goodness! This is just awful. I do love those beads of Hazel’s; but I didn’t take them. And, oh dear! There *are* girls that are going to believe I did unless you clear things up at once. I don’t *want* folks to think things like that about me.”

“Of course we’ll do what we can,” assured Mrs. Henry, “but it may take a little time. You must be patient for a little while, even if you have to rest under a suspicion that you don’t deserve. Shall I

take these things away?”

“Please do.”

“And you know nothing at all about them?” asked the older Mrs. Rhodes. “You’re not keeping them for Sallie Dickinson?”

“For Sallie? Oh, *no*. Sallie wouldn’t have taken them—I’m sure of that.”

“What about your roommate?”

“Henrietta? Why! Henrietta wouldn’t either.”

“Don’t worry too much,” advised Mrs. Henry. “You’d better go to bed and forget your troubles for tonight.”

When Henrietta went to her room almost an hour later, she found poor little Marjory huddled in a small heap on her cot, weeping bitterly. Between sobs she told Henrietta what had happened.

“Cheer up,” said Henrietta, kissing Marjory’s hot ear because that was the only dry spot in sight. “We wanted to come sooner but we didn’t dare; you know it’s against the rules to go to our rooms during a social evening; but Jean is going to slip in after ‘Lights Out’ and cuddle you a little. That’s a good deal for Jean to do, you know, when she always behaves as well as she can. And it isn’t as bad as you think. I believe in you—that’s one. The rest of the Lakeville girls believe in you—that’s four more. You believe in yourself, that’s six. Sallie and little Jane Pool adore you, Maude swears by you and there are others—”

“It’s the others that worry me,” sighed Marjory. “They’re going to be just beastly to me, I know.”

Marjory was right. If several of the girls were not “Just beastly” they were pretty close to it. One of Hazel’s beads had been broken and that fact made Hazel more unforgiving than she might have been. Before long, too, the story of the black bundle found in the little girl’s room leaked out (no one knew just how), and many were the scornful glances cast at poor Marjory. If she had been unpopular before, she was considerably worse than unpopular now. She seemed to shrink visibly under the scathing looks of her schoolmates. She even began, it was noticed, to wear a guilty look that proved exasperating to Henrietta.

“Hold your head up,” Henrietta would say, vigorously shaking her little friend. “You haven’t a thing to be ashamed of. For mercy’s sake, look folks right in the eye as you used to. You’re not half as bad as you *look*. You’re a *good* child. Well, then, *look* like a good child.”

“I can’t help wondering,” confessed poor Marjory, “if I took those things in my sleep. Those blue beads—I just loved them.”

“And that horrible magenta sweater of Augusta’s—I suppose you loved that too.”

“Well, of course, I’d *have* to be asleep to take that. But *do* you think I *could* have taken those things in my sleep?”

“Of course you didn’t, Marjory. You didn’t take them at all. It was some kind of an accident. I’ve thought sometimes that poor old Abbie wasn’t quite right. You know how absent minded she is. I don’t think she’d steal anything; but she goes around in sort of a daze and her hands keep plucking at things, as if her mind were in one room and her body in another, like the time she set the dining room clock back and then accused everybody else of doing it. She’s always doing things like that. And you know she’s always had to do such a lot of picking up after years and years of careless girls—well, perhaps she’s gotten the habit of picking up things unconsciously and putting them in places where they don’t belong.”

“Well, anyway,” pleaded Marjory, “do watch me. If you catch me taking things in my sleep I hope you’ll be able to prove that I *am* asleep. And let’s all of us keep an eye on poor old Abbie daytimes. You *might* be right about her.”

“A letter for Miss Henrietta Bedford,” said Sallie’s voice at the door. “Charles was late again today. Hope it’s a nice one, Henrietta.”

Henrietta ripped her letter open hastily and read it.

“It *isn’t* a nice one. It’s from my grandmother. That London man that looks after Father’s affairs has started for China to hunt for him. Mr. Henshaw thinks he went to Shanghai but isn’t sure. You see, girls, there really *is* cause for alarm. I’d like to go right over there and help search for him; but of course I couldn’t. And it’s awfully hard to have nothing to do but wait.”

## CHAPTER XIX—SALLIE’S STORY

During the dark days when Marjory and Sallie were under a cloud of suspicion; when Henrietta was worried and unhappy about her much loved and missing father and when Maude was again in disgrace with Miss Woodruff, it was natural that this little group of warm friends should spend

the leisure moments of the long afternoons together. And of course Cora, Jane Pool, Jean, Mabel and Bettie, always loyal, no matter what happened, stayed with them. But, in spite of the fact that these were the unhappiest days that these particular girls had ever spent, they were not without some brighter moments. And Maude Wilder, you may be sure, managed to provide some of the brightest.

On one of these afternoons, Maude found it necessary to explain to Sallie (who slept on the upper floor and had therefore missed the fun) the cause of her present disgrace.

“Of course I ought not to have done it,” said Maude. “But you know they took us to the movies Saturday afternoon to see ‘Treasure Island.’”

“Yes,” said Sallie. “I had to stay home to clean the silver—Annie had a sore finger.”

“And you know how sad we all were over the hymns Sunday night?”

“We always are,” returned Sallie.

“Well, when we were all trailing sadly up the front stairs to bed, afterwards, I had a lovely idea. I thought it would be fun to dress up just like one of those lovely ‘Treasure Island’ pirates so I did it—bloomers, sash, black eyebrows, whiskers, black hat with sweeping plume and everything. I was a bold buccaneer all right, wasn’t I, girls?”

“Yes,” assured Cora, “she looked the part, provided you didn’t examine her too closely.”

“Of course, after I was all fixed up, I wanted other folks to enjoy the fun too; so I started out in this corridor. I had a lovely time. I poked my head in at one door after another and growled in a deep bass voice:

> “‘Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest—
> Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!
> Drink and the devil had done for the rest—
> Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!’

“Of course Isabelle shrieked and Augusta screamed and Lillian yelped like a puppy and Marjory squealed; and altogether this corridor was full of lovely noises when I slipped out of it. I got across the square hall all right and into the North Corridor. I had a lovely time there, too. Victoria just laughed, but Gladys gasped like a fish and pretended to faint and the Miller girls fell into each other’s arms and bleated. It was just heavenly. And then suddenly it was all over. The bell rang for ‘Lights Out,’ and there was I at the far end of the North Corridor. All that long way from my own room.”

“What *did* you do?” asked Sallie.

“Well, you know a swarthy pirate doesn’t light up very well in the dark; so, knowing that I was no longer a fearsome sight, I started to sneak back to my own room. I *started* all right, but just then Mrs. Henry’s door opened and Miss Woodruff came out. I’d have been all right even then, but as luck would have it, the hairbrush that I had thrust into my manly belt dropped with a horrid clatter on the hardwood floor.

“But I was right near the vacant room at the end of the North Corridor. The door was open and I slipped in. And slid under the bed. And, my goodness! You could hear my heart beat all over the place; and you know what ears our dear Miss Woodruff has.

“What did she do but come into that room and sit on the very bed I was under and *listen*. It was awful. She sat and sat and sat and listened. And I knew that Mrs. Henry was standing just outside her own door listening too. I didn’t dare breathe, but my heart kept right on thumping like a brass knocker on a front door. It was moonlight outside, the shade was up part way and she was sitting on the side next the window. Her skirt was pulled up a little way at the back so I could see her thick ankles very plainly and a little of her fatted calf above them.

“Girls, I just couldn’t help it. I *had* to pinch her leg. I *had* to do it. I know it was crazy. I know it was the very last thing I *should* have done; but my thumb and finger went right out and did it.

“She let out the grandest shriek you ever *did* hear, and streaked out of there as if a whole regiment of pirates were at her heels. Mrs. Henry switched on all the lights and came on a run; and all the North Corridor girls popped out of their rooms and Miss Woodruff came back. And there was I, a crushed and humiliated pirate, crawling out on all fours; but Miss Woodruff looked so funny that I just looked up at her and said as sadly as I could: ‘*Nous avons les raisins blancs et noirs mais pas de cerises.*’ And of course all the North Corridor girls roared. I knew they would.”

“What *did* she do to you?” asked Sallie, when the girls’ shrieks of mirth had finally subsided. They loved Maude’s tales of her own dreadful doings quite as well as Maude loved to tell them.

“She said I was a bad influence to you younger girls—”

“You’re not,” said Henrietta. “Not one of us would attempt to follow in your wild footsteps. We wouldn’t dare.”

“And she said that I ought not to give way to my wicked impulses—”

“They’re, not really wicked,” said Jean. “At least you never do anything sneaky and you always tell the truth.”

“And,” finished Maude, “I’m perfectly incorrigible and I shall never grow up to be a lady.”

“I think you will,” laughed Henrietta. “The *good* die young, you know.”

“Didn’t she punish you?” asked Sallie.

“*Didn’t* she?” returned Maude. “I have to learn and recite a whole Chapter of American History. Prose, mind you. And she picked out the very dullest chapter in the whole book.”

“I’ll say this for Miss Woodruff,” laughed Henrietta. “Sometimes she shows remarkable ingenuity in her punishments. That one will keep Maude out of mischief for some time.”

“I wanted dreadfully to go to that movie,” confessed Sallie. “I read that book last vacation and I loved it. But Mrs. Rhodes keeps finding more and more things for me to do Saturdays and I just can’t get through in time to go any place.”

“Tell us about your own people,” pleaded Jean. “You know you always promised to.”

“Yes,” begged Bettie, “begin way back at the very beginning and tell us how it all happened. Perhaps our friend Mr. Black might tell us what to do in a case like that—we write to him every week you know. He might know how to find some of your lost people.”

“I’m sure it’s too late to do any good,” said Sallie, soberly. “But I’ll tell you about it. To begin with, I was about nine years old when my mother died. We were living then in a little bit of a town in Wisconsin. We had always moved about a great deal. You see, my father was always trying new things and new places—he used to say that he was a rolling stone; and then my mother would say: ‘Never mind, John, you’ll roll to the right spot some day.’

“Well, after my mother was gone, we went to Chicago and lived for a little while in a big apartment house. The only person that we knew very well was an old man that everybody called ‘Grandpa’ but he wasn’t really my grandfather—or anybody’s that I know of. He had a couple of rooms next to ours. I think he must have done some sort of writing for a living—copying perhaps —but I’m not very sure about that part of it. Anyway, he used to carry written papers away in an old black portfolio and come home with it empty. And when he wasn’t doing that, he was bent over his desk writing. He was very absent minded—always hunting for his spectacles when they were on top of his head and often putting his teakettle on to boil and letting it go dry. Father used to remind him to put his coat on when he was going out.

“I suppose my father found me a good deal of a nuisance daytimes. Perhaps he was more tied down than he liked to be and there were no relatives to look after me. I know that my mother’s people were dead and my father said once that *he* had nobody in the world but me.

“Anyway, he decided to put me into a girls’ school. He picked one out, bought me some clothes and a small trunk and told me that I must keep my new things nice and clean, because, in just about a week, I was going on the cars to a good school for little girls, where there would be lots of good women to take care of me while he was away at work.”

Sallie’s face wore a strange but very sweet expression while she was telling her story. The girls gazed at her sympathetically and listened intently. There was not a sound in the room but Sallie’s gentle voice.

“The very next day,” Sallie continued, “my father was taken sick. I don’t know what ailed him, but he was *very* sick. He gave Grandpa some money and asked him to take me to that school when the time came and Grandpa promised to do it. Of course I didn’t want to go when Father was so sick; but Grandpa said I must be good and not worry my father, so I *had* to go. Well, I suppose it hadn’t occurred to my father to write to that school to reserve a place for me—I know now that that is the proper thing to do; but lots of parents don’t seem to know about it. Several have turned up *here* with an unexpected girl on opening day; but this is a very large school and perhaps not one of the most popular ones so it doesn’t make so much difference—there are always vacant rooms.

“But when Grandpa presented me at that other school—and I couldn’t tell you where it was if you offered me a million dollars—it was full and they couldn’t take me—or at least they wouldn’t. They gave Grandpa quite a long list of other schools and some catalogues and we went to two other schools before we found one that would take me.”

“Was it this one?” breathed Bettie.

“Yes, this very one. But, by the time we reached this place, we had been getting on and off trains all day. I was so sleepy that I tumbled off my chair and I guess poor old Grandpa was just about walking in his sleep. We’d had a *dreadful* day. Somebody, I don’t know who, led me off and put me to bed. That’s the last I’ve ever seen of either my father or that poor old Grandpa.”

“But didn’t you write?” queried Jean.

“Yes, indeed. So did Doctor Rhodes—not *this* Doctor—hum—well, this Doctor’s cousin. But our letters came back from the Dead Letter Office.”

“What does a dead letter look like?” demanded Mabel, with sudden curiosity.

“Just like any other kind,” returned Sallie, “except that they come in a special envelope.”

“Then,” said Jean, “for anything you know to the contrary, your father and this grandfather person may still be living in that apartment, in Chicago?”

“No,” returned Sallie. “They’re not. You see my tuition was paid for the full school year. It was getting along toward the summer vacation when Doctor Rhodes began to write to my father. Afterwards he went to that apartment in Chicago to ask about him; but they could tell him nothing more about him. Then Doctor Rhodes went to a number of hospitals and learned that a John Dickinson had been discharged, after a long, long illness; and that he was still very far from strong when he left the hospital to look for work.”

“The apartment people told Doctor Rhodes that poor old Grandpa had had a breakdown and had been placed in an asylum. Doctor Rhodes visited that place but the poor old man had forgotten all that he had ever known of either me or my father; and quite soon after that he died.”

“Then,” said Henrietta, “your father may still be living.”

“Yes,” returned Sallie. “But, if he were, wouldn’t he hunt for me until he found me? There’s this about it. I’m sure that he thought that he was putting me in a place where I’d be safer and better cared for than I could be with him.”

“Did he have very much money?” asked practical Henrietta.

“I don’t think he had a great deal. He used to say that he was a poor man; and the houses we lived in were always rather small and poor. My mother, I think, had belonged to nice people. As nearly as I can remember, she spoke nicely and wouldn’t let me use slang; and I *think* her father was a clergyman—I can remember an old photograph; but I’m not very sure about that.

“And here I am now, just like poor old Abbie—a boarding school orphan, with not a relative in the world.”

“No, you’re *not* like Abbie,” declared Jean. “We won’t *let* you be like Abbie. You’re smart enough to crawl out of your hole; but Abbie never was.”

“Now,” pleaded Henrietta, “tell us the secret about the Rhodes family. We’re dying of curiosity about that.”

“No,” replied Sallie, firmly. “If I were paying my way with real money I *might* break my promise and tell. But I don’t know that I would, either; it would take a lot of courage to break a promise to Doctor Rhodes. But, of course, as long as I owe him for my bread and butter, I just couldn’t do it.”

“Of course you couldn’t,” agreed Maude. “It wouldn’t be honorable.”

“That’s just the way I feel about it,” sighed Sallie. “And there isn’t really anything very dreadful about that secret after all.”

“Except our curiosity,” said Henrietta, “that’s just *eating* us.”

“Pile off this bed, girls,” said Cora, who had looked at her watch. “It’s ten minutes to dinner time and Sallie has left all your hair standing right on end.”

“Say, Sallie, ring the old bell fifty-nine seconds late,” pleaded Maude. “I have to change my dress and the other one buttons behind.”

“I’ll button it all the way downstairs,” promised Cora.

## CHAPTER XX—A JOYFUL SURPRISE

Marjory was still more or less in disgrace the day that Doctor Rhodes announced that at last he had secured a new French teacher to take Madame Bolande’s place.

“Her name is—Ah! I’ve forgotten it. No, Miss—er—Miss Flower. That’s it. Miss Flower. She is not a French woman but comes very well recommended. It has been difficult at this particular time to find exactly the right person; but I think you will all be pleased.”

Doctor Rhodes was to prove a better prophet than he suspected. When the time came, some of the girls were *more* than pleased.

“Flower,” whispered irrepressible Maude, into a convenient ear. “She must be a regular daisy.”

“Perhaps she’s a Texas sunflower,” returned Victoria.

That afternoon, of course, all the Highland Hall girls, bristling with curiosity, congregated on the veranda to watch for the station hack.

“I’m mighty glad to give up my job,” said Henrietta, pausing near one of the many groups. “Eighty minutes of hard labor a day are quite a strain. That last Theolog was used up in less than a week and all my skirt bands are getting loose—all that hard labor with French verbs. I hope Miss Flower is an improvement on Madame Bolande.”

“Madame Bolande is the best French teacher *I’ve* had,” said Gladys de Milligan, rather pointedly. “I haven’t learned a thing since she left.”

“Of course, if you *like* that kind,” retorted Henrietta. “Come on, Hazel. Let’s stand on the railing and see if the old ‘bus is on the way. I don’t have to be dignified any more.”

Ten minutes later, a young woman descended from the timeworn hack. As she paid the driver, she stood in a patch of sunlight. From the veranda she was plainly visible and rather more than sixty eager young eyes, with no intention of rudeness on their owners’ part, took in every detail of the new teacher’s neat costume and dwelt pleasurably on her very attractive countenance. But suddenly there was a most remarkable commotion on that veranda. Five girls were scrambling down the steps, regardless of seated schoolmates, and five joyful voices were shrieking:

“It’s Miss Blossom! It is! It is! It’s our Miss Blossom! Our own Miss Blossom!”

“And *this*,” cried Mabel, triumphantly, “is the Flower we get!”

Much to the new teacher’s surprise and bewilderment, she was seized and hugged and kissed and squeezed by five excited girls.

“Well, I declare,” said she, when she could get a good look at them. “I *wondered* if this school always welcomed new teachers this way. If it isn’t Bettie, and Jean and Marjory and Henrietta and Mabel! Isn’t this great. And I thought I was going to be all alone among strangers. This is certainly too good to be true. Jean, you look just the same and good enough to eat. Bettie, you’re taller and plumper too—you’re looking fine. Marjory, you little mite; you aren’t as big as you were the last time I saw you—are they abusing you at this place? Here’s Henrietta as lovely as ever—but you’re pale, my dear. And Mabel—Why, Mabel, I do believe you’re taller—and thinner. And *aren’t* you good looking! But you all look as sweet as peaches and cream to *me*.”

“If we’d all picked out the person that we wanted most to come to this place,” declared Mabel earnestly, “that person would have been you.”

Every one liked Miss Blossom, the pleasant young woman who had spent a summer in Lakeville and had played in Dandelion Cottage with Jean, Bettie, Marjory and Mabel; and had later paid them a visit at Pete’s Patch, where she had met pretty Henrietta.

Never was teacher more popular. Before long, almost every girl in the school was completely in love with the charming young woman. And now, some of the girls who had listened most credulously to Gladys’s unpleasant tales about the Lakeville children, began, little by little, to doubt these tales. Miss Blossom was so very attractive, so genuinely good, so admirable in every way, that it couldn’t be possible that she would *like* those four Michigan girls if Laura’s tales were entirely true. And there was Henrietta, too, evidently firm in her belief in Marjory’s honesty. Surely if those two really particular persons considered Marjory a nice child, perhaps she wasn’t as black as she appeared to be painted.

The next dancing evening, Victoria Webster delighted Marjory by inviting her to two-step and Debbie Clark asked her for a waltz.

One night, almost a week after the new teacher’s arrival, Jean and Bettie were spending an evening in Miss Blossom’s own room. They had slipped away from the West Corridor without telling the other Lakeville girls where they were going. They appeared to have some weighty matter on their minds and were evidently not quite at ease.

“We want to tell you something,” explained Jean, fidgeting a little in her chair. “It’s a long story and some of it is quite horrid; but we need your help.”

“We *wanted* to come sooner,” added Bettie, “but we thought we ought not to bother you until you were settled and a little bit used to the school.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” assured Miss Blossom. “But now we have a long evening before us and I’m ready to listen with all my ears.”

So Jean, with some help from Bettie, told about the various thefts of money and other things, about Marjory and the blue beads, about Sallie and the stolen purse under her pincushion and the handkerchief full of purloined articles in Marjory’s drawer. About Laura and her mean little way of saying unpleasant things about the Lakeville girls.

And then they told Miss Blossom what they had been careful to mention to no one else. They

recounted their past experience with Laura in Lakeville; told how she had maliciously destroyed the wonderful vine that grew in their garden; and how now she had stolen the priceless treasures from their precious treasure boxes. How she had taken even the precious handkerchiefs that Miss Blossom herself had embroidered for the girls.

“Miss Blossom,” confessed Jean, who was obviously not enjoying her task, “we haven’t known *what* we ought to do. We thought, if Laura had changed for the better, that it wouldn’t be right for us to tell that she had changed her name and done things to her hair; and that when we knew her in Lakeville, she was common and dishonest and all that. When she came here she seemed improved in sort of a way; even if it wasn’t exactly a way we liked. And of course we didn’t want to be unfair to her in any way or to do anything that wasn’t kind. We *couldn’t* like her; but we *were* perfectly decent to her. And even now, we may be mistaken. We may be wronging her; but we can’t help thinking—Well, here is this thing about Marjory and that other thing about Sallie—”

“Those pocketbooks,” said Bettie, “in their two rooms. Marjory and I are almost sure that one person did that.”

“I think so too,” said Jean. “But I’ve thought and thought and thought; but I just didn’t know what I ought to do about it—or if I really ought to do anything. But there is poor Marjory getting thinner and thinner and our poor sweet Sallie—we do love Sallie, every one of us—with no people of her own to take her part. It does seem as if something ought to be done.”

“Don’t worry about it any more,” said Miss Blossom, with a wonderfully soothing hand on Jean’s troubled brow. “Something *is* going to be done. Our Marjory is going to hold her head up again and our Sallie is going to be proved honest; but you don’t need to think about it for another minute. You did perfectly right in coming to me and I’m glad you came. But now you must run along to bed—there’s the nine o’clock bell. Good night and pleasant dreams to both of you.”

Miss Blossom spent the next half hour with the Rhodes family. She told them what she knew of the Lakeville girls and of Gladys de Milligan, who had once lived in Lakeville as plain Laura Milligan.

“A silly girl with a foolish mother,” commented Doctor Rhodes. “Yet, strangely enough, there is no pupil in this school who has higher marks in her studies or for general deportment than this overdressed Milligan girl.”

“And I’m sure,” said Mrs. Henry, with a twinkle in her blue eye, “that Gladys would come first in any gum chewing contest.”

## CHAPTER XXI—A GIRL LEAVES SCHOOL

The next morning, during school hours, Mrs. Rhodes and Mrs. Henry Rhodes searched Laura’s room. There was nothing in it that did not belong to either Laura or her roommate Victoria Webster. Under the cover on the dresser top they found Laura’s trunk key and carried it to the attic trunk room.

There was nothing unusual about the tray of Laura’s trunk except the large hole that Mabel had made by tumbling into it. But when the tray was lifted out and several layers of clothing were removed, it looked very much as if all the mysteries were solved. A fat little roll of banknotes, tied up neatly with a pink ribbon, a candy box full of silver coins, several pairs of silk stockings marked with the names of the three Seniors, every article of jewelry that had been reported missing, as well as some others that the careless owners had not yet missed.

It looked very much as if all the mysteries were solved

“My opera glasses!” exclaimed Mrs. Henry.

“My real lace collar!” cried Mrs. Rhodes. “I suppose this *is* Gladys’s trunk?”

“Oh, certainly. Can’t you smell the perfume? Nobody else uses this kind. Besides, her name is on the outside.”

“Yes, that’s right. Now, I wonder what we’d better do about this.”

“We’ll have to talk it over with Father. I’m afraid there’s no doubt this time.”

“I’m sure there isn’t,” returned Mrs. Rhodes. “It’s the de Milligan girl without question. I don’t know why I didn’t suspect her sooner.”

“Well, *I* didn’t,” said Mrs. Henry. “And she was right in my own corridor. I’m awfully sorry about all this.”

“I’d have been sorrier,” returned the older woman, grimly, “if it had been any other girl. I never did like this one.”

When Laura was called into Doctor Rhodes’s office and invited to explain how all those things had found their way into her trunk, she appeared to be very much surprised. She was *sure* she didn’t know. She said she supposed that Sallie Dickinson had put them there, or if not Sallie, one of the maids; or possibly Marjory Vale. Marjory was ever a deceitful child, much given to thievery. She herself had often warned the other girls against Marjory.

Laura, standing with her back against the wall, seemed quite calm and unconcerned, except that she shifted her chewing gum from side to side with greater frequency than usual.

Doctor Rhodes had rather a terrible eye. Two of them in fact. He fixed them both on Laura’s unperturbed countenance and gazed so very sternly at her that presently Laura began to quail. She gulped suddenly and swallowed her gum. And then she began to stammer excuses.

She liked pretty things. She couldn’t resist taking things when it was so easy to do it. Her fingers *liked* to take things. She didn’t always want what she had taken. Sometimes she wished afterwards that she hadn’t taken them. Her father was stingy and wouldn’t give her expensive trinkets. Her mother *would* but didn’t have the money. Her mother *wanted* her to have nice things.

When did she take the things? Oh, at night sometimes. Her roommate, Victoria Webster, slept like a log and didn’t miss her if she left the room. Or daytimes, by getting upstairs ahead of the other girls it was easy enough to dash into a room, grab a bracelet or a pin left carelessly about and hide it in her pocket. There were plenty of chances like that, when girls were so heedless with their belongings. Really, it was the girls’ own fault *much* more than hers. Yes, she *had* put those beads in Marjory’s pocket while the dress was on Marjory’s bed, and she had placed that purse in Sallie’s room. She *wanted* people to think they had taken them—it had seemed a clever

thing to do—perhaps it wasn't as clever as she had thought. But if Doctor Rhodes would just forgive her *this* time, she wouldn't touch another thing, *ever*.

"But what about Sallie?" questioned Doctor Rhodes, hoping to find a little redeeming conscience in Laura. "And that other youngster, Marjory? How are *they* to be cleared?"

"I don't care about *them*," returned vulgar little Laura, hard-heartedly. "They're just nobody. Marjory's folks don't amount to anything—just a queer old aunt in a small town—and everybody knows Sallie is just nothing—no folks or money or anything else. Now listen (Laura *always* said 'Now listen'): *My* father has made money in the automobile business. He's richer—"

"Do you mean to say," demanded Doctor Rhodes, "that you'd actually be willing to let those honest little girls rest under a suspicion that they don't deserve just because they happen to be poorer than you are? That you'd hide behind them—"

"I don't care anything about *them*," repeated Laura, stubbornly. "They're nothing to *me*."

"However," returned Doctor Rhodes, "in simple justice, they will have to be cleared—and they are *going* to be cleared. *I* care, if you don't, what happens to those children. It's my duty to protect my pupils—"

"Well, then," interrupted Laura, hopefully, "why not protect me? Folks'll forget all about it after awhile and *nobody'll* be hurt so very much. Aw, come on, now. Just forget it all."

"I'm going to tell the truth," declared Doctor Rhodes, who was finding Laura quite the most detestable child he had so far encountered. "There is no place in this school for a dishonest girl or for a girl with so little kindness for her fellow pupils. There is such a thing as school spirit—"

"Well, anyhow," pleaded Laura, "just wait another two weeks. I'm not coming back after Easter vacation; so you might as well wait until then before you give me away, if you're going to do it. My mother has a friend that says he'll give me a good job in the movies; and that's what I'd *like* to do. You can give those things back to their owners after I'm gone and say any old thing you like about me. It won't hurt me any then."

"Wouldn't you *rather* have people remember you with liking and respect?" asked Doctor Rhodes, thoroughly shocked by Laura's hardened conscience. "Have you no shame at all?"

Laura shrugged her shoulders, a trick she had perfected by watching Madame Bolande. She tilted her chin and partly closed her eyes—to show her complete indifference to what people might think of her. She was not at all pretty when she did these things.

"I can see no reason for sparing you in any way," said Doctor Rhodes, coldly. "You may go to your room now and write for your mother to come for you at once. If she isn't here inside of three days I shall telegraph for her. Within five minutes after your departure, I shall state on the bulletin board that Miss Gladys de Milligan has been expelled under circumstances that absolutely prove the innocence of every other pupil in this school."

All this was done. Untruthful Laura, making her farewells airily, told her friends that she was merely going home a little ahead of time in order to have a longer vacation for spring shopping and necessary dressmaking. She'd see them all again right after Easter, and bring back lovely presents for all of them. She borrowed Augusta's best middy scarf in order, she said, that her mother might select about a dozen like it for her to give to the other girls. Augusta, of course, never saw either cheap little Laura or the precious scarf again.

Laura was certainly not a nice child; but circumstances were against her. She possessed a decidedly foolish, unladylike and not altogether truthful mother so perhaps Laura's lack of good qualities was not entirely her own fault. With a really nice mother, she might have been a really nice girl; but Mrs. Milligan's daughter had very little chance.

During the last three days of Laura's stay, it seemed to Jean that things were not clearing up as rapidly as Miss Blossom had predicted. She wondered if, after all, nothing had been done for Marjory. Poor little Marjory, in spite of Jean's encouraging words, in spite of Mrs. Henry's reassuring smiles and Miss Blossom's hopeful glances, could see no way out of her troubles. Hazel still drew her skirts aside when Marjory passed and snippy little Lillian Thwaite still almost tipped over backwards in her efforts to turn her very small nose up in Marjory's presence (for sticking-up purposes, it was really a very poor nose). And to Jean's surprise, there was Laura, apparently perfectly unconcerned, going on just as she always had. Was nothing *ever* going to be done to clear Marjory and Sallie?

Notwithstanding many unusual kindnesses from her Lakeville friends—even always-hungry Mabel begged her to eat part of her favorite dessert—puzzled Marjory felt that the sky was dark above her and the world a terrible place for little girls just her size. And then, quite suddenly, Laura was whisked away by her mother, and Doctor Rhodes, chalk in hand and frowning prodigiously, was approaching the fateful bulletin board.

You can imagine how, five minutes after Laura's going, the always curious girls flocked to the bulletin board to see what Doctor Rhodes had posted thereon. How eagerly they read the

astonishing announcement and how their tongues wagged afterwards. How glad Marjory and Sallie were to have the mystery cleared away and how relieved the Lakeville girls felt at having their precious Marjory emerge from the cloud that had obscured her happiness for so long a time.

“Right after Gladys’s mother came this morning,” said Sallie, “there was *something* going on in the office. It sounded very much like a very angry woman telling Doctor Rhodes just what she thought of him; but of course I didn’t stay to listen—I *wanted* to just awfully. But when I went back afterwards with the message I was waiting to deliver, the lady was gone and poor Doctor Rhodes was mopping perspiration from his forehead, although the room was quite cold. I guessed he’d been having a right trying interview with somebody. He looked perfectly wilted.”

Mabel giggled. “I guess he had one all right if it was Mrs. Milligan. We used to hear her in Lakeville.”

But Jean watched the smoke of the train that was bearing tawdry little Gladys Evelyn de Milligan toward Chicago, and out of this tale, and was sorry.

“Poor foolish Laura,” she breathed, “I’m so sorry you had to be you. You were smart enough to have made a perfectly lovely girl and I did have hopes of you.”

“*I* didn’t,” said Mabel, “and I’m glad I don’t have to be polite to her any more. It’s hard enough to be polite when you really *want* to be. But when you’re all impolite inside—”

“We know what you mean, Mabel,” laughed Henrietta. “And now that I know the horrible secret you’ve been keeping from me all this time I am filled with admiration for all four of you. I remember now that you told me long ago about a horrid child named Laura; but I never dreamed that she and Gladys were the same person. And you, Mabel, with your ‘impolite inside’ are a complete surprise. I didn’t think you could keep a secret.”

“Jean *made* us,” returned Mabel.

“Well,” assured Henrietta, “I think you were right to give Gladys a chance. It was noble of you to do it even if it hasn’t turned out as well as you expected. And isn’t it great to have Sallie and Marjory cleared! And there’s Hazel apologizing this very minute for being so nasty to Marjory about those blue beads.”

“She’s *lending* them to Marjory,” gasped Jean. “She’s fastening them about Marjory’s neck.”

## CHAPTER XXII—A MYSTERY CLEARED

For the proverbial nine days, tongues wagged furiously at Highland Hall; but seemingly to good purpose. The girls who had allowed doubts of Sallie and Marjory to creep into their hearts now strove earnestly to make up for their former unjust suspicions. Even the Seniors came down from their lofty perches long enough to stuff both girls so full of cream puffs and chocolate creams, dill pickles, ripe olives and angel’s food cake that for three days after this never to be forgotten feast they were unable to eat their regular meals.

“As for my legs,” laughed happy Marjory, after the next social evening, “they’re just ready to drop off—I’ve had so many invitations to dance.”

“So have I,” said Sallie. “Isn’t it great!”

“And the way those two Seniors scrapped over Marjory at the spell down today!” exclaimed Maude. “They both called at once and she was the very first one called. The rest of us were green with envy.”

“We’ve all been more popular lately,” said Bettie. “I’m afraid Laura did us more harm than we realized.”

“I think so, too,” said Jean. “I’ve felt all this week as if large black clouds had rolled away and let a great big chunk of sunshine drop right down into Highland Hall.”

“There’s one cloud left,” mourned Henrietta. “I don’t get a single scrap of encouraging news about my father; and now, every time I look at poor old Abbie, I say: ‘Just suppose anything happens to my grandmother and the family money. Where will *I* be? Right here washing windows like Abbie and looking for seven years’ bad luck because I’ve smashed a looking glass.’”

“Poor Abbie has enough foolish superstitions to keep her in bad luck for ninety years,” laughed Jean. “You and Sallie seem to be haunted by the same nightmare. I’ll promise you both this; on the day that you and Sallie get to looking just like Abbie, I’ll start for Europe on foot.”

With Laura gone, Highland Hall seemed really a different place. Now, except for occasional scraps among some of the older pupils, one realized that there was a wonderful spirit of friendliness among the girls. Even the once frosty Seniors had thawed to an unusual degree.

“They’ve gotten used to themselves,” explained Sallie, who had had almost six years’ experience with Seniors of assorted kinds. “At first they are always so set up over all their privileges that they just can’t associate with ordinary girls; but after a few months of solitary grandeur they are *glad* to climb down off their perches and associate with the rest of us. Now that they’re asking us to their spreads and coming to ours they’re having much better times than they did earlier in the year.”

“Of course,” said Maude, with one of her funny grimaces, “you can’t ‘spread’ so very much on thirty cents a week; but our popcorn party was all right and when we all chipped in and bought a barrel of apples—that was great. The Seniors’ heels looked just like anybody else’s when they dove to the bottom of the barrel for the last ones. And our molasses candy pull in the laundry—”

“Ugh!” groaned Mabel, “I was just like a web-footed duck—my hands, I mean. Cora had to scrape me all over with a knife and she didn’t care how much skin she got. It was even on my shoes—”

“What! Your skin?”

“No, the candy. Some folks can pull it when it’s hot and sticky but I never can. It just gets all over the place.”

“Anyway,” said Marjory, wickedly, “the Seniors laughed until they cried, seeing you try, so you contributed something to the entertainment.”

“Isn’t it lovely to have friends?” said Sallie, a little later, when she was seated beside Marjory on the veranda steps.

“Yes,” returned Marjory, a little wistfully, “but I’m not sure that I’m exactly pleased with some of my newest ones. Augusta and Grace Allen told me yesterday that they never *did* like Gladys. And Isabelle says she’s ashamed to have Clarence know that she ever went with Gladys. Isn’t that just awful—to go back on anybody like that! Of course I don’t care much for Isabelle or Augusta, anyway; but I did think I might like Grace. But now I’m not going to. I like friends that *stick*.”

“So do I,” agreed Sallie, heartily. “And I think we both have some of the sticking kind.”

One spring morning just after morning prayers when all the pupils were gathered in the Assembly room and Miss Woodruff was ready to call the roll, Doctor Rhodes stood up and said: “One moment, please.”

There was a little creaking all over the room as the girls settled themselves in listening attitudes. Doctor Rhodes was sure to be interesting.

“I have a little confession to make,” said Doctor Rhodes. “Perhaps some of the older girls will remember that I called them into my office immediately on their arrival last fall, told them a piece of very sad news and asked them to keep a secret for me.”

Some of the seats creaked again as several of the older girls nodded their heads.

“I believe,” continued Doctor Rhodes, “that you have all faithfully kept that secret, which is still a secret from the new girls. This is it. I am not the Doctor Charles Rhodes, whose name is in our catalogue and *has* been in our catalogue for nearly thirty years. I am his cousin, Doctor Julius Rhodes; a physician, not a Doctor of Laws—you have noticed the letters LL.D. after my cousin’s name.

“Some of you will remember that Doctor Rhodes was ill last June at Commencement time. He died in July. I was his nearest relative; and, in time, when his affairs are finally settled, I shall inherit his estate. The lawyers considered it unwise to announce Dr. Rhodes’s death at that time, though of course there were the usual notices in the papers. But no changes were made in the catalogue and no formal notices were sent to the pupils; as it seemed almost certain that any such announcement would cause the attendance for the following year to fall off, perhaps to the lasting detriment of the school. The lawyers suggested that I take charge of the school and keep it going, particularly as Doctor Charles Rhodes had expressed a wish to that effect.

“I was handicapped in one way. The courts were not yet ready to hand over to me the surplus fund of school money in the bank. I had very little capital to put in and certainly no experience with boarding schools for girls. I was not a teacher. Perhaps you have noticed that your instructors, with two exceptions, are members of my own family. They very kindly consented to help me through this first year; and I think you will agree that they have proved fairly good teachers, even if that hasn’t always been their regular profession. Miss Woodruff, of course, and Miss Blossom are regular teachers. I thought I might venture to afford two.

“I think you will agree that my most serious blunder was the engaging of Madame Bolande—I assure you that I didn’t see her first. Except for that one regrettable mistake, everything has gone so well and so prosperously, that I have decided to tell the whole truth now (and take the consequences if there are any) instead of waiting, as my lawyers advised, until my cousin’s estate is fully settled. I shall feel happier with everything quite open and above board. That’s all, except that I feel much indebted to the young ladies who have so kindly kept my secret to the present time.”

Of course, for a day or two after that, Highland Hall buzzed again with excitement and the newer girls besieged the older ones with questions.

“Doctor Charles Rhodes,” explained Sallie, “was a perfectly lovely old man. Everybody just adored him; he was so gentle and sweet. He hadn’t any family of his own left; but he seemed, some way, as if he were everybody’s grandfather. He was wonderfully good to me and to poor old Abbie too. In his time we had our pocket money just as the other girls did—out of his own pocket, I suppose. If Abbie had been bright to start with she wouldn’t have been the forlorn creature that she is now. He gave me every chance to learn; and I’m sure that Abbie had the same chances but was too stupid to take them. Probably no one but a kind man would have kept Abbie; she’s never been good for very much.

“But when this new Rhodes family came, it was all so different. At first, I didn’t like Doctor Julius Rhodes at all—or any of his family. But after awhile I began to see that things were not so terribly easy for *them*. The housekeeping job proved awfully hard on poor Mrs. Rhodes and she just sort of stiffened up under it in a queer way. I guess she’s a good deal of a mummy anyway and this job makes her more so. She *is* harder on Abbie and on me than the old housekeeper used to be; but at that her looks are the worst part of her.”

“Well,” agreed Henrietta, “she can’t help her looks—that’s the way she was made.”

“I like Dr. Julius Rhodes much better than I did at first,” continued Sallie. “I hated him at first. Of course he doesn’t look one bit like his cousin; that was one reason. In the next place, I hated having those people flock down here in my dear old Doctor Rhodes’s own home; and in the third place, it didn’t seem quite right to me to keep a thing like that hidden—to let people go on supposing that it was still Doctor Charles Rhodes when it wasn’t. But I overheard Dr. Rhodes and one of those lawyers talking in the office one day and I gathered then that Doctor Rhodes didn’t like keeping that secret himself—he *wanted* to tell, but the lawyer said it wasn’t good policy. And now, even if this Doctor Rhodes isn’t a lovely, gentle, sweet old man like Doctor Charles, I think he makes a very good head for this school. And when he is able to handle the school funds, there will be more regular teachers and he won’t have to work his family quite so hard.”

“At that,” said Maude, “the family isn’t so bad. Mrs. Henry is a dear, everybody says that old Miss Emily is terribly thorough and Miss Julia certainly makes the girls practise. And you all know, I’d *gladly* swap Miss Woodruff for any one of them—I still have seven pages of American History to learn by heart and recite.”

“But tell me,” pleaded Henrietta, “did they really open the girls’ letters, as Cora thought they did, to see if they’d written home about that secret.”

“Mercy, no!” replied Sallie. “They *have* to look over the addresses on those letters. They do it every day. Your folks wouldn’t get half of your letters if they didn’t—the girls are always leaving off towns or states or stamps. But only *one* of them ever writes ‘Dear Clarence’ on the outside of her envelope.”

## CHAPTER XXIII—PIG OR PORK?

The spring did perfectly wonderful things to the land adjacent to Highland Hall. It was really time that *something* was happening to improve that rather cheerless prospect. During the fall and winter months, the landscape had been mostly brown and gray and black, often more or less disfigured with patches of dingy snow; and a general misty bleakness surrounded the big, rather ugly building. But, with the coming of spring all this was changed. One could now see why the school prospectus had stated that Highland Hall was “beautifully located.”

The building stood at the top of a broad knoll. The level portion of this was covered by a well kept lawn—tall, lanky Charles, with his sandy hair on end and his angular elbows greatly in evidence, might be seen galloping over it with his lawn roller, getting certain bare spots ready for seed. The sloping banks were grassed also but this grass grew at its own sweet will; and then, quite suddenly it *wasn’t* grass but long stemmed violets. You could gather tremendous bunches of them and still there were millions left—popular Miss Blossom was fairly besieged with bouquets. Then, farther down the hillside were great patches of snowy bloodroot and miniature groves of mandrake with their hidden, creamy, heavily perfumed cups. There were wild crab-apple trees wreathed with wonderful pink and white buds and blossoms. The edges of the unsightly ditches along the road suddenly became brilliantly green and pink with oxalis and there were sheltered nooks along the margin of the grove that were blue with mertensia or purple with the spider lily. Even the dry prairie was bursting forth with bloom; the lovely lavender of the bird’s foot violet and later the showy blossoms of the shooting star. There were gorgeous blue jays and orioles in the trees and meek gray doves in the hedges.

All the girls except Henrietta seemed bubbling over with happiness these days. Even Sallie, dreadfully shabby as to clothes and growing shabbier, was more cheerful, because she loved the spring season at Highland Park; and because she had never before possessed so many warm friends among the pupils. But Henrietta was visibly drooping. Her eyes wore a strained, anxious look and every day at mail time, her brilliant color deserted her, leaving her pale and trembling and quite unlike her usual vivacious self. At sight of a telegram arriving for Doctor Rhodes—and

he often received as many as four a week—Henrietta's lips would turn absolutely white. And several times, on the days when her grandmother's letters came with no news of her still missing father, the girls had found her weeping. It was decidedly unlike Henrietta to weep.

But even Henrietta loved the wild flowers. Sallie knew where to find the choicest blossoms and Doctor Rhodes, glad to have the girls spend their leisure hours outdoors, even if it did increase their appetites alarmingly, extended their bounds a good half mile toward the south so the girls could roam at will.

One beautiful day, when school was dismissed earlier than usual, Mabel asked permission to take her friends as far as the cottage that contained Charles's interesting family.

"I'm awfully fond of children," explained Mabel. "I get lonesome for them when I don't have any. Several times I've given candy and little presents to Charles to take home to those cunning babies; but I'm just dying to see them again and some of the girls want to go, too."

"I've no objection to your *seeing* them," said Doctor Rhodes, with a friendly chuckle, "but you are strictly forbidden to accept any invitations to stay with that family and you are not to bring any of them home with you."

"I won't," promised Mabel. "Thank you ever so much for letting us go."

The long walk over the blossoming prairie was wonderful and the other delighted youngsters thanked Mabel for planning the trip. The children at the cottage proved interesting and sweet and the girls loved them. Tommy remembered Mabel and said: "Please stay wiz us, you is nicer than Lizzie," which pleased Mabel very much indeed, though of course she *didn't* stay. The shy twins soon became friendly and even the baby was smiling and responsive. Mrs. Charles had been making cookies and generously passed them around. Then Maude looked at her watch and said that it was time to start back.

The girls decided to go home by the road that wound along over the prairie and somewhat west of the more direct but pathless route they had taken *to* the cottage. It was longer but Sallie said that interesting things grew along the edges. Even Sallie, however, was surprised at one thing they discovered. Mabel, who was trudging sturdily along, a little ahead of the others—and of course she had a right to lead the procession since it was her party—suddenly stopped short.

"Mercy!" she gasped. "What's that!"

"What's *what*?" asked Sallie, crowding to the front. "Is it a new flower? Oh! Why, that looks like a little pig!"

"But 'way out here!" cried Maude. "It couldn't walk so far and there are no farms along here."

"But the farmers 'way south of here," returned Sallie, "send them in to the packing houses or down to the trains along this road. Probably this one got spilled out of somebody's wagon and the driver never missed him."

"No doubt," said little Jane Pool, "the other piggies squealed so hard that the poor man never heard the cries of distress from this one."

"It's so little and pink and clean," said Bettie, admiringly.

"But so naked," objected Marjory. "It really seems as if it ought to be wearing baby clothes—little woolly ones. I'm glad it's a warm day."

"See," said Mabel, "it's sucking my finger—I think it likes me."

"It's hungry," said Sallie. "It seems too bad to leave it here to starve."

"But *we* don't want any pig," objected Henrietta. "I don't think I *like* pigs."

"I'm sure *I* don't," said Maude. "Come on, girls, let's climb up the ladder to that windmill over there and walk all around it on that ledge—I think it's wide enough. We don't want to be bothered with any pigs."

But the lonesome little pig had no intention of being left behind. It trotted along at the girls' heels and squealed piteously in its efforts to keep up.

"Poor little thing," said Bettie, "it's just starving."

"And tired," said Mabel. "Every minute or two it loses its footing and rolls right over. It thinks it belongs to us."

"You're afraid to pick it up and carry it," teased Marjory.

"I'm not," said Mabel. "I'm going to do it. The rest of you can climb all the windmills you want to, but I'm going to be kind to this pig."

Whereupon kind Mabel picked up the pig and carried it. At first, however, the little animal squirmed and struggled so much that Mabel had all she could do to keep from dropping him.

“But what are you going to do with him?” queried Bettie.

“Oh, I’ll just slip around to the kitchen door—if I ever get that far—and ask Charles to take care of him.”

“Charles won’t be home,” said Sallie. “That’s the time of day he goes to the station to get the bread.”

“Then I’ll take him up to my room,” said Mabel, whose pet was now quite satisfied in her arms. “Perhaps you could bring up a cup of milk for him.”

“Mabel never comes home empty handed,” laughed Marjory. “And she isn’t particular what she brings, as long as it’s alive.”

“Won’t Isabelle be pleased?” laughed Maude.

“Lend him to me, Mabel. I’ll put him in Miss Woodruff’s bed.”

“No you won’t. I’m not going to have him abused.”

“Well, beware of Isabelle,” giggled Marjory.

Forewarned is forearmed. Mabel succeeded in slipping the pig into her bedroom closet without disturbing Isabelle who was busy writing what she was pleased to call “a poem.” She sent them, as she confided to Mabel, to her friend Clarence. Of course, when Isabelle had a pencil in her hand and that faraway look in her eye she was not likely to notice mere pigs.

Sallie had contrived a nursing bottle for the infant. Mabel, seated on the closet floor, succeeded in feeding her charge and presently made a nest for him by dumping the stockings out of her round mending basket; but to her surprise the pig, not being built that way, refused to curl. His tail curled beautifully but the rest of him wouldn’t. In no way, in fact, was he as accommodating an animal as a kitten or even a puppy.

“If he’d only just *cuddle*,” groaned Mabel, “he’d be so much more comfortable to live with.”

It was somewhere about midnight when Isabelle became aware of the pig. Mabel had been aware of him for a great many sleepless hours. Either he had had too much to eat or not enough. Perhaps he was only lonesome. At any rate he was quiet only when Mabel held him close to her own warm body and kept one or more of her fingers in his mouth. She had spent part of the night on the floor among the shoes; but the floor was hard and Mabel was sleepy; so finally she had crept into her own bed and taken the infant pig with her.

But nothing she could do seemed to please him. His squeals became louder and louder and more and more frequent. At last one of his very best squeals escaped from under the bedclothes.

“My goodness!” gasped Isabelle, suddenly sitting up in bed. “What’s that! Was that you, Mabel?”

“No,” returned Mabel, truthfully. “I didn’t speak.”

“It wasn’t a ‘speak’—it was more like a squeak.”

Piggy chose that moment to let out a smothered “Wee Wee!” in spite of Mabel’s restraining hand.

“Mabel, it *is* you. Are you sick?”

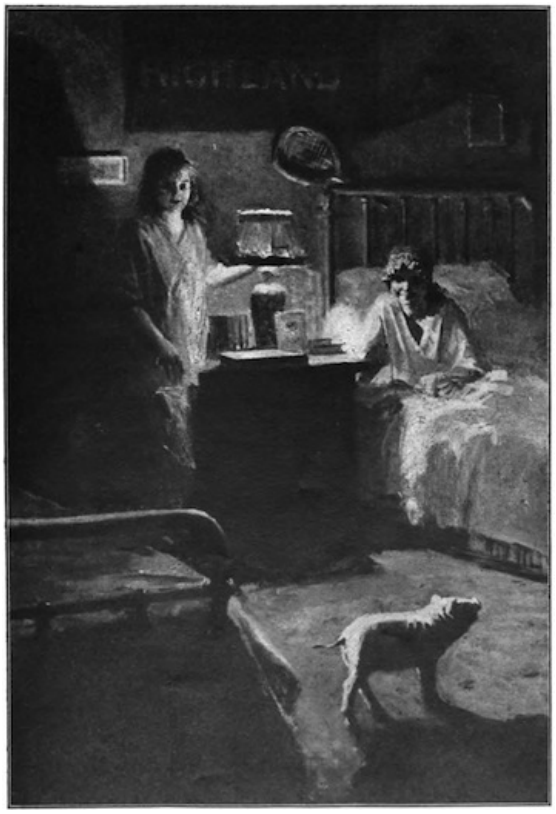
“I—I’m not sleeping very well,” offered Mabel, trying not to giggle. “I’m quite restless.”

“I thought I heard you eating things in the closet while I was writing. Perhaps you’ve made yourself sick.”

By this time Mabel was about helpless with laughter—it was so amusing to be taken for a pig. But just then her charge took a mean advantage of her. He squirmed suddenly, rolled out of bed and landed with a thump and an astonished grunt on the floor.

“My Uncle!” gasped Isabelle, leaping out of bed and switching on the light. “Are you killed!”

“For goodness’ sake keep still,” growled Mabel. “It isn’t me—it’s my pig!”



“For goodness’ sake keep still,” growled Mabel

The pink pig scuttling here and there across the floor was too much for Isabelle. She plunged into bed again and sat there with horrified eyes on the pig. Suddenly, as he dashed in her direction, she squealed and the pig squealed and they both squealed—a regular duet.

Miss Woodruff in her red flannel nightdress was the first to arrive at the party.

“What!” she demanded, pausing in the doorway, “does *this* mean?”

Piggy chose this moment for a mad dash for freedom. In his flight through the doorway he brushed the lady’s bare ankles. Miss Woodruff’s wild shrieks were added to Isabelle’s.

Of course everybody in the West Corridor was awake by that time. Brave Victoria Webster, now that Gladys was gone, was again rooming with Augusta and Lillian Thwaite. Pausing for nothing, Victoria rushed through the dark halls toward the portion of the house occupied by Doctor Rhodes. Her lusty cries of “Fire! Fire!” brought all the Rhodes family in bathrobes of assorted colors, to the West Corridor.

By the time they arrived, Lillian and Augusta had added their shrieks to Isabelle’s.

“Stop this noise,” commanded Doctor Rhodes, shaking Augusta. “What are you screaming for?”

“I don’t know,” chattered Augusta.

“What are *you* screaming for, Lillian?”

“Ow! Ow! I—I don’t know.”

“Miss Woodruff—”

“Why!” gasped Miss Woodruff, suddenly remembering her scarlet attire and bolting for her own room, “I don’t know.”

“Well, Isabelle, what are *you* screaming for? You seem to be the last.”

“I—I saw a pig!” shuddered Isabelle.

“Nonsense!” returned Doctor Rhodes. “You *couldn’t* have seen a pig. You’ve been having a nightmare—you ate too much roast pork for dinner.”

“No, no,” insisted Isabelle, “it *was* a pig.”

“There’s no such animal as a night pig,” returned Doctor Rhodes, with dignity. “Now get back to your beds, all of you, and don’t let me hear another sound from any of you tonight, about pigs or anything else.”

Mabel, tired as she was, stayed awake for an hour wondering what had become of the poor little pig. Although she listened with all her ears, not even the faintest squeal could she hear. Finally

she dropped asleep.

“Mabel,” said puzzled Isabelle, the next morning, “I really *thought* I saw a pig last night. Did *you* see one?”

“I thought I *heard* one,” returned Mabel, who was busy in the closet, stuffing a milky bottle into her pocket. “But of course no pig could climb all those stairs.”

“That’s so, too,” said Isabelle. “It *may* have been that pork—I forgot to eat my apple sauce.”

“I’m sure it was pork,” agreed Mabel, wickedly and truthfully.

At breakfast time Mabel found a note under her plate.

> “Dear Mabel: Found at 7 A. M. one pig rooting under the dining room table for crumbs. Charles is building a pen for him in the back yard and all is well—thought you’d like to know.
>
> Sallie.”

At recess time, Mabel led Isabelle to the new pig pen. Maude and little Jane Pool were looking over the edge.

“Jane and I thought somebody ought to give him a name so *we* did,” said Maude, with a wicked glance at Isabelle. “Don’t you think ‘Clarence’ would be a sweet name—for a pig?”

Then, with a gleeful shout, the naughty pair sped away to eat pie under the porch. And Sallie appeared with a message for Mabel.

“Doctor Rhodes wishes to see Miss Bennett in his office,” announced Sallie.

“I’m told,” said Doctor Rhodes, when Mabel stood demurely before him, “that Highland Hall has mysteriously acquired a pig. It occurs to me that you may be able to shed some light on the subject.”

“Yes,” said Mabel, “you’ve guessed right. I brought that pig home. Somebody had to—he was *so* lonesome.”

“But didn’t I tell you—”

“You didn’t say *pigs*. You said any of Charles’s family.”

“Hum—so I did. And you kept that animal in your room?”

“I tried to.”

“Then Isabelle really saw a pig?”

“She wasn’t sure at breakfast time,” giggled Mabel.

“You haven’t any *more* pets concealed on the premises, I suppose! An extra pig or two or a young hippopotamus or anything like that?”

“No,” giggled Mabel, “and I don’t *want* any more for a long time. A pig is a fearful responsibility.”

“You’ve been punished enough, I see. Well, don’t let it happen again.”

“I won’t,” promised Mabel, cheered by a certain twitching line in Doctor Rhodes’s cheek. “I’ve had enough pets to last a long time—besides one roommate is just about all Isabelle can stand.”

## CHAPTER XXIV—STILL NO NEWS

It was raining that Thursday morning and nobody was pleased. The recitation rooms were dark and gloomy on rainy days and all plans for a pleasant afternoon outdoors were spoiled. Naturally the girls hated the idea of being confined to the veranda when prairie, grove and meadow were so much more inviting. The morning had seemed long and poky, lessons had proved uncommonly monotonous, there was nothing at all interesting for lunch and study hour had dragged; but at last, here was Sallie with the mail bag. Everybody but Henrietta brightened perceptibly. Henrietta looked as if she were trying—without very much success—to brace herself for a trying ordeal.

Mabel, however, looked cheerfully expectant. Nowadays there was always at least one letter a week for Mabel from Germany, and when it came Mabel always felt quite distinguished; she was the *only* girl who received letters from a foreign land. She felt especially elated whenever Miss Wilson, the very stiffest of the Seniors, begged for the stamps to send to her brother who was making a collection. On this particular day, there were letters for most of the Lakeville girls and for Mabel too; but all four of them were casting anxious glances in Henrietta’s direction. They had acquired the habit. Their hearts were wrung by her obvious suffering and by the courage

with which she endured it. This long suspense was really getting to be hard on *all* of them.

“Miss Henrietta Bedford,” called Sallie.

Henrietta, pale and trembling, forced herself to step to the platform, received her letter, carried it to the window and nervously tore it open. Jean had followed her quietly and stood waiting to comfort her in case of need. After a moment or two, Henrietta pointed silently to the opening words and Jean read: “Still no news of your dear father.”

Presently Jean and Henrietta left the room and the sympathetic eyes of the other girls followed them to the doorway.

“That’s worse than losing a relative by sudden death,” said Eleanor Pratt, soberly.

“Yes,” agreed Elisabeth Wilson. “This suspense must be perfectly harrowing—in fact, I can *see* it is. Poor kid! I’m so sorry for her I don’t know what to do.”

“There isn’t anything one *can* do,” said Beatrice Holmes. “I’ve watched her every day at mail time and it’s just pitiful to see how she hates to open her letters.”

The mail distributed, some of the girls went to their respective rooms to remove from their persons the ink stains, chalk dust and other visible signs of a busy session in school. Others flocked to the veranda to stroll back and forth like caged lions grumbling in captivity.

“This is a beastly rain,” said little Jane Pool. “The ground is just soaked.”

“‘It isn’t raining rain, today,’” quoted Grace Allen, “‘it’s raining—’”

“Water,” said unpoetical Mabel.

“Violets,” concluded Grace.

“Water,” insisted Mabel.

“Violets,” said Grace.

“Both wrong,” said Debbie Clark. “It’s roses. We’ve *had* violets.”

“I don’t see any of those, either,” said Mabel, crossly. “It’s just plain water. I can’t even go to look at my pig.”

“You ought to sit beside him with an umbrella,” teased Debbie. “He may be getting drowned.”

“He’s all right,” assured always-comforting Sallie. “Charles moved him into the barn—he knew it was going to rain. Hello, Maude, why so pensive? What mischief are you cooking up now?”

“That’s just the trouble,” complained Maude. “Nothing *will* cook. I’ve been trying hard to think of something awfully wicked to do to cheer poor Henrietta up. The trouble is, when I really *want* to be bad I can’t do it. *My* badness always breaks out of its own accord when I least expect it; just when I’m really *trying* to be good. When it’s really necessary for me to be wicked, as it is right now, I surprise everybody—and especially dear Miss Woodruff—by being too good to be true. A regular angel child!”

“Still,” offered Hazel, “you managed to start something yesterday. I thought I’d *die* when I looked out the window and saw all you girls turning somersaults on the lawn.”

“What was that?” asked Isabelle. “I must have missed something.”

“You missed a lot,” assured Maude. “Charles left a large heap of stuff he had clipped from the hedges and the grass he had raked up after galloping around all the morning with his lawn mower, in a lovely big pile right in front of the office windows. Well, the minute I saw it yesterday afternoon, I forgot that I was a boarding school ‘Young lady’—I was back in my childhood—I was a girl again.”

“What did you do?” demanded Isabelle.

“You mean, how *many* did I do.”

“You didn’t *really* turn somersaults!”

“I *did*, and I loved it. And that was too much for Victoria. She did some, too—just lovely ones. So did Cora and Jane and Bettie—nearly all the West Corridor girls. All they needed was little Maude to start them.”

“You’d have thought they weren’t more than six years old,” said Hazel.

“What *did* Miss Woodruff say?”

“She *was* going to stop them,” returned Hazel, “but Doctor Rhodes and Mrs. Henry and Miss

Blossom came out on the porch and clapped their hands and Doctor Rhodes said he'd give a prize for the girl that could do the best handspring. He offered a quarter, and who do you think got it!"

"Victoria Webster, of course."

"Dead wrong. It was Eleanor Pratt."

"What! Not *Miss Pratt*!"

"Yes. Fancy a Senior doing a handspring! She rushed right down and did a perfectly lovely one and Doctor Rhodes presented her with the quarter. The other two would have tried it next; but just then Charles came with the wagon to pick the stuff up and he was none too pleased at finding it all over the place so we helped him load the wagon. Next time he cuts the grass he's going to make us a perfectly grand pile. He said he'd bring us up some of that long stuff from the meadow and we can have a regular party. It beats gym all hollow."

"I'm going in," said Isabelle, "it's too wet out here."

"So am I," said Hazel.

"And I have to dust the drawing room," said Sallie. "All those pictures of former graduating classes; all those proud Seniors in their white frocks. It's particularly harrowing just now because I haven't a decent rag to wear myself."

Presently the porch was deserted and the bored girls went to their own rooms.

One of Sallie's many duties at Highland Hall was to answer the doorbell at such times as the two neat maids were busy in the kitchen. Sallie had just dusted the class of 1897 and was beginning on the frame of class 1898, when the doorbell rang. It had taken her almost an hour to get that far because she had found a new interest in the pictures. She was examining the frocks and wishing that *she* might have tucks like these or ruffles like those or sleeves like some other one.

Ten minutes later, Sallie, very demure in the white apron that Mrs. Rhodes compelled her to wear when she opened the big front door to chance visitors, rapped at the door of room number twenty. Marjory opened it.

"A gentleman in the library to see Miss Henrietta Bedford," announced Sallie, sedately. But Sallie's eyes were dancing and she was a little breathless as if she had been running—as indeed she had—all the long way from the front door.

"A gentleman!" exclaimed Henrietta. "I don't *know* any gentleman. Do you mean Doctor Rhodes?"

"I do not," returned Sallie. "But don't be frightened—there isn't anything about this to frighten you."

"Some one from Lakeville? Not Mr. Black?"

"No. You must come down and see for yourself. I was told to bring you."

"I believe you and Maude have been up to some trick. You're just fooling me. There *couldn't* be a gentleman in the library to see me."

"But there *is*," declared Sallie. "You'll just hate yourself if you don't hurry. Do start. I want to see you moving before I deliver this Special Delivery letter to Isabelle—two cent stamps aren't swift enough for Clarence."

Henrietta laid her hairbrush down deliberately and started leisurely toward the door.

"Come on, Marjory," said she, "I ought to have a chaperon if there really is a gentleman, but I'm pretty sure it's Maude—she loves to dress up and play jokes on us. She might as well have two victims."

"Do you suppose," queried Marjory, in an awe-stricken whisper, when the pair had reached the top of the last long flight of stairs, "that it's that silly Theolog that wrote you a note after he saw you at the concert? There really *is* a hat on the hat rack."

"That's what I'm wondering," admitted Henrietta. "The silly goose makes eyes at me every Sunday. But surely he wouldn't have the nerve to *call* here. If that's who it is, I shall walk right back upstairs. I *know* it's *some* joke. Sallie's eyes were just dancing. Just at first I was frightened but I could see by Sallie's face that it wasn't anything dreadful."

"You go ahead," said Marjory. "If it really is *your* visitor—"

## CHAPTER XXV—AN EXCITING FATHER

A tall man, who was very good looking indeed, stood beside the library table. A man of perhaps

forty, with a fair skin, bronzed by much exposure to the sun, abundant light hair that grew in a pleasing way and fine blue eyes. He was gazing expectantly toward the door.

Henrietta, after one look at the visitor, was across the room with her arms about his neck.

“Daddy! Why, *Dad*!”

Marjory, wisely concluding that no chaperon was needed, slipped unheeded from the room and fled away through twisting hallways and long corridors to the West wing where she found that Sallie had already spread the news.

“Henrietta’s father,” breathed Bettie, “isn’t that great! And only two hours ago Henrietta was weeping on her bed because her grandmother’s letter was so discouraging.”

“Does he look like Henrietta?” asked Jean. “You know we’ve never seen him.”

“Not a bit,” said Marjory, “he’s fair—a regular blond. And oh, so good looking. She’s like the pictures of her dark mother, you know.”

“He looks just like an earl or a duke or something like that,” said Sallie. “When the Seniors see him they’re going to be glad that they were polite to Henrietta. He’s the best looking father that ever came to this school and I ought to know, because I’ve been making a study of fathers for a long, long time. Of course, most *any* kind of a father looks mighty good to *me*. I don’t envy Henrietta her good clothes, her pretty looks or her pretty ways; but I *would* like to wake up suddenly and find myself down in that library shaking hands with a *father*.”

In the meantime, Henrietta, who had been almost speechless at first, was making up for lost time. There were traces of tears on her cheeks but her eyes were joyful.

“So you went right straight to Lakeville from San Francisco and as soon as Grandmother told you where I was you came right here?”

“And I didn’t bring you a single thing. My luggage is still in Shanghai, I suppose. I believe I picked up some odds and ends in Canton. I was there for a very short time and foolishly neglected to cable Henshaw. When they rescued me from that coral reef, absolutely the only thing I owned was half a pair of trousers. I had to borrow clothes from the captain of the ship before I could land in San Francisco and I had to telegraph to London for money with which to travel east. Your Grandmother tells me that Henshaw has sent out a relief expedition—perhaps he’ll rescue my luggage. It seems to me I bought a mandarin’s coat and some beads—”

“I wouldn’t have cared if you hadn’t bought me a single thing. It was just you I wanted, Daddy. Don’t *ever* get lost again. It’s too hard on the family.”

“Do you know, it hadn’t occurred to me that you were grown up enough to worry; but, since you are, I suppose I’ll have to mend my ways. I *have* been careless a great deal of the time. I haven’t always written when I *could*; and of course, sometimes, I couldn’t. Now, couldn’t we go outside, some place? It seems dark and stuffy in here to a man who has lived on a coral reef for months.”

“Why,” cried Henrietta, “I do believe it’s clearing up.”

Henrietta was right. The rain had ceased, the sun was making up for lost time and in more ways than one it was now a pleasant day. On the veranda the happy little girl introduced her father to such of her special friends as were there and sent little Jane Pool flying after all the others. The entire West Corridor rushed down and out, as Maude said afterwards. Mr. Bedford bowed and smiled in a charming way and murmured: “Delighted, I’m suah.” He was not a talkative man, for which the girls were sorry because his speech was so delightfully English that the thoroughly American children were greatly impressed. They loved to hear him say “Cawn’t” and “Just fawncy,” and “Chuesday”—for Tuesday. And they were overjoyed when he asked Henrietta if she hadn’t better put on her “goloshes” before she walked on the wet grass.

Henrietta took her father for a walk to the village. It is to be suspected that she led him straight to the best candy store in the village because she returned later with an enormous box of chocolates. The girls were even gladder to see that her cheeks were glowing with some of their former bright color. Her father was placed in the company seat at Doctor Rhodes’s own table at dinner time that night; Henrietta sat demurely beside him; but occasionally she turned her head long enough to make an impish face at the girls at her own table.

“She’d rather be here,” said Jean, sagely.

“I wish she were,” said Maude. “I love to hear her father talk.”

It was bedtime before the West Corridor girls had a chance to hear all about it. They had flocked into Henrietta’s room and most of them undressed in there while listening to what she had to say.

“I’m going to do something wonderful,” said Henrietta. “First, I’m to spend tomorrow in Chicago with Father, and then he’s going right to England. Grandmother is going to meet us in Chicago, and what do you think! You couldn’t guess in a thousand years. We are both going right over to England with him so we can have a good long visit on the way. We’re going to stay just long

enough for Grandmother to count her relatives over there—Father says it won't be more than three weeks altogether—and then we're coming back. I'm going to bring something to every one of you. I may even get to Paris for just about a minute—Father says he has to go there to tell something to the French Government about something he dug up somewhere."

"How lovely!" cried Jean.

"How splendid," cried Bettie.

"How grand!" cried Marjory.

"How perfectly sweet," cried Cora.

"How darling," cried little Jane Pool.

"But, Henrietta," demanded Mabel. "You haven't told us where your father has been all this time. Why didn't he write?"

"Why, so I haven't," said Henrietta, "And this is my last chance—I'm going early in the morning, with just a few duds in a suitcase. Well, here's the story, all I could dig out of him. I'll sit on the dresser so you can all hear. It's really quite a tale.

"Well, first he went to Shanghai because he'd heard of a temple that was different from most temples; but it was way up the Yengtze river—in China, you know—so he rushed right up there to look for it. It was on the estate of an old Chinaman who didn't want any Englishmen or other foreigners poking round his old temple even outside—and it was said to be certain death to go *inside*. But father *did* manage to get inside and was copying some of the inscriptions as well as he could—it was too dark to use his camera and he didn't dare make a flashlight—when something hit him on the head. He doesn't know *yet* what it was.

"The next thing he knew, he was in kind of a dungeon, all stone and metal bars, under some building—that temple, perhaps, or possibly under a warehouse near the river. He says he doesn't know why they didn't kill him at once; but for some reason they didn't. Just kept him there and gave him very little food once a day for weeks and weeks and weeks—he does not know exactly how long.

"Then, one night, when he had just about given up all hope of *ever* getting out of that place, four big, ugly-looking Chinamen came and tied a bag over his head and bound his hands and feet and loaded him into a boat and poled it down a river for hours and hours. They chattered a lot in Chinese but Father couldn't understand them—his interpreter wasn't with him when he went into the temple, and he doesn't know *what* became of *him*. After a long, long time, Father heard sounds like men clambering aboard a vessel; but he thinks that the small boat he was in was towed for a long time behind some larger boat. He slept for part of the time, he says, and of course with that bag tied over his head he couldn't see anything or even hear a great deal.

"The next thing he was really sure of was that his hands were free. By the time he got the bag off his head, there was an old Chinese junk—that's a kind of a ship—way off in the distance, sailing away from him. He was alone in the boat but in one end of it he found a jar of water and some food. Also a long pole and a paddle. Of course he couldn't reach bottom with the pole because he was out of the river by that time and quite far out at sea—in the Yellow Sea or possibly the Eastern Sea. You know how they run together along there; and he showed me what he thought *might* be the place, on the atlas in the library.

"Well, Father thought other boats might come along that way so he stayed right there for about six hours; but none did; so then he fastened the long pole up like a mast and ripped open that bag that had been over his head and used it for a sail. He found some bits of rope and string and some old fishing tackle stuffed into the bow of the boat and used them to tie his sail to the pole.

"He sailed wherever the wind took him and after awhile he was picked up by another Chinese junk. He thinks that the men aboard this one were smugglers or pirates or something. He tried to get them to take him to Shanghai or Hong Kong or some other Chinese port; but he was so ragged and dirty that probably they didn't believe he'd be able to pay them what he promised—even if they understood him—and all he could get out of what *they* said was something about 'Philippines.'

"But they never got to the Philippine Islands, if that's where they were bound for. There was a typhoon—a sudden, terrible storm—and they were wrecked. My father and one very strong young Chinese sailor were thrown by the waves inside a coral reef that stuck up like kind of a fence, in a big half-circle. It made sort of a front yard to a small coral island and the water was smoother inside so they managed to swim ashore. But they were quite battered up at first and just crawled ashore on their hands and knees and fell asleep on the first dry spot.

"Their island was only a little one, just about big enough for two persons to live on. Fortunately there was a small spring of fresh water but it ran very slowly so that it took a long time to catch enough for a satisfying drink; and the young Chinaman was smart about catching fish and snaring sea birds and finding turtles' eggs. There were lots of shell fish, too; and a box of rice washed ashore about the time they did and they saved some of that, so of course they didn't

starve.

“But they had to stay there for months and months and months; until another ship got blown out of her course and was almost wrecked on that coral fence outside their little island. As soon as that storm calmed down, the ship sent a boat ashore to explore the island. There were English sailors aboard her but the ship was going to Calcutta. Father says she was a rotten old tub but he and the Chinaman were glad to be rescued by *anything*. He *wanted* to go to England and he didn’t want to go to Calcutta; but after a day or two he had a good chance to be transferred to a much faster and safer ship bound for San Francisco so he took it. The Captain had to give him some clothes—he lost just about all he had left when he was swimming to the island. He sent a wireless to my grandmother from the American ship but for some reason she didn’t get it. And he didn’t telegraph her from San Francisco because he supposed she *had* received the wireless.”

“Tell us all the *awful* part of it,” pleaded Mabel. “Cannibals and tigers and things like that.”

“That’s one trouble with Father’s adventures,” complained Henrietta. “He doesn’t *tell* the ghastly details. He just gives the main facts. He must have been almost dead in that dungeon, he must have hated that nasty bag over his head, and he must have been almost drowned swimming ashore and almost scared to death in that typhoon; but he doesn’t *say* so. He did mention a shark in the lagoon—the Chinaman killed that with his knife. Of course I’ll be able to dig more out of him when there’s more time; but he won’t tell me the *worst* things; he never does.”

“*I* think,” said Jean, “you managed to get considerable.”

“Yes,” agreed Maude, “you certainly own an exciting father.”

“I’m so glad I still *own* him,” breathed Henrietta.

And then the girls slipped away to their own beds to dream of Chinese temples, junks, dark dungeons, yellow pirates, sunny reefs and sunburned fathers. And of course they were all glad to have their Henrietta again happy and free from care; for they had all suffered with her.

## CHAPTER XXVI—HENRIETTA IS MYSTERIOUS

The girls began to miss Henrietta almost as soon as she was gone. For a small person, she left a tremendous vacancy. She was so lovely, so bright, so friendly with everybody and so very good to look at that it seemed, as Sallie put it, as if the sun had suddenly deserted the whole state of Illinois. Henrietta wrote to her friends, of course, but that wasn’t quite like having her actually on the premises.

One day, however, when Sallie was distributing the mail, the post girl experienced a joyful moment. She pulled a letter from the bag and read aloud the name on the envelope: “Miss Sallie Dickinson.”

“Why,” gasped Sallie, pink with surprise and delight. “That’s for me—from Henrietta.”

Henrietta had expected to return within three weeks. But did she? Not a bit of it. She and her delightful grandmother, Mrs. Slater, were having too good a time visiting their relatives in England to be willing to return at once to America. They were shopping in London.

“And oh, such shops as there are in London!” wrote Henrietta. “And oh, such funny English as I hear! My cousins took me to something they called a ‘Cinema’—and what do you think it was? Just a movie. When I come back I’ll talk some *real* English for you so you can see what it’s like.”

“I guess,” laughed Jean, “Henrietta is more American now than she is English.”

“I wish she’d come back,” said Bettie. “The days seem twice as long with her so far away.”

It was undeniably dull without Henrietta; but Maude managed on one occasion at least to cheer the other girls considerably. She had been unnaturally good for several weeks; but now the spirit of impishness that sometimes controlled her had been bottled up too long for safety and was just about ready to break loose.

A full length mirror stood at the end of the West Corridor, across one of the corners. It swung on pivots, from an upright frame. It was possible to unscrew those pivots and remove the framed mirror from this outer frame. Indeed, Sallie had once mentioned casually that this feat might easily be accomplished by two girls, whereupon curious Maude had examined the screws with much interest and had satisfied herself that Sallie’s statement was true.

At certain times of the day, Miss Woodruff, who was as regular as a clock in all her habits, strolled to that mirror to make certain that her skirts hung properly; for no one was more particular as to her appearance than was stout Miss Woodruff. She invariably wore gray, for school use. She possessed three serge gowns, made precisely alike, from the same piece of goods. She spoke of these garments as her “uniform.” When not in use, these gowns hung in her bedroom closet.

But one dreadful day, when excellent Miss Woodruff looked in the glass at the usual time, she started back in horror. There was her reflection, dark gray frock, unmistakable hair-do and all, yet what in the world was the matter with it? The face was different, the figure was shorter and fatter and its outline was curiously lumpy in places.

There were stifled giggles from the nearby doorways as the puzzled lady leaned forward to look closer—at Maude. For of course it *was* Maude, attired in one of Miss Woodruff's gray gowns, with pillows stuffed inside; and her hair, skilfully arranged by Cora, closely resembled Miss Woodruff's. The naughty but ingenious girl standing just back of the vacant frame, was faithfully imitating every movement made by Miss Woodruff, every expression that flitted across her astonished face.

"*Nous avons*," began Maude, stepping through the frame, with her hands crossed meekly on her dark gray breast, "*les raisins blancs et noirs*—"

But at this point, to the uproarious delight of the entire West Corridor, Miss Woodruff seized her reflection by the shoulders and shook it until pillows began to drop from beneath the gray gown.

"Maude Wilder," gasped the breathless lady, finally, "you may keep right on learning American History—two pages a day until Commencement."

Ten minutes later, when Miss Woodruff took her daily walk on the long veranda she was surprised to meet herself halfway, as it were.

"Don't be cross," laughed Maude, slipping her hand under Miss Woodruff's substantial elbow. "I just came down to apologize. I know I'm bad but if I didn't keep this place cheered up, think how dull we'd be. We'd all get in a rut. And you know I *do* respect you, tremendously, even if I do seem a little disrespectful towards your clothes at times. And I do like you a lot, even if I can't help teasing you. Come on and be a sport. Let's show the girls what lovely twins we make."

"But—"

"Come along, do," pleaded Maude's sweetly persuasive voice. "You *know* you aren't really cross about this. Let's be friends."

"You're incorrigible," sighed Miss Woodruff, falling into step with her wheedling tormentor. "I don't know what ever will become of you, but, in spite of my better judgment, I can't *help* liking you. And just to show you that I can do it, I *will* be a sport just for once."

"Hurrah for the Woodruff twins!" cried Maude, enthusiastically. But Maude's enthusiasm was doomed to wane. Sturdy Miss Woodruff, with a wicked gleam in her eye, kept her absurd twin walking back and forth on the veranda for a good two hours. The day was warm and the pillows tied firmly about Maude's waist added nothing to her comfort; the girls on the railing were obviously enjoying her predicament; but unmerciful Miss Woodruff proved tireless. Maude was tired of being a twin long before her teacher was; but revived somewhat when that surprising lady said, at last:

"Now, I *will* be a sport. I'm going to excuse you from learning that history. I think we're just about even without it."

"I didn't think she had it in her," commented Maude, reclining at length on the pillows she had gladly removed from her person. "There's more to that lady than I supposed there was."

There was much talk these days of Commencement. The three Seniors were to be graduated and, by some mysterious process, the five Juniors were to become Seniors. No wonder the Miller girls, quiet Virginia Mason, Sarah Porter and studious Mary Sherwood of the North Corridor had led a life apart from the younger girls. Of course, with a solemn thing like that hanging over them, and only a year away, they *couldn't* associate with a flock of careless infants in the lower grades.

There were to be Commencement clothes—white dresses, white shoes, white stockings for everybody, young or old. There was to be a class photograph of the Seniors, framed like all the rest, and hung in the big drawing room for future classes to admire. There were to be Exercises. Miss Julia's pupils were to play solos and duets; and everybody was to sing the songs that they were now practising daily and there were to be Essays. One of the Seniors, Miss Pratt, was known to be laboring over a strange thing called a Valedictory, Miss Wilson was struggling with the Class Prophecy and Miss Holmes was having a harrowing time with the Class Poem. Mabel hoped that none of these mysterious things would ever fall to *her* lot. Cream puffs and unlimited chocolate creams, it appeared, were not the only things that happened to a Senior.

And now, everybody was discussing clothes. Should they wear silk stockings or cotton ones? White pumps or Oxfords? Should their dresses be tucked or ruffled, full or scant? Should their sleeves be long or short or half way between? The Seniors were keeping *their* clothes a dark mystery; but all the other girls were willing to tell all they knew.

Jean, Bettie, Mabel and Marjory were to buy their dresses, shoes and stockings in Chicago. Mrs. Henry Rhodes and Miss Blossom were to take them to town for a whole joyous Monday.

They loved every inch of the way to the city, where Mrs. Henry piled them all into a 'bus at the station, took them to a big store on State Street, and whisked them aloft in an elevator. She and Miss Blossom spent a long morning trying fluffy white frocks on their lively charges.

There were large numbers of just-exactly-right frocks for Marjory and Bettie. They were easy to fit. Jean was tall and rather slender and it was some time before the interested clerk could find just the right pretty gown for Jean. As for plump Mabel—— Well, the sleeves were tight, the waists wouldn't button and the skirts were too scant.

"You see," explained the patient clerk, "she isn't a ready-made child. She hasn't got her shape yet. But you'll be all right, dearie (she called everybody 'dearie,' Mabel noticed), when you're older. Your shoulders are fine and you're right good looking; but they don't put cloth enough in Misses' garments these days for a real plump child. We'll have to make you a dress to order. You can pick out the style you like and our own Miss Williamson will measure you and in three days you'll have your dress. You'll look just as nice as anybody and your dress will be just exactly right."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Henry and Miss Blossom, "that's the thing to do."

Then they all got into the elevator and went up still higher and the Lakeville girls tried not to look surprised at finding a dining room so near the sky. After they had had lunch and purchased shoes and stockings it was time for their returning train.

Sallie listened to the thrilling news of the new dresses and the lovely new shoes rather soberly and with a lengthening countenance; but none of the girls noticed that she was not rejoicing with them until thoughtless Marjory suddenly asked:

"What are *you* going to wear, Sallie?"

"I have an old white dress," returned Sallie, flushing painfully. "It was new three years ago but I've worn it hard every summer, so it isn't new any more. All the tucks have been let out and the hem has been faced and it's still too short. Besides there's a bad rust stain on it and it's too tight across the chest I don't know *what* to do. I've been thinking I'd better put on a cap and apron and just pretend to be one of the regular maids. You see, ever so many parents and other guests will be coming so I'll have to answer the doorbell and run upstairs to announce guests and help in the dining room, anyway."

"But you have to help with the singing," said Bettie. "You have the best voice of all the girls. What are you going to do about that?"

"Perhaps I can stand behind a tree," offered Sallie. "Or I might burrow down in the tall grass and not be noticed. Of course I'd sing better if my clothes were all right; but I'll just try not to think about them."

The next day, some of the girls sat on a bench in the shady grove and talked this weighty matter over.

"It's a shame," said Jean. "Sallie's such a *dear* girl—one of the very sweetest girls in this school, *I* think, and she has a lovely voice. She ought to be able to stand right in the front row and be seen as well as heard."

"It isn't right," said Bettie, "for all the rest of us to be all dressed up and having a good time when Sallie can't—just because she's a boarding school orphan."

"Sometimes I've offered to lend her things," said Jean, "but she doesn't like it. I think it hurts her pride or something."

"I thought we might write home for money," said Marjory, "and get her a dress *that* way; but I'm sure Aunty Jane wouldn't give me a cent for it. She might, after a long, long time—if I'd begun to tease for it last September, for instance, she'd begin about now to loosen up a little."

"And my folks are too far away," mourned Mabel, "so *they're* no good."

"And mine," said Jean, "have to spend more on me now than they can afford."

"And of course," added Bettie, "the best *my* folks could do would be something out of a missionary box—something made of outing flannel most likely. Those boxes do run just awfully to outing flannel. Of course there's Mr. Black—but I wouldn't like to ask him."

"No," agreed Jean, "it wouldn't be right. Of course, if we'd started soon enough and saved all our weekly spending money—"

"Oh, why didn't we?" cried Bettie. "I do wish we had."

"If we four had saved *half* our money," said Marjory, who had been making figures with a stick in the sand, "we could have bought her a more expensive dress than any *we* are going to have. And shoes, too."

“Just think of that!” said Jean. “Next year I’m going to save a few cents every week—it’s mighty useful to have money when something like this comes up.”

“Of course,” said Marjory, who had been making more sums in the sand, “thirty cents isn’t much when you put a nickel in the plate every Sunday and chip in every now and then for spreads. Anyway, it’s all gone and poor Sallie hasn’t a dress.”

At mail time the next day, the schoolroom resounded with excited and delighted squeals. Sallie had had another letter from Henrietta. It was mailed in New York; and Henrietta was coming back.

“Grandmother is going to visit an old friend in Chicago,” wrote Henrietta, “and I’m coming back to study like mad to catch up with my classes. Tell the girls to have all their note books ready for me and I can *do* it. And Sallie, dear, I’m bringing you a present. I have something for all my best friends but if anybody can guess what I’m bringing you I’ll give her *two* presents.”

Jean looked at Bettie. Bettie nudged Marjory and Mabel managed—but not without difficulty—to wink at Jean.

“It’s a dress,” whispered Marjory. “I’m *sure* it’s a dress.”

“That’s just what I think,” agreed Jean.

Just two weeks before the close of school, Henrietta returned. She arrived during school hours and slipped quietly into her seat in the Assembly room; but she was so fidgety and there was such a fluttering among the other girls, who declared afterwards that she looked good enough to eat, that Miss Woodruff said: “Henrietta, I’ll excuse you for today. There’s only an hour left anyway.”

“Thank you,” said Henrietta. “I’m dying to unpack my new steamer trunk—Charles brought it right up along with me.”

The girls found Henrietta’s gifts in their rooms when they went upstairs at two o’clock. She had tried to find lovely, unusual things for them and had succeeded. A little gem of a picture in a silver frame for Jean, some lovely blue beads almost like Hazel’s for Marjory, an adorable turquois ring for Bettie and an exquisite enameled locket for Mabel. There was something for every girl in the West Corridor and a nice little graduating present for each of the three Seniors. There were some lovely white silk stockings “right straight from Paris” for Sallie.

“The rest of Sallie’s present is coming later,” said Henrietta, “I didn’t have room in my trunk for it. And on second thought, I’m not going to encourage any guessing. I *might* give the secret away and that wouldn’t do. I’m not going to tell what it is, but I’ll say this much. *Don’t worry about your clothes, Sallie.*”

“Did you get it in London?” demanded Mabel.

“Yes,” laughed Henrietta, “and that’s the last word I’m going to tell you about it.”

“I sort of hoped,” sighed Marjory, “it might have been *Paris*, like the stockings.”

But Henrietta only laughed harder than ever.

## CHAPTER XXVII—SALLIE’S PRESENT

Three days later, Henrietta, her eyes bright with excitement, rushed to the dining room and fell upon Mary, one of the neat maids.

“Lend me your cap and apron, quick!” demanded Henrietta, helping herself to the needed articles. “Don’t say a word. There’s a hack coming up from the station and I want to answer the doorbell—Doctor Rhodes said I could. Sallie’s in her room—I locked her in. I’m just getting even with her for something. I’ll bring your things back in just a few minutes and tell you the rest.”

Henrietta did answer the doorbell. The visitor was ushered to the library. Then away sped Henrietta up three flights of steps and through a tiresome number of corridors until at last she reached Sallie’s room on the top floor. She unlocked the door noiselessly, rapped on the panel and then announced, in a very good imitation of Sallie’s own voice:

“A gentleman in the library to see Miss Sallie Dickinson.”

“But there *couldn’t* be,” said Sallie. “I don’t *know* any gentleman.”

“But you *do*—or if you don’t, go down and get acquainted. Come on—you look all right.”

“It—it isn’t one of those Theologs—”

“Come on,” laughed Henrietta, “I’ll race you to the first floor.”

“It’s against the rules—”

“There’s nothing in the by-laws against sliding down the banisters. These nice black walnut ones were just made for that purpose. Down you go.”

“If I must, I must,” said resigned Sallie, meekly lying flat on the broad banister. “I know you’re playing some trick on me.”

“I *thought* you knew how to slide,” laughed Henrietta, following suit.

“Yes,” confessed Sallie, tackling the last banister, “I’ve helped polish them all—it’s a wonderful saving of legs.”

“Go on in,” urged Henrietta, at the library door. “Nobody’s going to eat you.”

Sallie saw a man standing by the table. A man who smiled pleasantly. She looked at him. Suddenly her heart began to thump wildly.

“Is it—Is it—”

“Yes, it *is*,” cried Henrietta. “Your father.”

Sallie’s face was turning from white to pink and momentarily growing brighter, but still she seemed unable to move. Henrietta gave her a gentle shove toward her father’s outstretched arms.

“I found him in London,” said Henrietta. “He’ll tell you all about it. Good-by, I’ll see you later.”

It happened to be a warm day, so the girls had left their rooms and were wandering in the grove, under the sheltering hickory trees where earlier in the season, Charles had placed a number of benches. At sight of Henrietta waving her arms wildly, the girls moved toward her.

“Help yourselves to the benches,” said Henrietta, seating herself on the ground. “I have a tale to tell. How would you like to be just awfully surprised?”

“I guess we could stand it,” drawled Miss Wilson, who, as usual, had a large box of chocolates under her arm. “Have some candy?”

“You wouldn’t try to stop my mouth with candy,” reproached Henrietta, “if you knew what you are bottling up thereby. Something’s happened—something wonderful. Something perfectly *grand*.”

“Tell us,” pleaded Jean, who could see that Henrietta was fairly bubbling over with news, “Come on, girls. Here’s a story.”

“Well,” began Henrietta, “once there was a man who was always moving around from one town to another looking for work. When he *had* work he wasn’t always satisfied with it. Sometimes he gave up a fairly good job and just went some place else because he happened to feel like it.”

“One of those rolling stones,” suggested Maude.

“Yes, a regular rolling stone. Well, after awhile he rolled out West. He tried ranching at first; but he didn’t care much about that. But there was a sort of cowboy chap that he *did* like—a young Englishman—and they decided to be partners. They tried mining for awhile but that didn’t pan out so they went down to Texas. They worked for an old man down there who was sick. They did something really worth while for *him*—something about saving a lot of cattle for him—and he was so grateful that he died and left his ranch to them.”

“Oh, Henrietta!” teased Hazel, “that *was* gratitude.”

“Well, I mean that *when* he died, he left his ranch to those two men. But the ranch wasn’t very much good—there was something wrong with the soil and nothing would grow—not even grass. But now pick up your ears, girls. One day, in one of the fields where the soil was *particularly* bad, the older man stepped into something soft and some queer greasy stuff oozed up out of the hole. It was *oil*. Experts came and tested it. They really had oil.

“Well, even when they had sold all their cattle they hadn’t money enough to develop their oil mine—”

“Oil *well*,” corrected Miss Wilson. “My father has them—but go on.”

“Yes, oil well. So the cowboy suggested going home to England where he had a lot of wealthy relatives and friends, to borrow the money. He wanted, for one thing, to let his own relatives reap some of the benefit if there *was* any. Well, that cowboy was—and is—sort of a distant cousin of my father’s; and my father was one of the men he wanted especially to see.

“Now, here’s the exciting part. His partner, the rolling stone, was with him when he went to my father’s rooms in London. And *I* was there. And when the cowboy introduced the other man to Father, I sat right up and looked at him—he looked like somebody I *knew*.

“Then Father introduced them both to me—he’s always careful about things like that, you know. And then I spoke right up and said:

“‘Mr. Dickinson, is your first name John? And did you ever have a little girl named Sallie?’ My goodness! You should have seen that little man’s face! All lit up with joy.”

“But,” cried Jean, “you don’t mean *our* Sallie! You don’t mean that that was Sallie’s *father*!”

“I *do*,” assured Henrietta. “Of course it seemed awfully nervy to speak right out like that to a strange man, right before my proper father and Cousin George. I never could have done it, if I hadn’t known myself how horrible it was to be a school orphan. After that, I told him all about Sallie. And *he* said that after he got out of the hospital he had hunted for her just as long as he had had any money; but the poor old man who had left Sallie at the wrong school couldn’t remember anything at all about it. Without money, and so weak that he could hardly crawl, Mr. Dickinson couldn’t do very much toward hunting Sallie up—and there were so *many* girls’ schools in this part of the country. And after he had drifted out West, he was always too poor to come back. This is the first bit of luck he’s had. But it’s a *big* bit. The oil well is all right—he had to stop in New York to attend to some part of the business—telegrams to and from Texas and things like that. That’s why he didn’t come when I did. Sallie’s father and the cowboy, too, will be very rich men. Of course he was going to begin to search for Sallie just as soon as things were settled; but I saved him a lot of time and trouble. But, oh! *Such* a time as I’ve had keeping this tremendous secret.”

“Where’s Sallie’s father now,” demanded Mabel.

“In the library with Sallie.”

“I’m glad about the money,” said Jean, earnestly, “but Henrietta, is—is he going to be a *nice* father for our Sallie?”

“Yes, he is,” returned Henrietta. “I watched him all the way over on the boat and there isn’t a single thing the matter with him.”

“That’s great,” breathed Mabel. “But what is he like?”

“Well, he has pleasant eyes and a *good* face and nice, gentle manners—and he doesn’t eat with his knife. Just after I found him I began to tremble for fear he *mightn’t* be the kind of father we’d want for our Sallie; but he *is*—just exactly. Perhaps he isn’t one of those terribly strong characters like Daniel Webster or Oliver Cromwell or John Knox—but who’d *want* a father like that! But I’m sure he’ll be a comfortable person to live with and Cousin George—the cowboy, you know—likes him; and Father says George is mighty particular about his friends. And of course he’ll pay up everything Sallie owes this school and give her everything she needs.”

At dinner time that night, Sallie’s father sat in the place of honor at Doctor Rhodes’s table. And Sallie, such a radiant Sallie, with her head high and her eyes bright, sat beside him, listening hungrily to his words.

And when Sallie’s clear young voice was lifted in song at the Commencement Day exercises, it didn’t come from behind a tree. Lovely Sallie didn’t *need* to hide behind a tree or to burrow down in the long grass; for her Commencement Day gown was quite as new and beautiful as anybody’s and certainly no other girl wore a happier expression.

“But it’s her father she’s the gladdest about,” explained Mabel. “She just *loves* him.”

“I’m glad of that,” said Bettie, who was sitting on her suitcase on the baggage strewn veranda. “It wouldn’t be much fun to go to Texas with a father you *didn’t* love. And isn’t it great! He’s going to let her visit Henrietta in Lakeville in August and go back to school with her afterwards so we aren’t going to lose every bit of our Sallie after all.”

“And,” said Jean, “Mabel is going to spend a week with me and then her own people will be home. And there’s Charles coming now to take us all to the station. Good-by, old Highland Hall. You’re going to be a big, lonesome place without us.”

“A year is a funny thing,” commented Bettie, with her last backward glance at the tall building. “While it’s happening, it seems to be a million miles long; and then, the very next minute, it’s all gone.”

“By this time tomorrow,” breathed Marjory, “we’ll be home; and all the days will have wings. But Mabel, what in the world *are* you doing?”

“I’m—kuk—crying,” gulped Mabel.

“You funny old baby,” laughed Henrietta. “You’re too tender hearted.”

“It isn’t that at all,” sobbed Mabel, “but something just terrible has happened. I forgot to label them and I kuk—kuk—can’t remember which lock of hair is Maude’s and which is Cora’s—and I just loved them both.”

“Well,” soothed Marjory, “both girls are far from bald—you can easily write for more hair.”

“Cheer up,” comforted Jean, “I *did* label mine and I can identify *anybody’s* hair. And—and we *all* hate to part with those girls; but we must look respectable when we get to the station; and when Mr. Black meets us in Chicago—”

“We’ll be mighty glad to see him,” said Mabel, smiling bravely through her tears, “and this time I’ll try not to get lost.”

“Climb out, everybody,” said Charles, stopping his car. “Here’s the station, right in the same old place. And there’s your train, right on time. And I hope I don’t see another girl or another trunk for the next four months. So long and good luck.”

THE END

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