

THE MADCAP of the SCHOOL

ANGELA BRAZIL



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Title: The Madcap of the School

Author: Angela Brazil

Illustrator: Balliol Salmon

Release date: May 10, 2009 [eBook #28749]

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/28749

Credits: Produced by Roger Frank, Suzanne Shell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

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OF THE SCHOOL ***



The Madcap of the School

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50 Old Bailey, LONDON
17 Stanhope Street, GLASGOW

BLACKIE & SON (INDIA) LIMITED
Warwick House, Fort Street, BOMBAY

BLACKIE & SON (CANADA) LIMITED
1118 Bay Street, TORONTO



“THE GIRLS PUT THEIR UNITED LUNG POWER INTO THE LOUDEST HALLOO OF WHICH THEY WERE CAPABLE” (Page 198)

The Madcap of the School

BY
ANGELA BRAZIL

Author of "The Luckiest Girl in the School"
"The Jolliest Term on Record"
"For the Sake of the School"
&c. &c.

Illustrated by Balliol Salmon

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
LONDON AND GLASGOW

By Angela Brazil

My Own Schooldays.

Ruth of St. Ronan's.

Joan's Best Chum.

Captain Peggie.

Schoolgirl Kitty.

The School in the South.

Monitress Merle.

Loyal to the School.

A Fortunate Term.

A Popular Schoolgirl.

The Princess of the School.

A Harum-Scarum Schoolgirl.

The Head Girl at the Gables.

A Patriotic Schoolgirl.

For the School Colours.

The Madcap of the School.

The Luckiest Girl in the School.

The Jolliest Term on Record.

The Girls of St. Cyprian's.

The Youngest Girl in the Fifth.

The New Girl at St. Chad's.

For the Sake of the School.

The School by the Sea.

The Leader of the Lower School.

A Pair of Schoolgirls.
 A Fourth Form Friendship.
 The Manor House School.
 The Nicest Girl in the School.
 The Third Form at Miss Kaye's.
 The Fortunes of Philippa.

Printed in Great Britain by Blackie & Son, Ltd. Glasgow

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THE MADCAP OF THE SCHOOL

CHAPTER I

THE MOATED GRANGE

“Here they are!”

“Not really!”

“It is, I tell you!”

“Jubilate! You’re right, old sport! Scooterons-nous this very sec! Quick! Hurry! Stir your old bones, can’t you?”

The two girls, who had been standing in the ruined watch-tower that spanned the gateway, tore down the broken corkscrew staircase at a speed calculated to imperil their necks seriously, and reached the bottom at the identical moment that a motor char-à-banc rounded the corner and drew up in front of the entrance. Sixteen jolly faces were grinning under sixteen school hats, and at least a dozen excited voices were pouring forth a perfect babel of exclamations.

“How ripping!”

“Oh, I say!”

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“This is top-hole!”

“What a chubby place!”

“I’d no idea it would be like this!”

“Oh, hold me up! This child’s knocked me over entirely!”

The opening day of a fresh term is always more or less of an event, but this particular reunion was a thrillingly important occasion, for during the Easter holidays the school had removed, and the girls were now having their first peep at their new quarters.

The vision that greeted them through the old gateway was certainly calculated to justify their ecstatic remarks. A grassy courtyard, interspersed with box-edged flower beds and flagged footpaths, led to a large, gray old

Tudor house, whose mullioned diamond-paned windows, twisted chimney stacks, irregular moss-grown roof, ivied bell-tower, stone balls and carved porch offered the very utmost of the romantic and picturesque. The change from the humdrum, ordinary surroundings of their former school was supreme. Miss Beasley had promised them a pleasant surprise, and she had undoubtedly kept her word. The sixteen new arrivals grasped their handbags and small possessions, and set off up the flagged pathway with delight written large on their countenances. Raymonde Armitage and Aveline Kerby, in virtue of half an hour's longer acquaintance with the premises, trotted alongside and did the honours.

“Yes, it's topping! Regular old country mansion sort of a place. Might have come straight, slap-bang out of a novel! You should see the Bumble Bee! I can tell you she's pleased with life! Buzzing about no end! Even the Wasp's got a smile on! Fact! You needn't look so incredulous. I'm not ragging.”

“It's true,” confirmed Raymonde. “The Wasp's quite jinky to-day. Actually said ‘my dear’ to me when I arrived. Of course, Mother was there, but even then it gave me spasms. Gibbie, of all people in this wide world, to call me ‘my dear’! I nearly collapsed! ‘Goodness! what next?’ I thought. ‘Wonders will never cease!’”

“Gibbie's certainly not given to trotting out pet names, even before parents,” chirruped Morvyth Holmes. “Perhaps she's striking out a new line, and we shall all be ‘Darling’ and ‘Sweetest’ now!”

“Don't you alarm yourself! She couldn't twist her tongue round them. I'd think she was pining away to an early death if she did! You'll hear plenty of plain, straight, wholesome talking-to before you're half an hour older, my child, or else I'm entirely mistaken.”

“*You* will, old sport, unless you've mended your ways,” chuckled Morvyth. “Are you a reformed character this term, may I ask? Come back with a certificate for good behaviour—no vice, gentle in harness, a child can drive her, etcetera?”

“Help! The school would die of dullness if I did! You'd be positively bored to tears. No, we all have our talents, and I consider my mission in life is to keep things humming and cheer you all up. I may do it at some personal sacrifice, but—”

“Personal thingumjig!” interrupted Valentine Gorton.

“But it is!” persisted Raymonde, her dark eyes dancing. “You don’t know how disinterested I am. Gibbie can’t row us all at once, and when I draw fire on myself I save you. See? I’m a kind of scapegoat for the school. Everybody’s sins are stuck on to me. Gibbie lets forth the vials of her wrath, the storm’s over, she feels better, and nobody else is much the worse.”

“Not even you—you heroic victim?”

“Bless you, child, I’m as used to scolding as eels to skinning. Neither the Bumble Bee nor the Wasp worry me. I let them both buzz. It seems to please them! Indeed, I think they expect it. When one’s got a reputation, one’s bound to live up to it.”

Raymonde Armitage would certainly not have won a medal for exemplary behaviour, had any such prize been offered at the school. There was no harm in her, but her irrepressible spirits were continually at effervescing point, and in fizzing over were liable to burst into outbreaks of a nature highly scandalizing to the authorities. As regarded Miss Beasley, the Principal, though she upheld discipline firmly, it was an open secret that she had a sneaking weakness for Raymonde. “The Bumble Bee rows Ray, but she likes her,” was the general verdict. With Miss Gibbs, however, it was a different matter. The humour of a situation never appealed to her. She frankly considered her troublesome pupil as a thorn in the flesh, and perhaps gave her credit for more than she really deserved in the way of blame. It was whispered in the school that several enterprising spirits had managed to shift on to Raymonde’s shoulders the consequences of their own crimes, with results more satisfactory to themselves than to their lively classmate. In spite of the fact that she had passed her fifteenth birthday, Raymonde was the most irresponsible creature in the world. She looked it. Her face was as round and smooth as an infant’s, with an absurd little dab of a nose, a mouth with baby dimples at the corners, and small white teeth that seemed more like first than second ones, and dark eyes which, when they did not happen to be twinkling, were capable of putting on a bewitching innocence of expression calculated to deceive almost any teacher, however experienced, save the case-hardened Miss Gibbs.

At the beginning of this term there were twenty-six girls in the little community assembled at Marlowe Grange. The old house provided ample

accommodation, and had been easily adapted to meet the wants of a school. Built originally in Elizabethan days, it had been added to at various times, and its medley of architecture, while hopelessly confusing styles, had resulted in a very picturesque and charming whole. Perhaps the most ancient part was the fortified gateway, ruinous and covered with ivy, but still preserving its winding stair leading to an upper story that spanned the entrance. With its tiny loophole windows and its great solid oak gate with the little door cut through, it had the aspect of a mediæval fortress, and was a fitting introduction to what was to follow. High walls on both sides enclosed the courtyard, and farther on, to the right of the house, was another quaint garden, where shaved yew trees and clipped hollies presented distorted imitations of peacocks, umbrellas, pagodas, or other ambitious examples of topiary art. Here, in the late April weather, spring bulbs were blooming, wallflowers made a sheet of gold, and the pear trees were opening pure white blossoms. Little clumps of pansies, pink daisies, and forget-me-nots were struggling up, rather mixed amongst the box edging, and a bank of white alyssum on the rockery near the hives provided a feast of nectar for the bees, whose drowsy hum seemed to hold all the promise of the coming summer.

Behind this garden, and sheltered by the outbuildings from the north and east winds, lay the orchard, neglected and unpruned, but very beautiful with its moss-grown apple trees, its straggling plums, and budding walnuts, and cherries just bursting into an ethereal fairy network of delicate palest pink bloom. Primroses grew here amongst the grass, and clumps of dog violets and little tufts of bluebells were pushing their way up to take the place of the fading daffodils, while a blackthorn bush was a mass of pure white stars. At the far end, instead of a hedge, lay the moat, a shallow stagnant pool, bordered with drooping willows, tall reeds, and rushes that reared their spear-like stems from the dark oozy water. Originally this moat had encircled the mansion as a means of defence, but now, like the ruined gateway, its mission was long past, and it survived, a sleepy witness to the warfare of our forefathers, and a picturesque adjunct to the general beauty of the place that could scarcely be surpassed. From the farther side of the moat peaceful meadows led to the river, where between high wooded banks a stately silver stream glided slowly and tranquilly on in its path towards the ocean, rippling over weirs, and bearing on its calm bosom an occasional pleasure boat, punt, or fussy little motor yacht.

The interior of the old Grange was quaint as its exterior. The large rooms lent themselves admirably to school uses. The big hall, with its oak-panelled walls, stained-glass windows, and huge fireplace, made an excellent lecture-room, or, when the forms were moved to one end, provided plenty of space for drilling or dancing. It seemed strange certainly to turn an Elizabethan bedroom into a twentieth-century class-room, and standard desks looked decidedly at variance with the carved chimney-pieces or the stags' antlers that still ornamented the walls; but the modern element only seemed to enhance the old, and the girls agreed that nothing could be more suitable than to learn history in such a setting.

“It'll give us a loophole for lots of our lessons,” remarked Raymonde hopefully, as she personally conducted a party of new arrivals over the establishment. “For instance, if I get muddled over circulating decimals, I'll explain that my brains fall naturally into a mediæval groove in these surroundings, and decimals weren't invented then, so that of course it's impossible for me to grasp them; and the same with geography—the map of Africa then had about three names on it, so it's quite superfluous to try to remember any more. I'm going to cultivate the mental atmosphere of the place and focus my mind accordingly. I'll concentrate on the Elizabethan period of history, and the rest I'll just ignore.” 16

“Don't know how you'll convince Gibbie!” chuckled Muriel Fuller.

“You leave Gibbie to me! My mind's seething with ideas. It's absolutely chock full. I see possibilities that I never even dreamt of at the old school. I believe this term's going to be the time of my life. Bless the dear old Bumble Bee! She's buzzed to some purpose in bringing us here!”

Perhaps what struck the girls most of all was the large dormitory. In the days of the French Revolution Marlowe Grange had been the refuge of an order of nuns, who had escaped from Limoges and founded a temporary convent in the old house. It was owing to the excellence of their arrangements, and the structural improvements which they had left behind them, that the Grange had been so eminently suitable for a school. Seven little bedrooms placed side by side served exactly to accommodate the members of the Sixth Form, while the great chamber, running from end to end of the house, with its nineteen snow-white beds, provided quarters for the rank and file. Just for a moment the girls had stared rather aghast at their

vast dormitory, contrasting it with the numerous small rooms of their former school; but the possibilities of fun presented by this congregation of beds outweighed the disadvantages, and they had decided that the arrangement was “topping.” It had, however, one serious drawback. At the far end was a small extra chamber, intended originally for the use of the Mother Superior of the convent, and here, to the girls’ infinite dismay, Miss Gibbs had taken up her abode. There was no mistake about it. Her box blocked the doorway; her bag, labelled “M. Gibbs. Passenger to Great Marlowe via Littleton Junction,” reposed upon a chair, her hat and coat lay on the bed, and a neat time-table of classes was already pinned upon the wall.

“We didn’t bargain to have the Wasp at such close quarters!” whispered Ardiune Coleman-Smith ruefully. “She’ll sleep with both ears open, and if we stir a finger or breathe a word she’ll hear!”

“Cheero! There are ways of making people deaf,” remarked Raymonde sanguinely. “How? Ah, my child, that’s a surprise for the future! D’you suppose” (with a cryptic shake of the head) “I’m going to give away my professional secrets? I’ve told you already it’s my mission to enliven this school, and if you don’t have a jinky term I’ll consider myself a failure. Haven’t I started well? I arrived half an hour before everyone else, and booked up all the beds on the far side for our set. Here you are! A label’s pinned to each pillow!”

The six kindred spirits who revolved as satellites in Raymonde’s orbit turned to her with a gush of admiration. It was a brilliant thought to have labelled the beds, and so secured the most eligible portion of the dormitory for themselves.

“You’re the limit, Ray!” gurgled Aveline.

Aveline was generally regarded as Raymonde’s under-study. She was not so clever, so daring, or so altogether reckless, but she came in a very good second-best in most of the harum-scarum escapades. She could always be relied upon for support, could keep a secret, and had a peculiarly convenient knack of baffling awkward questions by putting on an attitude of utter stolidity. When her eyes were half-closed under their heavy lids, and her mouth wore what the girls called its “John Bull” expression, not even Miss Beasley herself could drag information out of Aveline. The

Sphinx, as she was sometimes nicknamed, prided herself on her accomplishment, and took particular care to maintain her character. Raymonde had apportioned the bed on her right to Aveline, and that on her left to Fauvette Robinson, who occupied about an equal place in her affections.

Fauvette was a little, blue-eyed, fluffy-haired, clinging, cuddly, ultra-feminine specimen who hung on to Raymonde like a limpet. Raymonde twisted her flaxen locks for her in curl rags, helped to thread baby ribbon through her under-bodices, hauled her out of bed in the mornings, drummed her lessons into her, formed her opinions, and generally dominated her school career. Fauvette was one of those girls who all their lives lean upon somebody, and at present she had twined herself, an ornamental piece of honeysuckle, round the stout oak prop of Raymonde's stronger personality. She was a dear, amiable, sweet-tempered little soul, highly romantic and sentimental, with a pretty soprano voice, and just a sufficient talent for acting to make her absolutely invaluable in scenes from Dickens or Jane Austen, where a heroine of the innocent, pleading, pathetic, babyish, Early Victorian type was required.

A more spicy character was Morvyth Holmes, otherwise "The Kipper." Her pale face and shining hazel eyes showed cleverness. When she cared to work she could astonish her Form and her teacher, but her energy came in such odd bursts, and with such long lapses between, that it did not in the aggregate amount to much. It was rumoured in the school that Miss Beasley had her eye on Morvyth as a possible candidate for public examinations, and, in fear lest such an honour might be thrust upon her, Morvyth was careful to avoid the display of too deep erudition.

"It wouldn't do," she assured her chums. "Catch me swatting for the Senior Oxford like poor old Meta and Daphne. I tell you those girls will hardly enjoy a decent game of tennis this term. The Bumble Bee's got their wretched noses on the grindstone, and they'll have a blighting time till the affair's over. No, I'm a wary bird, and I'm not going to be decoyed into an intellectual trap and dished up for examination. Not even the Essay Prize shall tempt me! You may win it yourself, Ray, if you like!"

"Poor old Kipper!" murmured Raymonde. "It's a little rough on you that you daren't exhibit your talents. Can't you show a doctor's certificate

prohibiting you from entering for public exams. and limiting your prep.? The kind of thing one brings back to school after scarlet fever, you know.”

Morvyth shook her head dolefully.

“It’s no go! The Bumble would be capable of sending for the doctor and thrashing the matter out with him. My only safety lies in modesty. No school laurels for me. They cost too dear.”

Valentine Gorton and Ardiune Coleman-Smith, known familiarly as “Salt” and “Pepper,” were inseparable friends in spite of the fact that they quarrelled on an average at least three times a day. Their tiffs were very easily made up, however, and they always supported each other in upsets with anyone else, merging what might be termed tribal disputes in national warfare. Being well supplied from home with chocolates, and liberal in their dispensation, they were favourites in their Form, and indeed throughout the school wore the hallmark of popularity.

Raymonde’s particular set of chums was completed by Katherine Harding, a damsel whose demure looks belied her character. Katherine’s innocent grey eyes and doll-like complexion were the vineyards that hide the volcano. She could always be relied upon to support any enterprising project or interesting hoax that was presented for her approval. These seven comrades, close chums in the past, banded themselves together anew to enjoy life to the best of their ability, and to obtain the maximum of fun and diversion out of the forthcoming term. It is with their immediate adventures that this book is largely concerned.

CHAPTER II

The Mystic Seven

“D’you know,” said Morvyth, flopping down disgustedly on to a form, and addressing an interested audience of three; “d’you know, my children, that I consider these two new girls the very limit?”

“Absolute blighters!” agreed Raymonde hastily, “I was thinking so myself only this morning. I can’t decide which is the worst.”

“Not a pin to choose between them!” commented Aveline with a yawn.

“I gave Cynthia Greene credit for shyness during the first twenty-four hours,” continued Morvyth. “I thought in my own mind, ‘the poor thing is suffering, no doubt, from home-sickness and general confusion, and we must be gentle with her’, but I kept a wary eye upon her, and I’ve come to a conclusion. It’s not shyness—it’s swank!”

Ardiune nodded her head approvingly.

“Swank, and nothing else,” she confirmed. “I know something about it too, for I heard her expounding to her own Form this morning. It almost made me ill. I had to take a run round the garden before I felt fit again. It seems she’s come from some much smaller school, where she’s been the head girl and show pupil, and the rest of it. She said the younger ones had all looked up to her, and the Principal had treated her as a friend, and that she’d always worked hard to keep up the tone of the place.”

“O Sophonisba!” ejaculated Raymonde. “Well, it strikes me we’ve got the tone of this school to look after. We can’t allow Fourth Form kids to bring those notions and run them here. She won’t find herself queen of this establishment!”

“Hardly!” chuckled Aveline.

“Aren’t her own Form attending to the matter?” enquired Morvyth.

“Naturally. They’re giving her as bad a time as they know how, but they don’t make much headway. She tells them she fully expects to be ragged, and she simply won’t believe a word they say. They haven’t taken her in once yet.”

“That’s because they’re not skilful,” said Raymonde thoughtfully. “They don’t do the thing artistically. There’s a finesse required for this kind of work that their stupid young heads don’t possess. I’m not sure if it wouldn’t be philanthropic to help them!”

“Set your own house in order first!” grunted Ardiune. “You’ll have your hands full with Maudie Heywood.”

“I’m not going to neglect Maudie; don’t alarm yourself! She’s the best specimen of the genus prig that I’ve ever come across in the course of my life. She ought to have a Form all to herself, instead of being plumped into the Fifth. I see dangerous possibilities in Maudie. Do you realize what she did this morning? Learnt the whole of that wretched poem instead of only the twenty lines that were set us.” 23

“I heard Gibbie complimenting her, and thought she’d get swelled head.”

“Swelled head indeed! It’s the principle that’s involved. Don’t you see that if this girl goes and learns whole poems, Gibbie’ll think we can do the same, and she’ll give us more next time. It’s raising the standard of work in the Form.”

“Great Minerva! So it is!”

“We’ll have to put a stopper on that,” urged Aveline indignantly.

“There are a good many things that have given me spasms since I came back,” proclaimed Raymonde. “They’re things that ought to be set right. What I vote is, that our set form ourselves into a sort of Watch Committee to attend to any little matters of this sort. It would be a kindness to the school.”

Ardiune chuckled softly.

“By all means! Let us be the Red Cross Knights, and go out to right the wrong. We’ll attack Duessa straight away, and teach her to mend her morals. You’ll let Val be in it?”

“Rather! And Fauvette and Katherine. Seven’s a mystic number. You know there were the Seven Champions of Christendom, and there are the Seven Ages of Man, and the Seven Days of Creation, and seven years of apprenticeship, and—and—”

“Seven deadly sins!” suggested Aveline cheerfully. “And the Seven Vials—and—”

“Well, anyhow it’s always seven, so we’ll make ourselves into a society. We’ll have a star with seven rays for our secret sign. It has a nice occult kind of smack about it. When we chalk that mark upon anybody’s desk, it means we’ve got to reform her, whether she likes it or whether she doesn’t.”

“She probably won’t,” twinkled Ardiune.

“Then the sooner she submits the better. She’ll find it’s no use fighting against fate—otherwise the Mystic Seven!”

“We’ll start business with Cynthia Greene to-morrow,” decided Aveline.

Fauvette, Valentine, and Katherine were duly informed of the existence of the new society and their initiation thereinto. They offered no objections, and indeed would have been prepared at Raymonde’s request to join a Black Brotherhood, or a Pirates’ League with a skull and cross-bones for its emblem. A special committee meeting was held to discuss the matter of Cynthia Greene.

“It needs finesse,” said Morvyth. “She’s been to school before, and she’s up to most dodges. Naturally she comprehends that her own Form are trying to rag her.”

“That’s where we come in,” agreed Raymonde. “We’re going to pose as philanthropists. One or two of us have got to take Cynthia up. We’ll make her realize, of course, how very kind it is of Fifth Form girls to befriend a lonely junior.”

“And having taken her up—what then?” queried Fauvette.

“Bless your innocence, child! Why, we’ll let her down with a run!”

“Are we all in it?”

“No; it would be too marked. Best leave the affair to Aveline and me. You others must stand aloof and look disinterested but sympathetic. I’ll speak to

her at lunch-time.”

During the mid-morning interval, therefore, Raymonde singled out her victim. Cynthia was standing slightly apart from her Form, consuming thick bread and butter with an air of pensive melancholy, and twisting a pet bracelet that adorned her wrist. Raymonde strolled up casually.

“Getting on all right?” she began, by way of opening the attack. “I say, you know, I thought I’d just speak to you. I expect you’re having a grizzly time with those wretched juniors. They’re a set of blighters, aren’t they?”

“I do find them a little trying,” admitted Cynthia cautiously, “especially as I was head girl at my old school.”

“Rather a climb-down from Senior to Junior, isn’t it? Why didn’t Miss Beasley put you in the Fifth?”

“My mother asked her to, but she said as I was only thirteen it was quite impossible. It’s all right. I expect to be ragged a little at first. I’ll live it down in time.”

Cynthia’s expression of patient resignation was almost too much for Raymonde, but she controlled her countenance and continued:

“They’ll respect you all the more afterwards, no doubt.”

“I hope so. We didn’t rag new girls at The Poplars. I always made a point of showing them they were welcome. It seemed only fair to Miss Gordon. She was more like a personal friend than a teacher, and she looked to me, you see, to keep up the tone of the school.”

“She must be lost without you!”

“I think they’ll miss me,” admitted Cynthia, with a little fluttering sigh²⁶ of regret. “The girls all subscribed before I left and gave me this bracelet as a keepsake. It’s got an inscription inside. Would you like to look at it?”

Cynthia had unclasped her treasure, and handed it with an assumed nonchalance for Raymonde’s inspection. On the gold band was engraved: “To Cynthia Greene, a token of esteem from her schoolfellows.”

“Highly gratifying!” gurgled Raymonde.

“It was sweet of them, wasn’t it? Well, I tried to do my best for them, and I’ll do my best for this school too when I get the chance. I’m in no hurry. I’m content to wait, and let the girls come round.”

“Quite the best plan. In the meantime, if there are any little tips I can give you, come to me.”

“Thanks awfully! I will. I’d have done the same by you if you’d been a new girl at The Poplars.”

Raymonde retired bubbling over with suppressed mirth.

“That girl’s the limit!” she reported to her confederates. “For calm self-complacency I’ve never seen anybody to equal her. The idea of imagining *me* as a new girl at her wretched pettifogging old school! Oh, it’s too precious! She’d patronize the Queen herself! The Poplars must be executing a war-dance for joy to have got rid of her. Probably they’d have subscribed for more than a bracelet to pass her on elsewhere!”

“So she’s waiting patiently till she wins the school,” hinned Aveline. “Poor angel! Did you notice her wings sprouting, or a halo glowing round her head?”

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“I think we can put her up to a few tips,” chuckled Ardiune.

“It would only be kind,” gushed Raymonde. “The sort of thing she must have done herself hundreds of times to many a poor neglected new girl at The Poplars. The bread she cast upon the waters shall be returned to her.”

“With butter on it!” added Aveline.

“She can swallow any amount of butter,” observed Raymonde. “She evidently likes it laid on thick. Suggestions invited, please, for kind and disinterested advice to be administered to her.”

“Professor Marshall comes to-morrow,” volunteered Aveline.

“The very thing! Ave, you old sport, you’ve given me an idea! Now just prepare your minds for a pretty and touching little scene at the beginning of the mediæval arts lecture. No, I shan’t tell you what it is beforehand. It’ll be something for you to look forward to!”

The staff at Marlowe Grange consisted of Miss Beasley, Miss Gibbs, and Mademoiselle, but there were several visiting masters and mistresses who

had attended at the former house, and were now to continue their instructions at the school in its present quarters. Among these Professor Marshall was rather a favourite. As befitted a teacher in an establishment of young ladies, he was grey-haired and elderly, and, as the girls added, “married and guaranteed not to flirt,” but all the same he was jolly, had a hearty, affable manner, and a habit of making bad jokes and weak puns to break up the monotony of his lectures. It was decidedly the fashion to admire him, to snigger indulgently at his mild little pleasantries, and to call him “an old dear.” Some of the girls even worked quite hard at their preparation for him. He had written his autograph in at least nineteen birthday books, and it was rumoured that, when the auspicious 10th of March had come round, no less than fourteen anonymous congratulatory picture post-cards had been directed to him from the school and posted by stealth. Having already improved their minds upon a course of English Classics and Astronomy, the school this term was booked for culture, and devoted to the study of the fine arts of the Middle Ages. A few selected members of the Sixth had been told off to search through back numbers of *The Studio* and *The Connoisseur* for examples of the paintings of Cimabue and Giotto, and the large engraving of Botticelli’s “Spring,” which used to hang in Miss Beasley’s study, now occupied a prominent position on the dining-room wall to afford a mental feast during meal-times.

Raymonde, anxious not to overdo things, left Cynthia to herself for the rest of the day; but the following morning, after breakfast, she seized an opportunity for a few words with her.

“You won’t mind my giving you a hint or two on school etiquette?” she observed casually. “You see, there are traditions in every school that one likes to keep up, and of course you can’t find them out unless you’re told.”

“I’d be very glad,” gushed Cynthia gratefully. “We’d a regular code at The Poplars, and I used to initiate everybody. They always came straight to me, and I coached them up. I can’t tell you how many new girls I’ve helped in my time!”

“Well, you’re new yourself now,” said Raymonde, detaching Cynthia’s mind from these reminiscences of past service and bringing it up to date. “Professor Marshall’s coming to-day, and you’ll have to be introduced to him.”

“Oh dear! I’m so shy! I wonder what he’ll think of me?” fluttered Cynthia.

“Think you’re the sickliest idiot he ever met!” was on the tip of Raymonde’s tongue, but she restrained herself, and, drawing her victim aside, whispered honeyed words calculated to soothe and cheer, adding some special items of good advice.

“Thank you,” sighed Cynthia. “I won’t forget. Of course, we never did such a thing at The Poplars, but, if it’s expected, I won’t break the traditions of the school. You can always depend upon me in that respect.”

Precisely at 11.30 the whole of the school was assembled in the big hall awaiting the presence of their lecturer. Professor Marshall, who had been regaling himself with lunch in Miss Beasley’s study, now made his appearance, escorted by the head mistress, and apparently refreshed by cocoa and conversation. The girls always agreed that his manners were beautiful. He treated everybody with a courtly deference, something between the professional consideration of a fashionable doctor and the dignity of an archdeacon. After Miss Gibbs’s uncompromising attitude, the contrast was marked. He entered the room smiling, bowed a courteous good morning to his pupils, who rose to receive him, and placed a chair for Miss Beasley with gentlemanly attention.

The Principal, radiant after showing off her new quarters, refused it with equal politeness.

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“No, thank you, Professor. I’m not going to stay. I have other work to do. You will find your class the same as before, with the addition of two new girls. Maude Heywood—come here, Maudie!—and Cynthia Greene. I hope they’ll both prove good workers.”

Maudie Heywood, blushing like a lobster, stepped forward and thrust three limp fingers for a fraction of a second into the Professor’s large clasp, then thankfully merged her identity among her schoolfellows. Cynthia, who was behind her, smiled bewitchingly upwards into the florid, benevolent face of her new instructor, then, falling gracefully upon one knee, seized his hand and touched it with her lips.

The sensation in the room was immense. The Professor, looking decidedly astonished and embarrassed, hastily withdrew his hand from the affectionate salutation. Miss Beasley’s eyes were round with horror.

“Cynthia!” she exclaimed, and the tone of her voice alone was sufficient reproof.

The luckless Cynthia, instantly conscious that her act had been misconstrued, retired with less grace than she had come forward, and spent most of the lecture in surreptitiously mopping her eyes. As she walked dejectedly down the corridor afterwards, she was accosted by Hermione Graveson, a member of the Sixth.

“Look here!” said Hermione briefly. “What prompted you to make such an utter exhibition of yourself just now? I never saw anything more sickening in my life!”

Cynthia’s tears burst forth afresh.

31

“It wasn’t my fault,” she sobbed. “I didn’t want to do it, but I was told it was school etiquette and I must.”

“Who told you such rubbish?”

“That girl with the dark eyes and a patriotic hair ribbon.”

“Raymonde Armitage?”

“I believe that’s her name.”

Hermie shook her head solemnly.

“New girls are notoriously callow,” she remarked, “but I should have thought anybody with the slightest grain of sense could have seen at a glance what Raymonde is. Why, she’s simply been playing ragtime on you. Did you actually and seriously believe that the girls at this school were expected to go through such idiotic performances? Don’t believe a word Raymonde tells you again.”

“Whom shall I believe? Everybody tries to stuff me!” wailed the injured Cynthia. “I never treated anybody like this at The Poplars.”

“Trust your common sense—that is, if you happen to have any; and, for goodness’ sake, don’t snivel any more. Wipe your eyes and take it sporting. And, wait a moment. If you want a bit of really good, sound advice, don’t mention The Poplars again, or the fact that you were head girl there, and the idol of the school, and the rest of it. You’re only a junior here, and the sooner you find your level the better. We’re not exactly aching to have our

tone improved by you! And, look here! Take that absurd keepsake bracelet off, and lock it up in your box, and don't let anybody see it again till the end of the term. There! go and digest what I've told you." 32

Having settled with Cynthia Greene, it now remained for the Mystic Seven to turn their attention to the matter of Maudie Heywood. The situation was growing acute. Maudie had been ten days at the Grange, and in that brief space of time she was already beginning to establish a precedent. She was a tall, slim girl, with earnest eyes, a decided chin, and an intellectual forehead. Work, with a capital W, was her fetish. She sat during classes with her gaze focused on her teacher, and a look of intelligent interest that surpassed everyone else in the Form. Miss Gibbs turned instinctively to Maudie at the most important points of the lesson. There was a feeling abroad that she sucked in knowledge like a sponge. Nobody would have objected to her consuming as much as she liked of the mental provender supplied had she stopped at that. Maudie unfortunately was over-zealous, and finding the amount of preparation set her to be well below the limit of her capacity, invariably did a little more than was required. Her maps were coloured, her botany papers illustrated with neat drawings, her history exercises had genealogical tables appended, and her literature essays were full of quotations. This was all very exemplary, and won golden opinions from Miss Gibbs, but it caused heartburnings in the Form. It was felt that Maudie was unduly raising the standard. Miss Gibbs had suggested that other botany papers might contain diagrams, and had placed upon the classroom chimney-piece a book of poetical extracts suitable for use in essay-writing.

"If we don't take care we'll be having our prep. doubled," said Aveline uneasily. 33

It was decided to reason with Maudie before taking any more active measures. The united Seven tackled her upon the subject.

"I promised Mother I'd work," urged Maudie, in reply to their remonstrances.

"But you've no need to work overtime," objected Ardiune. "We don't mind how hard you swat during prep., but it isn't right for you to be putting in extra half-hours while the rest of us are in the garden. It's stealing an advantage."

“It’s a work of supererogation,” added Katherine.

Maudie wrinkled up her intellectual forehead anxiously.

“Works of supererogation are supposed to count,” she interposed in her precise, measured voice.

“Yes, if they’re done with intention for somebody else!” flared Raymonde. “But yours aren’t! They’re entirely for your own pride and vanity. Do you come and translate my Latin for me in those extra half-hours? Not a bit of it!”

“Oh, that wouldn’t be fair!” Maudie’s tone was of shocked virtue.

“It’s more unfair to heap burdens on the rest of your Form.”

“I’m bound to do my best.”

“The fact is,” burst out Aveline, “you’re suffering from an over-developed conscience. You’ve got an abnormal appetite for work, and it ought to be checked. It isn’t good for you. Promise us you won’t write or learn a word out of prep. time.”

Maudie shook her head sadly. Her grey eyes gleamed with the enthusiasm of the martyr spirit. 34

“I can’t promise anything,” she sighed. “Something within me urges me to work.”

“Then something without you will have to put a stop to it,” snapped Raymonde. “We’ve given you full and fair warning; so now you may look out for squalls.”

When preparation was over, the girls were allowed to amuse themselves as they liked until supper. Most of them adjourned to the garden, for the evenings were getting longer and lighter every day, and the tennis courts were in quite fair condition. It was Maudie’s habit to take a pensive stroll among the box-edged flower beds in the courtyard, and then repair to the class-room again to touch up her exercises. On this particular evening Raymonde, with a contingent of the Mystic Seven, lingered behind.

“We’ve just about ten minutes,” she announced. “Old Maudie’s as punctual as a clock. She’ll walk five times round the sundial and twice to the gate.”

“That girl’s destined for the cloister,” said Aveline pityingly. “She’s evidently thirsting to live her life by rule. Mark my words, she’ll eventually take the veil.”

“No, she’ll pass triumphantly through College and come out equal to a double-first or Senior Wrangler, or something swanky of that kind, and get made head mistress of a high school,” prognosticated Ardiune.

“In the meantime, she won’t swat any more to-night!” grinned Raymonde. “Wait for me here, girls; I’ve got to fetch something.”

Raymonde performed her errand with lightning speed. She returned with⁵ a lump of soft substance in one hand, and a spirit-lamp and curling-tongs in the other. Her chums looked mystified.

“Cobblers’ wax!” she explained airily. “Brought some with me, in case of emergency. It’s useful stuff. And I just looted Linda Mottram’s curling apparatus from her bedroom. Don’t you twig? What blind bats you are! I’m going to stick up Maudie’s desk!”

Raymonde lighted the spirit-lamp and heated the tongs, then spreading a thick coating of the wax along the inside edge of the desk, she applied the hot iron to melt it, and put down the lid.

“It will have hardened by the time Maudie has finished her constitutional among the flower beds,” she giggled. “I’ll guarantee when she comes back she won’t be able to open her desk.”

“It’s only right for her to feel the pressure of public opinion,” decreed Ardiune. “We’re working in a good cause.”

“But we’re modest about it, and don’t want to push ourselves forward,” urged Raymonde. “I vote we go for a stroll down to the very bottom of the orchard, near the moat.”

A quarter of an hour later, Miss Beasley and Miss Gibbs were sitting together in the Principal’s study enjoying a well-earned period of repose and a chat. Their conversation turned upon the varied dispositions of their pupils.

“Maudie Heywood strikes me as a very earnest character,” observed Miss Beasley, toying with the violets in her belt. “Her work is really excellent.”

“Almost too good,” agreed Miss Gibbs, who was perhaps beginning to find out that Maudie’s exercises took twice as long to correct as anybody else’s, and thus sensibly curtailed her teacher’s leisure. “The child is so conscientious. In my opinion she needs to concentrate more on physical exercise. I should like to see her in the tennis courts instead of copying out reams of poetry.”

“Yes,” said Miss Beasley, looking thoughtful. “Her activities perhaps need a little adjustment. We mustn’t allow her to neglect her health. She looks over-anxious sometimes for a girl of fifteen.”

“She is always such a calm, self-controlled, well-regulated child,” remarked Miss Gibbs appreciatively.

At that moment there was a hurried rap-tap-tap; the door opened, and Maudie burst in unannounced. Her calm self-control had yielded to an agitated condition of excitement and indignation. Her earnest eyes were flashing angry sparks, and her cheeks were crimson.

“Oh, Miss Beasley!” she began, “those girls have actually gone and stuck up my desk, so that I can’t get out my books. They say I work overtime, and it’s not fair, for if I like to work, why shouldn’t I? I just detest the whole lot of them! I hate this place!”

“I think you’re forgetting yourself, Maudie,” returned the Principal. “It is hardly good manners to enter my study so abruptly and to speak in this way to me. If you wish to please me, I should much prefer you to spend your leisure time at games instead of lessons. To-morrow evening I hope to see you playing tennis. If you ask the cook for a screw-driver you’ll probably be able to wedge open your desk easily. But in future you’ll be wiser³⁷ to confine your work to the preparation hours. The bow must be unstrung sometimes, or your health will suffer. If you join with the other girls at their games you’ll soon get to know them, and feel more at home here. Try to be sociable and make yourself liked. Part of the training of school life is to learn to accommodate yourself to a community.”

The crestfallen Maudie retired, murmuring apologies. Miss Beasley picked up her copy of *The Graphic* and laughed.

“As a rule, we may trust the girls themselves to do any necessary pruning. They’re the strictest Socialists that could be imagined. They instinctively

have all the principles of a trade union about them. On the whole, it's good for Maudie to be restrained. A little innocent practical joke will do her no harm for once. She must be able to take her share of teasing. Humour is her one deficiency."

"I think I can guess who's at the bottom of the business," sniffed Miss Gibbs. "Raymonde Armitage is the naughtiest girl in the school."

"Pardon me!" corrected Miss Beasley. "The most mischievous, perhaps, and the most troublesome; full of bubbling spirits and misplaced energy, but straightforward and truthful. There is something very lovable about Raymonde."

CHAPTER III

The Limberlost

Everybody agreed that Marlowe Grange was an ideal spot for a school. The picturesque old orchard and grounds provided an almost unlimited field of amusement. Those girls who were interested in horticulture might have their own little plots at the end of the potato patch, and a delightful series of experiments had been started down by the moat, where a real, genuine water-garden was in process of construction. Here, duly shod in rubber waders, a few enthusiasts toiled almost daily, planting iris and arrow-head and flowering rush, and sinking water-lily roots in old wicker baskets weighted with stones. There was even a scheme on hand to subscribe to buy a punt, but Miss Beasley had frowned upon the idea as containing too great an element of danger, and of consequent anxiety for teachers.

“I don’t want a set of Ophelias drowning themselves among the willows and the long purples!” she remarked firmly. “If we bought a punt, we should need a drag and a life-belt as well. You shall go for a row on the river sometimes during the summer, and that must content you. There are plenty of occupations on dry land to amuse yourselves with.” 39

The Grange certainly contained ample space for interests of every description. The old farm buildings made sheds for carpentry and wood-carving, or any other work that was too messy for the schoolrooms. Under the direction of Miss Gibbs, some of the elder girls were turning the contents of a wood pile into a set of rustic garden seats, and other industrious spirits had begun to plait osierwithes into baskets that were destined for blackberry picking in the autumn. The house itself was roomy enough to allow hobbies to overflow. Miss Beasley, who dabbled rather successfully in photography, had a conveniently equipped dark-room, which she lent by special favour to seniors only, on the understanding that they left it as they found it. Miss Gibbs had taken possession of an empty attic, and had made it into a scientific sanctum. So far none of the girls had been allowed to peep inside, and the wildest rumours were afloat as to what

the room contained. Batteries and other apparatus had been seen to be carried upstairs, and those scouts who had ventured along the forbidden upper landing reported that through the closed door they could hear weird noises as of turning wheels or bubbling crucibles. It was surmised in the school that Miss Gibbs, having found a congenial mediæval atmosphere for her researches, was working on the lines of the ancient alchemists, and attempting to discover the elixir of life or the philosopher's stone. One fact was certain. Miss Gibbs had set up a telescope in her solitary attic. She had bought it second-hand, during the holidays, from the widow of a coastguardsman, and with its aid she studied the landscape by day and the stars by night. The girls considered she kept a wary eye on watch for escaped Germans or Zeppelins, and regarded the instrument in the light of a safeguard for the establishment.

“Besides which, anything's a blessing that takes Gibbie upstairs and keeps her from buzzing round us all the time,” averred Raymonde.

“She's welcome to keep anything she likes in her room, from a stuffed crocodile to a snake in a bottle!” yawned Fauvette. “All I ask is that she doesn't take me up and improve my mind. I'm getting fed up with hobbies. I can't show an intelligent interest in all. My poor little brains won't hold them. What with repoussé work and stencilling and chip carving, I hardly ever get half an hour to enjoy a book. My idea of a jinky time is to sit by the moat and read, and eat chocolates. By the by, has that copy of *The Harvester* come yet? Hermie promised to get it for the library.”

The girls at the Grange had fashions in books, and at present they were all raving over the works of Gene Stratton Porter. Even Raymonde, not generally much of a reader, had succumbed to the charms of *Freckles* and *A Girl of the Limberlost*. The accounts of the American swamp forest fascinated her. It was a veritable “call of the wild.”

“I'd give anything—just anything—to get into such a place!” she confided to Fauvette. “I'd chance even the snakes and mosquitoes. Just think of the trees and the flowers and the birds and the butterflies! Why don't we have things like that in England?”

“I expect we do, only one never gets to see them. There's a wood over there on the hill that looks absolutely top-hole if one could go into it. Hermie said

the other day that the Bumble Bee had buzzed out something about taking us all for a picnic there some day. It would be rather precious.”

Raymonde shook her head reflectively.

“Picnics are all very well in their way, but when you turn about thirty people together into a wood, I fancy the birds and butterflies will give us a wide berth. Freckles found his specimens when he was alone. You can’t go naturalizing in a crowd! Look here! Suppose you and I go and explore. I’ll be the Bird Woman, and you can be the Swamp Angel.”

“Oh, what a blossomy idea! But what about Gibbie? Can we dodge her?”

“We’ll wait till she’s shut herself up in her attic, and then we’ll scoot. Between tea and prep.’s the best time, especially now prep.’s been put later.”

“You really have the most chubby inspirations, Ray,” burred Fauvette. “You’re an absolute mascot!”

The idea of posing as the Swamp Angel appealed to Fauvette. She was conscious that she looked the part. She fingered her fluffy flaxen curls caressingly, and resolved to wear a blue cotton dress for the next day or two, in case there was a chance of the expedition. In imagination she was already photographing rare birds and shooting villains with revolvers, and looking her best through it all.

“I wish I knew how to mix iced drinks,” she sighed regretfully. “One can’t get even the ice over here, not to speak of the bits of cherry and lemon and grape and pineapple that the Angel used for Freckles. Girls in America have a far better time than we have.”

“Cheero! We’ll get a little fun, you’ll see, if we can only circumvent the Wasp.”

It was not a remarkably easy matter to leave the premises unobserved. Monitresses had a tiresome habit of hanging about in places where they were not wanted; Mademoiselle made herself far too conspicuous, and Miss Gibbs seemed everywhere. The chums decided that a too great attention to duty can degenerate into a fault.

“It’s what Miss Beasley said in the Scripture lesson,” declared Raymonde. “Economy over-done turns into parsimony, liberality into extravagance,

self-respect into pride. Gibbie's over-stepping the mark, and letting responsibility run to fussiness."

It is hardly possible to tackle a mistress and convince her of her faults, so Miss Gibbs's pharisaical tendencies went unchecked. Evidently the only possible method was to dodge her. Whether her suspicions were aroused it is impossible to say, but for several days she neglected her attic sanctum and pervaded the garden during recreation hours.

Raymonde and Fauvette lay low, and toiled with an amazing spurt of industry at osier-weaving.

"You've each nearly finished a basket," said Miss Gibbs approvingly.

"Yes, if we go on working hard this afternoon I think we shall finish them," replied Raymonde craftily.

"It's nice to have a thing done. I'm glad you've taken to such a sensible employment," commented Miss Gibbs.

"We like to have our fingers occupied, and then our minds haven't time to wander," said Raymonde, quoting so shamelessly from Miss Beasley that Fauvette kicked her surreptitiously in alarm.

Miss Gibbs regarded her for a moment with suspicion, but her eyes were bent demurely over her basket, and her expression was innocence personified.

"It's as well you have something to do under cover, for I think it's going to rain," observed the mistress as she turned to leave the barn.

The girls watched her cross the courtyard and enter the house; then Fauvette, scooting in by the back way, had the further satisfaction of seeing the tail of her skirt whisking up the attic stairs. She ran back to report to Raymonde.

"Gibbie's safe in her sanctum. She thinks we're happily employed here for the next hour. Let's bolt for the Limberlost! There's nobody in the courtyard."

"Right-o!" echoed Raymonde. "It's the opportunity of a lifetime."

They did not wait to fetch hats, but, strolling down the flagged path as if for exercise, reached the great gate. Then, glancing cautiously round to see that

the coast was absolutely clear, they unlatched the little postern door, slipped through, and shut it after them. A moment later they were running at top speed down the road that led to the wood. It was not a very great distance away, and they had often passed near it in their walks. To scramble over the palings and enter its cool, mysterious shade had been their dream. They were resolved now to make it a reality.

They had been prepared for something delightful, but not for the little terrestrial paradise that spread itself at the farther side of the fence. The wood had been thinned comparatively recently, so that it admitted an unusual amount of light and air. The trees, just bursting into the tender green of early May, spread delicate lacy boughs overhead, like tender fingers held out to guard the treasures underneath. The ground below, still moist and boggy from the spring rains, was clothed with a carpet of dog violets, growing in such profusion that they seemed to stretch in a vista of palest mauve into the distance. At close intervals among these grew glorious clumps of golden cowslips and purple meadow orchis, taller and finer by far than those in the meadows, and deliciously fragrant. In the swampy hollows were yellow marsh marigolds and blue forget-me-nots; on the drier soil of the rising bank the wild hyacinths were just shaking open their bells, and heartsease here and there lifted coy heads to the sunlight.

Raymonde and Fauvette wandered about in ecstasy, picking great bunches of the flowers, and running from clump to clump with thrills of delight. Surely even Freckles's "Limberlost" could not be more beautiful than this. A persistent cuckoo was calling in the meadow close by; a thrush with his brown throat all a-ruffle trilled in a birch tree overhead, and a blackbird warbled his heart out among the hazel bushes by the fence. The girls went peeping here and there and everywhere in quest of birds' nests, and their diligent search was amply rewarded. In the hollow of a decaying stump a robin was feeding five little gaping mouths, the blackbird's mate guarded four speckled eggs, and three separate thrushes had pale-blue treasures in clay-lined cradles amidst the undergrowth.

As they penetrated farther into the wood they struck upon a pond closely surrounded by willows and alders. Raymonde peered through the shimmering leaves, and called Fauvette with a cry of joy, for covering almost the entire surface of the water was a mass of the gorgeous pale-pink fringed blossoms of the bog bean. The girls had never found it before, and it

was indeed rare for it to be growing in a Midland county. They thought it was the most beautiful flower they had ever seen. How to pick any was the difficulty, for even the nearest piece lay fully a yard from the edge of the pond, and the finest blooms were in the middle of the water.

“I’m going to get some somehow, if I have to take off my shoes and stockings!” declared Raymonde.

An easier way than wading, however, presented itself. Close by the side of the pond was a young tree which had been blown over by the spring gales; the forester had chopped it from its roots, but had not yet removed it. By dint of much energy the girls lifted this, and pushed it over the water till part of it rested securely on an alder which grew on a little island in the midst. It made a rather shaky but perfectly possible bridge, if not for Fauvette, at least for Raymonde. The latter advanced upon it cautiously but courageously. She took three steps, almost slipped, but regained her balance by a miracle, grasped an overhanging bough of the alder, and set a firm foot on the island. From here, by reaching a long arm, she could gather some fine specimens of the bog bean. She pulled it up in handfuls, with trailing oozy stalks. As she turned to grip the alder branch before venturing back over her primitive bridge, her eye suddenly caught sight of a large nest built at the extreme brink of the water. It held four brown-speckled eggs, and an agitated moorhen, seeking cover among the reeds, gave the clue to their parentage.

The school was making a collection of birds’ eggs for its museum. There were plenty of robins’ and thrushes’ and blackbirds’, and all the common varieties, but so far not a solitary specimen of a moorhen’s egg. Raymonde felt that even at the risk of betraying their secret expedition she must secure some of these. She decided to go halves, to take two and leave two in the nest to console the moorhen when she came back. She wrapped them in some grass and packed them in her handkerchief, which she slung round her neck for safety. Then taking her bunch of bog bean she managed to scramble back to the bank.

The girls were naturalists enough to remove their tree-trunk from the island, lest it should tempt marauding boys to go across and discover the moorhen’s nest. They hoped the bird would return and sit again when they were out of the way. Each carefully carrying one of the precious eggs, they

went on farther to explore the wood. They had only walked a short distance when Fauvette stopped suddenly. 47

“What’s that queer squeaking noise?” she asked.

“Do you hear it too?” confirmed Raymonde.

The girls glanced round, and then looked at each other blankly. There was no doubt that the persistent chirruping and peeping came from the eggs in their hands.

“Oh, good night! The wretched things are hatching out!” gasped Raymonde.

They had indeed robbed the poor moorhen at the very moment when her chicks were in the process of hatching. Already there was a chip in the side of each egg, and a tiny bill began to protrude, the owner of which was raising a shrill clamour of welcome to the world. The girls laid them hastily down on the grass.

“Those won’t be any use for the museum!” exploded Fauvette.

“I wonder if we ought to put them back,” murmured Raymonde, decidedly conscience-stricken, though somewhat unwilling to venture again over the slippery tree-trunk.

She might perhaps have braved the crossing, and restored the eggs to the nest, but at that moment the rain, which had been threatening all the afternoon, came down in a torrent. She felt it had sealed the fate of the chicks.

“We’ll just have to leave them here. It’s like murder, but I can’t help it. If we don’t get back quick we shall be drenched.”

As the girls turned to retrace their steps they became aware that they were not alone in the wood. Some distance among the bushes a dark coat and hat were plainly advancing in their direction. Undoubtedly somebody had been watching them and was following them. Wild visions of Black Jack and his “Limberlost” gang swam before their eyes, and with one accord they ran—ran anywhere, panic-stricken, bent only on escaping.

A voice shouted, and it added to their terror, and sent them hurrying on the faster. They imagined oaths and pistol-shots behind them. Such exciting scenes were all very well in the pages of *Freckles*, but they would be

decidedly out of place in an English wood. When it came to the point, neither of them possessed the courage and presence of mind of the Swamp Angel.

Suppose they found themselves bound and gagged, and tied to trees, while some dastardly ruffians hewed down the best timber in the wood? The shouts behind grew nearer. Their pursuer was evidently gaining upon them. Through the pouring rain they struggled on, splashing anyhow through swampy places, regardless of soaked shoes and stockings, pushing through wet bushes and underneath dripping branches, possessed by the one idea of flight. Down through the hollow where they had gathered the forget-me-nots, and up the bluebell bank they struggled, with never a thought for the flowers; and they were just about to scramble over some felled trees when Raymonde, who was a yard in advance, caught her foot in a tangle of brier and fell on her hands and knees among the springing bracken. Fauvette, unable to stop herself, collided heavily and collapsed by her side. Too much out of breath to stir, the girls lay for a few moments panting.

“Hallo! Wait!” shouted their pursuer.

49

The rather rasping, authoritative voice was so well known and familiar that the girls scrambled up and turned round, to find—no desperate villain armed with revolver and bowie-knife, but Miss Gibbs, in a neat, shiny-black mackintosh and rainproof hat to match. She advanced breathless and agitated, and very decidedly out of temper.

“You naughty girls! What do you mean by running away like this? I watched you through my telescope as you went to the wood, and of course followed you. Why didn’t you come at once when I called?”

“We didn’t know it was you!” murmured Raymonde, forbearing to explain that they had taken their mistress for a ruffian.

Fauvette said nothing. She was looking horribly conscious and caught. Miss Gibbs glared at the guilty pair, and, telling them curtly to come along, led the way back.

Such a serious breach of school discipline was naturally visited with heavy consequences. For the next three days Raymonde and Fauvette spent their recreation hours indoors, copying certain classic lines of *Paradise Lost*. They were debarred from the purchase of chocolates or any other form of

sweetstuff for the period of a month, and made to understand that they were under the ban not only of Miss Gibbs's, but also of Miss Beasley's displeasure.

"I never thought of that wretched telescope," mourned Fauvette. "Just imagine Gibbie spying on us all the time! She must have watched us scramble over the palings into the wood. It's worse than second sight! And then for her to come gallivanting out after us in that swanky mackintosh! It gave me spasms!"

"We'd a jinky time, though, first. It was worth being caught afterwards," maintained Raymonde candidly. "And, you know, in secret the Bumble Bee was rejoiced to see that bog bean. She won't admit it, of course, but I know it's the discovery of the term. It's recorded in the Nature Note-book, and the best piece was pressed for the museum. My own private opinion is that both the Bumble and the Wasp will go buzzing off to that Limberlost, exploring on their own, some day, and I don't blame them. It's a paradise!"

"Most top-hole place I've ever been in in my life!" agreed Fauvette, sighing heavily. "I say, I call it rather appropriate of the Bumble to have made us copy out *Paradise Lost!*"

CHAPTER IV

Raymonde Explores

There was no doubt that Marlowe Grange was one of the quaintest old houses in the county. The girls all felt that its mediæval atmosphere was unrivalled. Even such prosaic subjects as geometry or analysis took on an element of romance when studied in an oak-panelled chamber with coats of arms emblazoned on the upper panes of the windows. It was the fashion in the school to rejoice in the antique surroundings. The girls took numerous photos, and printed picture post-cards to send home to their families and friends, and everyone with the least aptitude for drawing started a sketchbook. Like most ancient buildings, the old hall, while preserving its principal rooms in good repair, was growing shaky in the upper stories. The labyrinth of attics that lay under the roof had been neglected till the latticed windows were almost off their hinges, and the plaster had fallen in great patches from the ceilings. Fearing lest the worm-eaten floors were really unsafe, Miss Beasley had made the top story a forbidden territory, and, to ensure her orders being obeyed, had placed a wire door to shut it off from the rest of the house. This door was kept locked, Miss Beasley and Miss Gibbs each having a key. Every day, girls pressed inquisitive noses against the wire netting to peep at the tantalizing prospect beyond. They could just see round the corner of a winding oak staircase on to a dim, mysterious landing beyond. Once or twice Miss Gibbs had gone to her attic laboratory and had left the door open behind her, and a few bold spirits had ventured upstairs, but, as the door of her room had also been wide open, they had not dared to pass it and risk discovery, and had been obliged to beat a hasty retreat. It was highly aggravating, for the vista of dark passages looked most alluring.

“Couldn’t we ask the Bumble to take us round the attics some Saturday for a special treat?” suggested Ardiune.

“’Twouldn’t be much fun going in a specially conducted party like a crowd of tourists!” sniffed Raymonde. “We’d all have to stand at attention while

the Bumble gave a short lecture on the architecture or the historical significance of some thingumbobs. It would just turn it all into a lesson. What I want is to go and poke about on my own; and I mean to some day!”

“Gibbie’d snap your head off if she caught you!”

“I don’t intend to be caught.”

It was all very well to lay plans, but another matter to carry them out. Miss Gibbs usually locked the wire door behind her, only leaving it open when she went upstairs to fetch something and meant to return almost immediately. The mere fact of its difficulty increased Raymonde’s zest for the adventure. Her wild, harum-scarum spirits welcomed the element⁵² of possible danger, and the imminence of discovery added an extra spice. For days she haunted the vicinity of the winding staircase, hiding in bedrooms and watching, in case Miss Gibbs went to her laboratory. Twice she watched the mistress pass through the wire door and lock it safely behind her, quite unaware of the outraged pupil fuming in No. 3 Dormitory opposite. Raymonde reiterated her old opinion that Miss Gibbs was far too exact and conscientious.

On one eventful afternoon, however, fortune favoured her. No less a person than Miss Beasley ascended the interesting staircase, actually leaving the defences unsecured. Raymonde seized the opportunity, and like a little ghost or shadow stole softly after her. The head mistress had entered the laboratory, and had closed that door after her. Raymonde tiptoed up to it, and could hear voices inside, the whirling of a wheel, and a kind of bubbling sound. Was Miss Beasley assisting Miss Gibbs with the alchemy? She did not wait even to take a survey through the keyhole, but, hurrying on, turned the corner of the passage.

She found herself in another long, narrow landing, with rooms on both sides. She peeped into most of these. They were empty, and in a deplorable state of disrepair. Plaster had fallen from the ceilings, showing the rafters; in some places, even streaks of daylight shone through chinks in the tiled roof. The worm-eaten old floors had rotted into holes, and Raymonde had to walk warily to avoid putting her foot through in tender places. Many of the rooms had cupboards—dark, mysterious, cobwebby recesses—into which she peered with a rather jumpy sensation that a bogy might suddenly pop⁵⁴ out. The whole atmosphere of the place was ghostly, even in the daytime.

“I shouldn’t like to come up here at night!” shivered Raymonde.

As far as she could tell, the passage seemed to be leading her round the house. It turned several corners, and ended in a long gallery. This looked more cheerful, for the sun shone in through the large end window and brightened the cracked old walls. She danced along the floor with quite a return of high spirits.

“I wish the Bumble would let us come up here on wet days. It would be a glorious place for games, nicer by far than the barn. I call it mean of her to lock up all this part of the house. We’d have absolutely topping fun! I say! what’s that little door over there?”

The door in question was very small, and quite low down on a level with the floor. Raymonde went on her hands and knees to investigate. It was secured with a bolt, which she easily opened. To her surprise, she found herself looking out upon the roof. Whether it had been constructed in past days to provide a means of escape from danger, or merely to allow workmen to replace loose tiles, it was impossible to say. It was certainly within the bounds of probability to imagine a Jacobite, with a price set on his life, creeping through the little opening to find a more secure hiding-place among the twisted chimneys, while King George’s soldiers searched the mansion below.

Raymonde put her head out. The roof sloped steeply up in front. To a girl of her temperament the temptation to explore farther was irresistible. She squeezed through the small door, and wriggled out on her hands and knees on to the tiles.

She was in the angle of a small gable. She could see roof all round her, and sky above. Still on hands and knees, she began to creep upwards. The weather-beaten old tiles had mellowed to dull red and orange, and were partly covered with moss. She could not help admiring the artistic beauty of their colour. She reached the ridge, and peered over. Apparently she was somewhere in the middle of the roof, for a tall, twisted stack of chimneys reared itself close by, and gables spread on all sides. She went cautiously down the next incline, and up to the summit of a further ridge, which was higher. Here, by standing up and holding on to a chimney ledge, she had an excellent view. She could not see the courtyard, but she could command the bottom of the orchard, the moat, the fields that led to the river, and the cliffs

and woods beyond. It was quite a bird's-eye prospect. She seemed to be looking on to the top of everything. The cattle in the meadows appeared mere specks, and a cart and horses passing over the bridge were like a child's toy. It was fascinating to watch them vanishing down the road.

Raymonde was in no hurry to return. She stood for quite a long time enjoying an exhilarating sense of being on the summit of a mountain. At last the recollection that it must be nearly preparation time recalled her to the necessity of departure. With a sigh of regret she dropped back on to the ridge, and crawled over the gables again. She was sure that she had left the little door open behind her, but when she approached it she saw that it was shut. Perhaps the wind had blown it to. She put out her hand to fling it open, but it did not yield. She pushed harder, pressing with all her force. It remained immovable. Then the awful truth burst upon her. Somebody had latched the door on the inside, and she was locked out upon the roof. Had Miss Beasley or Miss Gibbs been taking a survey of the attics? No matter who it was, the horrible result remained the same. What was she to do? She beat wildly at the door, hoping to break it in, but sixteenth-century oak and bolts were made of stuff too strong for a girl's hands. She shouted and called, knowing all the time that it was of little avail. Whoever bolted the door must have gone away. Miss Gibbs's laboratory was at the other side of the house, and she might scream herself hoarse without anyone hearing her. For a minute or two she sat huddled up in despair. Would she have to spend the night on the roof?

It was a ghastly prospect. Hot tears came welling up, but she dashed them away angrily. Her innate pluck rose to the surface. She had been in difficult, even dangerous positions before, and had escaped. Surely there must be some way out of this?

"I'll climb farther on over the roof," she decided. "If I can get nearer the edge, perhaps someone may see me."

The chance of rescue meant admitting her adventure, and incurring great wrath at head-quarters, but that was a lesser evil than passing a night on the roof. She crawled to her old vantage-ground, and descended to the right, where a gable sloped steeply. At the bottom she passed along a wide gutter, and, rounding a corner, found that she could easily drop on to a lower portion of the roof. She was in a state of tense excitement. Where was she

getting to? Would anybody see her from the courtyard; and if so, how would they propose to rescue her? It would be difficult to shout down and explain that she had come through the little door in the upper gallery. She was on a much lower level now than when she had first started. She crawled on, with hands and knees rather sore and scraped with the tiles.

Another corner, and another short drop. She was nearing the edge of the parapet. She must creep down this next piece of roof. There was another wide gutter at the bottom. She walked along this, rounded a jutting chimney-stack, and then paused with a cry. Facing her was a small door, identical with the one by which she had emerged. Could it possibly be open? She stumbled up to it, and pressed it with trembling fingers. It yielded easily. The next moment she was creeping through.

Raymonde now found herself inside a cupboard full of old lumber. The dust was thick, and surely had not been disturbed for years. Some broken chairs with moth-eaten seats were piled together, and some ancient boxes lay full of rubbish. Straw, old books, hanks of rope, and other miscellaneous things occupied the corner. There was a door opposite, without either latch or knob. Raymonde with some difficulty managed to pull it open, and stepped out into a passage. When she pushed the door to behind her, she noticed that it fitted so exactly into the oak panelling as to be quite undiscernible. Could it be a secret cupboard? She wondered if Miss Beasley knew of its existence. There was a window close by; she looked out and took her bearings. Apparently she was just over the big dormitory; the tiles across which she had crawled to enter the cupboard must have been those of Miss Gibbs's bedroom. The landing where she found herself at present led to the servants' quarters; the staircase was to her right.

Raymonde hurried down without meeting anybody, washed the dust and dirt off her hands, and walked in to preparation in the very nick of time.

CHAPTER V

Fifth-Form Tactics

It was an unfortunate truth that Miss Gibbs was not very popular at the Grange. She was clever, conscientious, and well-meaning, and preserved a high ideal of girlhood. Much too high for practical use, so her pupils maintained.

“This isn’t a school for saints!” grumbled Valentine one day. “If we followed all Gibbie’s pet precepts we should have halos round our heads.”

“And be sprouting wings!” added Raymonde. “A very uncomfortable process too. I expect it would hurt like cutting teeth, and it would spoil the fit of one’s blouses. I don’t want to be an angel! I’m quite content with this world at present.”

“I’m so tired of developing my capabilities!” sighed Fauvette. “One never gets half an hour now, just to have fun.”

Miss Gibbs, who aspired to a partnership in the school, was deeply concerned this term with the general culture and mental outlook of her charges. She had attended an educational congress during the Easter holidays, and came back primed with the very latest theories. She was determined to work on the most modern methods, and to turn her pupils out into the world, a little band of ardent thinkers, keen-witted, self-sacrificing, logical, anxious for the development of their sex, yearning for careers, in fact the vanguard of a new womanhood. Unfortunately her material was not altogether promising. A few earnest spirits, such as Maudie Heywood, responded to her appeals, but the generality were slow to move. They listened to her impassioned addresses on women’s suffrage without a spark of animation, and sat stolidly while she descanted upon the bad conditions of labour among munition girls, and the need for lady welfare workers. The fact was that her pupils did not care an atom about the position of their sex, a half-holiday was far more to them than the vote, and their own grievances

loomed larger than those of factory hands. They considered that they had a very decided grievance at present.

Miss Gibbs, acting on the advice of a book entitled *Education out of School Hours*, was determined that every moment of the day should be filled with some occupation that led to culture. She carefully explained that the word “recreation” meant “re-creation”—a creating again, not a mere period of frivolity or lotus-eating, and advocated that all intervals of leisure should be devoted to intellectual interests. She frowned on girls who sauntered arm-in-arm round the garden, or sat giggling in the summer-house, and suggested suitable employments for their idle hands and brains. “Never waste a precious minute” was her motto, and the girls groaned under it. Healthy hobbies were all very well, but to be urged to ride them in season and out of season was distinctly trying. One well-meant effort on Miss Gibbs’s part met with particular disapproval. She had decided to take the girls on Saturday afternoons to visit various old castles, Roman camps, and other objects of historical and archæological interest in the neighbourhood. On former similar occasions she had been in the habit of delivering a short lecture when on the spot; but, noticing that many of the girls were so distracted with gazing at the surroundings that they were not really listening, she determined that they should absorb the knowledge before visiting the place. She wrote careful notes, therefore, upon the subject of their next ramble, and giving them out in class, ordered each girl to copy them and to commit them to memory.

The result of her injunction was an outburst of almost mutinous indignation in Form V.

“When does she expect us to do it, I should like to know?” raged Morvyth. “There’s not a moment to spare in prep., so I suppose it will have to come out of our so-called recreation! Look here, I call this the very limit!”

“Saturday afternoon’s no holiday when we’ve got to go prowling round a wretched Roman camp!” mourned Valentine. “What do I care about ancient earthworks? If they were modern trenches, now, with soldiers in them, it would be something like! There’ll be nothing to see except some mounds. I suppose we shall have to stand round and listen while she holds forth, and look ‘intelligent’ and ‘interested’.”

“I don’t know whether she’s going to hold forth herself,” said Aveline. “I hear she’s invited several people from an archaeological society to meet ⁶³us there, and probably one of them will do the spouting—some wheezy old gentleman with a bald head, or an elderly lady in a waterproof and spectacles. One knows the sort!”

“Oh, good biz!” exclaimed Raymonde. “If visitors are coming, Gibbie’ll have to talk to them, and she won’t have so much time to look after us. She’s welcome to the bald old boys! Let her have half a dozen if she wants!”

“You forget you’ve got to listen to them.”

“Oh, I’ll listen! At least I’ll look serious and politely absorbed. That’s all that’s expected.”

“In the meantime we’ve these wretched notes to copy,” groused Katherine.

“Have we? I don’t think so! I’ve got an idea. Maudie Heywood’s sure to make a most beautiful copperplate copy; we’ll borrow hers, and just skim them over to get a kind of general acquaintance with the subject, sufficient to show ‘intelligent interest’. Gibbie won’t be able to question us with those other people there.”

“But suppose she asks beforehand to see our notes?”

“I’ve thought of that. We’ll each copy out the first page, and stick some old exercise sheets behind it. She’ll never find out.”

The Mystic Seven looked at their leader in admiration. They considered that on such occasions her resourcefulness amounted to genius. They followed her advice, and copied the front page only of the notes, placing underneath some portions of Latin translation or historical essay. Aveline underlined her title with red ink, Morvyth ruled a neat margin, and Fauvette tied ⁶³her sheets together with a piece of the blue baby ribbon which she used for threading through her underclothes. On the outside, at any rate, their copies looked most presentable.

It was only the Fifth Form who were accorded the privilege of the ramble. They were Miss Gibbs’s special charge this term, Miss Beasley devoting herself to the Sixth, and Mademoiselle looking after the Juniors. The Fifth hardly appreciated receiving the lion’s share of Miss Gibbs’s attention.

They complained that she tried all her educational experiments upon them. They were ready, however, the whole ten of them, on Saturday afternoon, clad in the neat school uniform, brown serge skirt, khaki blouse, scarlet tie, and burnt-straw hat. Miss Gibbs viewed them with approval. Each had slung over her shoulders a vasculum for botanical or other specimens, and each carried in her hand a copy of the notes. They looked business-like, healthy, well trained, and alert with intelligence, altogether an excellent advertisement for the school and its modern methods.

The camp was about a two-mile walk from the Grange, so the Form had at least the satisfaction of obtaining exercise. As Valentine had prophesied, it consisted of some mounds in the middle of a field, where, to Fauvette's infinite discomposure, some cows were grazing. The members of the Archæological Society had already arrived, and came forward to greet Miss Gibbs. There was a large stout gentleman, with a grey moustache and bushy overhanging eyebrows; also a little thin gentleman with a pointed beard and an argumentative voice; a tall lady with a high colour, who carried a guide-book, and a short-sighted younger man, who was trying to spread out an ordnance map. These seemed to be the principal members of the party, though there were a few stragglers.

"Professor Edwards—my girls!" said Miss Gibbs, introducing the Form *en bloc* to the leader for the afternoon.

The stout gentleman smiled blandly, and murmured some suitable remark about the value of acquiring antiquarian tastes while still young.

"I had perhaps better read my short paper before we inspect the remains," he added.

"Goody! He surely isn't going to disinter any dead Romans to show us, is he?" whispered Katherine.

"Bunkum!" replied Ardiune. "Nothing as thrilling as that, don't you fear!"

Miss Gibbs smiled encouragingly to the Form, and beckoned them to draw nearer. They arranged themselves in a respectful semicircle, with attentive eyes fixed on the lecturer, and copies of notes rather conspicuously flaunted.

He discoursed exhaustively on the subject of Roman camps in general, and the girls listened with receptive faces, but minds wandering upon more

modern themes. Morvyth was speculating whether it would be possible to purchase chocolates on the way home, Fauvette was planning her next party frock, and Aveline was wondering whether there would be jam or honey for tea that day.

“Before I ask you to take a personal survey of the earthworks,” concluded the Professor, “I should like to have Miss Gibbs’s opinion as to the exact position of the entrance and the approximate date of construction. She has, I know, made a study of this branch of archæology.”

“My ideas are embodied in my notes,” purred Miss Gibbs. “Perhaps you would not mind reading the paragraph. I lent them a short time ago to Mrs. Gladwin.”

Professor Edwards turned expectantly; but the tall lady, who a moment before had been at his elbow, had strayed away, papers in hand, and was not available for reference.

“My girls all have copies of the notes. Pass yours, Ardiune,” smiled the mistress.

The luckless Ardiune blushed scarlet, but dared not disobey.

“The passage occurs about the middle,” prompted Miss Gibbs, as the Professor fumbled with the pages. “May I find it for you? Why, surely there must be some mistake! This is French! Valentine, your copy, child!”

With an even more crimson countenance Valentine tendered her manuscript, which consisted of last week’s essay on Comets. Miss Gibbs, with a growing tightness round her lips, inspected Raymonde’s extracts from Chaucer, and Katherine’s translation of Virgil, before Aveline had the presence of mind to hand up Maudie Heywood’s copy. It is unwise for a mistress to show temper before visitors, and Miss Gibbs, with admirable self-control, mastered her feelings and read the paragraph calmly. During the discussion which followed, the girls availed themselves of an invitation from the short-sighted gentleman to inspect the earthworks, and thankfully fled to the farthest limits of the field. They knew, of course, that it was only putting off the evil hour, and further events justified their forebodings. Miss Gibbs preserved an ominous silence on the way home, and after tea summoned the Form to their class-room, where she went into exhaustive details of the whole business.

“I’m disgusted with you—utterly disgusted!” she declared. “It seems of little use to spend time in attempting to give you intellectual interests. Those girls who did not copy the notes will stay in now and write them. I shall look at them all at eight o’clock.”

“It means a good solid hour’s work,” whispered Raymonde to Ardiune. “Tennis is off to-night. Strafe the old camp! I wish the Romans had never lived!”

CHAPTER VI

A Midnight Scare

Miss Gibbs's plans for the enlargement of her pupils' minds ran over a wide range of subjects from archæology to ambulance. As they expressed it, she was always springing some fresh surprise upon them. Like bees, they were expected to sip mental honey from many intellectual flowers. They had dabbled in chemistry till Ardiune spilt acid down Miss Gibbs's dress, after which the experiments suddenly stopped. They had collected fruits and seed-vessels, had studied animalculæ through the microscope, and modelled fungi in plasticine. Stencilling, illuminating, painting, and marqueterie each had a brief turn, and were superseded by raffia-plaiting and poker-work. Miss Beasley suggested tentatively that it might be better to concentrate on a single subject, but Miss Gibbs, who loved arguments about education, was well prepared to defend her line of action.

"There is always a danger in specialization," she replied. "You can't tell how a girl's tastes will run till you give her an opportunity of proving them. My theory is, let them try each separate craft, and then choose their own hobbies. One will take naturally to oil-painting, another may find clay⁶⁸ or gesso her means of artistic expression. Some minds delight in pure Greek outline, while others revel in the intricacies of Celtic ornament. Again, a girl with no æsthetic sense may be enraptured with the wonders of the microscope, and those who find a difficulty in mastering the technical terms of botany may yet excel in the extent of their collections of specimens. Who would have imagined that Veronica Terry would develop an interest in geology? I had always considered her a remarkably dull child, but her fossils formed the nucleus of the school museum. I have hopes at present that one or two of my girls are developing tastes that will last them for life."

It was one of Miss Gibbs's pet theories that not only should her pupils have the opportunity of sampling arts, handicrafts, and scientific pursuits, but that they should in every respect cultivate a wide mental horizon. She was

fond of suggesting emergencies to them, and asking how they would act in special circumstances.

“Imagine yourself left a widow,” she had once propounded, “with three small children to support, and a capital of only three hundred pounds. How would you employ this sum to the best advantage, so as to provide some future means of subsistence for yourself and family?”

The opinions of the Form had been interesting, and had varied from poultry farming to the establishment of a boarding-house or the setting up of tea-rooms. The most original suggestion, however, was contributed by Fauvette, and, while it outraged Miss Gibbs’s sense of propriety, caused infinite hilarity in the Form. 69

“If I were left a widow,” she wrote, “I should get the children into orphanages, or persuade rich friends to adopt them. Then I would spend the three hundred pounds in buying new clothes and staying at the best hotels, and try to get married again to somebody who could provide for me better.”

Among the flights of fancy in which the Fifth Form were forced to indulge were a railway collision, a fire, a bicycle accident, an escape of gas, the swallowing of poison, the bursting of the kitchen boiler, a case of choking, and an infectious epidemic. On the whole they rather enjoyed the fun of airing their views, and when asked to propose fresh topics had suggested such startling catastrophes as “A German Invasion,” “A Revolution,” “A Volcanic Eruption,” “A Famine,” and “A Zeppelin Raid.”

Rejecting the first four, Miss Gibbs had chosen the last for discussion, and for fully ten minutes the Form, in imagination, dwelt in an atmosphere of explosives. They clutched their few valuables that were within reach, donned dressing-gowns and bedroom slippers, each seized a blanket, and all descended to the cellars with the utmost dispatch of which they were capable, while bombs came crashing through the roof, and the walls of the house tottered to ruin.

“I shall never dare to go to sleep again!” shivered Fauvette, appalled at the mental picture presented to her.

“Are the Zepps likely to come, Miss Gibbs?” enquired Ardiune.

“Not so likely at this time of year as in winter. Still, of course, one never can tell,” replied the mistress, anxious to justify the usefulness of her 70

emergency lessons. "It is wise to know what to do. We ought all to adopt the Boy Scouts' motto—'Be Prepared'."

"And suppose we ever do hear dreadful noises in the middle of the night?" said Raymonde, gazing with solemn, awestruck eyes at the teacher.

"Then you must make for the cellar without delay," replied Miss Gibbs emphatically.

If she could have seen Raymonde's expression, as that young lady turned her head for a moment towards Aveline, she would have been surprised. The serious apprehension had changed to dancing mischief. Even so well-seasoned a mistress as Miss Gibbs, however, cannot be aware of every sub-current in her Form. Human nature has its limits.

Raymonde left the class-room chuckling to herself, and at the earliest convenient moment summoned a committee of the Mystic Seven.

"I've got the idea of my life!" she declared. "It isn't often I have a really topping notion, but this is one of those inspirations that come sometimes, one doesn't know how."

"You needn't be quite so peacocky about it!" chirruped Katherine. "Other people have ideas occasionally as well as you."

"Ah! but wait till you've heard mine, and then you'll allow I've some reason to cock-a-doodle. Look here, don't you think it's extremely nice to be philanthropic?"

"Don't know," replied the others doubtfully. They distrusted Raymonde's philanthropy, and were unwilling to commit themselves. 71

"It's so nice to do things for others," continued their schoolmate gushingly. "When somebody has been looking forward to an event, just think of the bliss of being able to bring it to pass! One would feel a sort of mixture of Santa Claus and Cinderella's Fairy Godmother!"

"Go on!" murmured the Mystics.

"Well, you see, what I mean is this. Gibbie's been taking ever such a lot of trouble to teach us how to act in emergencies. She must have spent hours thinking out those problems. I sometimes feel, girls, that we do not sufficiently appreciate our teachers!"

The grimaces of the six were eloquent.

“Get to the point!” suggested Ardiune.

“I’m getting! Well, you know, we’re all very grateful to Gibbie, and interested in the problems, and happy in our work, and all the rest of it. I think we ought to do something to make a little return to her for her kindness. Now it must be very disappointing to coach us up for these emergencies, and never have an opportunity of putting what we’ve been taught into practice. If we could show her that her lessons have sunk in, and that we could face a sudden catastrophe with calm courage and prompt presence of mind, then she’d feel her labour had not been in vain. She really deserves it!”

“We can’t burst the kitchen boiler, or set the cook on fire to oblige her!” objected Valentine.

“Certainly not; but there are other emergencies. With proper preparation we might engineer a very neat little Zepp raid, quite sufficient to put every theory into practice.”

72

Smiles illuminated the faces of the committee. They began to see daylight. Raymonde re-tied her hair ribbon, and continued:

“On that afternoon when I went exploring, I discovered a way on to the roof exactly over Gibbie’s bedroom. Now what you’ve got to do for the next few days is to collect old tins. There ought to be plenty of them about. You can leave the rest to me!”

The result of Raymonde’s suggestion was an extraordinary activity on the part of her friends in the acquisition of any species of discarded can. They begged empty cocoa tins from the cook, and even climbed over the wall on to the rubbish heap to rescue specimens, rusty or otherwise, that lay there unnoticed and unappropriated. Each can was furnished with four or five large pebbles inside, and was secured at the end with brown paper if the original lid was lost. They were packed in osier-plaited baskets, and hidden away in a corner of the barn until they were wanted.

Raymonde regarded her preparations with much satisfaction.

“It ought to be enough to wake the dead!” she said, rattling one of the tins in demonstration.

As has been before explained, the members of the Fourth and Fifth Forms—nineteen girls in all—slept in the huge chamber which occupied an entire wing of the house, and had been the dormitory of the French nuns a hundred years ago. The small room at the end, formerly the cell of the Mother Superior, was now the bower of Miss Gibbs. It had two doors, one leading into the passage and another into the dormitory, so that she could keep an eye upon the nineteen inmates. It was a very unnecessary arrangement to have her so near, the girls considered, for she would come popping in immediately if they made a noise. They envied the Sixth, who slept in little bedrooms along the corridor, and wished Miss Gibbs had possessed a lesser sense of duty and a greater appreciation of luxury, so that she might have chosen a more comfortable and spacious bedroom elsewhere.

When sufficient tin-can ammunition had been prepared, Raymonde carried the baskets upstairs by stealth, and hid them in the lumber cupboard which she had discovered on the day she had explored the roof. They were not likely to be disturbed here, for probably no one save herself knew of the existence of the tiny room. She crept through the small door on to the tiles, and verified her position by cautious tapping, to which Morvyth, stationed in the passage below with a hockey stick, replied. Having thus taken her exact bearings, she felt that the whole plot was in good training.

“We must choose a moonlight night, or I shouldn’t be able to see my way over the roof,” she informed the committee. “Of course Zepps don’t generally come when there’s a moon, but there’ll be no time for anybody to think of that. You know your part of the business?”

“Ra—ther!”

The household at the Grange retired early to rest. Miss Gibbs, who was an ardent advocate of daylight saving, and always rose at six, was generally in bed by eleven, on the theory that it is impossible to burn a candle at both ends. As a rule, every occupant of the long dormitory was wrapt in slumber before that hour, and the mistress, taking a last peep at the rows of small beds, would hear nothing but peaceful breathing. On one particular evening, however, when she made her usual survey of the room, seven of the apparent sleepers were foxing. They lay with closed eyes and composed faces, but inwardly they were particularly lively. Each one had solemnly

passed her word to keep awake, and considered herself on sentry duty. To pass the time they had brought acid drops to bed with them, and sucked them slowly, so as to make them last as long as possible. They dared not talk, for fear of disturbing the others, though the temptation was great. Occasionally a stealthy hand would reach over to the next bed, to make sure of its occupant's vigilance, and the squeeze would be passed on down the row of seven.

When the old grandfather clock on the stairs chimed midnight, Raymonde and Morvyth rose quietly, and donned dressing-gowns and bedroom slippers, then, with a final signal to their fellow mystics, crept cautiously out of the room. The passage was very dark, but Morvyth had brought her electric torch, and flashed a ray of light in front of them. It felt decidedly spooky, and they were thankful to be together. They went up the stairs towards the servants' quarters, and along an upper landing. By the aid of the torch it was not difficult to find the secret door among the panelling. The little lumber-room looked horribly dark; it needed an effort of will to enter among its dim shadows. A rat was gnawing in the corner, and scurried away with noise enough for a lion. Raymonde peeped through the small door on to the roof. Outside, the moon was shining brilliantly. She could see each separate tile as clearly as by daylight. The sight restored her courage.

"I'll creep through, and then you hand me the baskets," she whispered. "I know just the place to drop the tins. They'll go plump, and roll down the whole length of the gable."

"Right-o, old sport!" returned Morvyth.

Miss Gibbs lay in her bedroom, sleeping the sleep of the just. The moonlight, flooding through her hygienically wide-open window, revealed the rows of photographs on her chimney-piece, the gilt-edged volumes on her book-shelf, and the little emergency medicine cupboard on the wall. Was she dreaming of the lesson she meant to give to-morrow, or of the officer whose portrait, in the silver frame, occupied the post of honour in her picture gallery? Who could tell? Unsympathetic school-girls do not know all the secrets of a teacher's life. Perhaps Miss Gibbs, like the familiar chestnut burr, hid a silver lining under her prickly exterior. She slept so peacefully—it was a shame to disturb her. Schoolgirls are ruthless beings at best.

Bang! Rattle! Bang! Bump! She woke with a start. Projectiles were falling upon the roof with terrific force. At the same moment shrieks issued from the dormitory, and a wild shout of "Zepps!" Miss Gibbs's presence of mind did not desert her. It took her exactly three seconds to put on her dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, two more to sweep her watch, purse, and a little packet of treasures (placed nightly in readiness) into the ample pocket of her wrapper, and the next instant she was flashing her torchlight in the dormitory.

The girls, most of them very scared, were turning out of bed; Aveline, Fauvette, Valentine, Ardiune, and Katherine were already garbed, and encouraging the others. Before a minute and a half had elapsed, the whole party was on its way to the cellar, having rung the great bell on the stairs to warn the rest of the household.

Raymonde and Morvyth, having expended the ammunition, hurried downstairs, and slipped in among their Form mates unobserved. The school spent an agitated hour in the cellar, sitting on blankets clutched from their beds. As all appeared quiet, and no more mysterious thumps resounded on the roof, Miss Beasley, who had reconnoitred, declared it safe to return to roost, and ordered her twenty-six pupils upstairs again. Possibly she had her suspicions, for very early next morning she went out to investigate the extent of the damage, and discovered a selection of the projectiles lying on the lawn. The result was a solemn harangue to the whole school.

"I don't know who has played this contemptible practical joke," she proclaimed witheringly. "It may seem humorous to small minds, but to me it is pitiable. There were no doubt instigators amongst you, and for the sake of those ringleaders I shall punish you all. You will spend Wednesday afternoon in your class-rooms copying out 'Lycidas,' instead of taking our projected trip on the river. It is hard to punish the innocent with the guilty, but those responsible for this occurrence are probably known to their companions, who will, I hope, visit their displeasure upon them, and cause them to regret that they have deprived the school of a holiday."

Miss Beasley's method of punishment, though voted abominably unfair by the majority, was certainly efficacious. Such grave suspicion fell on the Mystic Seven that the indignant monitresses took the matter in hand, and insisted on investigating the entire business. Popular opinion raged hotly

against the culprits, for the promised expedition to the river had been regarded as the treat of the term.

“I believe it’s all your fault, Raymonde Armitage!” scolded Linda Mottram. “If there’s any mischief about, one may be sure you’re at the bottom of it. We don’t want your monkey tricks here. They’re on the level of a kindergarten for little boys. If anything more of this sort happens, you may expect to find yourself jolly well boycotted. I shan’t speak to you, in any case, for a week, and I hope none of the other monitresses will. You deserve sending to Coventry by everybody.”

“How hard it is to be public-spirited!” mourned Raymonde to her chums afterwards. “I’m sure I gave everybody a treat, and especially Gibbie. I’m a martyr to the cause of emergencies. For goodness’ sake don’t any of you drink poison by mistake, or they’ll lay the blame on me and send me to the gallows!”

CHAPTER VII

The Crystal Gazers

It was about this time that a wave of the occult passed over the school. It began with Daphne Johnson, who happened to read a magazine article on "The Borderland of the Spirit World," and it spread like an epidemic of influenza. The supernatural was the topic of the hour. Ghost stories were at a premium, and any girl who could relate some creepy spiritual experience, which had happened to the second cousin of a friend of a friend of hers, was sure of a thrilled audience. This taste for the psychic was particularly strong among the girls of the Sixth Form, who leaned towards its intellectual and scientific aspects. They despised vulgar apparitions, but discussed such abstruse problems as phantasms of the living, thought transference, will power, hypnotism, and clairvoyance. Meta Wright dabbled a little in palmistry, and examined the hands of her schoolmates, prophesying startling events in their future careers. Lois Barlow sent half-a-crown to a ladies' newspaper to have her horoscope cast, and was terribly dejected at the gloomy prospects offered her by the planets, till she fortunately discovered that she had put the date of her birth wrong by three hours, which would, of course, completely alter the aspect of the heavenly bodies, and cause the best of astrologers to err. Veronica Terry talked darkly of experiences in the psychic world, of astral bodies, etheric doubles, elemental entities, and nature spirits. She went to sleep at night with her thumbs and big toes crossed, in the hope of bringing back the adventures of her dreams into her waking consciousness. She was a little hazy on the subject, but yearned for further instruction.

"It's called 'Yoga'," she confided to her particular chum, Barbara Rowlands. "You concentrate your mind before you go to sleep, and then you're able to function in the astral body. My cousin Winnie told me of a girl at College who did it, and she was seen standing in the room of a friend at the other side of the hostel, while all the time she was asleep in bed."

“I hope you won’t do that!” shuddered Barbara nervously. “It would give me a fit if I woke up and found you staring at me, and knew it wasn’t really you. Promise you won’t!”

“It may be rather difficult to regulate one’s movements, once one is out of the body,” returned Veronica guardedly.

Barbara did not crave for spiritual excursions, and secretly preferred the old days, when her chum talked tennis instead of psychology; but the occult was paramount, and she was obliged to follow the fashion. The atmosphere of the Grange was certainly conducive to superstition. The dim passages and panelled walls looked haunted. Every accessory of the old mansion seemed a suitable background for a ghost. The juniors were frankly frightened. They did not dare to go upstairs alone. They imagined skeleton fingers clutching their legs through the banisters, or bodiless heads rolling like billiard balls along the landings. Having listened, awestruck, to Veronica’s accounts of a séance, they were apprehensive lest the tables should turn sportive and caper about the rooms rapping out spirit messages, or boisterous elementals should bump the beds up and down and fling the china about.

“That only happens if there’s a powerful medium in the house,” Veronica had assured them, and the girls devoutly hoped that none of their number possessed the required mystic properties.

“Look here,” said Raymonde one day to Ardiune, “I’m getting rather fed up with this spook business.”

“So’m I,” agreed Ardiune. “I thought it was fun at first, but it’s got beyond the limit now. The sillies can talk of nothing else. I’m sick of sitting on Veronica’s bed and hearing about mediums and messages. I’d like a potato race for a change. I vote we get up some progressive games.”

“It would be more jinky! I fancy a good many are tired of ghosts, only they don’t like to say so. Ardiune! I’ve got an idea! While the school’s still mad on these things, why shouldn’t we have some fun out of it? Play a rag on them, you know.”

“Dress up in a sheet and rub wet matches on one’s hands?” suggested Ardiune.



“THE PASSAGE WAS VERY DARK, BUT MORVYTH
HAD BROUGHT HER ELECTRIC TORCH”

“No, no! Nothing so stale as that! Why, it would hardly take in the juniors for more than a minute. I’m angling for bigger fish. I want to hook the Sixth!”

“H’m! Not so easy, my good girl!”

“It needs craft, of course, and one must have a suitable bait. The common or garden ghost trick would be useless. I want something subtle. If I could have developed mediumistic powers, now, and gone into a trance!”

“Couldn’t you?” queried Ardiune eagerly.

Raymonde shook a regretful head.

“Veronica knows too much about séances. She says the great test of the trance is to stick pins into the medium. If she doesn’t utter a groan, then her conscious entity is suspended, and a spirit is about to materialize. I couldn’t stand being a living pin-cushion. I know I’d squeal.”

“But we might pad you with cushions. Séances are always held in the dark, so they wouldn’t find out.”

“Trust Veronica to find my vulnerable spot! She detests me, and she’d just enjoy prodding me up with pins. No, we must have something less painful than that, please.”

“Table-turning might be possible?”

“The Sixth did it, and the table was beginning to go round quite nicely when they discovered that Linda was pushing the leg. I think pretty nearly everything occult has been tried here lately, except just one. We’ve not had any crystal gazing.”

“How d’you do that?”

“Don’t you remember that chapter in *Zilla, the Sahara Queen*? How she goes to the Coptic magician, and he pours some ink into a little boy’s hand, and sees all her future in it?”

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“Ink would stain horribly,” commented Ardiune.

“Yes, I don’t mean to use ink. What I want is a crystal. There’s something on Gibbie’s chimney-piece that would do jolly well. I believe I’ll borrow it! I know just how to manage, because Mabel and Sylvia went to consult a psychist in Bond Street, and they told me all about it, and everything she said and did. As a matter of fact she described Mabel’s fiancé quite wrong, and pretended she saw him sitting in a dug-out, while all the time he was on a battleship; but they thought it great fun, because they hadn’t really intended to believe her.”

“Would the girls believe you?”

“Certainly not as Raymonde Armitage. I don’t mean them to know me. We’re going to disguise ourselves, so that our very mothers wouldn’t own

us.”

“Whew!”

Ardiune looked decidedly sceptical.

“Wait till I’ve done telling you before you pull faces, you old bluebottle! Can’t you trust me by now to get up a decent rag? Yes, I’m offended! All right, I’ll accept apologies. Now if you’re really listening, I’ll explain. You know the gipsies are camping down by the river. Everybody in the school has noticed their caravans, and realizes they’re there. Now what’s more natural than for a couple of these gipsies to stroll round by the barn some evening during recreation time, and offer to predict the future? Katherine and Ave could be in the secret, have their fortunes told first, and then bring others. We’d install ourselves in the old cow-house; it’s so dark, no one would see us very plainly.”

“Ray, you’ve enough imagination for a novelist!” murmured Ardiune admiringly.

Having settled their plan of campaign, the next step was to carry out details. The question of costume loomed largest.

“We must look real gipsies, not stage ones,” decreed Raymonde. “The thing’s got to be done properly, if it’s done at all.”

They ransacked the property box used for school theatricals, and having selected some likely garments, set to work on an ideal of realism. Two skirts were carefully torn on nails, artistically stained with rust and mud, and rubbed on the barn floor to give them an extra tone. Some cotton bodices were similarly treated. Shoes were a knotty problem, for gipsies do not generally affect trim footgear, yet nobody at the Grange possessed worn-out or dilapidated boots. In the end Raymonde carefully unpicked the stitches in her oldest pairs to give them the requisite burst appearance, and with the aid of a file rubbed the respectability from them. A dip in the mud of the moat completed the transformation. Some cheap beads and coloured handkerchiefs, and a faint wash of Vandyke brown over face and hands, gave the finishing touches.

In the interval between preparation and supper, when several members of the Sixth Form were pursuing carpentry and other industrial occupations in the barn, Aveline Kerby entered to borrow a screw-driver. She conversed

casually on the topics of wood-carving, photography, pressed flowers, and kindred hobbies; then, just as she was leaving, turned back and remarked, apparently as an afterthought:

“Oh, by the by, do you know there are two gipsies in the cow-house? They’re from the caravan by the river. They came in through the back gate, begging, and Morvyth happened to meet them. They offered to tell her fortune, so she took them into the cow-house, so that Gibbie shouldn’t see them. She says they’re marvellous. They described her mother exactly, and her brother at the front. Isn’t it wonderful now they can do it?”

“Are they there still?” asked Veronica, swallowing the bait.

“I believe so. At least they were, five minutes ago. Elsie Moseley and Cynthia Greene had gone to see them. I’d go myself, but I’ve spent all my allowance, and of course one has to cross their palms with the orthodox piece of silver, I suppose. It’s hard luck to be stony-broke. Ta-ta! Thanks for the screw-driver!”

Aveline beat a judicious retreat, and left her words to work. As she had expected, the news of the arrival of the occultists was received with interest.

“It’s an extraordinary thing that gipsies are so often gifted with psychic powers,” commented Meta.

“They’re children of nature,” returned Veronica. “I suppose our ultra-civilization blunts our astral perceptions. One finds marvellous things among the hill tribes in India—things that can’t be explained by any known rules of science.”

“I suppose these ancient races have inherited secrets that we can’t grasp?”⁸⁴

“Yes, they follow forgotten laws of nature. Some day, no doubt, science will rediscover them.”

Veronica spoke seriously. During the holidays she had studied the subject by the aid of books borrowed from the Free Library.

“I should like just to go and have a look at these gipsies,” she added. “Will you come with me?”

She voiced the feelings of the others. They rose with one accord, and went in the direction of the cow-shed. They met Cynthia Greene and Elsie

Moseley coming out, half-awed, half-giggling. At the sight of monitresses they dived round the corner of the building, and escaped into the orchard.

“It’s certainly our duty to investigate,” propounded Meta.

It is pleasant when duty and inclination coincide. The girls walked forward briskly. The interior of the cow-house was dark as an Eastern temple. The gipsies had established themselves in the dimmest corner, and were squatting on bundles of straw under a manger. Obviously they were extremely dirty and dilapidated. Their hands and faces appeared to be unacquainted with soap and water, their clothes were tattered, their shoes seemingly in the last stage of decrepitude.

“Tell your fortunes, my pretty ladies?” pattered one of the Romanys. Her voice was hoarse but conciliatory. Possibly she had a cold—tents are notoriously draughty sleeping-places.

“We don’t care about vulgar fortunes, we are really interested,” commenced Veronica. “What we’d like to know is how you get your powers. Where does your knowledge of the future come from? I’ve always wanted to ask this.”

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The gipsy woman shook her head pityingly.

“Ah, lady! We don’t know ourselves! It comes to us suddenly. Like a flash of light we see your future—then it fades. It’s a sixth sense that’s given to the poor gipsies. They’re born with it, and they can’t explain it any more than you can explain the breath of your body.”

“I’ve often heard of this sixth sense,” whispered Daphne to Lois.

“Sometimes we feel what’s going to be, and sometimes we see it,” continued the gipsy, fumbling with something in her lap. “We can’t tell beforehand which way the knowledge will come.”

“What’s that you’ve got there?” asked Veronica sharply. “Is it a crystal?”

“You’re right, lady. It is a crystal, and a wonderful one too. My grandmother got it from—but no! I’d best not be telling that. I wouldn’t part with it, lady, if the Queen offered me her crown in exchange. Take it in your hand! Look how it sparkles! It doesn’t often shine like that—only when someone with the sixth sense holds it.”

“I’ve sometimes suspected that I possess psychic powers!” murmured Veronica complacently.

“Would you like to learn the future, lady?” queried the gipsy. “Then hold it so, in your hands, for a minute. Now it has felt you and known you, and it will tell—oh, yes! it will tell!”

She took the crystal again, and turned to the companion who squatted beside her on the floor.

“Zara! Look what is coming to the lady,” she commanded softly.

Zara, who had apparently been in a deep reverie, roused herself with a start, placed the crystal in her lap with the first finger and the thumb of each hand lightly touching it, and stared fixedly into the magic glass. For a moment or two the future seemed obscured, then evidently it cleared. She began to speak in a deep, monotonous voice, as if talking in her sleep.

“I see the sea—waves—waves—everywhere. There is a ship—oh! it has changed. I see sand, and a white house, and palm trees. A soldier in khaki is coming out of the house. He stops to speak to a servant—a black man in a turban—he is angry—he frowns—he goes again into the white house. Oh, it is fading—it is gone!”

“My brother Leslie’s in Egypt!” gasped Veronica, much impressed.

She would have requested a continuance of the vision, but at that moment the dressing-bell clanged loudly. It was plainly time to go and tidy up for supper.

“If you could come again to-morrow about five,” she suggested, pressing a coin into the gipsy’s ready hand.

“Yes, lady, if we’re still in the neighbourhood. We never know when we’ll be moving on, you see. But we’ll try to oblige you if we can.”

Raymonde’s and Ardiune’s toilets that evening would have done credit to quick-change variety artistes. With clean faces and hands, and their dresses at least half fastened, they slipped into their places at the supper-table just in time; a little flurried, perhaps, but preserving an outward calm. So far their scheme had succeeded admirably. The Sixth appeared to have no suspicions.

They repeated their performance on the following day, installing themselves in the cow-house, and receiving relays of enquirers who came to consult them as to their future. Knowing somewhat of the private history of each member of the school, they got on excellently, and their reputation spread till more than half the girls had paid surreptitious visits to their retreat. All might have gone well, and their secret might have remained undiscovered, had it not been for Veronica's friendship with Mademoiselle. Veronica was so impressed with the value of the crystal's information that she could not help confiding the news, and bringing the impressionable Belgian to consult the seer for herself.

Ardiune's visions of smoking ruins and rescued refugees left Mademoiselle almost speechless. She in her turn felt impelled to seek a confidante, and imparted the wonderful revelations to Miss Gibbs.

That worthy lady immediately set off for the cow-house. As she entered there was a scuttling of juniors, who sought safety behind the partition. Raymonde stared for a moment aghast, then whispered to Ardiune: "Bluff it out!"

Miss Gibbs proceeded in an absolutely business-like manner. She requested a consultation, and listened while the gipsy, decidedly nervous, gave a rambling description of a dark gentleman and an Indian temple.

"Thank you," she said at last. "I think it only fair to warn you that you can be prosecuted and fined twenty-five pounds for telling fortunes. I should like to know where you got that crystal! It's remarkably like the ball of glass that was broken off my Venetian vase. I missed it yesterday from my mantelpiece. By the by"—stooping down suddenly, and pulling aside the handkerchief from Zara's swarthy neck—"you are wearing a locket and chain that I know to be the property of one of my pupils. It is my duty immediately to put you in the hands of the police."

The game was up! The disconcerted gipsies rose from their alcove, and came back from the psychic to the material world. It was a hard, exacting, unsympathetic world as mirrored in Miss Gibbs's keen grey eyes. She told them briefly to go and wash their faces and change their attire, then to report themselves in the class-room, where she would be at work correcting exercises.

“You can bring with you the money that you have collected over this business,” she added.

Half an hour later, two clean, tidy, but dejected pupils entered the classroom, and placed the sum of thirteen and ninepence upon her desk. Miss Gibbs counted it over scrupulously.

“Any girls who were foolish enough to give you this, deserve to lose it,” she remarked, “and I shall send it as a contribution to the Red Cross Fund. You will each learn two pages of Curtis’s *Historical Notes* by heart, and repeat them to me to-morrow after morning school. I may mention that I consider it a great liberty for any girl to enter my bedroom and remove ornaments from my mantelpiece.”

That evening, after preparation and supper, the entire school, instead of being allowed to pursue fancy work, was summoned to the lecture hall, and harangued by Miss Beasley upon the follies and dangers of superstition. She touched upon ancient beliefs in witchcraft, and modern credulity in clairvoyance and spiritualism, and placed an equal ban upon both. 90

“In these enlightened times, with all the advantages of education to dispel ignorance,” she concluded, “it is incredible to me that anybody can still be found ready to believe in such nonsense. I beg you all, and especially those elder girls who should be leaders of the rest, to turn your thoughts and conversation to some healthier topic, and to let these morbid fancies sink into the obscurity they deserve.”

“It was a nasty hit for the monitresses!” whispered Ardiune to Raymonde afterwards. “Did you see Veronica turning as red as beetroot? We’ll have to wake early to-morrow morning, and swat at those wretched dates. It was grizzly bad luck Gibbie found us out!”

“But on the whole the game was worth the candle!” proclaimed Raymonde unrepentantly.

CHAPTER VIII

The Beano

After the events related in the last chapter, the monitresses suddenly awakened to a sense of their responsibility as leaders of the school. Particularly Veronica. She had a sensitive disposition, and Miss Beasley's reproof rankled. She determined to set an example to the younger ones, and to be zealous in keeping order and enforcing rules. She held a surprise inspection of the juniors' desks and drawers, and pounced upon illicit packets of chocolate; she examined their books, and confiscated any which she considered unsuitable; she put a ban upon slang, and wrote out a new set of dormitory regulations. Her efforts were hardly so much appreciated as they deserved. The girls grumbled at this unanticipated tightening of the reins.

"We've always bought sweets and kept them in our desks," declared Joan Butler. "I believe Veronica used to do it herself."

"Life wouldn't be worth living without chocolates!" mourned Nora Fawcitt.

"And we always used to scramble for the bathroom in the mornings, ever since I've been here," grouched Dorothy Newstead. "It's no fun to wait in a queue." 92

The Fifth fared no better than the Fourth, and being older, their indignation was even hotter.

"Veronica took away *Adam Bede*, and said it wasn't 'suitable'!" fumed Aveline. "She told me I might read Scott and Dickens instead. And I'd just got to the interesting part! It's too idiotic!"

"I can't see why Veronica need act censor to all our reading," agreed Katherine bitterly. "Why should we be allowed Jane Austen and not Charlotte Brontë?"

"Little girls mustn't read love stories!" mocked Raymonde.

“But they’re all love stories—Scott’s and Dickens’s and Jane Austen’s and everyone’s! How about Shakespeare? There’s heaps of love-making in *Romeo and Juliet*, and we took that with Professor Marshall!”

“I don’t think Gibbie ever quite approved of it. She thought it indiscreet of the Professor, I’m sure, and likely to put ideas into our heads!”

“Does she expect we’ll go eloping over the garden wall? Perhaps that’s why she keeps such a vigilant look-out with the telescope!”

“It’s quite bad enough to have Gibbie always on our trail,” said Ardiune gloomily, “but when it comes to Veronica turning watch-dog as well, I call it an outrage!”

“I think Fifth-Form girls have responsibilities as well as monitresses,” grunted Raymonde. “It’s not good for Veronica to take life so earnestly! She’ll grow old before her time. The Bumble’s always rubbing it into us to make the most of our girlhood, and not be little premature women, so I vote we live up to her theory. It’s Veronica’s last term here. She ought to be bubbling and girlish, and carry away happy memories of her light-hearted school-days when she goes out into the wide world to be a woman. I consider it’s our duty to look after this. The Bumble says the value of school life consists in its ‘give and take’. We’re taking a good deal from Veronica at present, so we must give her something back. Let’s teach her to be kittenish and playful.”

The chums exploded. The idea of the serious-minded Veronica developing a bubbling or kittenish manner was too much for them.

“We did pretty well when we took Maudie Heywood in hand,” urged Raymonde. “She’s wonderfully improved. Never exceeds the speed limit in her lessons, and if she writes extra essays she keeps them to herself, and doesn’t flaunt them before the Form. And there was Cynthia Greene, too! We don’t hear a word about The Poplars now, or her wretched bracelet. It may be difficult, perhaps, but we’ll do our best with Veronica. We must regard ourselves as sort of missionaries.”

Having decided that it was their vocation to cultivate a spirit of artless happiness in the school, the Mystic Seven set to work on Veronica. She did not respond to their efforts; on the contrary, she seemed to resent them. When they attempted to introduce lighter veins of conversation, she

reproached them with being frivolous. She frowned on riddles, limericks, and puns. One day she so far forgot herself as to murmur “Cheeky kids!”

Raymonde, with a shocked and grieved expression, looked at the illuminated card deprecating the use of slang, which had lately been hung in the lecture hall, and Veronica flounced out of the room. 94

That night, when the monitress went to bed, her sponge, nail-brush, tooth-brush, and cake of soap were missing, and it was only after a long search that she found them at the bottom of her emptied water-jug. On the next evening it was impossible for her to strike a light, owing to the fact that both her candle and matches had been carefully soaked beforehand in water.

Veronica felt it was high time to lay the matter before her fellow-monitresses. They decided that such flagrant cases of insubordination must be promptly dealt with. In order to catch the offenders they laid a trap, Linda and Daphne concealing themselves in Veronica’s bedroom, while Veronica herself walked ostentatiously in the courtyard.

As they had expected, it was not long before two stealthy figures came tiptoeing in, and were taken red-handed in the very act of constructing an apple-pie bed. The vials of wrath which descended upon the would-be practical jokers were enough to damp the spirits of even such madcaps as Raymonde and Aveline. After all, monitresses are monitresses, and to affront them is rather like twisting a lion’s tail. Miss Gibbs herself could not have been more scathing in her sarcasms than Linda. For once the Mystics retired crushed, and with a due respect for their seniors.

It was not in the nature of things, however, for Raymonde’s spirits to remain long below zero. After a decent period of immersion they once more rose to the surface. The occasion of their revival was sufficient to awaken enthusiasm in the most down-trodden and monitress-ridden of school-girls.¹⁸⁵

A report was rumoured through the Grange; nobody seemed to know quite where it started, or what was the fount of information, but everybody said it was perfectly true, and girl whispered to girl the astounding secret.

“The Bumble and the Wasp are going out to dinner on Thursday, and are to stay the night, only we’re not supposed to get a hint of it, so don’t breathe a word, or let on you’ve heard.”

Circumstantial evidence seemed to confirm the statement. Emily, the sewing-maid, had been seen in the linen-room employed on some renovations to Miss Beasley's best evening dress; Miss Gibbs's suit-case had been brought down from the box-room to have its lock and handles polished; and Dorothy Newstead, concealed behind a laurel bush during a game of "Hide-and-seek," had overheard the Principal give instructions to the gardener to order a conveyance for Thursday evening at half-past six. Certainly nothing could be more conclusive. Excitement was rife. Never in all the annals of the school had Miss Beasley and Miss Gibbs together taken a night off!

"It seems a shame to waste such a golden opportunity!" said Raymonde enthusiastically. "Gibbie was talking to us only to-day about seizing our opportunities.

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying,
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying!"

She quoted it most impressively."

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"She didn't go on to the verse about getting married while you'd the chance, though!" chuckled Ardiune.

"No, my child. Such a subject as matrimony is not supposed to be a fitting topic for a ladies' school. Gibbie always gracefully shelves it. But you're side-tracking, and I want to get back to my point. I was talking of opportunities, and never in the whole of our school-days shall we get such another as next Thursday. How are we going to make use of it? I vote for a beano in our dormitory."

"What's a 'beano'?" demanded Fauvette's plaintive voice. "You're always saying things I don't understand."

"You're young, child!" returned Raymonde indulgently, "and you can't be expected to know everything. A beano is a bean-feast. Now don't look alarmed! We're not going to eat beans; we'll have something far more appetizing—sardines, and tinned peaches, and biscuits, and anything else we can get. If the Bumble and the Wasp gad off to enjoy themselves, why shouldn't we make a night of it too?"

“How about those kids?”

“They’ll join in. It shall be an affair for the whole dormitory. We’ll share the treat, for once!”

“You won’t get the monitresses to join,” interposed Katherine dubiously.

“Shan’t ask them! I’ve settled all that in my mind. You know the big oak door across the passage that leads to their rooms? Well, I’m going to fasten it after they’ve gone to bed, and lock them up in their own quarters.” 97

“That would be all right, old sport, if there were a key, but there isn’t.”

“Morvyth Holmes, d’you think I’m an infant? I know perfectly well there isn’t a key. I’m going to fix a screw in the door and another in the doorpost beforehand, and then twist some strong wire across. It’ll act like a lock.”

The Mystics stared at their leader in admiration. Her resourcefulness knew no bounds. With the monitresses safely boxed up in their bedrooms, any jinks would be possible in the dormitory. Of course there remained Mademoiselle, but she slept at the other side of the house, and from past experience they judged that she was more likely to devote the evening to her own pleasure than to an over-strict attention to duty. The juniors, when sounded on the subject, responded to a girl. Even Cynthia Greene assented gleefully. Every occupant of the dormitory vowed with a solemn oath to preserve the secret at all costs. A fund was opened to defray expenses. How to get the provisions was the main difficulty. There was not a single servant in the establishment whom they felt was absolutely to be trusted.

“I believe even that new little Lizzie would go and sneak to the Bumble,” sighed Raymonde. “We shall have to go for the things ourselves. There’s nothing else for it. Who’ll volunteer? Oh! not all of you! We can’t trot off in a body. Look here, I’ll go with Morvyth.”

The village, which lay half a mile away from the Grange, was out of bounds. It would be an extremely risky proceeding for two girls, in the ordinary brown serge uniform and conspicuous hats of the school, to enter 98 a shop and make purchases. Some tiresome busybody would be sure to see them, and report the matter to Miss Beasley.

“It’s a case of disguising ourselves,” decided Raymonde. “The maids keep their waterproofs and hats in the passage near the kitchen. We’ll turn up our

hair, borrow what garments we want, and dash off between prep. and supper. Anyone noticing us on the road will think we're new servants from some house in the neighbourhood."

The audacity of the project almost staggered Morvyth, but as a member of the Mystic Seven she was pledged to follow her leader, and would not for worlds have displayed symptoms of the white feather, though her more cautious soul began to calculate consequences if caught. There were so many pitfalls in the path—servants, monitresses, and mistresses must be outwitted, both in going and returning, to make their excursion a success. The juniors, however, played up nobly. At a concerted hour, they managed by cleverly concocted excuses to engage the attention of all the monitresses, and hold them busy for five minutes explaining details of lessons or fancy work. Meantime, Aveline and Valentine purloined waterproofs of a suitable length, together with appropriate hats, from the passage near the kitchen.

Raymonde and Morvyth, after a rapid toilet and a hasty review of themselves in a looking-glass, were pleased with their appearance, especially the way they wore their hats.

"Tilt yours a little more on one side," commanded Raymonde, "and open your mouth with a sort of cod-fishy expression, as if you'd got adenoids. Remember, you want to look as common as possible. Drop your h's when you speak, wherever you can. Say you're in a 'urry to get back. I shall sniff all the time, as if I'd a bad cold."

"I shall laugh if you do!"

"No, you won't, because we're going to different shops. I'll do Adcock's, and you shall have Seymour's. It'll be far better than going together."

Under cover of a guard of Form-mates the conspirators managed to slip past the barns and off the premises, secure in the knowledge that Miss Gibbs was correcting exercises in the study, so could not possibly be watching them through her too useful telescope. Before arriving at the village they separated, Raymonde going a little in advance, and Morvyth following, as if they had no acquaintance with each other. It was perhaps as well for their mutual composure that they visited separate shops, for Morvyth's provincial accent and Raymonde's cold might have been mirth-provoking to a fellow conspirator, though they passed muster well enough with strangers. At the

end of ten minutes the two girls were hurrying back, each armed with a large parcel. These were handed at once to scouts when they reached the Grange, and their costumes were removed in the barn, and replaced without delay on their hooks in the kitchen passage by Valentine and Ardiune.

So far so good. The commissariat department had managed to run the blockade of school regulations, and secure provisions for the entertainment. No Tommies looting supplies from the enemy's trenches could have felt prouder. 100

When the eventful Thursday arrived, great anxiety was felt as to whether the Principal and her assistant were really and actually going out or not. They did not announce their intention, and gave no hint of the matter. Little Nancie Page, however, sent to Miss Gibbs's room with a message, reported having seen that lady engaged in packing her suit-case, which was taken as proof conclusive of the contemplated expedition.

“We'll be subdued saints all supper-time!” suggested Raymonde. “Let's talk intelligently to the monitresses about intellectual subjects—the deeper the better. Make them think we're going to bed with our minds fixed on Egyptology, and the wonders of the microscope, and the Bagdad railway, and the future of European politics. Be sure you go upstairs very quietly. Anyone who laughs will give the show away.”

The behaviour of the school that evening was a subject of satisfaction to Veronica and her fellow monitresses.

“I was afraid,” remarked the head girl, “that they might take advantage when they saw Miss Beasley's and Miss Gibbs's places empty at supper, but they seemed to feel on their honour to be steadier than usual. I really think their tone is improving. Raymonde Armitage was particularly quiet.”

“Yes,” returned Daphne dubiously. “So she was; but if Raymonde has a quiet fit like that on, I generally look out for squalls afterwards.”

When Mademoiselle went the round of the dormitory that night at 9.30, she found absolute peace and tranquillity reigning. Apparently the occupants of the nineteen beds were already wrapt in well-earned repose. One or two were even snoring slightly. Mademoiselle heaved a sigh of relief, and went off thankfully to her own bedroom to write letters. She did not consider it necessary to interrupt herself at this occupation. Miss Gibbs had indeed

urged the expediency of a surprise visit at about 10 p.m., but Mademoiselle had no vocation for enforcing discipline, and was not over-burdened with conscientious scruples. Moreover, she considered that, if her Principal took an evening off, she might be licensed to do the same.

The conspirators had decided not to begin the celebrations too early. With heroic self-restraint they remained quietly in bed until 10.30. By that hour monitresses and servants alike would probably be asleep. Mademoiselle, at the far end of the house, on the other side of the big staircase, would hear nothing.

When the charmed moment arrived, everybody sprang up and lighted candles. Raymonde hurried into pink dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, and crept up the passage to the door which led to the monitresses' rooms. She had inserted her screws earlier in the evening, so with the aid of a pair of pliers, purloined from the wood-carving bench, it did not take her long to fix her wire and secure the door. She came back chuckling.

“If they should hear any slight sounds of revelry, and try to come upon the scenes, they'll just find themselves jolly well locked in!” she remarked with gusto.

“Perhaps they'll think Mademoiselle's done it!” suggested Ardiune. 102

Preparations for the feast were proceeding briskly. Two beds, pulled into the middle of the room, formed the table, and on these the comestibles were spread forth. The village shops had not offered a very wide range of dainties, but there were sardines, and canned peaches, and biscuits, and three Huntley & Palmer's cakes, rather dry, because they had been kept in a tin box, probably since last Christmas. The drinkable was lemon kali, served in bedroom tumblers, and stirred up with lead-pencils or tooth-brush handles.

Everybody was busy. Morvyth and Valentine were opening the tins with wood-carving implements; Ardiune was performing an abstruse arithmetical calculation as to how to cut up three cakes into nineteen exactly even portions, while Katherine waited with the penknife ready. Even the hitherto irreproachable Maudie Heywood and Cynthia Greene were occupied with scissors, making plates out of sheets of exercise paper. Beds drawn up alongside the impromptu table served for seats, and the girls crowded

together as closely as they could. Raymonde and Morvyth, by virtue of their expedition to the shops, were voted mistresses of the ceremonies, and dispensed the provisions. Sardines on biscuits were the first course, followed by canned peaches, the juiciness of which was a decided difficulty, as there was not a solitary spoon with which to fish them up from the tin.

“Never mind, I’ll spear them with a lead-pencil and stick them on biscuits, and you must drink the syrup in the glasses. I dare say it’ll mix all right with lemon kali,” purred Raymonde, thoroughly in her element as hostess.⁴⁰³

The fun waxed furious, and it only increased when the sardine tin upset in the middle of one of the temporary tables.

“But it’s my bed!” wailed Cynthia Greene.

“Cheer up! Someone’s got to make a sacrifice for the good of the assembly, and you see the lot’s fallen on you,” said Raymonde consolingly. “You ought to be proud to have your bed chosen!”

“I’d just as soon it had been yours!” grumbled Cynthia. “I shan’t like sleeping in a puddle of oil!”

“If you grouse any more, I’ll empty the can of peaches on your pillow, so shut up!” commanded the mistress of the ceremonies. “A beano’s a beano, and we’re going to enjoy ourselves.”

“If we make too much noise, though—” suggested Maudie Heywood.

Ardiune snapped her up promptly.

“We’ll make what noise we like! What does it matter? The monitresses are locked out, and Mademoiselle will never hear. We’ve got the place to ourselves to-night, thank goodness! Just for once, Mother Soup’s room down there is vacant!”

“Empty is the cradle, baby’s gone!” mocked Morvyth.

“Xpect she’s having the time of her life at the dinner-party.”

“Well, we’ll have ours!”

A quarter of an hour later the dormitory presented a convivial scene. An orchestra of five, seated on a hastily cleared dressing-table, were

performing music with combs, while the rest of the company waltzed¹⁰⁴ between the beds, with intervals of the fox-trot. Maudie Heywood and Cynthia Greene had accepted the inevitable, and joined the multitude. Apparently they were enjoying themselves. Maudie's cheeks were scarlet, and Cynthia's long fair hair floated out picturesquely as she twirled round in Elsie Moseley's arms.

"We're certainly making the most of our bubbling girlhood!" murmured Raymonde with satisfaction. "The Bumble couldn't call us little premature women to-night!"

The dark anti-zepp curtains swayed in the night breeze, and the candles flared and guttered, the musicians tootled at their tissue-paper covered combs with tingling lips, faster and faster whirled the dancers, the fun was at its zenith, when quite suddenly the unexpected happened. The door of Miss Gibbs's room opened, and that grim lady herself stood on the threshold.

If a spectre had made its appearance in their midst, the girls could not have been more disconcerted. A horrible hush spread over the room, and for a moment everybody stared in frozen horror. The musicians slipped down from the dressing-table and scuttled towards their own beds.

"H'm! So this is how you are to be trusted!" remarked Miss Gibbs tartly, advancing towards the scene of the beano, and hastily casting an eye over the empty tins and crumby remains of the repast. "Move this rubbish away, and push those beds back to their places. Now get into bed, every one of you! Not a single sound more is to be heard to-night. We'll settle up this matter to-morrow."¹⁰⁵

Having seen each occupant of the dormitory ensconced between her sheets (Cynthia did not dare to complain that hers were sardiny!) Miss Gibbs went back to her own room, leaving the door wide open. With an enraged dragon in such close vicinity the girls did not venture to stir, and silence reigned for the rest of the night. At the first coming of the dawn, however, Raymonde rose with infinite precaution, and stole barefoot along the passage to remove her wire and screws from the oak door. She accomplished that task without discovery, and, after hiding the screw-driver behind a wardrobe, crept back to bed.

Nineteen subdued penitents, clothed in mental sackcloth and ashes, went down to breakfast next morning. Their fears were not without foundation, for when Miss Beasley returned at ten o'clock they were summoned to the most unpleasant interview they ever remembered, from which the more soft-hearted of them emerged sobbing. They spent Saturday afternoon in the schoolroom writing punishment tasks, while the monitresses went boating on the river. It was trying to see Daphne and Hermie coming downstairs in their nice white dresses and blue ties, and to know that they themselves were debarred the excursion. They hung about the hall sulkily.

"It's your own faults," moralized Veronica. "After that disgraceful business on Thursday, you couldn't expect anything else. We heard you plainly enough, and we were utterly disgusted. I'd like to know who locked that passage door. I have my suspicions," with an eye on Raymonde.

The babyish innocence of Raymonde's face at that moment might have served an artist as a model for a child angel.

"Have you? It's a pity to harbour suspicion!" she returned sweetly. "We ought to learn to trust our schoolfellows! I loathe Veronica," she added in a whisper to Ardiune, as the monitress tripped cheerily to the door.

CHAPTER IX

A Week on the Land

The vacations at the Grange were arranged in rather an unusual fashion, a full week's holiday being given at Whitsuntide instead of the ordinary little break at half-term. This year Miss Gibbs, who was nothing if not patriotic, evolved a plan for the benefit of her country. She saw an advertisement in the local newspaper, stating that volunteers would soon be urgently needed to gather the strawberry crop upon a farm about fifteen miles away, and begging ladies of education to lend their services. Such a splendid opportunity of war work appealed to her. She wrote at once for particulars, and after some correspondence and a visit to the scene of action, announced her scheme to the school. She proposed that any girls who cared to devote their holidays to a useful end should join a camp of strawberry-pickers who were to be employed on the farm.

“It is being arranged by a Government bureau,” she explained, “and many people will be coming who, like ourselves, want to help to bear their country's burdens—university students, journalists, social workers, hospital nurses, matrons of institutions, and mistresses and scholars from other schools. We shall sleep in tents, and lead an absolutely outdoor life. It will be a healthy way of passing a week, as well as a benefit to the nation. Any girl who would like to do her share may give me her name this afternoon, and Miss Beasley will write to her parents for permission for her to join the camp.”

Outside in the quadrangle the school talked over the proposition at its leisure.

“Will they let us eat the strawberries?” asked Fauvette anxiously.

“Certainly, you little glutton!” snapped Veronica. “You'll be allowed to stuff till you loathe the very thought of swallowing a strawberry. But you'll have to pick hard and do your share, or they'll turn you off!”

The monitresses were fired with the idea, and all, except Linda, had decided to “do their bit.” Their enthusiasm spread downward like a wave. Before the day was over, eighteen girls had given in their names as volunteers, Raymonde, Morvyth, Katherine, and Aveline being among the number.

“I would like to have joined you, really!” protested Fauvette, “only I know I’ll be so dreadfully home-sick all the rest of the term if I don’t go home, and—”

“Don’t apologize, child!” interrupted Raymonde. “Nobody in their senses expects you to go. You’d be a huge embarrassment to the rest of us. Blue-eyed darlings, all baby-ribbon and fluffy hair, aren’t meant for hard work. Why, you’d pick about six strawberries in an hour, and eat three-quarters of them! Go home and be petted, by all means! We don’t want you weeping yourself to sleep at night, it disturbs the dormitory. The country’ll survive without your services!”

Raymonde’s harum-scarum mind was for once really filled with a wish to help. She meant to do her full share of work. Also she was determined to enjoy herself. The prospect of camp-life was alluring. There was a gipsy smack about it that satisfied her unconventional instincts. It seemed almost next door to campaigning.

“If I’d only been a boy, I’d have run away to the front long ago!” she announced.

“Girls have their own chances in life as well as boys now,” said Hermie. “Wait till you’ve finished with school, then you must try to find your niche in the world. There’s plenty of pioneer work for women to do yet. They haven’t half exploited the colonies. Once we show we’re some good on the land, why shouldn’t the Government start us in co-operative farms out in New Zealand or Australia? It ought to be done systematically. Everything’s been so haphazard before. Imagine a farm all run by girls educated at our best secondary and public schools! It would be ideal. I’m yearning to try it.”

Hermie’s aspirations towards field labour and a colonial future had been greatly spurred on lately by the advent of some lady labourers on a farm near the Grange. For the last fortnight the milk had been delivered, not by the usual uncouth boy, but by a charming member of the feminine sex, attired in short smock, knickers and gaiters, and a picturesque rush hat.

Hermie had entered into conversation with her, and learned that she was a clergyman's daughter, that she milked six cows morning and evening, and went round with the cart delivering the milk, and that she was further concerned with the care of poultry, pigs, and calves. The glamour of her experiences made Hermie wish that the Grange were full of pigs instead of pupils.

"I'd rather attend to a dozen nice little black Berkshires than act monitress to those juniors!" she sighed. "There would really be more satisfaction in it. And as for Raymonde Armitage and her set—give me young calves any day!"

Miss Gibbs was extremely busy making preparations for the expedition. The farmer undertook to provide tents for the party, and bags of hay to sleep upon, but each member must bring her own pillow, blankets, mug, knife, fork, spoon and plate, as well as her personal belongings. These latter were whittled down to the smallest capacity, for there would be little room to stow them away in the tents. Stout boots, waterproofs, and hockey caps were taken, in case the weather might change, the girls wearing their usual Panama school hats on fine days. In order to prevent difficulty with the ordinary strawberry-pickers, they were to be paid for their work according to the amount accomplished, and were each to contribute ten shillings towards the canteen, the tents being provided free.

"But suppose we don't each earn ten shillings?" asked Daphne the cautious.

"Whoever doesn't will have to make up the balance from her own pocket," said Miss Gibbs. "If the ordinary pickers can pay their way, I suppose we can do the same, but it will mean sticking at it hard, and no shirking. We must show what we're made of!"

On the Friday before Whitsun week an excited little party of eighteen stood with bags and bundles ready to start, Miss Gibbs bustling round them like a fussy hen with a large brood of chicks, giving ever so many last directions and injunctions, which seemed rather superfluous as she was going with them, and would have them under her charge the whole time. They went by rail to Ledcombe, the nearest station to Shipley, where the strawberry gardens were situated. The scene on the platform when they arrived was certainly new and out of the common. A train had just come in from London, bringing pickers from the slums. It was labelled "Strawberry

Gatherers Only,” and its cargo was lively, not to say noisy. There were elderly men, younger ones unfit for military service, women with bawling babies, girls shouting popular songs, and a swarm of turbulent children. Whole families had apparently set forth to spend a few weeks helping at the fruit harvest, combining a holiday in the country with profit to their pockets.

“We’re not going among that crew, I hope?” said Daphne, staring rather aghast at the unkempt crowd.

“Certainly not; we shall have our own quarters,” returned Miss Gibbs, marshalling her flock to the gate of exit. Drawn up outside the station were six large hay wagons, and on one of these hung a placard: “Marlowe Grange.” Miss Gibbs made for it immediately, turning out some struggling slum children who had already climbed in and taken temporary possession, and stowed the baggage inside.

“There’s plenty of room for us all,” she announced, “but you’ll each have to sit on your own bundle. I’m glad I stipulated that they should reserve us a wagon for ourselves.”

Judging by the rabble who were swarming on to the other hay carts, the girls also considered it a cause for rejoicing. Their own vehicle started first, and began to jolt slowly down the country road, its occupants sitting as steadily as they could on their knobbly luggage, and indulging in decidedly feminine squeals when, as often happened, an extra hard jog threw them together. After four miles of this rather exciting journey they reached the farm. Their driver stopped at a gate, and, pointing across a field to some tents, indicated that this was their destination. He could take them no nearer, and they must convey their own bags and bundles over the pasture.

Hauling their own luggage with them was no light task, and they were heartily tired of their burdens before they reached the tents. Three of these, labelled Marlowe Grange, they appropriated; then Miss Gibbs, after a brief confabulation with the canteen matron, beckoned to her flock.

“I hear we must go at once and secure first pick of the hay sacks,” she said. “Come along, all of you!”

Over three more fields and two stiles they came to the farm buildings, where, spread out on hurdles, were a number of large sacks, mercifully

clean. An individual in charge, wearing a faded blue suit and a two days' growth of stubbly beard, told them briefly to help themselves, and then take their sacks to the barn and fill them with hay. Preparing their own mattresses was a new experience, but an amusing one. It was fun stuffing the sweet-smelling hay into the rough canvas bags, and more fun still carrying the bulky bedding back over fields and stiles to the tents. Here, amid a chaos of unpacking, they at last disposed their belongings to their satisfaction.

Their special little colony consisted of nine tents and a marquee for meals. It was in charge of a matron, who directed the canteen, and was responsible for the comfort and order of the camp. In each tent hung a list of rules respecting hours of rising and going to bed, meals, and general conduct. As there was no servant except the cook, the task of washing up must be shared by all in rotation, the matron having authority to apportion the work. No lights or talking were to be allowed after 10.30 p.m.

By the time the girls had settled all their possessions it was seven o'clock, and the rest of the camp returned from the strawberry fields. Supper was served in the marquee, everybody sitting on benches round wooden tables without cloths. The company proved pleasant and congenial; there were fifty in all, including some students from Ludminster University, and eight girls and two teachers from a secondary school at Tadbury. The slum party, it seemed, were lodged in the big barns behind the farm, while some caravans of gipsy pickers had possession of a corner of a field some distance away.

Supper finished, most of the workers sat about and rested. A few, possessed of superfluous energy, took a walk to the village a mile off, but the generality were very tired. A gramophone in the marquee blared away at popular songs, and the more lively spirits joined in the choruses; one or two even attempted to dance on the grass. Miss Gibbs had already struck up a friendship with a lady journalist, and some of the girls began to make overtures to the Tadbury scholars, who looked rather a jolly little set. Everybody retired early, as they would have to be up at 5.30, and in the fields by seven.

The Marlowe Grange contingent were much exercised as to the best way to place their mattresses. They did not know whether to sleep with their heads

or their feet to the tent-pole, and finally decided in favour of the former. Going to bed was a funny business in so very small a space, with no chairs or places to put clothes down, and only one tin basin amongst six to wash in. It was funnier still when they attempted to lie down on their mattresses. A bag stuffed with hay is so round that it is very difficult to keep upon it without rolling off, and there was much pommelling and flattening before the beds were at all tenable. At last everyone was settled, the lights were out, and the campers, rolled in their blankets, tried to compose themselves to sleep.

Raymonde, whose billet was opposite the door of the tent, could see out, and watch the stars shining. She lay awake a long time, with her eyes fixed on a bright planet that moved across the little horizon of sky visible to her, till it passed out of sight, and at length she too slept.

CHAPTER X

The Campers

Life began at the camp soon after 5 a.m., when the more energetic spirits tumbled off their hay sacks, flung on dressing-gowns, and scrambled for turns at the bath tent. Fetching water for the day was the first business of the morning, and those on bucket duty trotted off to the stream, two fields away, joking and making fun as they went, but returning more soberly with the heavy pails. The 6.15 breakfast tasted delicious after their early outing, and most of the workers seemed in good spirits. By seven o'clock the whole party were down in the gardens. The Marlowe Grange girls had never seen strawberries by the acre before, and they were amazed, almost daunted, at the sight of the vast quantity of fruit that must be gathered. They were told off to a certain portion of the field, given baskets, and shown where to bring them when full. Each novice, for the first day, was expected to work near an experienced hand, who could show her what was required, as the picking, though quick, must be careful, so as not to bruise the strawberries. Raymonde and Morvyth found themselves under the wing of a Social Settlement secretary, a business-like dame who had picked the previous summer, and understood the swiftest methods. Close by, they could hear Miss Gibbs being instructed by the lady journalist, with whom she had apparently cemented a friendship.

It was a point of honour to fill the baskets with the utmost possible speed, and everybody worked steadily. There was no rule against eating the fruit, but the pay was according to the number of baskets handed in, so that shirkers would find themselves unable to earn their keep. It was a rather back-breaking employment, but otherwise pleasant, for the day was fine, the larks were singing, and wild roses and honeysuckle bloomed in the hedgerows. The slum pickers at the other side of the field toiled away with practised fingers. Many of them came every year, and would return in September for the hop harvest. The small children played under the hedge and took charge of the babies, who cried and slept alternately, poor little souls! without receiving much attention from the hardworking mothers.

The slum contingent was a subject of much amusement and curiosity to the Marlowe Grange platoon. Though they occupied different portions of the field, they would meet when they went to deliver baskets. The rollicking good nature and repartees of some of these people, especially of the gipsies, were often very funny. They would chaff the agent who registered their scores, with a considerable power of humour, and the Grange girls, waiting in line for their turns, would chuckle as they overheard the conversations.

At eleven everybody ate lunch which they had brought with them, then worked till one, when they returned to the camp for dinner. Picking went on again from two till six, with an interval at four o'clock for tea, which was brought down to the gardens in large cans, and poured into the workers' own mugs. It was almost the most acceptable meal of the day, taken sitting under the hedge, with the scent of roses in the air, and the summer sunshine falling across the fields.

By the end of the first evening, the Grange girls decided that, though they wished they had cast-iron backs, the experience on the whole was great fun. They liked the camp life, and even their hay-sack beds.

"I vote we don't sleep with our heads to the tent-pole to-night, though," said Raymonde. "You flung out your arms, Morvyth, and gave me such a whack across the face! I wonder I haven't a black eye. Let's turn the other way, with our feet to the pole."

"Right you are! I'm so sleepy, I don't mind which end up I am, if I can only shut my eyes!" conceded Katherine, yawning lustily.

"I shan't need rocking, either," agreed Morvyth.

Perched on her hay-bag, Raymonde was very soon in the land of Nod. She was dreaming a confused jumble about Miss Gibbs and gipsies and strawberries, when she suddenly awoke with a strong impression that someone was pulling her hair. She sat up, feeling rather scared. The tent was perfectly quiet. The other girls lay asleep, each on her own sack with her feet to the central pole.

"I must have dreamt it!" thought Raymonde, settling down again. 118

She had scarcely closed her eyes, however, before she heard a curious noise in the vicinity of her ear, and something unmistakably gave her plait a

violent wrench. She started up with a yell, in time to see an enormous head withdraw itself from the tent door. A clatter of hoofs followed.

“What’s the matter?” cried the girls, waking at the disturbance; and “What is it?” exclaimed Miss Gibbs, aroused also, and hurrying in from the next-door tent. But Raymonde was laughing.

“I’ve had the fright of my life!” she announced. “I thought a bogy or a kelpie was devouring me, but it was only Dandy, the old pony. He stuck his head round the tent door, and mistook my hair for a mouthful of grass, the wretch!”

“I’ve seen him feeding near the tents before,” said Valentine. “There’s some particular sort of grass here that he specially likes. It’s rather the limit, though, to have him coming inside!”

“He oughtn’t to be allowed in this field at night,” declared Miss Gibbs. “I shall speak to Mr. Cox, and ask to have him put in another pasture. We can’t close our tent doors, or we should be suffocated. I hope we shan’t have any other nocturnal visitors! It’s a good thing we have no valuables with us. I don’t trust those gipsies.”

Miss Gibbs’s fears turned out to be only too well founded, for, on the morning but one following, there was a hue and cry in the camp. The larder had been raided during the night, and all the provisions stolen. The canteen matron and the cook were in despair, as nothing was left for breakfast, and the workers would have gone hungry, had not a deputation of them visited the farm, and begged sufficient bread and jam to provide a meal.

“A lovely ham gone, and four pounds of butter, and a joint of cold beef, and all the bread!” mourned the distracted matron. “I shall have to go in to Ledcombe again this morning for fresh supplies, and I believe Mr. Cox wants the pony himself.”

“We ought to be able to track the thieves,” said Miss Gibbs firmly. “There should be an inspection at lunch-time, and anyone seen eating ham should be under suspicion.”

“They’d be far too clever to eat it publicly,” objected Miss Hoyle, the lady journalist. “Gipsies are an uncommonly tricky set. They probably had a midnight feast, and finished the last crumb of our provisions before

daybreak. We shall get no satisfaction from Mr. Cox. He'll say he's not responsible."

"Then we must take precautions that it doesn't happen again," decreed Miss Gibbs. "Isn't it possible to procure a lock-up meat safe? I never heard of a camp being without one."

"Perhaps you haven't had much experience," remarked the canteen matron icily. She thought Miss Gibbs "bossy" and interfering, and considered that she knew her own business best, without suggestions from outsiders.

The Grange girls chuckled inwardly to hear their teacher thus snubbed. They hoped a retort and even a wrangle might follow; but Miss Gibbs had too much common sense, and, restraining herself, stalked away with as unconcerned an aspect as possible. 120

"Look here, old sport!" whispered Raymonde to Morvyth, "somebody ought to take this matter up. I consider it's a job for us. Let's watch to-night, and see if we can't catch the prowling sneaks. Are you game?"

"Rather! It's a blossomy idea, only don't let Gibbie get wind of it."

"Do I ever go and tell Gibbie my jinky little plans? It's not this child's usual way of proceeding."

Raymonde and Morvyth had intended to run this little expedition "on their own," but in the end they were obliged to let the rest of the tent into the secret, as it was impossible to go to bed fully dressed without exciting comment. Their comrades refused to be left out, so it was decided that all six, under Raymonde's leadership, should mount guard over the larder. They drew their blankets up to their noses, and pretended to be very sleepy when Miss Gibbs came to take a last look at them before retiring. Apparently she noticed nothing unusual, for she only glanced quickly round, and went softly away. The self-constituted sentries allowed nearly an hour to pass before they dared to venture forth. Until that time the camp was not really quiet. The university students were a lively set, apt to keep up their fun late, and the secondary school girls often talked persistently, to the annoyance of their neighbours. At last, however, all lights were out, and a profound silence reigned. Not even an owl hooted to-night, and, as Dandy had been banished from the field, even his crunching of the grass was absent. Raymonde crept from her blankets and listened. Her companions, to

judge from their breathing, were sound asleep. She felt much tempted²⁴ to awaken only Morvyth, but she knew that if she omitted to call the others, their reproaches next morning would be too unbearable. So she roused the five. Taking torchlights, ready but not switched on, they stole from the tent towards the scene of action.

The larder was only a portion of the marquee curtained off, so it was really an easy prey for marauders. The girls could not quite decide where would be their best post for sentry duty; whether to dispose themselves in positions outside, or to keep guard within the tent. As it was rather a cold night, they plumped for the latter. Cautiously as Indians on the war trail, they crept across the marquee towards the farther corner where the stores were kept. Raymonde, as leader, went first, with her body-guard in close attendance behind her. Very, very gently she drew back the curtains and entered the larder. It was pitch-dark in here, and she began to grope her way along the wall. Then she stopped, for in front of her she fancied she heard breathing. She listened—all was silent. She started again, intending to go to the far side of the table. She put out her hand to guide herself, and came in contact with something warm and soft, like human flesh. In spite of herself she could not suppress an exclamation. It was too horrible, actually to touch a burglar! She had not bargained to find one already in possession of the larder. Instantly the girls behind her flashed on their torchlights, and the little sentry party found themselves confronted with—Miss Gibbs!

Yes, it was Miss Gibbs, crouching down near the table with Miss Hoyle,²⁵ the lady journalist, close to her, both looking very determined, and ready to tackle any number of gipsy thieves. The astonishment was mutual.

“What are you doing here, girls?” asked Miss Gibbs sharply, the schoolmistress in her rising to the surface.

“Only trying to guard the larder!” faltered Raymonde.

“That’s just what we’re doing,” explained Miss Hoyle.

At that moment the matron put in an appearance. She also had been on the qui vive in defence of her stores, and hearing voices, was sure she had trapped the thieves. She had already passed on the alarm, and in a few moments, acting on a preconcerted signal, Mr. Cox and several of the farm hands burst upon the scene, ready to knock down and secure intruders.

Explanations naturally followed. It seemed that nearly everyone in the camp had private and separately arranged watch parties, each unconscious of the others' vigilance, and that all had mistaken their neighbours for burglars. No one quite knew at first whether to be annoyed or amused, but in the end humour won, and a general laugh ensued. As nobody felt disposed to spend the whole night on sentry duty, the matter was settled by Miss Corley and Miss Hoyle proposing to bring their beds and sleep in the marquee for the future.

"I wake easily, so I should hear the very faintest footstep, I'm sure," said Miss Hoyle. "I'm going to keep a revolver under my pillow, too, and I hope you'll spread that information all over the gardens, and add that I'm accustomed to use it, and would as soon shoot a man as look at him."

Whether through fear of Miss Hoyle's bloodthirsty intentions, or with a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Cox was on the watch, the marauders did not repeat their midnight visit, and left the camp in peace. Miss Hoyle seemed almost disappointed. Being a journalist, she had perhaps hoped to make copy of the adventure, and write a sparkling column for her newspaper. The Grange girls decided that it was not the revolver, but the dread of Miss Gibbs which had scared away the gipsies.

"They've seen her in the fields, you know, and I should think one look would be enough," said Morvyth. "She has a 'Come here, my good man, and let me argue the matter out with you' expression on her face this last day or two that should daunt the most foolhardy. If she caught a burglar she'd certainly sit him down and rub social reform and political economy into him before she let him go!"

CHAPTER XI

Canteen Assistants

The many acres of strawberry gardens were situated some little distance from the camp, so that the walk backwards and forwards occupied about a quarter of an hour each way. Once work was begun, nobody returned to the tents except on some very urgent errand, as the loss of time involved would be great. A really valid excuse occurred one morning, however. Aveline missed her watch, and remembered that she had laid it on the breakfast table in the marquee. It seemed very unsafe to leave it there, so she reported the matter to Miss Gibbs, who told her to go at once and fetch it, and sent Raymonde with her, not liking her to have the walk alone. The two girls were rather glad of the excuse. They were not shirkers, but the picking made their backs tired, and the run through the fields was a welcome change. They found the watch still lying on the table in the marquee, and Aveline clasped it round her wrist.

They were leaving the tent when Miss Jones, the canteen matron, bustled in, looking so worried that they ventured to ask: "What's the matter?"

She stopped, as if it were a relief to explode.

"Matter, indeed! You'll have no potatoes or vegetables for your dinner, that's all, and nothing at all for your supper! Mrs. Harper hasn't turned up, and I can't leave the place with nobody about. I meant to go to Ledcombe this morning for fresh supplies, and it's early-closing day, too, the shops will shut at one. Oh, dear! I can't think what's to be done! These village helps are more trouble than they're worth."

Mrs. Harper, the cook, had failed the camp before, taking an occasional day off, without any previous notice, to attend to her domestic affairs at home. Miss Jones knew from former experience that she would either stroll in casually about midday, or more probably would not come at all until tomorrow. In the meantime fifty people required meals, and the situation was urgent.

“Couldn’t we go to Ledcombe for you?” suggested Raymonde.

The matron’s face cleared; she jumped at the proposition.

“Geordie’s somewhere about the buildings. He’d harness the pony for you, if you can manage to drive. I’ll give you a list of what’s needed. The meat’s come, and I can put that on to stew, and get the puddings ready, and if you’ll be back by eleven there’ll be time to wash the potatoes. It’s only half-past eight now. I’ll write down all I want done.”

It was impossible to go back to the gardens and ask permission from Miss Gibbs. The girls considered that the matron’s authority was sufficient to justify the expedition, which was certainly for the benefit of the camp. Neither of them had ever handled the reins in her life before, so the drive would be a decided adventure. 126

Armed with a long list of necessaries, two huge market baskets, and Miss Jones’s hand-bag containing a supply of money, they started off to the farm to find Geordie, a half-witted boy who did odd jobs about the fold-yard. After a considerable hunt through the barns they discovered him at last inside the pigsty, and bribed him with twopence to go and catch the pony. Dandy was enjoying himself in the field, and did not come readily; indeed, the girls were almost despairing before he was finally led in by his forelock. The little conveyance was a small, very old-fashioned gig, and though in its far-off youth it may have possessed a smart appearance, it was now decidedly more useful than ornamental. The varnish was worn and scratched, the cushions had been re-covered with cheap American cloth, the waterproof apron was threadbare, and one of the splash-boards was split. The harness also was of the most ancient description, and the rough pony badly needed clipping, so that the whole turn-out was deplorably shabby and second-rate.

“It’s hardly the kind of thing one would drive in round the Park!” laughed Aveline.

“Scarcely! It’s the queerest little egg-box on two wheels I’ve ever seen. But what does it matter? Nobody knows us in Ledcombe. The main point is, will it get us over the ground?”

“I wish we’d bicycles instead!”

“But we couldn’t bring back a whole cargo of stores on them. I think it’s top-hole!”

With much laughter and many little jokes the girls tucked themselves into their funny conveyance, evidently greatly to the interest of Dandy, who turned his head anxiously as they mounted the step.

“He do be a wise ’un!” explained Geordie. “You see, sometimes Mr. Rivers takes his father-in-law, as weighs seventeen stone, and, with a calf or maybe a young pig as well, it do make a big load. Dandy don’t be one to overwork hisself. I reckon you’ll have to use the whip to he!”

Neither of the girls had even the most elementary experience of driving, but Raymonde, as the elder, and the one who in general possessed the greater amount of nerve, boldly seized the reins and armed herself with the whip. Geordie released Dandy’s head, and gave him a sounding smack as a delicate hint to depart, a proceeding which brought clouds of dust from his shaggy coat, and caused him to scramble suddenly forward, and plunge down the lane at quite an adventurous and stylish pace.

“If he won’t go, just cuss at him!” yelled Geordie as a last piece of advice.

Though Dandy might make a gallant beginning, he had no intention of breaking the record for speed, and at the end of a few hundred yards dropped into an ambling jog-trot, a form of locomotion which seemed to jolt the badly hung little gig to its uttermost.

“It’s rather a painful form of exercise!” gasped Aveline, setting her feet firmly in an attempt to avoid the jarring. “I believe something must be wrong with the springs. Can’t you make him go faster?”

“Only if I beat him; and then suppose he runs away?”

“Well, if he does, we’ll each cling on to one rein and pull. I suppose driving is pretty much like steering a bicycle. Is the rule of the road the same?”

“Of course. Don’t be silly !”

“Well, I never can make out why it’s different for foot-passengers. Why should they go to the right, and vehicles to the left?”

“You may be certain all motors will take the middle of the road, at any rate. We shall have to be prepared to make a dash for the hedge when we hear a

‘too-hoo’ round the corner. I’ve no mind to be run over and squashed out flat!”

“Like the naughty children who teased Diogenes in an old picture-book I used to have. I always thought it was a lovely idea of his to start the tub rolling, and simply flatten them out like pancakes. I expect it’s a true incident, if we only knew. One of those things that are not historical, but so probable that you’re sure they must have happened. He’d reason it out by philosophy first, and feel it was a triumph of mind over matter. Perhaps his chuckles when he saw the result were the origin of the term ‘a cynical laugh’. The children in the picture looked so exactly like pieces of rolled pastry when the tub had done its work.”

“I don’t think the motors would have any more compunction than Diogenes, so the moral is—give them as wide a berth as possible. If we were driving a big hay-cart, I’d enjoy blocking the way!”

They had turned out of the lane, and were now on the high road to Ledcombe, but progressing at an extremely slow pace. Raymonde ventured to apply the whip, but on the pony’s thick coat it appeared to produce as slight an impression as the tickling of a fly, and, when she endeavoured to give a more efficacious flick, she got the lash ignominiously entangled in the harness. There was nothing for it but to pull up, and for Aveline to climb laboriously from the trap, and release the much-knotted piece of string. Rendered more careful by this catastrophe, Raymonde wielded her whip with caution, and gave what encouragement she could by jerking the reins vigorously, and occasionally ejaculating an energetic “Go on, Dandy!” The pony, however, was a cunning little creature, and, knowing perfectly well that he was in amateur hands, took full advantage of the situation. Under the excuse of a very slight hill he reduced his pace to a crawl, and began to crop succulent mouthfuls of grass from the hedge-bank, as a means of combining pleasure with business. It was only by judicious proddings with the butt-end of the whip that he could be induced to hasten his steps.

In spite of the difficulties with Dandy, the drive was enjoyable. The country was very pretty, for they were nearing the hills, and the landscape was more diversified than in the immediate neighbourhood of the camp. They passed through a beech wood, where the sun was glinting through leaves as transparent and delicate as fairies’ wings.

“I feel like primeval man to-day,” said Aveline. “The wander fever is on me, and I want to see fresh things.”

“We shall be in Ledcombe soon.”

“I don’t mean towns; it’s something much subtler—different fields, unexplored woods, a new piece of river, or even a patch of grass with flowers I haven’t found before.” 130

“I know,” agreed Raymonde. “It’s the feeling one had when one was small, and read about how the youngest prince set out into the great wide world to seek his fortune. I always envied him.”

“Or the knights-errant—they had a splendid time roaming through the forest, and tilting a spear against anyone who was ready for single combat. One might lead a very merry life yet, like Robin Hood and his band, in the ‘good greenwood’, though we shouldn’t be ‘hunting the King’s red deer’.”

“It was pretty much like camp life, I dare say, only a little rougher than ours. More like the gipsy diggings.”

“Talking of gipsies, I believe you’ve conjured them up. That looks like a caravan over there. I expect it is some more of the tribe coming to pick strawberries.”

The gipsies, collected in a group in the roadway, were loudly bewailing a catastrophe, for their horse had just fallen down dead. Until they could obtain another they must needs stay by the roadside, and could not get on to the gardens.

“They’re a handsome set,” said Aveline, taking out her camera, which she had brought with her. “Just look at the children!”

“It’s the mother that attracts me most,” said Raymonde.

The woman, indeed, was a beautiful specimen of Romany blood, tall and dark, with great flashing eyes and coarse black hair. She resembled a man more than the gentler sex. She wore a very short red skirt, and had a little barrel hung over her shoulder by a strap. 131

“I wish I’d brought my camera!” murmured Raymonde. “I simply hadn’t room to stuff it in. It was a choice between it and my night-gear, and I thought Gibbie’d treat me to jaw-wag if I left out my pyjamas.”

Aveline descended from the trap to take her photo, hoping to get a snapshot of the gipsies, just as they were, grouped in dramatic attitudes round the dead horse. At the sight of two well-dressed strangers, however, the tribal instincts asserted themselves, and the woman was pushed hurriedly forward by the rest.

“Tell your fortune, my pretty lady!” she began to Aveline in a half-bold, half-wheedling voice. “Cross the poor gipsy’s hand with a shilling and she’ll read the stars for you!”

“No, thanks!” said Aveline, rather scared by the woman’s jaunty, impudent manner. “I only wanted to take a photo.”

“Cross the gipsy’s hand first, lady, before you take her photo. Don’t you want to know the future, lady? I can read something in your face that will surprise you. Just a shilling, lady—only a shilling!”

The rest of the tribe were approaching the trap and begging from Raymonde, looking so rough and importunate that the girls began to be thoroughly alarmed, and afraid for the safety of the money they had brought with them. Aveline regretted her folly in having dismounted from the gig, and backed towards it again, pestered by the gipsy. She did not want a photo now, only to get away as swiftly as possible. But that the dark-eyed crew did not seem disposed to allow. A dusky hand was laid on the pony’s reins, and a voluble tongue poured forth a jumble of planets and predictions. The situation had grown extremely unpleasant for the girls, when fortunately a cart was seen coming in the distance. The gipsies melted away instantly, Aveline jumped into the trap, and Raymonde whipped up Dandy, who evidently resenting on his own account the tribe’s interference, set off at a swinging pace, and soon left the caravan behind. In another ten minutes they had reached the outskirts of Ledcombe, and arrived at civilization.

The little country town was one of those sleepy places where you could almost shoot a cannon down the High Street without injuring anybody. There were shops with antiquated-looking goods in the windows; a market hall, closed except on Tuesdays; a church with a picturesque tower, a bank, and a large number of public-houses. It seemed to the girls as if almost every other building displayed a green dragon, or a red lion, or a black boar, or some other sign to indicate that the excessive thirst of the inhabitants

could be satisfied within. Raymonde felt rather nervous at driving in the town, but fortunately, being a Thursday morning, there was little traffic in the streets. Had it been market day she might have got into difficulties. She sat outside in the gig while Aveline went into the shops and purchased the various commodities on Miss Jones's list. These were so many, that by the time everything had been bought the gig was crammed to overflowing, leaving only just room for the two girls. Raymonde sat with her feet on a sack of potatoes, Aveline clutched the big baskets full of loaves and vegetables, while parcels were piled up on the floor and on the seat. Their business had taken them longer than they expected, and the church clock warned them that they must hurry if the potatoes were to be cooked in time for dinner. As soon as they were clear of the town, Raymonde attempted to communicate the urgency of the case to Dandy. Her efforts were in vain, however. That faithless quadruped utterly refused to proceed faster than an ambling jog-trot, and took no notice of whipping, prodding or poking, beyond flicking his ears as if he thought the flies were troublesome.

"We shall never get back to the camp at this rate," lamented Raymonde. "What are we to do?"

"Geordie suggested 'cuss words'," grinned Aveline. "I expect that's what Dandy's accustomed to from most of his drivers."

"Don't suppose he'd be particular as to the exact words," said Raymonde. "Probably it's the tone of voice that does it. Let's wait till he gets to the top of this hill, then I'll prod him again, and we'll both growl out 'Go on!' and see if it has any effect."

"If it hasn't, I shall lead him and run by his head. It would be quicker than this pace."

"We'll try shouting first. Here we are at the top of the hill. Now, both together, in the gruffest voice you can muster. Are you ready? One—two—three—GO ON, DANDY!"

Whether it was really the result of the deep bass tones, or Raymonde's unexpected prod, or merely the fact that they had arrived at the summit of the slope, the girls could not determine, but the effect on the pony was instantaneous. He gathered all four legs together, and gave a sudden jump,

apparently of apprehension, then set off down the hill as fast as he could tear.

“Hold him in!” yelled Aveline, alarmed at such an access of speed.

“I’m trying to!” replied Raymonde, pulling at the reins as hard as her arms would allow.

Dandy, however, seemed determined for once to show his paces, and took no more notice of Raymonde’s checking than he had previously done of her urgings. The little trap was flying like the wind, when without the least warning a most unanticipated thing happened. The worn, crazy old straps of the harness broke, and the pony, giving a wrench that also snapped the reins, ran straight out of the shafts. The gig promptly fell forward, precipitating both girls, amid a shower of parcels, into the road, where they sat for a moment or two almost dazed with the shock, watching the retreating heels of Dandy as he fled in terror of the dangling straps that were hitting him on the flanks.

“Are you hurt?” asked Raymonde at last, getting up and tenderly feeling her scraped shins.

“No, only rather bruised—and astonished,” replied Aveline.

Then the humour of the situation seemed to strike both, for they burst into peals of laughter.

“What are we to do with the trap?” said Aveline. “We can’t drag it back ourselves. And what about the pony? He’s playing truant!”

“And Mr. Rivers said he was so quiet and well-behaved that a baby in arms could drive him!” declared Raymonde, much aggrieved.

“Well, they shouldn’t patch their harness with bits of string!” said Aveline. “It’s very unsafe. I noticed it before we started out, but I supposed it would be all right. Hallo! Here’s Dandy back! Somebody’s caught him!”

It was the gipsy woman who made her appearance, leading the pony. She looked rather scared, and much relieved when she saw Raymonde and Aveline standing safe and sound in the middle of the road.

“I thought for sure someone was killed!” she remarked when she reached the scene of the accident. Though the girls had been frightened of her

before, they were glad to see her now, for they had no notion what to do next. She at once assumed command of the situation, sent one of the children, who had followed her, back to the caravan to fetch her husband, and with his assistance set to work and patched up the harness.

“We’re tinkers by trade, lady, so we know how to put in a rivet or two, enough to take you safely home, at any rate; but they don’t ought to send that harness out again, it’s as rotten as can be. Mr. Rivers’s, did you say? Why, it’s his farm as we’re going to, to pick strawberries, as soon as we can get there, with our horse lying dead!”

A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind, and before the harness was mended the girls had struck up quite a friendship with the gipsies, which was further cemented by the transference of half a crown from Raymonde’s purse to the brown hand of the woman, and the bestowal of the greater part of Aveline’s chocolates into the mouths of the dark-eyed children.

Dandy was placed between the shafts once more, and the parcels were restored to the gig. The girls, being doubtful as to the security of the hastily-mended harness, did not venture to mount inside, but led the pony by the head, lest he should be inspired to race down another hill. It was a slow progress back, and the workers were just returning from the fields as they reached the camp. Naturally there were no potatoes for dinner that day, though Raymonde and Aveline congratulated themselves that the bread was just in time. They were the heroines of the hour when they related their adventures, and even Miss Gibbs did not scold them, though they afterwards heard her remarking to Miss Hoyle that Miss Jones was a poor manager, and ought to make better arrangements about catering.

“Gibbie’s got to let fly at somebody!” chuckled Raymonde. “If it can’t be us, it’s someone else, but she’d better not try criticizing Miss Jones’s methods to her face, or there’ll be fighting in the camp.”

“Wouldn’t I like to see a match between them!” sighed Aveline. “I’d stake my all on Gibbie, any day!”

“I don’t know,” said Raymonde reflectively. “Gibbie has fire and spirit, and powers of sarcasm, and traditions of Scotch ancestry; but there’s a suggestion of icy stubbornness about Miss Jones that looks capable of

standing out against anybody with bulldog grit. I believe I'd back Miss Jones, if it came to the point!"

CHAPTER XII

Amateur Detectives

The girls felt that their short week of strawberry picking was crammed more full of experiences than a whole term of ordinary school life. There were so many interesting people at the camp who had been working at various absorbing occupations, and were ready to talk about their adventures. Miss Hoyle could give accounts of celebrities whom she had been sent to interview by her newspaper; Miss Gordon, the Social Settlement secretary, had stories of factory girls and their funny ways and sayings to relate; Nurse Gibbons had much to tell about her training in a London hospital; Miss Parker was an authority on munition work, and Miss Lowe, an artist, drew spirited sketches of everybody and everything, to the amusement of all. There was a great feeling of comradeship and bonhomie in the camp; everyone was ready to be friendly, and to meet everybody else on equal terms. There was only one member who did not seem responsive and ready to mix with the others. This was Mrs. Vernon, a shy, reserved little woman, who never blossomed out into any confidences. She would sit and listen attentively to all the tales told by Miss Hoyle and Miss Parker, and would even question the latter about her munition work, but she gave no information at all respecting herself or her occupation. It was rumoured that she was a widow, but the report was not confirmed. The Marlowe Grange girls did not much like her, and took very little notice of her. It was the easiest thing in the world to ignore her, for she seemed to shrink from even the most ordinary civilities, and would vouchsafe nothing but a curt reply when spoken to.

On the morning after the expedition to Ledcombe there was considerable excitement in Raymonde's tent. Katherine woke up with her face covered with a rash. Morvyth, who slept next to her, noticed it immediately, and told her that she had better stay in bed until Miss Gibbs saw her. Naturally Miss Gibbs was in a state of great apprehension, and feared that Katherine must be sickening for measles, scarlatina, chicken-pox, or some other infectious complaint. Manifestly the first thing to be done was to send for a doctor.

The nearest medical man lived at Ledcombe, and in order to save time Raymonde and Aveline offered to walk in to Shipley village, and telephone to him from the post office there.

“Nice little business if Kitty starts an epidemic in the camp!” said Aveline as they went along. “I suppose we couldn’t go back to school?”

“No, and we shouldn’t be allowed to pick strawberries either, if we were infectious. They’d turn us out of the camp, and treat us like lepers.”

“Oh, I say! It would be no fun at all!”

They had reached Shipley by this time—a little quaint old-world place consisting of one village street of picturesque cottages, most of them covered with roses or vines, and with flowery gardens in front. The tiny church stood on a mound, surrounded by trees, and looked far smaller than the handsome vicarage whose great gates opened opposite the school. The post office appeared also to be a general store, where articles of every description were on sale. From the ceiling were suspended tin pails, coils of clothes-line, rows of boots or shoes, pans, kettles, brooms, and lanterns, while the walls were lined with shelves containing groceries and draperies, stationery, hosiery, quack medicines, garden seeds, and, in fact, an absolutely miscellaneous assortment of goods and chattels, some old, some new, some fresh, some faded, some appetizing, and some decidedly stale.

Raymonde asked to use the telephone, and retired to the little boxed-off portion of the shop reserved for that instrument, where she successfully rang up Dr. Wilton, and received his promise to call during the morning at the camp. This most pressing business done, they proceeded to execute a few commissions for Miss Jones, Miss Lowe, and several other members of the party. Miss Hoyle had begged them to buy a few yards of anything with which she might trim a large shady rush hat she had brought with her, so the girls asked the postmistress to show them some white ribbon. That elderly spinster, having first, with considerable ingenuity, satisfied her curiosity as to the object for which they required it, commenced a vigorous hunt among the miscellaneous collection of boxes in her establishment.

“I know I have some,” she soliloquized, “for it was only six weeks ago I sold a yard and a half to Mrs. Cox, to finish a tea-cosy she was making. Where can I have put it? No, this is lead-pencils and india-rubber, and this,

neuralgic powders and babies' comforters. It might have got into the small wares, but I had that out only yesterday. Why, here it is, after all, among the tapes and buttons!"

The girls soon found that shopping at Shipley possessed an immense advantage over kindred expeditions in town. When there was only a single article, no selection could be made; it was impossible to be bewildered with too many fineries, and "This or nothing" offered a unique simplicity in the way of choice. Miss Pearson, the postmistress, decided for them that the ribbon was the right width and quality, and even offered a few hints on the subject of trimming.

"I believe she's longing to do it herself!" whispered Aveline. "Are those specimens of her millinery in the window? I'd as soon wear a cauliflower on my head as that erection with the squirms of velvet and the lace border!"

"You're sure three yards will be sufficient?" pattered the little storekeeper. "Well, of course you can come for more if you want. I'm not likely to be selling it out, and, if anybody should happen to come and ask for the rest of it, I'll get them to wait till you've finished trimming your hat. Dear me! If I haven't mislaid my scissors now! I was cutting flowers with them in the garden before breakfast, and I must have put them down in the middle of the sweet peas, or on the onion bed. It wouldn't take me five minutes to find them. You'd rather not wait? Then perhaps you'll excuse my using this."¹⁴¹

Without further apology, Miss Pearson seized the carving-knife with which she usually operated on the cheese and bacon, and, giving it a hasty wipe upon her apron, proceeded to saw through the ribbon, wrapping up the three yards in a scrap of newspaper.

"I'm sorry I'm out of paper bags," she announced airily, "but the traveller only calls once in six months. Let me know how you get on with the hat, and, if you want any help that I can give you, just bring it across to me, and I'll do my best. By the by, I suppose you young ladies go to a fine boarding-school? Do you learn foreign languages there?"

"Why, yes—French and German and Latin—most of us," replied Raymonde, rather astonished.

"Then perhaps you'll be so good as to help me, for there's a letter arrived this morning I can make nothing of. It's certainly not in English, but

whether it's in French or German or Russian or what, I can't say, for I'm no authority on languages."

"Let me look at it, and I will do my best."

Miss Pearson bustled to her postmistress's desk, and with an air of great importance produced the letter. Raymonde took it carelessly enough, but when she had grasped a few sentences her expression changed. She read it through to the end, then laid it down on the counter without offering to translate.

"This is not addressed to you, I think," she remarked.

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"You're quite right, it's for Martha Verney; but she's no scholar, so I opened it for her, like I do for many folks in Shipley. I was quite taken aback when I couldn't make it out, and Martha said: 'Miss Pearson, if you can't read it, I'm sure nobody else can!' But I told her to leave it, in case anyone came into the shop who could."

"Where's the envelope?" asked Raymonde briefly.

"It's here. The writing is small and queer, isn't it? I had to put on both my pairs of glasses, one over the other, before I could see properly."

"You've made a very great mistake," said Raymonde. "The letter is addressed to Mrs. Vernon, Poste Restante, Shipley."

"Well, I never! I thought it was Martha Verney. There are no Vernons in Shipley."

"There's a Mrs. Vernon at the camp. No doubt it's intended for her."

"Well, I am sorry," replied Miss Pearson. "To think of me being postmistress all these years, and making such a mistake! I'll put it in an official envelope and readdress it. She'll get it to-morrow. Is it important? I suppose you were able to understand it?" with a suggestive glance at the letter, as if she hoped Raymonde would reveal its contents.

Raymonde, however, did not answer her question.

"I think you had better seal it up at once," she parried, "and drop it into the box, and then you'll feel you've finished with it."

“Oh, it will be all right! I hope I know my duties. If people addressed their envelopes properly in a plain hand, there’d be no mistakes,” snapped Miss Pearson, highly offended, putting back the bone of contention among her papers, and locking the desk. She knew she had been caught tripping, and wished to preserve her official dignity as far as possible. “I’ve opened Martha Verney’s letters for the last fifteen years, and had no complaints,” she added.

“Ave,” said Raymonde, as the two girls left the shop and turned up the lane towards the camp, “that was a most important letter. I didn’t tell that old curiosity-box so, but it was written in German. I’d Fräulein as my governess for four years before I came to school, so I can read German pretty easily, as you know. Well, I couldn’t quite understand everything, but the general drift seems to be that Mrs. Vernon has a husband or a brother or a cousin named Carl, who is interned not so far away from here, and is trying to escape. This evening’s the time fixed, and he’s coming into the neighbourhood of our camp, and she’s to meet him, and give him clothes and money.”

“Good gracious! What are we to do? Go back and ’phone to the police—or tell Mr. Rivers?”

“Neither,” said Raymonde decidedly. “After that idiotic business on Wednesday night, trying to guard the larder with everybody tumbling over everyone else, it’s worse than useless to tell. It would be all over the camp in five minutes, and Mrs. Vernon would hear about it, and go and warn ‘Carl’ somehow. As for the police, they’d spend a week in preliminaries. They’d have to send a constable to look at the letter, and ask questions of us, and Miss Pearson, and Mr. Rivers, and no end of red-tape nonsense; and by that time Carl would be safely out of the country, and on to a neutral vessel. No, my idea is to ‘set a thief to catch a thief’. I’m going to ask the gipsies to help us. If anybody can deal with the business, they can!”

“Topping!” exclaimed Aveline. “I’d back the gipsies against the best detectives in England.”

“I’ll go to the field and talk to that woman who caught Dandy for us yesterday. Mr. Rivers sent a horse last night, and brought their caravan to the farm, so they’ll all be at work picking this morning. Don’t tell a single soul in the camp. You and I will watch Mrs. Vernon, and follow her if she

goes out, and the gipsies shall keep guard in the wood where she's evidently arranged to meet him. They'll get a reward if they catch him."

"That'll spur them on, as well as the sport of the thing!" laughed Aveline.

The girls were fearfully excited at the idea of such an adventure. They had never liked Mrs. Vernon, and now saw good ground for their suspicions. They wondered how much information she had gleaned at the camp, for Miss Hoyle and Miss Parker were not very discreet in their communications. They walked at once to the gardens, found their Romany friend among the strawberries, and with much secrecy told her the whole affair. As they had expected, she rose magnificently to the occasion.

"You leave it to us gipsies," she assured them. "Bless you, we're used to this kind of job. There's a lot of us altogether working here, and I'll pass the word on. There'll be scouts this evening behind nearly every hedge, and if any German comes this way we'll get him, I promise you. You keep your eye on that Mrs. Vernon! We may want a signal. Look here, lady; come to the back of that shed, and I'll teach you the gipsies' whistle. Anybody with Romany blood in them's bound to answer it."

The gipsy's whistle was a peculiar bird-like call, not very easy to imitate. Raymonde had to try again and again before she could accomplish it to her instructress's satisfaction. At last, however, she had it perfectly.

"Don't use it till you must," cautioned her dark-eyed confederate; "but, if we hear it, it will bring the lot of us out. Now I must go back to my picking, or the agent will be turning me off."

"And I must rush back to the camp," declared Raymonde, remembering that Miss Gibbs, who had stayed with the invalid, would expect a report of the visit to the telephone. The excitement of the German letter had temporarily banished Katherine's illness from her thoughts, and she reproached herself for her unkindness in forgetting her friend. The doctor called during the course of the morning, and, after examining the patient, pronounced her complaint to be neither measles, chicken-pox, nor anything of an infectious character, but merely a rash due to the eating of too many strawberries.

"They cause violent dyspepsia in some people," he remarked. "I will make up a bottle of medicine, if you can send anybody over on a bicycle for it this afternoon. You mustn't eat any more strawberries, young lady. They'd be

simply poison to you at present. Oh yes! you may go and pick them; the occupation will do you no harm.”

Much relieved that they had not started a centre of infection in the camp, Katherine and Miss Gibbs returned to work after lunch, the latter issuing special instructions to her girls against the excessive consumption of the fruit they were gathering. Katherine was inclined to pose as an interesting invalid, and to claim sympathy, but the general feeling of her schoolfellows was against that attitude, and the verdict was “Greedy pig! Serves her right!” which was not at all to her satisfaction.

“You’re most unkind!” she wailed. “You’ve every one of you eaten quite as many strawberries as I have, only I’ve a delicate digestion, and can’t stand them like you can. You’re a set of ostriches! I believe you’d munch turnips if you were sent to hoe them! I don’t mind what you say. So there!”

As half-past six drew on, and most of the workers were handing in their last baskets for the day, Raymonde and Aveline kept watchful eyes on Mrs. Vernon. They fully expected that she might disappear on the way back to the camp, so, without making their purpose apparent, they shadowed her, pretending that they were looking for flowers in the hedge. They hung about in the vicinity of her tent until supper-time, and changed their seats at table so that they might sit nearer to her in the marquee. When the meal was over, and the washing up and water carrying finished, nearly everybody collected for an amateur concert. Miss Hoyle had a banjo, which she played atrociously out of tune, but on which she nevertheless strummed accompaniments while the rest roared out “Little Grey Home in the West,” “The Long, Long Trail,” and other popular songs. It was certainly not classical music, but it was amusing; and, as everybody joined in the choruses, the company consisted entirely of performers, with no audience except the cows in the adjacent pasture. Even Mrs. Vernon was singing, though with an inscrutable look in her grey eyes hardly suggestive of enjoyment.

“She’s doing it as a blind!” whispered Raymonde to Aveline. “Don’t let her out of your sight for a single moment!”

When the fun was at its height, and everybody seemed fully occupied with ragtimes, two pairs of watchful eyes noticed Mrs. Vernon slip quietly away in the direction of her tent. She went inside for a moment, then, coming out

again with a parcel in her hand, walked rapidly towards a stile that led into the fields. Raymonde and Aveline allowed her to reach the other side of it, then flew like the wind to a gap in the hedge through which they could see into the next meadow. She was walking along the path among the hay, in the direction of the wood, and was no doubt congratulating herself upon getting rid of her camp-mates so easily. There was nothing at all unusual in the fact of her taking a stroll; many of the workers did so in the evenings, though they generally went two or three together. Had it not been for the letter she had read at the post office, Raymonde's suspicions would probably never have been aroused. The two girls crossed the stile, and began to follow Mrs. Vernon as if they, too, were merely enjoying an ordinary walk, leaving a considerable distance between her and themselves. She turned round once, but as they were in the shadow of the hedge she did not see them. It was a more difficult business to track her through the wood. The light was waning fast here, and in her brown costume she was sometimes almost indistinguishable among the tree-trunks and bushes. That she was going to some specially arranged trysting-place they were certain. Using infinite caution, they followed her. Towards the middle of the wood she paused, looked round, and, seeing nobody (for the girls were hidden behind a tangle of bramble), she stood still and called softly. There was no answer. She called again, waited a few moments, and then began to walk farther on into the wood. She was at a point where two paths divided, and she chose the one to the right.

"Ave," whispered Raymonde, "we must spread ourselves out. She's evidently looking for 'Carl', and he may be on the other path. We mustn't miss him. You follow her, and I'll take the way to the left."

Aveline nodded and obeyed. She did not much relish going alone, but she had a profound respect for her chum's judgment. The path which Raymonde had chosen was the narrower and more overgrown. She stole along, listening and watching. After a few hundred yards she came to an ancient yew-tree, the trunk of which, worn with age, was no more than a hollow shell. It would be perfectly possible for anyone to hide here. An idea occurred to her, venturesome indeed, but certainly feasible. Raymonde was not a girl to stop and consider risks. If an escaped German were in the wood, it was her duty to her king and country to try to effect his arrest. All her patriotism rose within her, and, though her heart thumped rather loudly,

she told herself that she was not afraid. Going into the middle of the path, she called as Mrs. Vernon had done, then dived into the shelter of the hollow tree.

“If he’s anywhere near here, that’ll bring him!” she thought.

For a moment all was silence, then came a crashing among the bushes, and an answering call. Someone was coming in the direction of the yew-tree.

Peeping from her hiding-place, Raymonde could just distinguish a man’s figure advancing through the gathering darkness of the wood. Then awful fear fell upon her. Suppose he were to look inside the hollow tree and find her? He was a German, and a desperate man; she was a girl, and alone. Why, oh why had she sent Aveline away? He would be quite capable of murdering her.

In that moment of agony she bitterly repented her folly. To be sure, there were the gipsies, but she was not certain whether they were really within call, and would come quickly in answer to her signal. The footsteps drew nearer, they were almost at the tree; she shrank to the farthest corner, trusting that in the darkness her brown serge school costume might escape notice. Just at that moment another cautious shout sounded through the wood. The footsteps stopped, so near to her tree that Raymonde could see the flap of a coat through the opening; then they turned, and went in the direction of the voice. Raymonde drew a long breath of intense relief, and peeped out. The man was tacking down a little incline towards the brook, guided by a further call.

“I’ve seen he’s here, and I know he’s going down there to meet her,” thought Raymonde. “It’s time for me to act.”

She slipped from the tree, ran nearer to the edge of the wood, and gave the peculiar blackbird-like whistle which the Romany woman had taught her. Its effect was immediate. Within ten seconds one of the gipsy boys ran up to her, and she told him briefly what had occurred.

“I’ll pass the signal on,” he replied. “There’s a ring of us all round the wood. We won’t let him go, you bet!”

He gave a low cry like the hooting of an owl, which was at once answered from the right and the left.

“That means ‘close the ring,’” he explained. “We’ve all sorts of calls that we understand and talk to each other by when we’re in the woods. They’ll all be moving on now.”

The gipsy boy went forward, and Raymonde, with her heart again thumping wildly, followed at a little distance. This was indeed an adventure. She wondered where Aveline was, and if she were equally frightened. She wished she had not left her friend alone.

The gipsies, well versed in wood-craft, walked as silently as hunters stalking a buck. She would not have known they were within a mile of her, had she not been told. Her boy guide had vanished temporarily among the bushes. She stood still for a few minutes, uncertain what to do.

Then there was a shout, and a sound of running footsteps crashing through the bushes, excited voices called, and presently between the trees came five or six of the gipsies hauling a man whose arms they had already bound with a rope. The Romany woman, herself as strong as any man, was helping with apparent gusto. When she saw Raymonde she ran to her.

“We’ve got him right enough, lady!” she exclaimed triumphantly. “They’re going to take him to the farm, and borrow a trap to take him to the jail at Ledcombe. We nabbed him by the brook as neat as anything. The other young lady’s over there.”

“Aveline! Aveline!” called Raymonde, rushing in pursuit of her friend.

The two girls clung to each other eagerly. They were both thoroughly frightened.

“Let’s go back to the camp,” gasped Aveline. “I daren’t stay here any longer. Oh! I was terrified when you left me!”

“What’s become of Mrs. Vernon?” asked Raymonde.

Aveline did not know. In the hullabaloo of the pursuit the woman had been allowed to escape. She had the wisdom not to return to the camp, and was indeed never seen again in the neighbourhood. Great was the excitement at the farm when the gipsies brought in the German. Mr. Rivers himself undertook to drive them and their prisoner to the jail.

Raymonde and Aveline had a thrilling story to tell in the marquee that night, where everybody collected to hear the wonderful experience, those who had

already gone to their tents donning dressing-gowns and coming to join the interested audience. Miss Gibbs seemed divided between a sense of her duty as a schoolmistress to scold her pupils for undertaking such an extremely wild proceeding, and a glow of pride that her girls had actually succeeded in effecting the capture of an escaped enemy. On the whole, pride and patriotism prevailed, and the pair were let off with only a caution against madcap adventures.

Raymonde found herself the idol of the gipsies at the strawberry gardens next day.

“We’re to have a big reward, lady, for copping that German!” said the Romany woman. “It’ll buy us a new horse for our caravan. Will you please accept this basket from us? We wish we’d anything better to offer you. I’ll teach you three words of Romany—let me whisper! Don’t you forget them, and if you’re ever in trouble, and want help from the gipsies, you’ve only to say those words to them, and they’ll give their last drop of blood for you. But don’t tell anybody else, lady; the words are only for you.”

“What was she saying to you?” asked Morvyth curiously.

“I can’t tell you,” replied Raymonde. “It’s a secret!”



“RAYMONDE DREW A LONG BREATH OF INTENSE RELIEF, AND PEEPED OUT”

CHAPTER XIII

Camp Hospitality

The brief visit at the camp was vanishing with almost incredible rapidity; the week would finish on Saturday, but Miss Gibbs had decided to stay till Monday morning, so as to put in the full period of work on Saturday afternoon. Sunday was of course a holiday, and the pickers enjoyed a well-earned rest. Those who liked went to the little church in Shipley village, the clergyman of which also held an outdoor service in the stackyard at the farm for all whom he could persuade to come.

In the afternoon the members of the camp gave themselves up to hospitality. They had small and select private tea-parties, and invited each other, the hostesses generally being "at home" in some cosy spot beneath a tree, or under the shelter of a hedge, where the alfresco repast was spread forth, each guest bringing her own mug and plate. Raymonde, Morvyth, Katherine, and Aveline were the recipients of a very special invitation, and Miss Gibbs assenting, they accepted it with glee. Miss Lowe, the artist with whom they had struck up a friendship, had removed on Friday from the camp to lodgings at an old farm near the village, and she had asked her four school-girl acquaintances to come for early dinner and tea, so that they might spend the afternoon with her.

Miss Lowe was an interesting personality. She sketched beautifully, and had shown the girls a few charming specimens of her work. She had been painting in the neighbourhood for some weeks before the strawberry picking began, and had many quaint accounts to give of her experiences. Her quarters in the village had been decidedly uncomfortable, and it seemed very uncertain whether the rooms she had engaged at the farm would turn out to be any improvement.

"You'll have to take pot-luck if you come to dinner with me," she announced to her guests. "I don't believe my landlady has even the most elementary notions of cooking. The meal will probably be a surprise."

“We shan’t mind that!” the girls assured her.

Miss Lowe had chosen her lodgings more for the sake of the picturesque than for creature comforts. The farm-house was an extremely ancient building, and its very dilapidation rendered it a more suitable subject for her brush. It consisted of a front later-date portion, and a much older part at the back, the two being really separate blocks, connected by a large central hall. This hall, which measured about twenty feet square and thirty feet in height, must at one time have belonged to a family of some pretensions. The walls to a height of fifteen feet were covered with splendid oak panelling, grey with neglect, and above that were ornamented with plaster designs in bas-relief—lions, unicorns, wild boars, stags, and other heraldic devices, a form of decoration which was also continued over the ceiling. The back part¹⁵⁵ of the house was evidently the older; the same beautiful plaster-work was to be seen, both in the bedrooms and kitchen, together with fine black oak beams. There was a winding stair to the upper story, with narrow windows that suggested a castle, and that dull, dim, soft yellow-brown light about everything which only seems reflected from ancient walls. The front portion consisted of two great sitting-rooms, one of which was empty, while the other had been arranged for the accommodation of visitors. Neither walls nor window-sills had been touched with paint for half a century, and they were sadly in need of attention. The house was the property of an old miser, who refused to spend a penny on repairs, and every year things went on from bad to worse. The woodwork of the wide old staircase was rotting away, most of the doors were off their hinges, and the rain came through several spots in the roof. Like many another fine mansion, it had descended from hall to farm-house, and showed now but faded relics of its former grandeur.

The farmer and his family lived entirely in the back premises, and the whole of the front was given up to their lodgers.

“I shouldn’t like to sleep here alone,” said Morvyth, as Miss Lowe acted cicerone and showed them through the house. “These long, gloomy, eerie corridors give me the shivers!”

“I felt the same,” admitted their friend, “so I persuaded Miss Barton to join me. She’s as mad on the antique as I am, and together we enjoy ourselves immensely, though we should each feel spooky alone. Our first business last

night was to turn five bats out of our bedroom. There's an open trap-door¹⁵⁶ in the ceiling of the landing, and a whole colony of them seem to be established up there; they flit up and down the stairs at dusk! One has to sacrifice comfort to the picturesque. I think I begin to have just a glimmer of an understanding why some people prefer new houses to old!"

Both Miss Lowe and Miss Barton certainly found their romantic proclivities came into collision with their preconceived ideas of the fitness of things. Mrs. Marsden, their landlady, was a kind soul who did her best; but she had all her farm work and a large family of children to cope with, so it was small wonder that cobwebs hung in the passages and the dust lay thick and untouched. It is sometimes wiser not to see behind the scenes in country rooms. Miss Barton had set up her easel in the great hall, and absolutely revelled in painting the grey oak and plaster-work, nevertheless she had a tale of woe to unfold.

"They use the place as a dairy," she explained, "and they keep the milk in large, uncovered earthenware pots. First I found the cat was lapping away at it, and I jumped up and scared it off; and then the dog strayed in and began to help itself, and I had to rush again and chase it away. Then the unwashed baby, still in its dirty little night-gown, brought a mug and kept dipping it into the pot to get drinks. We're going to take a jug into the field at milking-time this afternoon, and ensure our particular portion straight from the cow."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Morvyth, looking considerably relieved. ¹⁵⁷

"Perhaps it's as well we don't see most foodstuffs in the making," moralized Aveline.

"Decidedly! Isn't there a story of a barrel of treacle, and a little nigger baby being found at the bottom?"

"And an attendant who fell by mistake into the sausage machine," added Miss Lowe, laughing. "I suppose one ought to be judiciously blind if one is to preserve one's peace of mind."

"One may shut one's eyes, but one can't do away with one's nose!" persisted Miss Barton. "There was the most horrible and peculiar and objectionable odour in the hall yesterday morning, all the time I was painting. I came to the conclusion that a rat must have died recently behind

the panelling. Then Mrs. Marsden came in with some milk-cans, and she raised a lid from a big pot close to where I was sitting. What do you think was inside? Twelve pounds of beef that she had put down to pickle! I hinted that it was rather high, but she didn't seem to perceive it in the least. She can't have the slightest vestige of a nose!"

"Perhaps, like some tribes of Africans, she prefers her meat gamey. Don't look so alarmed, you poor girls, it's not going to appear on our table for dinner! I ordered a fowl."

"Which was alive only a couple of hours ago, for I saw the children assisting to chase it wildly round the yard and catch it!" put in Miss Barton. "We warned you, when we invited you, not to expect too much!"

Mrs. Marsden's training in the domestic arts had evidently been defective, and her cooking was decidedly eccentric. The fowl turned up at table plucked, certainly, but looking very pale and anæmic with its long untrussed legs sticking helplessly out before it. It was such an absurd object that as soon as the landlady had departed from the room the company exploded.

"How am I to carve the wretched thing?" shrieked Miss Lowe. "I hardly know where its wings are! I've never before seen a chicken served absolutely *au naturel!*"

"I expect it to rise up and walk!" hinned Miss Barton. "It seems hardly decent to have left its claws on! Look at the sauce! It's simply bread and milk! Oh, for the fleshpots of Egypt!"

A ground-rice pudding which followed proved equally astonishing. Miss Lowe had suggested that an egg would be an improvement in its composition, and behold! when it made its appearance there was an egg neatly poached in the middle. The giggling guests rather enjoyed the episode than otherwise. They had come to be entertained, and they certainly found plenty to amuse them, especially in the humorous attitude with which their hostesses viewed all the little inconveniences.

"Perhaps we shall do better at tea-time," said Miss Barton hopefully. "Mrs. Marsden surely can't go very wrong there. We're going to walk to the woods this afternoon. I've bespoken Jenny, the fourth child, as a guide. She's the most quaintly fascinating person. I hope she won't be long; we're waiting for her now."

The girls were all impatient to start for the woods, so, as their little guide was already late, Miss Barton went to the kitchen in search of her, and found her concluding a somewhat lengthy toilet with the assistance of her family. The choicest possessions of several members, in assorted sizes, seemed to have been commandeered, and she was finally turned out in a red serge dress, a black jacket much too large, a feather boa, and a pair of woollen gloves, which, considering that it was quite a hot day, was rank cruelty, though—true daughter of Eve as she was—she seemed so pleased with her appearance that nothing would induce her to pull off her suffocating grandeur. She was not at all shy, and very old-fashioned for her seven years. The girls found her conversation most entertaining as they walked along.

“She is absolutely refreshing!” giggled Raymonde. “The way she shakes out her skirts and manœuvres the sleeves of the big jacket is perfectly lovely. She ought to be a mannikin when she grows up, and try on coats and mantles in shops. Wouldn’t she just enjoy it?”

To Jenny an expedition with six ladies was apparently the opportunity of a lifetime, and she was determined to make the most of it. She volunteered to recite, and wound out a long poem in such a rapid, breathless monotone that it was hardly possible to distinguish a word. The party politely expressed gratitude, whereupon she announced: “I’ll say it for you again!” and plunged at once into an encore.

“For pity’s sake stop her! I’m getting hysterical!” gurgled Morvyth. “She’s like a gramophone record that’s rather blurred and has been set too fast. Thank goodness, here’s the wood! She can’t recite while she’s climbing that stile.”

Everybody decided that the wood was worth the walk. They spent a delicious afternoon lying under the tall straight pines, with the sweet-smelling needles for a bed, watching the delicate and illusive effects of light filtering among the shimmering leaves of birches.

“I feel as if I ought to be picking something!” laughed Katherine, throwing pine cones at Raymonde. “If I live to be a hundred, I’ll never forget this strawberry-gathering business. One got to do it automatically.”

“You know the story, don’t you, of the old man who described himself in the census as a picker?” said Miss Barton. “When he was asked to explain, he said: ‘Well, in June I picks strawberries, and then I picks beans, and then I picks hops, then when them’s over I picks pockets, and then I gets copped and sent to quod, and picks oakum!’ I shouldn’t wonder if some of your gipsy friends, Raymonde, could boast of a similar record.”

“I don’t care—they’re top-hole!” declared Raymonde, sticking up for the tribe.

“Who wants tea?” said Miss Lowe. “We’ve asked Miss Nelson and Miss Porter from the camp, and if we don’t hurry back at once, we shall find them waiting for us when we return, and slanging us for being rude. Come along!”

Miss Lowe had casually informed Mrs. Marsden that she expected a few friends to tea, but had not mentioned anything about special preparation, thinking that they would carry the cups and saucers into the garden, and have it under the trees. Little did they know the surprise their enterprising landlady had in store for them. When they arrived at the farm they found her, dressed in her best attire, waiting at the door to receive them, and she proudly ushered them into the sitting-room, where she had spread forth a meal such as might be set before a particularly hungry assemblage of Sunday School scholars.

A large ham, not yet quite cold, adorned one end of the table, and a big apple-pie the other, while down the centre were seven round jam-tarts, each measuring about seven inches in diameter. The cruets had been put in the middle of the table instead of Miss Barton’s bowl of flowers, and there were several substantial platefuls of currant-bread. It was an extremely warm afternoon, and even to school-girl appetites the sight of such plenty at 4 p.m. was appalling. Miss Lowe’s convulsed apologies sent the visitors into explosions.

“Look at the tarts!” choked Miss Barton. “They’re all made with black-currant jam! There’s one apiece for us, counting the apple-pie. And the currant-bread is half an inch thick! Who’ll take a slice of lukewarm ham? Oh, it’s positively painful to laugh so hard! I never saw such a bean-feast in my life!”

“We certainly can’t consume all these!” echoed Miss Lowe. “The children must eat up some of them for supper. It will take days to get through such a larderful! For once they’ll be satiated with jam-tarts. Well, I suppose it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good. Still, if the baby comes to an untimely end through acute dyspepsia, I shan’t be in the least surprised.”

Mrs. Marsden seemed determined to entertain her guests, and had yet another surprise in store for them. She beckoned them into a little private parlour of her own, and showed them the paintings of her eldest boy, a youth of eighteen, who, she proudly assured them, had never had a drawing lesson in his life. It was not difficult to believe her, for the specimens were so funny that the spectators could hardly keep their faces straight. Horses with about as much shape as those in a child’s Noah’s ark, figures resembling Dutch dolls in rigidity, flowers daubed on with the crudest colours, and the final effort, a bird’s-eye view of the village, consisting chiefly of tiled roofs and chimney-pots in lurid red and black.

“No doubt it has afforded him the supremest delight,” whispered Miss Lowe to Miss Barton, “and it’s evidently a subject of the utmost satisfaction to his mother, so I won’t make carping criticisms, but take it as a moral for the necessity of due humility over one’s own productions. Perhaps mine would be as diverting to an Academician as his are to me.”

In the same room Mrs. Marsden showed her visitors a mysterious oil-painting, black with age and hideous beyond compare, which she informed them was an original portrait of Nell Gwynn. She supposed it to be immensely valuable, and was keeping it safe until prices rose a little higher still, after the war, when she had hopes of launching it on the auction rooms in London, and realizing a sum that would make her family’s fortune.

“An ambition she’ll never realize in this wide world,” said Miss Barton afterwards, “for the thing is absolutely not genuine. It’s not the right period for Nell Gwynn, and it’s so atrociously badly painted that it’s obviously the work of some village artist. She’s in for a big disappointment some day, poor woman! I hadn’t the heart to squash her, when she seemed so proud of it—especially as she was still a little huffy that we hadn’t consumed her black-currant tarts!”

Though physically they were rather weary, the girls were sorry when their week’s strawberry picking came to an end. It was found that when their

canteen bills had been paid, and railway fares subtracted, they had each earned on an average a little over five shillings; some who were quicker pickers exceeding that amount, and others falling below. They decided to pool the general proceeds, and present the sum cleared—£4, 16s. 8d.—to the Hospital for Disabled Soldiers as their “bit” towards their country. They went back to school feeling highly patriotic, and burning to boast of their experiences to those slackers who had chosen the parental roof for their holidays.

“I’d have loved it!” protested Fauvette, “but I really did have a very nice time at home. My cousin was back on leave. He’s in the Flying Corps, and he’s six feet three in his stockings—and—well—I’ve got his photo upstairs, if you’d like to look at it.”

“Oh, we’re all accustomed to gipsies and poachers now, and don’t think anything of airmen!” returned Morvyth nonchalantly (she was apt to sit on Fauvette). “You should see my snapshots of the strawberry pickers!”

“And mine!” broke in Cynthia Greene. “By the by, I wrote my name and school address on a card, and packed it inside one of my strawberry baskets. I put on it: ‘Will the finder kindly write to a blue-eyed, fair-haired girl who feels lonely?’”

“Cynthia, you didn’t!” exploded the others.

“I did—crystal! Why shouldn’t I? Lonely soldiers beg for letters, and it’s as lonely at school as in barracks any day, at least I find it so!”

“Suppose somebody takes you at your word and sends an answer?”

“I heartily and sincerely hope somebody will. It would be absolutely topping!”

CHAPTER XIV

Concerns Cynthia

“Look here!” said Hermie to Raymonde two days later, when the latter was helping the monitress to put away the wood-carving tools; “what’s the matter with Cynthia Greene? She’s behaving in the most idiotic fashion—goes mincing about the school, and sighing, and even mopping her eyes when she thinks anybody’s looking at her. What’s she posing about now?”

“She says she feels lonely—and fair-haired and blue-eyed—at least that’s what she wrote inside her strawberry basket,” volunteered Raymonde.

“What in the name of the Muses do you mean?”

Raymonde explained. The monitress listened aghast.

“Well, I call that the limit!” she exploded. “The little monkey! Why, Gibbie would slay her if she knew! Such an atrociously cheeky, unladylike thing to do, and putting her address here at the Grange! Bringing discredit on the school! I don’t suppose whoever finds it will take any notice.”

“She’s hoping for an answer,” said Raymonde. “I believe she’s just yearning to be mixed up in a love affair.”

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“At thirteen!” scoffed Hermie. “The silly young blighter! I’d like to shake her!”

“If you do, she’ll be rather pleased than otherwise,” returned Raymonde. “She’ll pose as a martyr then, and say the world is unsympathetic. I’m beginning to know Cynthia Greene.”

“I believe you’re right!” said the monitress thoughtfully.

Sentiment was not encouraged at the Grange. Miss Beasley very rightly thought that girls should keep their childhood as long as possible, and that premature love affairs wiped the bloom off genuine later experiences. The school in general assumed the attitude of scoffing at romance, except in the

pages of the library books. It was not considered good form to allude to it. Tennis or hockey was a more popular topic.

“So Cynthia’s trying to run the sentimental business,” mused Hermie. “It’ll spread if we don’t take care. It’s as infectious as measles. I’m not going to have all those juniors wandering about the garden, reading poetry instead of practising their cricket—it’s not good enough. Yet it’s difficult for a monitress to interfere. As you say, Cynthia would take a melancholy pride in being persecuted. Look here, Raymonde, you’re a young blighter yourself sometimes, but you don’t go in for this kind of rubbish. Can’t you think of some plan to nip the thing in the bud before it goes further? You’re generally inventive enough!”

“If I might have a free hand for a day or two, I might manage something,” admitted Raymonde with caution.

“I’d tell the other monitresses to let you alone. I don’t mind how you contrive it, as long as you knock the nonsense out of the juniors. Cynthia Greene of all people, too! The former ornament of The Poplars, who used to keep up the tone (so she says) and set an example to the rest. What is she coming to? I should think they’d want that bracelet back, if they knew!”

The Mystic Seven had a special Committee Meeting before tea, and pledged one another to utmost secrecy. The result of their confabulations seemed satisfactory to themselves, for they parted chuckling.

The next morning, when Cynthia Greene went to her desk to take out a lesson book, she found inside a letter addressed to herself. She opened it in a whirl of excitement. It was written in a slanting, backward kind of hand, with a very thick pen. Its contents ran thus:

“DEAR MISS CYNTHIA,

“Being the fortunate recipient of the card placed in a strawberry basket, and bearing your name, I am venturing to answer it. I, too, am lonely, and long for friendship. I admire blue eyes and fair hair; I myself am dark. I should like immensely to meet you. Could you possibly be at the side gate of your garden shortly after seven this evening? I shall arrive by motor, and walk past on the chance of seeing you.

“Yours respectfully but devotedly,
“ALGERNON AUGUSTUS FITZMAURICE.”

The conduct of Cynthia during the course of the day was extraordinary. She exhibited a mixture of self-importance and fluttering anticipation that was highly puzzling to her companions. She refused to explain, but dropped sufficient hints to arouse interest. It was presently whispered among the juniors that Cynthia had received a love-letter from somebody highly distinguished and aristocratic.

“Did it come by post?” asked Joan Butler.

“No, of course not. Gibbie would never have given it to her if it had. Cynthia found it inside her desk. She doesn’t know who put it there. It’s most mysterious.”

For the day, Cynthia was a heroine of romance among her Form. She played the part admirably, wearing an abstracted expression in her blue eyes, and starting when spoken to, as if aroused from daydreams. She mentioned casually that she believed the family of Fitzmaurice to be an extremely ancient one, and that its members were mentioned in the *Peerage*. As there was no copy of that volume in the school library, nobody could contradict her, and her audience murmured interested acquiescence. When asked whether they preferred the name of Algernon or Augustus, their opinions were divided.

At first the juniors were sympathetic, but by the end of the afternoon the goddess of envy began to rear her head in their midst. Cynthia’s manner had progressed during the day to a point of patronage that was distinctly aggravating. She openly pitied girls who did not receive private letters, and spoke of early engagements as highly desirable. She missed two catches when fielding at cricket, being employed in staring sentimentally at the sky instead of watching for the ball.

“Buck up, you silly idiot, can’t you? You’re a disgrace to the school!” snarled Nora Fawcitt furiously.

Cynthia sighed gently, with the air of “Ah-if-you-only-knew-my-feelings!” and twisted the ends of her hair into ringlets. After tea, in defiance of all school traditions, she changed her dress and put on her best slippers. She appeared in the schoolroom with a bunch of pansies pinned into her belt.

Preparation was from six to seven, and was supposed to be a period of strenuous mental application. That evening, however, Cynthia made little progress with her Latin exercise or the Wars of the Roses. Her Form mates, looking up in the intervals of conning their textbooks, noted her sitting with idle pen, gazing raptly into space or glancing anxiously at the clock. Though she had not confided the details of her secret, her companions felt that something was going to happen. Romance was in the atmosphere. Several of the juniors found themselves wishing that clandestine letters had appeared in their desks also. When the signal for dismissal was given, and the girls trooped from the schoolroom, Cynthia mysteriously melted away somewhere. Ardiune, walking round the quad. five minutes later, accosted Joan Butler, Janet Macpherson, Nancie Page, and Isobel Parker, who were sitting on the steps of the sundial reading Ella Wheeler Wilcox's *Poems of Love*.

"If you'd like a little sport," she observed, "come along with me. You may bring Elsie and Nora if you can find them. I promise you a jinky time!"

The juniors rose readily. None of them were really very fond of reading, but Cynthia had lent them the book earlier in the day, with a few pages turned down for reference. They flung it on to the stone step, with scant regard for its white cover. Ardiune led her recruits hastily to the back drive, and bade them hide behind the thick laurel and clipped holly bushes that backed the border.

"Somebody you know is coming to keep an appointment, and will get a surprise," she volunteered.

They had hardly taken cover when Cynthia Greene appeared, strolling along the drive. She advanced to the gate, leaned her elbow on it, and, posing picturesquely, glanced with would-be carelessness up and down the back lane, and coughed.

At this very evident signal a figure emerged from the shelter of the opposite bushes and strode to the gate. The juniors gasped. They had all taken part in last Christmas's term-end performance, and they easily recognized the hat, long coat, and military moustache of the school theatrical wardrobe, the only masculine garments permitted at the Grange. Cynthia, being a new-comer, was not acquainted with them. Her agitated eyes merely took in a

manly vision who was accosting her politely, though without removing his hat.

“Have I the pleasure of addressing Miss Cynthia Greene?” asked a deep-toned voice.

Cynthia, utterly overcome, giggled a faint assent.

“I am Algernon Augustus. Delighted to make your acquaintance! You’re the very girl I’ve always longed to meet. I can’t describe my loneliness, and how I’m yearning for sympathy. Fairest, loveliest one, will you smile upon me?”

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What Cynthia might have answered it is impossible to guess, but at that critical moment the hat, which was several sizes too large, tilted to one side, and allowed Raymonde’s hair to escape down her back. Cynthia’s agitated shriek brought a crowd of witnesses from out the laurel bushes. They did not spare their victim, and a perfect storm of chaff descended upon her.

“Did it go to meet its ownest own?”

“Did you call him Algernon, or Augustus?”

“Did he tell you his family pedigree?”

“Where’s his motor-car, please?”

“Is the engagement announced yet?”

“I think you’re a set of beasts!” whimpered Cynthia, leaning her head against the gate and sobbing.

“If you hadn’t been such a silly idiot you wouldn’t have been taken in by such a transparent business,” returned Raymonde, pulling off her moustache. “Look here, we don’t care about this sickly sort of stuff, so the sooner you drop it the better. Gracious, girl! Turn off the waterworks! Be thankful Gibbie didn’t scent out your romance, that’s all! If the Bumble knew you’d put that card inside that strawberry basket, she’d pack up your boxes and send you home by the next train. Crystal clear, she would!”

For at least a week after this, Cynthia Greene suffered a chastened life, and shed enough tears to make her pocket-handkerchiefs a conspicuous item in her laundry bag. She began to wish that the names of Augustus and Algernon could be expunged from the English language. Her Form mates

hinted that she might receive a present of Debrett's *Peerage* on her next birthday. If she missed a ball at tennis, or slacked a little at cricket, somebody was sure to enquire: "Thinking of him?" She found a picture of two turtle-doves attached to the pin-cushion on her dressing-table, and drawings of hearts and darts were scrawled by unknown hands inside her textbooks. Moreover, she lived in constant dread lest somebody should have really found the card inside the strawberry basket, and should send an answer by post, which would fall into the hands of Miss Beasley. The prospect of expulsion from the school haunted her.

Fortunately for her, nobody troubled to notice her request for correspondence, the basket of strawberries having probably found its way to some snuffy individual at a greengrocer's stall, who took no interest in the loneliness of blue-eyed, fair-haired damsels. As for her volume of *Poems of Love*, Hermie confiscated it until the end of the term, and recommended a *Manual of Cricket* instead.

CHAPTER XV

On the River

Miss Gibbs was fast arriving at the disappointing conclusion that patriotism costs dearly: in other words, that if you take away eighteen girls to do strawberry picking, you cannot expect them, immediately on their return, to settle down again into ordinary routine and everyday habits. An atmosphere of camp life seemed to pervade the place, a free-and-easy, rollicking spirit that was not at all in accordance with Miss Beasley's ideas of propriety. The Principal, who had never altogether approved of the week on the land, considered that the school was demoralized, and made a firm effort to restore discipline. The monitresses, several of whom had been guilty of whistling in the passages, were summoned separately for private interviews in the study, whence they issued somewhat subdued and abashed; and the rank and file, by means of punishment lessons and fines, were made to feel a wholesome respect for the iron hand of the law.

Miss Beasley and Miss Gibbs agreed that the Fifth Form gave the largest amount of trouble. It was here that most of the mischief fermented and fizzed out on unexpected occasions. At present the Mystic Seven, who beforetime had offered a united front to the world, were suffering from¹⁷⁴ a series of internal quarrels. The four who had been to camp assumed an air of superiority over the three who had not, which led to unpleasantness. Naturally it was annoying to Ardiune, Valentine, and Fauvette to hear constant allusions to people they had not met, and to thrilling experiences in which they had not participated. They sulked or flew out as the occasion might be.

"I believe you're just making up half the things to stuff us!" sneered Ardiune.

"Indeed we're not!" flared Morvyth. "Every word we've told you is gospel truth, as you'd have found out if you'd come and done your bit for your country!"

“D’you mean to call me a slacker?”

“Certainly not, but it’s no use ostriching about things. You either went and picked strawberries, or you didn’t”

“You know I wasn’t allowed to go! You mean wretch!”

“I know nothing at all about it.”

“Well, I’ve told you a dozen times.”

“I really can’t listen, child, to all the things you tell me!”

“Then I shan’t take the trouble to speak to you again!”

With Ardiune and Morvyth on terms of distant iciness, Valentine and Katherine constantly sparring over trifles, Fauvette preserving an attitude of martyred dignity, and Aveline, out of sheer perversity, striking up a friendship with Maudie Heywood, matters were not very brisk in the Fifth.

“I’m getting just about fed up with you all!” said Raymonde irritably.¹⁷ “I never saw such a set! How can we have any fun, when everybody’s grouching with everyone else? For goodness’ sake, buck up! I’ve a blossomy idea in my head! Yes, I have, honest!”

Signs of interest manifested themselves on the faces of her companions. Raymonde’s ideas were always worth listening to. Aveline stopped yawning, Morvyth desisted from kicking her geography book round the floor, and Fauvette snapped the clasp of her bracelet, and sat bolt upright.

“We’re hanging upon your words, if you’ll condescend to explain, O Queen!” she vouchsafed.

Raymonde bowed, with heels together and hands back, like the star of a pierrot troupe.

“Don’t mensh! Glad to do my bit!” she replied. “Well, my notion’s this. It’s the Bumble’s birthday on Friday!”

“As if every girl in the school didn’t know that!” chafed Ardiune impatiently. “Haven’t we all given our shillings towards her present ages ago? Really, Ray, what more chestnuts are you going to bring forth?”

“Don’t be in such a hurry, my good child! I haven’t finished yet. I should have thought you could have trusted your grannie by this time. My remark,

though no doubt stale, was only one of those preliminary announcements with which a chairman always has to begin—like ‘Glad to see so many bright young faces collected here’, or ‘Gratified to be allowed the pleasure of saying a few words to you’. But don’t look so scared, I’m not going to prose on like a real chairman at a prize-giving; I’m going to get to the point quick. Being the Bumble’s birthday—if you grin, Ardiune Coleman-Smith, I’ll pinch you!—Being, as I have observed, the Bumble’s birthday, it seems only right and fit and proper that the other bees in the hive should buzz in sympathy, and take a holiday, and go and sip nectar. Let us copy Nature’s methods!”

“Copy Nature, by all means,” sneered Ardiune, “only don’t suggest that bumble-bees live in hives, or you’ll be a little out of it!”

“Oh, you’re so literal! It’s only for the sake of the metaphor. Mayn’t I talk about ‘the busy bee’ and ‘the shining hour’?”

“For pity’s sake, don’t get flowery!” snapped Morvyth.

“How doth the little busy bee
Delight to bark and bite;
She gathers honey all the day,
And eats it up at night!”

misquoted Aveline with a giggle.

“Stop frivolling, and let me get to my point!” commanded Raymonde. “For the third time, let me remind you that it is the Bumble’s birthday on Friday, and that it’s only decent and seemly and becoming that the school should do something to celebrate so joyous an occasion.”

“Stop a minute!” interrupted Katherine. “Are we rejoicing that she came into this world to gladden us, or are we counting one more year off towards the time when we’ll have done with her? I’m not quite clear which.”



“GRACIOUS, GIRL! TURN OFF THE WATERWORKS!”

“Whichever you like, so long as you look congratulatory and happy-in-our-school-days and love-our-teachers, and all the rest of it. What you want is to spread the butter on thick, then, when there’s an atmosphere of smiles, ask for a holiday and suggest the river. Yes, my children, I said the river. You didn’t misunderstand me; I speak quite clearly.”

“Whew! She’ll never let us! Might as well ask for the moon. Why, our river expedition was knocked off after that little business of the Zepp scare!”

“All the more reason why we should have it now.”

“Ray, you’re the limit!”

“Hope I am, if it means getting what we want. I propose a deputation to the Bumble, to state that the gratitude and devotion of the hive can only work itself off on water. Yes, Ardiune Coleman-Smith, I did say ‘the hive’, my sense of poetry being more highly developed than my love of exact science. You needn’t lift your eyebrows, it’s not a pretty habit.”

“Who’s going to make the deputation?” asked Fauvette.

“You, for one. You’re our strongest point. You look naturally affectionate and clinging and docile, and ready-to-be-taught-if-taken-the-right-way, and easily led, and all the rest of it. You’ll burble forth something pretty about wanting to have an expedition with our Principal in our midst, and mention what a wet day it was last year, and how disappointed we all were.”

“Look here, I’m not going to do all the talking, so don’t think!”

“Oh, we’ll support you! But I’m just giving you a few leading lines to work upon. We’ll take Maudie Heywood with us; she got ninety-five marks out of a hundred last week, which ought to go for something!”

“Then Magsie and Muriel had better come too. It won’t do to let the Bumble think the whole idea has originated with us.”

“Right you are! The more pattern pupils we can scrape together, the better.”

At five o’clock the deputation presented itself at the door of the study, and was received graciously by the Principal, though she declined to commit herself to an immediate answer, promising to think the matter over and to let them know later on.

“Which means she daren’t say ‘yes’ till she’s asked leave from Gibbie!” declared Raymonde, when the delegates were out of ear-shot of the sanctum. “Fauvette, child, you did splendidly! I’d give five thousand pounds to have your big, pathetic, innocent blue eyes! They always bowl everybody over. I envy you at your first grown-up dance. You’ll have your programme full in five minutes, like the heroine of a novel.”

Raymonde’s supposition was not altogether mistaken, for that evening, after the school had gone to bed, Miss Beasley, Miss Gibbs, and Mademoiselle

sat up talking over the proposed expedition. Miss Gibbs vetoed the idea entirely.

“The girls have not been behaving well enough to justify any such indulgence,” she maintained impressively. “Their conduct on the stairs yesterday was disgraceful. Better make them stick to their lessons.”

Mademoiselle, whose mental scales always tipped naturally towards the side of pleasure, thought it was a beautiful idea of the dear girls to want to give their headmistress a fête on her anniversary. So sweet to go upon the water, and while the weather was so pleasant! It would be an event to be remembered for ever in their young lives, when sterner lessons might be forgotten; at which remark Miss Gibbs sniffed, but restrained herself. Miss Beasley vibrated for some minutes between the practical and the ideal aspects thus presented to her, but finally decided in favour of the latter.

“It seems ungracious to refuse when they wish it to be my birthday treat,” she said rather apologetically. “The poor children would be so disappointed. We might make a clear mark-book a necessary condition.”

“Yes,” Miss Gibbs grudgingly conceded. “They’ll miss their Latin preparation that evening,” she added.

“And their French,” sighed Mademoiselle. “But what will you?” with a little shrug. “It is not every day that our Principal makes a birthday! As for me, I am glad I bought my new sunshade.”

The announcement of the forthcoming water excursion was received with great rejoicings. Ever since the beginning of the term the school had thirsted to go upon the river. They had been taken for an occasional walk along its banks, and had greatly envied the young men and maidens who might be seen punting up its willowy reaches.

“That’s what I’m going to do directly I’m grown up!” Fauvette had confided to her chums. “I’ll buy a white boating costume, exactly like that girl’s with the auburn hair, and lean against blue cushions while HE rows. He’ll have to have brown eyes, but I’ve not quite decided yet whether he shall have a moustache or not. On the whole I think I’ll have him clean shaven.”

“And tall,” prompted Raymonde, to whom Fauvette’s prospective romances were a source of perennial interest.

“Yes, tall, of course, with several military crosses. He’s the one I’m going to like the best, though there’ll be others. They’ll all want me to go and row with them—but I shan’t. I don’t mean to flirt.”

“N—no!” conceded Raymonde a little dubiously. “Don’t you think, though, it might be rather good for him not to let him see you were too keen? Of course I don’t want you to break his heart, but—”

Fauvette shook her yellow curls.

“It’s not right to trifle with people’s hearts,” she decided, with all the authority of an experienced reader of magazine stories. “If you pretend you don’t care for them, they drive their aeroplanes recklessly and smash up, or expose themselves to the enemy’s fire, or get submarined, before you’ve had time to tell them you didn’t really mean to be cold. I’m not going in for misunderstandings.”

Raymonde glanced at her admiringly. With those blue eyes and fluffy curls it all seemed so possible. She felt that she should look forward to her chum’s inevitable engagement almost as much as Fauvette herself. It would be as good as a Shakespeare play, or one of the best pieces on the kinema. But these rosy prospects were still in the dim and distant future; the present was entirely prosaic and unromantic. Whatever punting excursions Fauvette might enjoy in years to come, this particular water party would be quite unsentimental, conducted under the watchful eyes of Miss Beasley and Miss Gibbs, with boatmen well over military age to do the rowing. For the first time for four years the Principal’s birthday morning was gloriously fine. The pupils placed the usual bouquet of flowers opposite her seat at the breakfast table, together with a handsomely bound volume of Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*. She thanked them with her customary surprise and gratitude, and assured them, as she did annually, what a pleasure it was to her to receive so kind a token of their esteem.

This preliminary business being over, breakfast and classes proceeded as usual, a more than ordinary atmosphere of decorum pervading the establishment, for Miss Gibbs had announced that the afternoon’s excursion depended upon the mark-book, and the girls knew that she would keep her word. The veriest slackers paid attention to lessons that morning, and even Raymonde for once did not receive an order mark.

Lunch was served early, and directly the meal was finished all the girls flew upstairs to change their attire. During hot weather the school was not kept strictly to the brown serge uniform, and the girls blossomed out into linen costumes, or white drill skirts and muslin blouses. For the credit of the Grange they made careful toilettes that afternoon; Fauvette in particular looked ravishingly pretty in a pale-blue sailor suit with a white collar and silk tie. She made quite a sensation as she came down the stairs.

The mistresses had also turned out suitably dressed for the occasion: Miss Beasley was dignified and matronly in blue voile with a motor veil; Miss Gibbs, who intended to row, was in practical blouse and short skirt; while Mademoiselle was a dream of white muslin, chiffon ruffles, and pink parasol.

It was about half an hour's walk to the river, down shady lanes and across lately cleared hayfields. There was a little landing-place close to the weir, with a boat-house, a refreshment room, and rows of benches and tables under the trees, where visitors could sit and drink tea or lemonade. Miss Beasley had engaged boats beforehand, and these were drawn up ready, with their boatmen, a rheumatic and elderly set, waiting about smoking surreptitious pipes among the willows. There was a great deal of arranging before everybody was settled, and many injunctions to sit still, and not to change places, or to grab at water-lilies, or lean too far over the side, or play any other foolish or dangerous prank likely to upset the equilibrium of the boat and endanger the lives of its occupants. At last, however, the whole party was stowed safely away, and the little procession set off up the river.

All agreed that it was quite delightful. The banks were covered with trees, and tall reeds, and masses of purple willow herb, and agrimony, and yellow ragwort, which were reflected in the dark waters of quiet pools. In the centre the sunshine made little gleaming, glinting ripples like leaping bars of gold, and here and there patches of water-lilies spread their white chalices open to the sky. There was a delicious breeze, most grateful after the hot walk across the hayfields, and the smooth gliding motion was ideal. The girls trailed their hands in the river, and dabbed their faces, and said it was topping, and began to sing boat songs which they had learnt at school, and which sounded very pretty and appropriate to an accompaniment of oars and lapping water.

The great event of the afternoon was to be a picnic tea. Hampers of provisions had been brought, and Miss Beasley proposed that they should land at one of the numerous little islands, light a fire, and boil their big kettles. The selection of the particular island was, of course, in her discretion, and she had a conference with her old boatman on the subject.

“Island? I know of the very one to suit you. I’ve taken parties there before, and there’s a good spot to land, and a place to tie the boats to, which there isn’t on every one of them islands. It’s just an hour’s row up from the weir, and less time to go back because of the current.”

After gliding onward for what seemed to the girls all too short a space of time, but no doubt appeared considerably longer to their rheumatic rowers, the island in question was at last reached. It looked most attractive with the willows and bulrushes and tangly interior. A tree-stump made quite a good landing-place, and everyone managed to scramble out successfully without planting a foot in the water. The first business was to explore, and to hunt up sufficient wood for a camp fire. Luckily the weather had been dry, so that all available sticks would be suitable for fuel. The girls dispersed in various directions, on the understanding that they were to reassemble when Miss Beasley blew her whistle as a signal.

“I call this a great stunt!” observed Morvyth, as the Mystic Seven moved off in company. 184

“Even Gibbie’s in spirits, bless her!” murmured Aveline fatuously.

“So she is. But all the same, I’d rather wander off alone than be tied to her apron-strings; so come along, quick! Remember you’re to earn your living by picking up sticks, so don’t slack!”

“Cheero, old sport! Don’t get raggy!”

Pioneers were penetrating the virgin forest on all sides. From right and left came squeals, giggles, or chuckles, as the girls investigated the capacities of the island. Some kept to the banks and cut dry reeds to make the bonfire burn quickly, while others were in quest of more solid fuel.

“If we’d only had a hatchet or a saw,” sighed Raymonde, “we might have cut off some quite nice logs. There really isn’t much to pick up on the ground.”

“Wish we could take that rotten tree along with us,” murmured Morvyth, pointing to a decayed old stump that stood upright with two withered boughs like scraggy arms outstretched on either side of it.

“Too big a job, my child; but we might break off one of those branches,” opined Raymonde. “No, I know we can’t reach it from below, that’s self-evident. Your humble servant’s going to climb. Here, Ave, you bluebottle, give me a leg up!”

“Oh! Suppose it topples over with you! Don’t, Ray!”

“Bunkum! It won’t! I’m not scared, thanks!”



As a matter of fact, Raymonde knew perfectly well that she was going¹⁸⁵ to perform rather a risky feat. She did it because she was in a don't-care frame of mind, also because she had quarrelled with Morvyth earlier in the afternoon, and wished to astonish her. Morvyth was standing now, elevating her eyebrows, and looking as if she did not believe that Raymonde would really carry out her boast, which was all the more reason for the latter to put speech into action.

Aveline obediently rendered the required assistance, and with a swing and a clutch Raymonde managed to scramble up the trunk to the place where the boughs forked. One of these was in a particularly crumbling and decrepit condition, and she thought that with a strong effort she might succeed in breaking it off. It was not an easy matter to balance herself on the fork and stretch out to pull at the branch.

“You'll be over in a sec.!” called Morvyth.

“Bow-wow!” responded Raymonde airily.

She leaned a little farther along, seized the branch with both hands, and gave a mighty tug. The result was more than she anticipated. The poor old tree had reached a stage of such interior decay that it was really only kept together by the bark. The violence of the wrench upset it to its foundations; it tottered, swayed, and suddenly descended. The girls picked up Raymonde out of a cloud of dust and a mass of touchwood. By all strict rules of retribution she ought to have been hurt, but as a matter of fact she was only a little bruised, considerably choked with pulverized wood, and very much astonished. When she recovered her presence of mind, she set to work to break off pieces from the boughs, which were just exactly what was wanted for the bonfire fuel.

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“Don't tell Gibbie!” she besought the others.

“Right-o! Mum's the word!” her chums assured her. “Bless its little heart, we wouldn't get it into a scrape! Don't think it of us!”

Miss Beasley's signal sounded at this critical moment, so the Mystic Seven filed off like vestal virgins to feed the fire which Miss Gibbs, with her accustomed energy, had already lighted. Their contribution of wood was so

substantial that it drew comment from the rest of the party, but they received the congratulations with due modesty, and did not divulge the source of their supply. Most of the girls were too much interested in proclaiming their own adventures to care to listen to anybody else's, and the mistresses were busy watching the kettles. It seemed like camp life over again to be sitting in a circle, drinking tea out of enamelled mugs, and eating thick pieces of bread and butter. Miss Beasley had provided a large home-made plum birthday cake, with a sixpence baked in it, the acquisition of which was naturally a matter of keen interest to each several girl, until the lucky slice fell to the lot of Cynthia Greene, who fondled the coveted coin tenderly.

“I'll have a hole bored through it, and wear it on my chain always, in memory of you, dear Miss Beasley!” she declared in emphatic tones.

“Little sycophant!” sneered Morvyth enviously.

“She ought to give it to the soldiers!” snapped Raymonde.

But Miss Gibbs was rattling a row of mugs together as a delicate hint that the feast was finished, and the Principal was consulting her watch, and calling to the boatmen to make ready. The mistresses swept all remaining comestibles into the baskets, stamped out the fire, emptied the kettles, and proclaimed the camping-ground left in due order. One by one the boats started on their way down the river, drifting easily now with the current, and leaving long trails of ripples behind them. The sun was sinking low in the west, and there was a lovely golden light on the water, the shadows on the willowy shore were deep and mysterious, a kingfisher flashed along the bank like a living jewel. The spirits of the school, already risen to fermenting point, effervesced into stunt songs composed on the emergency of the moment, and passed on from boat to boat.

“For we've had such a jolly good day-ay-ay,
As we only get once in a way-ay-ay!
I can tell you it was prime,
Oh! we've had a topping time,
And we wish a little longer we could stay-ay-ay!
With a rum-tum-tum
And a rum-tiddley-um,
We will make the river hum;

So come, come, come,
Don't be glum, glum, glum!
But pass the stunt along and just be gay-ay-ay!"

CHAPTER XVI

Marooned

Amongst other cardinal virtues the practice of philanthropy was zealously cultivated at Marlowe Grange. The girls made garments for the local hospital, contributed towards a crèche for soldiers' children, and on Sunday mornings put pennies into a missionary box. Charity is apt to wax a trifle cold, however, when you never see the object of your doles; and though ample statistics were provided about the crèche babies, and literature was sent describing the Chinese orphans and little Hindoo widows, these pieces of paper information did not quite supply the place of a real live protégé. It was felt to be a decided asset to the school when old Wilkinson loomed upon their horizon. The girls discovered him accidentally, engaged in the meritorious occupation of carrying his own water from the well. He had opened a gate for them, and had touched his forelock with the grace and fervour of a mediæval retainer. His pink cheeks, watery blue eyes, snow-white hair, and generally picturesque personality made the more enthusiastic members of the art class anxious to paint his portrait. It was ascertained that he subsisted upon an old-age pension of five shillings a week, and resided in a romantic-looking, creeper-covered cottage just between the Grange and the village. To visit old Wilkinson, and present him with potatoes from their own little war-gardens, became an immediate institution among the girls. There was no doubt about his gratitude. All was fish that came to his net, and he accepted anything and everything, from tea and tobacco to books which he could not read, with the same toothless smile and showers of blessings. If, as Miss Gibbs suggested, his cottage would have been improved by a little more soap and water, and a good stiff broom, that did not really matter, as he was generally sitting outside on a bench beside a beehive, with a black-and-white Manx cat upon his knee, and a tame jackdaw hanging in a wicker cage by the window, exactly like a coloured frontispiece in a Christmas number of a magazine.

It was a tremendous blow to the school when the news was circulated that old Wilkinson had received notice to quit his cottage. The girls were filled

with indignation against his landlord. The fact that that long-suffering farmer had received no rent for the last six months, and badly required the cottage as a billet for lady workers on the land, went for nothing in the estimation of the Grange inmates. Wilkinson, so they considered, was a persecuted old man, about to be evicted from his home, and a very proper object for sympathy and consideration.

“Something’s got to be done for him—that’s flat!” declared Raymonde. “You don’t suppose we can allow him to be taken to the workhouse? It’s unthinkable! He’d break his poor old heart. And we’d miss him so, too. Won’t the landlord change his mind and let him stay?”

“Miss Gibbs went to see him about it,” vouchsafed Aveline agitatedly, “and she came back and shook her head, and said she couldn’t but feel that the man was only doing his duty, and women were wanted on the land, and must have a place to live in, and someone had to be sacrificed.”

“He’s a victim of the war!” sighed Morvyth. “One of those outside victims who don’t get Victoria Crosses and military funerals.”

“He hasn’t come to a funeral yet!” bristled Raymonde. “The old boy looks good for another ten years or so. Don’t you go ordering tombstones and wreaths!”

“I wasn’t going to. How you snap me up! All the same, I heard Miss Beasley tell Miss Gibbs that if he has to go to the workhouse it will be enough to kill him.”

“Then we’ve absolutely got to keep him alive! Won’t anybody in the village take him in?”

“No, they’re all full up, and say they can’t do with him, and he hasn’t any relations of his own except a drunken granddaughter in a town slum.”

Raymonde sighed dramatically.

“I’m going to think, and think, and think, and think, until I find some way of helping him,” she announced. “It’ll be hard work, because I hate thinking, but I’ll do it, you’ll see!”

Raymonde was abstracted that evening, both at preparation and at supper. In the dormitory she put aside all conversation with a firm: “Don’t talk to me,

I'm thinking!" She borrowed Fauvette's bottle of eau-de-Cologne, and went to bed with a bandage tied round her head to assist her cogitations. 191

"Of course I shan't go to sleep," she assured the others. "I must just lie awake until the idea comes to me. Old Wilkinson's on my mind."

"Glad he's not on mine," gurgled Aveline, settling herself comfortably on her pillow. "Couldn't you leave him until to-morrow?"

"Certainly not! I shall wake you up and tell you when my idea arrives."

"Help!" murmured her schoolmate, half-asleep.

That night, when the whole household at the Grange was soundly wrapped in slumber, Aveline was suddenly brought back from a jumbled dream of punts, cows, and Latin exercises by feeling somebody shaking her persistently and urgently.

"What's the matter?" she asked, sitting up in bed. "Is it Zepps?"

"Sh—sh! Don't wake the whole dormitory, you goose!" came Raymonde's voice in a whisper. "Remember Gibbie's door's wide open, can't you? I've just got my idea."

Aveline promptly lay down again and closed her eyes.

"Won't it keep till to-morrow?" she murmured.

"Certainly not! You've got to hear it now. Move further on—I'm coming into bed with you. That's better!"

"But I'm so sleepy,"—rather crossly.

"Don't be horrid! You might wake up for once, and listen!"

"I am listening."

"Well, I'll tell you, then. I said to myself when I began to think: 'What's wanted is a home for old Wilkinson!' and just now it suddenly flashed into my head: 'We'll make him one for ourselves!'"

"Where?"

"That's the point. The Bumble says she can't have him at the Grange—Hermie suggested that—and every place one knows of seems to belong to somebody who wants it—all except the island!"

“What island? The one on the river?”

“No, no! Not so far as that. The island on our moat, I mean. We’ll build a little house for him, and he can have it all for his very own.”

“Wouldn’t it—wouldn’t it be rather difficult to build?” gasped Aveline, dazed at the magnitude of her chum’s idea.

“Oh, not impossible! There are heaps and heaps of railway sleepers down in the wood heap, and we could pile them up into a hut. It’s only what people do out in Canada. Gibbie’s always telling us tales of women who emigrate to the backwoods, and build colonies of log-cabins. Ave, you’re not going to sleep again, are you?”

“N—no!” came a rather languid voice; “but how’ll we ever get to the island?”

“We’ll make a raft. We’ll do it to-morrow, you and I. Don’t tell any of the others yet. Morvyth’s been so nasty lately, I’m fed up with her, and Ardiune would only laugh. When we’ve got the thing really started, we’ll take them over and let them help, but not till then. Will you promise to keep it an absolute secret?”

“I’ll promise anything you like”—wearily—“if you’ll only go back to your own bed.”

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“All right, I’m off now—but just remember you’re not to mention it to a single soul.”

Raymonde, next day, was tremendously full of her new scheme. It savoured of romance. Old Wilkinson would be a combination of a mediæval hermit and Robinson Crusoe, and in imagination she already saw him installed in a picturesque log-cabin, with his Manx cat and his tame jackdaw for company. Naturally the first step was to take possession of the island. It lay in the middle of the moat, a reedy little domain covered with willows and bushes. It had never yet been explored by the school, for the simple reason that there had been no means of gaining access to it. The water was too deep for wading, and Miss Beasley had utterly vetoed the suggestion of procuring a punt. Raymonde had cast longing eyes at it many times before, but not until now had she made any real effort to reach it. She thought out her plans carefully during the day—considerably to the detriment of her lessons—and when afternoon recreation time came round she linked

Aveline's arm firmly in hers, and led her to the lumber yard. Here, piled up behind the barn, was a large stack of wood stored for fuel—old railway sleepers, bits of broken fencing, packing-cases, tumbled-down trees, and brushwood.

“What we want to make first,” she announced, “is a raft. I wonder it never struck me to make it before!”

Now rafts sound quite simple and easy when you read about them in books of adventure. Shipwrecked mariners on coral islands in the Pacific always lash a few logs together with incredible speed, and perform wonderful journeys through boiling surf to rescue kegs of provisions and other useful commodities which they observe floating about on the waves. The waters of the moat, being tranquil, and overgrown with duckweed, would surely prove more hospitable than the surging ocean, and ought to support a raft, of however amateur a description. Nevertheless, when they began to look round, it was more difficult than they had expected to find just the right material. The railway sleepers were too large and heavy, and the fence poles were of unequal lengths. Moreover, there was nothing with which to lash them together, for when Raymonde visited the orchard, intending to purloin a clothes-line, she found the housemaid there, hanging up a row of pantry towels, and was obliged to beat a hurried retreat. After much hunting about, the girls at last discovered in a corner exactly what they wanted. It was the door of a demolished shed, made of stout planking, strongly nailed and braced, and in fairly sound condition. Nothing could have been better for their purpose. After first doing a little scouting, to make sure that the rest of the school were safely at the other side of the garden, they dragged it down to the edge of the moat, returning to fetch two small saplings to act as punt-poles.

“For goodness' sake, let's be quick and get off before anybody comes round and catches us!” panted Raymonde.

“Are you absolutely certain it's safe?” quavered Aveline dubiously.

Raymonde looked at her scornfully.

“Aveline Kerby, if you don't feel yourself up to this business, please back out of it at once, and I'll go and fetch Morvyth instead. She may be a blighter in some things, but she doesn't funk!”

“No more do I,” declared Aveline, suddenly assuming an air of dignified abandon, reminiscent of the heroes of coral-island stories. “I’m ready to brave anything, especially for the sake of old Wilkinson. Don’t tip the thing so hard at your end! You’ve made me trap my fingers!”

They launched their craft from the water-garden, treading ruthlessly on Linda’s irises and Hermie’s cherished forget-me-nots. It seemed to float all right, so they crawled on, and squatted on the cross-beams on either side of it to preserve its balance. A good push with their poles sent them well out on to the moat. It was really a delightful sensation sailing amongst the duckweed and arrow-head leaves, although their shoes and skirts got wet from the water which oozed up between the planks. The raft behaved splendidly, and, propelled by the poles, made quite a steady passage. They had soon crossed the piece of water, and scrambled out upon the island. It was a rather overgrown, brambly little domain, and to penetrate its fastnesses proved a scratchy performance, resulting in a long rent down the front of Raymonde’s skirt, and several tears in Aveline’s muslin blouse, to say nothing of wounds on wrists and ankles. There was quite a clearing in the middle, with soft, mossy grass and clumps of hemp agrimony, and actually a small apple-tree with nine apples upon it. They were green and very sour, but the girls each sampled one, with a kind of feeling that by so doing they were taking formal possession of the territory, though, with Paradise for an analogy, it should have been just the reverse.

“We’ll have the log-cabin exactly here,” said Raymonde, munching abstractedly. “It’ll face the sunset, and he can sit and watch the glowing west, and hear the evening bells, and—and—”

“Smoke his pipe,” suggested Aveline unromantically. “He generally seems most grateful of all when one gives him tobacco.”

“We shall be able to see him sitting there,” continued Raymonde, in her most meditative mood. “There’ll be a rose-tree planted beside the door, and nasturtiums and other thingumbobs for the bees. It’ll make a beautiful end to his declining years.”

“Yes,” agreed Aveline, suppressing a yawn. She was not so enthusiastic over the scheme as her chum, and her apple had been much too sour to be really enjoyed. Raymonde sat twining pieces of grass round her finger; her

eyes were dreamy, and she hummed “Those Evening Bells,” which the singing class had learnt only the week before.

At that identical moment the clang of a very different bell disturbed the echoes. The girls sprang to their feet.

“Prep.!” they gasped in consternation.

They had absolutely no idea it was so late. Time had simply flown. They must get back immediately, and even then might expect to lose order marks. Regardless of scratches, they scurried through the brambles to the place where they had left their raft. To their horror it was gone! They had forgotten to anchor it, and it had floated out into the middle of the moat. 197

This was indeed a predicament! They looked at each other aghast.

“We’re marooned, that’s what it is!” stammered Aveline. “Raymonde, you’re the silliest idiot I’ve ever met in the course of my life!”

“Well, I like that!”

“Can’t help it—it’s the truth! Whatever did you bring me out here for, on such a wild-goose chase?”

“Why, you wanted to come!”

“I didn’t! You’ve landed me in a horrible scrape. I’ve been late for prep. twice already this week, and Gibbie gave me enough jaw-wag last time, so what she’ll say this time, goodness knows! How are we ever going to get back?”

Raymonde shook her head and whistled. She might have attempted to defend herself, but Aveline by this time had begun to sob hysterically, and she knew that arguments were useless. The prospects of immediate rescue certainly appeared doubtful. Everyone would be indoors for preparation. No doubt they would be missed, and probably a mistress might be sent in quest of them, but the house would be searched first, and then the barns and garden; and it was quite problematical whether it would enter into anybody’s head to walk to the edge of the moat, and look across towards the island.

“I suppose you can’t swim?” asked Aveline, choking back her sobs, and dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

“No; only a little bit when somebody holds me up. Whoever would have thought of that wretched raft floating off in that fashion? It’s too sickening!”

“Don’t you think we’d better give a good shout?”

The girls put their united lung power into the loudest halloo of which they were capable, but it only scared a blackbird in the orchard, and provoked no human response. They sat down in a place where they could be best seen from the mainland, and waited. There were too many brambles for comfort, and the midges were biting badly. Raymonde began to wonder whether, after all, the island were as ideal a situation for a residence as she had supposed. Some lines from a parody on one of Rogers’s poems flashed into her mind:

“So damp my cot beside the rill,
The beehive fails to soothe my ear”;

and

“Around my ivy-covered porch
Earwigs and snails are ever crawling.”

“It mightn’t be just the best place in the world for rheumatism,” she decided, “and probably there’d be just heaps of snails and slugs.”

“Shall we shout again?” suggested Aveline forlornly.

The chums called, whistled, halloed, and cooeed until they were hoarse, but not a soul took the slightest notice. Time, which had sped so rapidly during their first twenty minutes on the island, now crawled on laggard wings. After what appeared to them an absolutely interminable period, but which was in reality about an hour and a half, the familiar figure of Hermie Graveson suddenly appeared on the mainland close to the water-garden. Raymonde and Aveline started up, and emitted yells that would have done credit to a pair of Zulu warriors on the war-path. Hermie waved frantically, shouted something they could not hear, and ran back towards the house. In a few minutes she returned with Miss Gibbs. That worthy lady picked up her skirts and advanced gingerly to the extreme limit of the stones that bordered the water-garden. She put her hands to her mouth to form a speaking-trumpet, and bawled a communication of which the marooned ones could only catch such fragments as “How ... get ... doing ...”

On the presumption that it was an enquiry into their means of locomotion, they pointed sadly to the floating raft. Miss Beasley now came hurrying up, surveyed the situation, and also attempted to converse, but with no better success. After an agitated colloquy with Miss Gibbs she retired.

“D’you think they’ll have to leave us here for the night?” fluttered Aveline anxiously.

“Don’t know. It looks like it, unless anyone can swim!” returned Raymonde, with what stoicism she could muster.

“Perhaps they’ll hire a cart to the river, and fetch up a punt?”

“It’ll take hours to do that!”

The prospect of supper and bed seemed to be retreating further and further into the dim and faraway distance. Aveline remembered that it was the evening for stewed pears and custard, and tears dripped down her cheeks on to her torn blouse.

“Oh! brace up, can’t you?” snapped Raymonde. “It gives me spasms to hear you sniff!”

Aveline was bursting into an indignant retort, when her companion nudged her and pointed to the mainland. 200

Mackenzie, the old gardener, was coming across the orchard carrying on his shoulder a very large wash-tub. The cook followed him, bearing a clothes-prop.

“They’ve the best brains in the house! He’s going to rescue us!” exclaimed Raymonde ecstatically.

The prisoners on the island watched with deep interest while Mackenzie launched his shallop, clambered in, and seizing the clothes-prop from Cook, pushed off cautiously. His craft was very low in the water and looked particularly wobbly, and they were terribly afraid it would upset. In spite of their anxiety they could not help seeing the humorous side of the episode, and they choked with laughter as the tub gyrated and bobbed about, and the old man clutched frantically at his pole. He made first of all for the floating raft, secured it with a piece of rope, and dragged it to the island. The girls straightened their faces and welcomed him with polite expressions of gratitude.

He received their thanks ungraciously—perhaps he had seen them laughing—pushed the raft to a spot where they could board it, and remarked tartly:

“Ye deserve to stop where ye are the night, in my opeenion. Get on with ye now, and paddle yerselves back. Giving a body all this trouble—and me with my leg bad, too!”

It was possibly a satisfaction to Mackenzie that Miss Beasley shared his views as to the culpability of the delinquents and the necessity of giving them their deserts. They were summoned to the study after prayers. 201

“What did she say?” whispered Ardiune, Morvyth, and Katherine, as they escorted the crestfallen pair upstairs to the dormitory.

“All recreation stopped for three days, and learn the whole of Gray’s Elegy!” choked the sinners.

“Gray’s Elegy! You’ll never do it! Oh, you poor chickens! The Bumble can be a perfect beast sometimes! I say, what was it like on the island?”

“Top-hole!” responded Raymonde, as she mopped her eyes.

The very next day came the news that the farmer had decided to run up a number of corrugated-iron hutments in one of his own fields to accommodate his lady workers, and that the Squire had promised to pay the rent of old Wilkinson’s cottage so long as he was left there undisturbed. Everybody felt it was a happy solution of the difficulty.

“After all, the island might have been rather an awkward place for him,” admitted Raymonde. “I don’t know how he’d have got backwards and forwards without a drawbridge.”

“Unless he’d used a wash-tub,” giggled Aveline. “I shan’t forget Mackenzie in a hurry! It was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Talk of people looking sour! He might have been eating sloes. Cook’s taken it personally, I’m afraid. I asked her for some whitening this morning to clean my regimental button, and she scowled and wouldn’t let me have any—nasty, stingy old thing!”

“It’s a weary world!” sighed Raymonde. “Especially when you’ve got to learn the whole of Gray’s Elegy by heart!”

CHAPTER XVII

The Fossil Hunters

If Miss Beasley had been asked what was her most difficult problem in the management of her school, she would probably have replied the arrangement of the practising time-table. With the exception of four, all the girls learned music, and therefore, for a period of forty-five minutes daily, each of these twenty-two pupils must do execution on the piano. There were five instruments at the Grange, and, except during the hours of morning lessons and meals, they hardly ever seemed to be silent. At seven o'clock they began with scales, arpeggios, and studies, and passed during the day through a selection of pieces, classical and modern, in such various degrees of playing, strumming, and thumping as might be calculated to wear out their hammers and snap their strings in double quick time. About half of the girls learned from Mademoiselle, and the remainder had lessons from Mr. Browne, a visiting master who came twice a week to the school. He was a short little man, with sandy hair, and a bald patch in the middle of it, and a Vandyke beard that was turning rather grey. He was himself an excellent musician, and sometimes the performances of his pupils offended his sensitive ear to the point of exasperation, and he would storm at them in a gurgling voice, blinking his short-sighted hazel eyes very rapidly, and wrinkling up his forehead till it looked like squeezed india-rubber. It was on record that he had once hit Lois Barlow a hard crack over the knuckles with his fountain-pen, whereupon she wept—not so much from pain as from injured feelings—and he had apologized in quite a gentlemanly fashion, and picked up the music that in his burst of temper he had flung upon the floor. In spite of his acknowledged irritability, all the girls who learned from him gave themselves airs of slight superiority over those who only learned from Mademoiselle. Though strict, he was an inspiring teacher, and when, as occasionally happened, he would push his pupil from the stool, and seat himself in her place to show the proper rendering of some passage, the music that followed was like a lovely liquid dream of sound.

Professor Marshall also attended the school twice a week to lecture on literature and natural science. He was a much greater general favourite than Mr. Browne; everybody appreciated his affable manner and bland smile, and the little jokes with which he punctuated his remarks.

The girls always felt that it made a change to have anybody coming in from the outside world. The one disadvantage of a boarding-school is that mistresses and pupils, shut up together, and seeing one another week in, week out, are rather apt to get on each others' nerves. At a day school the girls take their worries home at four o'clock, and the mental atmosphere has time to clear before nine next morning; but, when there is no home-going until the end of the term, little trifles are sometimes unduly magnified, and a narrow element—the bane of all communities—begins to creep in. To do Miss Beasley justice, she made a great effort to combat this very evil, and to run her school on broad lines. She recognized the necessity of letting the girls mix sometimes with outsiders. In a country place it was impossible to take them to concerts or entertainments, but they occasionally joined the rambles of the County Antiquarian Society or the local Natural History Club.

It occurred to Miss Beasley that it would be an excellent plan to throw open some of Professor Marshall's lectures to residents in the neighbourhood, asking those people who attended to stay to tea afterwards, thus giving her girls an opportunity of acting as hostesses, and entertaining them with conversation. A short course of four lectures on geology was announced, and quite a number of local ladies responded to the invitation. The girls received the news with mixed feelings.

“Rather a jink!” ventured Ardiune. “It'll be queer to see rows of strangers sitting in the lecture room! Did you say we've to give them tea when the Professor's done talking?”

“Yes, and talk to them ourselves too, worse luck! I'm sure I shan't know what to say!” fluttered Aveline.

“Oh, the monitresses will do that part of the business!” decided Raymonde easily. “We'll stand in the background, and just look ladylike and well-mannered, and all the rest of it.”

“Will you, my child? Not if the Bumble knows it! She’s nuts on ^{this} afternoon-tea dodge! (I don’t care—I shan’t put a penny in the slang box—Hermie isn’t here to listen and make me!) Gibbie told me that we’re all to act hostesses in turn. We’re to be divided into four sets, and each take a time.”

“Help! How are you going to divide twenty-six by four? It works out at six and a half. Who’s to be the half girl?”

“Oh! They’ll make it seven on one afternoon and six the next, I expect.”

“That’s not fair! It’s throwing too much work on those six and not enough on the seven. It’s opposed to all the instincts of co-operation and justice which Gibbie has laboured so hard to instil into me.”

“Don’t see how the Bumble can manage otherwise, unless she chops a girl in half. No, I predict you’ll be chosen among a select six, and have to pour out tea and hand cakes with one-sixth extra power laid on, and your conversation carefully modulated to your hearers.”

“Oh, Jemima!”

“Please to remember that this is a finishing school!” mocked Ardiune. “Don’t on any account shock the neighbourhood by an unseemly exhibition of vulgar slang!”

“It’ll slip out, I know, when I’m not thinking,” groaned Raymonde.

On the first afternoon of the geological course, an audience of about twenty visitors augmented the usual gathering in the lecture hall. They were accommodated with the best seats, and the school occupied the third and fourth rows. Directly in front of Raymonde sat an elderly lady in a large ²⁰⁶ black hat trimmed with cherries, which bobbed temptingly over the brim. She appeared to take an interest in her surroundings, glanced about the room, and turned a reproving eye on Raymonde, who ventured to whisper to Aveline. With Miss Gibbs hovering in the background with a now-mind-you-keep-up-the-credit-of-the-school expression, the girls hardly dared even to blink, but Aveline managed to write: “What a Tartar in front!” on a slip of paper, and hand it to her chum.

The Professor, bland as ever, was coming into the room and hanging a geological map over the blackboard. He smiled broadly, showing his large

white teeth to the uttermost, and, after a few preliminary remarks of welcome to the visitors, plunged into a description of the earth's crust.

All went well for a while; then an untoward incident happened. The lady with the cherries in her hat, who had possibly taken cold, or was affected by the pollen in the flowers upon the table, sneezed violently, not only once, but twice, and even a third time.

"Three's for a wedding! Is it Gibbie?" whispered Raymonde the incorrigible.

Aveline's mental equilibrium was always easily upset. The idea of Miss Gibbs in connection with matrimony was too much for her, and she exploded into a series of painfully suppressed giggles. The more she tried to stop, the more hysterical she grew, especially as her lack of self-control appeared to produce great agitation among the cherries on the black hat in front. It was only by holding her breath till she almost choked that she managed to avoid disgracing herself absolutely.

As Morvyth had predicted, Raymonde was among the hostesses for the afternoon. She rose admirably to the occasion, handed round cakes and bread and butter, and talked sweetly to the guests on a variety of topics. Aveline, also one of the chosen, though less agile in conversation, tried to look "hospitable" and "welcoming," and cultured and pretty-mannered and gracious, and everything else which might be expected from a young lady at a finishing-school.

Miss Gibbs, who was keeping the deportment of the hostesses well under inspection, beamed approval, but spurred them on to fresh efforts.

"See that nobody is neglected," she whispered. "Hand the cakes to that lady who is standing by the piano; and you, Raymonde, take her the cream."

The chums had instinctively avoided the owner of the black hat with the cherries, but thus urged they were bound to fulfil their social obligations. They offered a selection of ginger-nuts and fancy biscuits, and the best silver cream-jug, and murmured some polite nothings on the hackneyed subject of the weather. The lady helped herself, and regarded them with an offended eye.

"I believe you're the two girls who sat behind me during the lecture!" she remarked tartly. "I should like to say that I considered your behaviour

disgraceful. It would serve you right if I were to tell your governess.”

Overwhelmed with confusion, Raymonde and Aveline beat a hasty retreat.²⁰⁸

“Oh, dear! Does she think I was laughing at her?” whispered Aveline. “What must I do? Ought I to go and explain and apologize? I simply daren’t!”

“She’s a nasty old thing!” returned Raymonde in an indignant undertone. “I hope she won’t sneak to Gibbie! You can’t explain. I shouldn’t go near her.”

“Gibbie’s working round towards the piano!”

“No, Mrs. Horner’s stopped her.”

Fortunately for the girls, at this moment Professor Marshall cleared his throat violently, and, obtaining by this signal a temporary respite in the babel of small talk, announced that on the following Saturday afternoon he proposed to lead a party to Littlewood Quarry to examine the geological formation there, and search for fossils. He hoped that all the present company would be able to attend, as the expedition would be of great educational value. The general conversation in the room immediately turned upon geology. The black hat with cherries bore down upon the Professor, and its owner plunged into a lengthy discussion on the flora of the carboniferous period, so apparently absorbing that it left her no opportunity to lodge complaints as to the behaviour of the pupils. The chums, whose social duties were now finished, slipped thankfully away to prep.

“I’m disgusted with the Professor!” groaned Morvyth. “It’s too bad of him to take up another of our precious Saturday afternoons with his geology excursion. The tennis match will be all off now, and I know we could have beaten the Sixth! I don’t want to hunt for fossils! I’m tired of continually having my mind improved!”

“We really don’t get a fair chance for games at this school,” Ardiune grumbled in sympathy. “I wish Gibbie were sporting instead of intellectual!”

It was really a grievance to the girls to be obliged to abandon tennis on this occasion. The match between Sixth and Fifth had been a fixture, and each side had hopes of its own champions. Daphne and Barbara were good players, but Valentine and Muriel had been practising early and late, and in

the estimation of their own Form were well in the running for victory. Even the juniors had looked forward to witnessing the combat. Valentine, in her disappointment, went so far as to suggest to Miss Gibbs that the match might claim precedence over the excursion. The astonished mistress gazed at her for a moment with blank face, then burst out:

“Give up the fossil hunt in favour of tennis! What nonsense! You ought all to be deeply grateful to Professor Marshall for coming to take us. You girls don’t appreciate your privileges!”

“There’s one compensation,” urged Fauvette. “We shall walk through the village, and, if we break line a little, it will give a chance for somebody to dash into the shop and buy pear-drops. One had better do it for us all, and get a pound. We’ll pay up our shares, honest.”

On the afternoon of Saturday, twenty-six rather apathetic geologists started forth from the Grange. Each carried a basket, and a few, who had scrambled first, had secured hammers. Miss Gibbs, armed with “An Illustrated Catalogue of the Fossils in the Bradbury Museum,” by means of which she hoped to identify specimens, brought up the rear, in company with Veronica, and the school crocodiled in orthodox fashion as far as the village. Here they were met by the Vicar’s wife and daughter, and several other ladies who were to join the excursion. The double line swayed and broke. Miss Gibbs’s attention became engaged by visitors, and, during the few minutes’ halt, Raymonde, well covered by her comrades, seized the golden opportunity, darted into the shop, and emerged with a large packet hidden in her basket, before mistress or monitresses had had time to miss her.

“Paradise drops!” she announced with gleeful caution. “Got them because they were on the counter, and the quickest thing I could buy. No, I daren’t dole them out now. You must wait till we get to the quarry. Gibbie’d notice you sucking them, you idiots!”

It was rather a long way to Littlewood. Much too far, in the girls’ opinion, though they would have thought nothing of the walk had they been keener on its object.

“Shouldn’t have minded so much if we’d come on a Thursday, and missed French translation. Why had it to be Saturday?” groused Ardiune.

“Because Saturday’s the only day the men aren’t working in the quarry. For goodness’ sake, stop grumbling!” returned Hermie in her most monitressy manner. “If you can’t enjoy things yourself, let other people have a chance, at any rate!”

Duly snubbed, Ardiune subsided, and tramped on in silence, her discontent slightly alleviated by the prospect of Paradise drops, for Raymonde was rattling the basket suggestively to cheer her up. Extra visitors joined the party here and there upon the way, and outside Littlewood village the Professor himself was waiting for them, beaming as usual, and carrying a most professional-looking hammer, and a little bass for specimens. He greeted them with one of his customary jokes, and they smiled obediently, more out of habit than inclination.

The quarry proved more exciting than they had anticipated. It was a large place, and to get down into it they were obliged to descend several steep ladders, leading from one platform to another. Arrived at the bottom level, Professor Marshall collected his students in a group round him, and delivered a lecturette upon the points to be noticed in the strata surrounding them. Raymonde listened sadly. It seemed to her an unprofitable way of spending a Saturday afternoon. She brightened, however, when the audience dispersed to commence practical work.

“Come along!” she whispered to her chums. “Let’s scoot over there and begin to chop rocks! Quick!”

“Where are the Paradise drops?” enquired the others eagerly.

“Don’t worry, I have them safe. Only wait till Gibbie’s back is turned.”

Though they were decidedly tired of lectures, the girls nevertheless were quite mildly interested in searching for fossils. There was an element of competition about it which appealed to them, and when Hermie found a fine specimen of *Cupressocrinus crassus*, the Fifth felt that they must not be outdone.

“We haven’t got anything really decent yet!” sighed Aveline, watching with envious eyes as Hermie exhibited her treasure to the admiring visitors. “The Sixth are cackling ever so hard.”

“Let’s go over there,” suggested Raymonde. “No one’s explored that bit of the quarry. We might find all sorts of things.”

The Mystic Seven, who generally clung together in their undertakings, scaled a ladder therefore, climbed a mound of refuse, and found themselves on new ground. They dispersed, and each searched to the best of her ability among the pieces of crumbly rock that were lying about. Aveline, absorbed in splitting strata with her hammer, was suddenly disturbed by a piercing yell and a shout of “Help!” She ran at once in the direction of the screams, and round the corner discovered Raymonde, sunk nearly to her waist in a kind of clay bog.

“Help me!” she implored. “I can’t get out. The more I try, the deeper I seem to sink in.”

“Don’t struggle, then; wait a minute,” said Aveline, advancing on to some firm-looking stones and stretching out a hand. “Can you manage now?”

Raymonde made a desperate but futile effort. “No, I’m stuck tight—can’t move my legs.”

“Don’t pull me, or I’ll be in too! Now, I’m going to tug one of your legs out! That’s it! Now the other! Here you are! Good gracious! What a mess you’re in!”

Arrived on firm ground, Raymonde certainly looked a deplorable object. Her feet were two shapeless lumps of wet clay. She regarded them with rueful consternation. Ardiune came running up, and, being of a practical turn of mind, set to work to scrape her friend clean with a thin piece of stone. She succeeded in removing the bulk of the matter adhering to her, but there still remained a most unsightly coating of mud.

“What were you doing to get yourself in such a fix?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It looked quite solid, and then, when I stepped on it, I just sank in—squash! I might have been swallowed up in it and killed, if Ave hadn’t tugged me out!”

“You look a nice object to walk home with!” giggled Aveline. “What’ll Gibbie say?”

What Miss Gibbs remarked when she saw the state of her pupil’s garments was:

“Really, Raymonde, I might have known you would be sure to do some stupid thing! No other girl in the school has fallen into the mud. Why didn’t

you keep with the rest, and look where you were going? You're more trouble than everybody else put together. If you can't behave yourself when you come on an excursion, you must be left behind to do some preparation."

The Mystics consoled their leader as best they could, offering her their last remaining Paradise drops, and walking in a clump round her through the village to shield her from observation. Ardiune, who was poetically inclined, thought the occasion worthy of being celebrated in verse, and at bedtime handed Raymonde the following effusion, illustrated with spirited sketches in black lead-pencil, representing her with clay-covered feet of gigantic proportions.

Raymonde, a nice and cheerful child
Who seldom wept and often smiled,
Was taken by her teachers kind
A jaunt, to elevate her mind.

By lengthy ladders undismayed,
Behold her seek the quarry's shade,
With firm resolve to hit and hew,
And find a fossil fern or two.

She rapped the rocks with anxious pick,
And scooped the ammonites out quick,
But as she rang her brief tap-tap
There chanced to her a sad mishap.

Urged on by hope of fossil round,
She stepped on some perfidious ground,
So now behold our luckless Ray
Plunged in the midst of horrid clay.

The mud had nearly reached her waist,
She called aloud in frantic haste:
"I sink, I sink in quagmire sable,
To free myself I am unable!"

Her friend, who hurried to her shout,
Had much ado to drag her out.
See! thick with mud and faint with fright,
She bravely bears her woeful plight.

Her tender teacher's anxious fears
She soothes, and dries her friends' fond tears,
Declaring, with a courage calm,
The outing had been worth th' alarm.

“Humph! Good for you, Ardiune!” commented Raymonde. “Not much tenderness about Gibbie, though! And I didn’t see anybody’s fond tears! You all laughed at me! My feet weren’t a yard long, anyway!”

“Poetic and artistic license allows a few slight exaggerations. Even Shakespeare took liberties with his subjects!” returned the authoress blandly. “If not exactly a yard long, your feet, not small by nature, looked absolutely enormous! It’s the truth!”

CHAPTER XVIII

Mademoiselle

“Parlez-vous français, Mademoiselle?
She opened the window, and out she fell.
And what happened next I’ve never heard tell,
Parlez-vous français, Mademoiselle?”

chanted Raymonde, dancing into the dormitory and plumping down on Fauvette’s bed amid a pile of chiffons, muslins, and other flimsy articles of wearing apparel. “Why, what’s the matter, child? Whence this spread-out? You look weepy! Packing to go home? Mother ill? Or are you expelled?”

“Neither,” gulped Fauvette with a watery smile. “It’s only her—Mademoiselle! She’s turned all my drawers out on to the floor, and says I’ve got to tidy them. She lectured me hard in French. I couldn’t understand half of what she said, but I knew she was scolding. And I’ve to sort all these things out, and put them neatly away, and mend up everything that needs mending before this evening, or else she’ll tell the Bumble to come and look at them, and I shall get ‘sadly lacking in order’ down in my report again. It’s too bad!”

“It’s positively brutal of Mademoiselle!” said Raymonde reflectively. “If it had been Gibbie, now, it would have been no surprise to me. Don’t cry, you little silly! You look like a weeping cherub on a monument! Shovel your clothes back again into your drawers, and put a tidy top layer. That’s what I always do!”

“So do I,” wailed Fauvette. “But it won’t work this time. Mademoiselle was really cross, and I could see she means to come to-night, and hold what she calls ‘une inspection’. She said something about making me an example. Why, if she wants an example, need she choose me?”

“It’s certainly breaking a butterfly,” agreed Raymonde. “I’m afraid there’s something seriously wrong with Mademoiselle. She’s completely altered

this last week. She never used to worry about things, and she's suddenly turned as fussy as Gibbie."

Raymonde was not the only one who had noticed the change in the French mistress. It was apparent to everybody. Her entire character seemed suddenly to have altered. Whereas beforetime she had been easygoing, slack, and ready to shut eyes and ears to school-girl failings, she was now keenly vigilant and highly exacting. In classes and at music lessons she demanded the utmost attention, and no longer passed over mistakes, or allowed a bad accent. She prohibited the use of the English tongue altogether during meals, and insisted upon her pupils conversing in French, requiring each one to come to table primed with a suitable remark in that language. The number of fines which she inflicted was so heavy that the missionary box filled with a rapidity more gratifying to the local secretary of the society than to the contributors. The girls were considerably puzzled at this change of face on the part of Mademoiselle, but Morvyth and Katherine gave it as their opinion that Miss Beasley lay at the back of it.

"The Bumble's probably had a talk with her, and told her she must buck up or go!" suggested the former. "I'm sure she always thought Mademoiselle a slacker—which she certainly was! Possibly she's given her till the end of the term to show what she's capable of, and if she doesn't come up to the mark, we shall start next term with a new French governess."

"I shouldn't care!" said Raymonde easily. "I never liked her much. We used to call her 'the butterfly', but she's 'the mosquito' now. She's developing a very unpleasant sting."

Whatever might be the truth of Morvyth's surmises as to the reason of Mademoiselle's new attitude, the fact loomed large. Having determined to demonstrate her powers of discipline, she overdid it. She was one of those persons who cannot keep order and enforce rules without losing their tempers, and she stormed at the girls continually. She developed a mania for what she called "surveillance." She was continually paying surprise visits to dormitory or schoolroom, and pouncing upon offenders who were talking, or otherwise neglecting their duties. It was even suspected that she listened behind doors. Fauvette, whose babyish characteristics led her into many pitfalls, seemed suddenly to become the scapegoat of Mademoiselle's freshly acquired vigilance. Fauvette lacked spirit, and went down like a

ninepin before the least word of reproof. Her feelings were easily hurt, and her tears always close to the surface. She sat now and sobbed pathetically upon her pillow, without making the least effort to tidy up her belongings. Raymonde shook her head over her.

“You’re the sort of girl who ought to go through life with a nurse or a maid to look after you; you’re not fit to take care of yourself,” she decided. “Look here, how much wants doing to your clothes before the Mosquito comes buzzing round to inspect?”

“Shoals!” sighed Fauvette wearily. “I’m afraid I’ve left my mending. There are stockings, and gloves, and—all kinds of things.”

“Can you get it done in time?”

“Impossible!” and the tears dripped again on to a dainty muslin collar.

“Then there’s nothing for it but to get up a Mending Bee, and help you! We seven are sworn to stick together.”

“There’ll be squalls if you’re caught in the dormitory during recreation. I was told to stay here,” cautioned Fauvette.

“We’ve got to risk something,” returned Raymonde cheerily, scurrying off in search of the remaining five of the Mystics.

“You’ve all got to fetch work-baskets and come this instant,” she commanded. “It’s an urgency call, like last term when we made T bandages for Roumania, and nose-bags for the horses, only it’s even more important and urgent.”

Armed with their sewing materials, the girls slipped one by one upstairs, and, settling themselves upon the beds in the immediate vicinity of Fauvette’s, set to work. It was a formidable task. Their comrade had brought a large assortment of garments to school with her, and had happily left them unmended, trusting to take them home to be repaired. At present they were mixed in a hopeless jumble on the floor and on her bed, just where Mademoiselle had tipped out the drawers. Stockings, underclothes, gloves, handkerchiefs, photos, old letters, ribbons, ties, beads, locket, books, and an assortment of odd treasures were lying together in utter confusion.

Fauvette brightened at the sight of her friends, mopped her eyes, and pushed back her fluffy hair from her hot forehead.

“Brace up!” Raymonde encouraged her. “We’re not going to help unless you’ll do your own share. Sort those things out, and be putting them in your drawers while we do your mending. Morvyth, take these stockings; Katherine, you’re artistic, so I’ll give you baby ribbon to thread through these bodices. Ardiune, you may mend gloves. Ave, collect those hair ribbons, and put them neatly inside that box, and stack those photos together. Why they’re not in an album I can’t imagine!”

“Because I generally sleep with one or two of them under my pillow,” confessed Fauvette. “Why shouldn’t I, if I like? There’s no harm in it. Oh! please be careful with those beads, you’ll break the strings!”

“I can’t think why you need so many empty chocolate boxes,” commented Aveline, sweeping up treasures with a ruthless hand. “Your drawers will be so full they won’t shut. Throw half of them away!”

“No, no! I always keep them to remind me of the people who gave them to me. You mustn’t throw any of them away. They’re chock-full of memories.”

“Rather have them chock-full of chocs, myself!” remarked Morvyth dryly. “Fauvette, you’re interesting and pretty—when you don’t cry (for goodness’ sake look at your red eyes in the glass!); but you’re as sentimental as an Early Victorian heroine. You ought to wear a bonnet and a crinoline, and carry a little fringed parasol, and talk about your ‘papa’! If you don’t get safely engaged to an officer before you’re out of your teens, you’ll turn into one of those faded females who bore one with sickly reminiscences of their past, and spend the remainder of your life pampering a pet poodle. Here, I’ve mended two pairs of stockings for you.”

“And I’ve done three pairs,” said Raymonde, folding up the articles in question and putting them in her friend’s second long drawer. “We’re getting on. Kathy, have you finished the bodices? We’ll soon have you straightened up, Baby, and if Mademoiselle—Oh!”

Raymonde’s sudden ejaculation was caused by a vision of no less a person than Miss Gibbs, who was standing in the doorway of the dormitory regarding the sewing party in some astonishment.

“What are you girls doing here?” she demanded, making a bee-line for them among the beds.

Nobody answered, and for a moment or two blank dismay spread itself over the countenances of the Mystics. Then Raymonde’s lucky star came to the rescue, and popped an inspiration into her head.

“You were telling us in Social History class yesterday, Miss Gibbs, about the necessity of women co-operating in their work if they are ever to command a higher scale of pay,” she explained glibly; “so we thought we’d better begin to put our principles into practice. Fauvette had fallen into arrears, and was in danger of—er—trouble, so we all came just to boost her up to standard, and let her get a fair start again. It’s on the basis of a Women’s Union or—or—Freemasons. We thought we were bound to help one another.”

Miss Gibbs was not a remarkably humorous person, but on this occasion the corners of her mouth were distinctly observed to twitch. She mastered the weakness instantly, however, and remarked:

“I’m glad to hear that you are interested in co-operation. This is certainly a practical demonstration of the theory, and Fauvette ought to be grateful to you. Be quick and finish straightening the things, and, if anybody asks questions, you may say that you have my permission to remain here until tea-time.”

The girls sat at attention till the door closed upon their mistress, then their mingled amazement and gratitude burst forth.

“Good old Gibbie!”

“She’s an absolute sport to-day!”

“Never known her in such a jinky mood before!”

“The fact of the matter is,” observed Raymonde sagely, “I believe Gibbie absolutely loathes Mademoiselle, and that for once in a way she’s not above taking a legitimate chance of paying her out.”

When the French mistress came round that evening on her tour of inspection, she found Fauvette’s drawers in apple-pie order right to the very bottoms—beads, ties, and collars carefully arranged in boxes, and nicely mended stockings placed in a row.

“It only show vat you can do ven you try!” she commented. “In a woman to be untidy is—ah! I have not your English idiom?”

“The limit!” wickedly suggested Raymonde, who was standing close by.

But Mademoiselle, who had been warned against the acquisition of slang, glared at her till she beat a hasty retreat.

It was growing near to the end of the term, and examinations loomed imminently on the horizon. They were to be conducted this year by Miss Beasley’s brother, a clergyman, and a former lecturer at Oxford. He had made a special study of modern languages, so that his standard of requirement in regard to French grammar was likely to be a high one. Up till now the Fifth Form had plodded through Déjardin’s exercises in an easy fashion, without worrying greatly about the multitude of their mistakes, over which their mistress had indeed shaken her head, but had made no special crusade to amend. Now, in view of the awe-inspiring visit of the Reverend T. W. Beasley, M.A., Mademoiselle had instituted an eleventh-hour spurt of diligence, and kept her pupils with reluctant noses pressed hard to the grindstone. Irregular verbs and exceptions of gender seemed much worse when taken in such large doses. The girls began to wish either that the Tower of Babel had never been attempted, or that the world had reached a sufficient stage of civilization to adopt a universal language. Over one point in particular they considered that they had a just and pressing grievance. The French classes of Form V came on the time-table from 12 to 12.30, being the last subjects of morning school. Dinner was at one o’clock, and in the intervening half-hour the girls put away their books, washed their hands and tidied their hair, and refreshed their flagging spirits by a run round the garden. Mademoiselle had been wont to close her book at the exact minute of the half-hour, but now she utterly ignored the clock, and would go on with the lesson till a quarter or even ten minutes to one. The wrath of the Form knew no bounds. They valued their short exercise before dinner extremely. To have it thus cut off was an infringement of their rights. Mademoiselle, who was perfectly aware that she was exceeding the limit of the time-table, sheltered herself behind excuses.

“Ven I take your verbs I forget it is so late,” she would remark. “Ze lesson slip away, and ve not yet done all ve should.”

The girls held an indignation meeting to discuss the subject. Even Maudie Heywood's appetite for knowledge was glutted by this extra diet of French syntax, and Muriel Fuller and Magsie Mawson, amiable nonentities who rarely ruffled the surface of the school waters, for once verified the proverb that the worm will turn.

"It's not fair!" raged Ardiune.

"Ma'm'selle knows she ought to stop at half-past!" urged Magsie in injured tones.

"It's taking a mean advantage!" echoed Muriel.

"And we can't really work properly when she goes on so long!" wailed Maudie. 225

"I vote we strike!" suggested Morvyth fiercely. "Let's tell her we won't go in for the exam. at all, if she goes on lengthening out the lessons."

Several of the Form brightened up at the suggestion, but Aveline, a shade more practical, shook her head discouragingly.

"If we do, there'll be a fine old row! The Mosquito'll appeal to the Bumble, who'd have her back up directly. I think we'd better not try that on. We don't want to take home 'conduct disgraceful' in our reports."

"Ave's right," agreed Raymonde. "We know the Bumble! This is a matter for tact, not brute force. We must manage Mademoiselle. She pretends she forgets the time—very well, then, we must take steps to bring it palpably to her notice. Will you leave the matter in my hands? I've got an idea."

Raymonde's inspirations were so well known in the Form, that the rest willingly consented to appoint her as a sub-committee of one to undertake the full management of the affair. Before the next French class she made a tour of the monitresses' bedrooms. They had instituted an early-rising society among themselves this term, and almost everyone was provided with an alarum-clock. Raymonde boldly borrowed five of these, without asking leave of their owners, and set them all carefully for 12.30, winding them up to their fullest extent. She then placed them inside the book cupboard in the class-room, and covered them with some sheets of exercise paper.

The lesson proceeded even more painfully than usual. Ardiune got hopelessly mixed between indefinite pronouns and indefinite pronominal adjectives, and Fauvette floundered over the negations, while Muriel found the proper placing of the *p*'s and *l*'s in the conjugation of *appeler* an impossible problem. As 12.30 drew near, there was much glancing at wrist-watches. Mademoiselle kept her eyes persistently turned away from the clock, with the evident intention of once more ignoring the time. This morning, however, Fate, in the person of Raymonde, had been against her. Exactly at the half-hour five alarums started punctually inside the cupboard, raising such a din that it was impossible to hear a word. Mademoiselle flew to investigate, took them out, shook them, and laid them on their backs, but they were wound up to their fullest extent, and nothing short of a hammer would have stopped them. The noise was terrific.

The baffled French governess, clapping her hands over her ears, raised her eyebrows in a signal of dismissal, and the girls availed themselves of the permission with record speed. The alarums burred cheerily on for about twenty minutes, after which, by Mademoiselle's instructions, they were replaced in the monitresses' bedrooms by Hermie. The Fifth were prepared for trouble, but to their surprise no notice was taken of the incident at headquarters. Possibly Mademoiselle was aware that her late efforts at discipline were regarded by Miss Beasley with as little favour as her former slackness, and considered it useless to appeal to her Principal. She took the hint, however, and in future terminated the lesson punctually at the half-hour, so on this occasion the girls considered that they had most decidedly scored.

CHAPTER XIX

A Mysterious Happening

It was now nearly the end of July. The weather, which for many weeks had been fine and warm, suddenly changed to a spell of cold and wet. Rain dripped dismally from the eaves, the tennis courts were sodden, and the orchard was a marsh. The girls had grown accustomed to spending almost all their spare time out of doors, and chafed at their enforced confinement to the house. They hung about in disconsolate little groups, and grumbled. Miss Beasley, who was generally well aware of the mental atmosphere of the Grange, registered the barometer at stormy, and decided that prompt measures were necessary. To work off the steam of the school, she suggested a good old-fashioned game of hide-and-seek, and gave permission for it to be played on those upper landings which were generally forbidden ground. Twenty-six delighted girls started at once upstairs, and passed through the wire door, specially unlocked for their benefit, to the dim and mysterious regions that lay under the roof. It was the best place in the world for the purpose—long labyrinths of passages leading round into one another, endless attics, and innumerable cupboards. The smallness of the latticed windows, combined with the wetness of the afternoon, produced a twilight that was most desirable, and highly suited to the game.

Hermie and Veronica picked sides, and the former's band stole off to conceal themselves, while the others covered their eyes in orthodox fashion, and counted a hundred.

"Cuckoo! We're coming!" shouted Hermie at last, and the fun began.

Up and down, and in and out, diving through doorways, racing along passages, chasing one another round corners, groping in cupboards, panting, squealing, laughing or shuddering, the girls pervaded the upper story. There was a ghostly gloom about the old place which made it all the more thrilling, and gave the players a feeling that at any moment some bogy might spring upon them from a dark recess, or a skinny hand be stretched downwards through a trap-door. Flushed, excited, and really a little

nervous, both sides at last sought the safety of the “den.” Two or three of them began to compare notes. They were joined by others. In a very short time the whole school knew that at least a third of their number had seen a “something.” They were quite unanimous in their report. “It” was a girl of about their own age, in a dark-green dress with a wide white collar. Hermie and Ardiune had noticed her most distinctly. She had smiled and beckoned to them, and run along the passage, but when they turned the corner she had disappeared; and Linda and Elsie, whom they had met coming in the opposite direction, declared that they had seen nobody. Lois and Katherine had caught a glimpse of her as they chased Maudie in one of the attics, and Joan declared positively that she had seen her flitting down the stairs.

“It’s queer in the extreme,” murmured Valentine.

“Are you quite sure it wasn’t really only one of us?” urged Meta.

“Absolutely!” declared Hermie emphatically. “We all have on our brown serges to-day, and I tell you this girl was in dark green; not a gym. costume to wear over a blouse, like ours, but a dress with long sleeves and a big white collar.”

“I don’t believe she’s a real girl at all,” faltered Magsie tremulously. “She’s a spook!”

Magsie voiced the opinion of the majority. It was what most of the school had been feeling for the last five minutes. The interest in the supernatural, which had been a craze earlier in the term until sternly repressed by Miss Beasley, suddenly revived. Daphne remembered the magazine article she had read entitled “The Borderland of the Spirit World,” and cold thrills passed down her spine. Veronica ventured the suggestion that the apparition might be an astral body or an elemental entity.

“It’s a case for the Society for Psychical Research to investigate,” she nodded gravely. “I always said the Grange was bound to be haunted.”

“What was this girl like?” asked Raymonde reflectively. “Ancient or modern?”

“Modern, decidedly. She had on a green dress with a white—”

“So you’ve told us already,”—impatiently. “We know about her clothes. What was she like?”

Hermie stood for a moment with eyes shut, as if calling up a mental picture.

“About Ardiune’s height, but slimmer: rosy face, and dark hair done in a plait—really not so unlike you, Ray, only I should say decidedly prettier.”

“Thank you!” sniffed Raymonde.

“That just about sizes her up!” agreed those who had seen the vision.

“She didn’t look spooky at all,” continued Hermie. “She was quite substantial. You couldn’t see through her, and she didn’t melt into the air.”

“And yet she disappeared?”

“Yes, she certainly disappeared, and in a passage where there were no doors.”

“Do you remember the story I told you of the lady whose astral double left her body during sleep, and haunted a friend’s house?” began Veronica darkly.

“Don’t tell any ghost stories up here—don’t!” implored Fauvette. “I’ll have hysterics in another minute!”

“I’m frightened!” whimpered Joan.

“I vote we go downstairs,” suggested Morvyth. “I don’t want to play any more hide-and-seek at present.”

Nobody else seemed anxious to pursue the game. The attics were too charged with the occult to be entirely pleasant. Everybody made a unanimous stampede for the lower story, passing down the winding staircase with a sense of relief. Once on familiar ground again, things looked more cheery.

“Back already?” commented Miss Gibbs, who had met them on the landing.

“Yes, we’re all—er—a little tired!” evaded Hermie, with one of her conscious blushes.

“Better go to the dining-room and get out your sewing, then,” replied the mistress, eyeing her keenly.

The girls proceeded soberly downstairs, still keeping close together like a flock of sheep. Raymonde, however, lagged behind. For a moment or two

she stood pondering, then she ran swiftly up the winding staircase again into the attic.

The talk of the school that evening turned solely upon the ghost girl. Meta, who had not seen the vision, declared it was nothing but over-excited imagination, and feared that some people were apt to get hysterical; at which Hermie retorted that no one could be further from hysteria than herself, and that six independent witnesses could scarcely imagine the same thing at the same moment, without some basis for their common report. Veronica considered that they had entered unwittingly into a psychic circle, and encountered either a thought-form that had materialized, or a phantasm of the living.

“Some people have capacities for astral vision that others don’t possess,” she said in a lowered voice. “It’s quite probable that Hermie may be clairvoyante.”

Hermie sighed interestedly. It was pleasanter to be dubbed clairvoyante than hysterical. She had always felt that Meta did not appreciate her.

“We’ve none of us been trained to realize our spiritual possibilities,” she replied, her eyes wide and thoughtful.

While a few girls disbelieved entirely in the spectre, and others accepted the explanation according to Veronica’s occult theories, most of the school considered the attic to be haunted by a plain old-fashioned ghost, such as anybody might expect to find in an ancient mansion like the Grange. They waived the subject of modern costume, deciding that in the dim light such details could hardly have been adequately distinguished, and that the apparition must have been a cavalier or Jacobite maiden, whose heart-rending story was buried in the oblivion of years.

“Perhaps her lover was killed,” commented Fauvette, with a quiver of sympathy.

“Or her father was impeached by Parliament,” added Maudie.

“She may have had a cruel stepmother who ill-treated her,” sighed Muriel softly.

Raymonde alone offered no suggestions, and when asked for her opinion as to the explanation of the mystery, shook her head sagely, and said nothing.

The immediate result of the experience was that Veronica went to Miss Beasley, and borrowed *An Antiquarian Survey of the County of Bedfordshire, including a description of its Castles and Moated Houses, together with a History of its Ancient Families*—a ponderous volume dated 1823, which had before been offered for the girls' inspection, but which nobody had hitherto summoned courage to attack. She studied it now with deep attention, and gave a digest of its information for the benefit of weaker minds, less able than her own, to grapple with the stilted language. The school preferred lighter literature for their own reading, but were content to listen to legends of the past when told by Veronica, who had rather a gift for narrative, and could carry her audience with her. As the next afternoon was still hopelessly wet, the girls gathered in one of the schoolrooms with their sewing, and were regaled with a story while they worked.

“I found out all about the Grange,” began Veronica. “It belonged to a family named Ferrers, and they took the side of the King in the Civil War. While Sir Hugh was away fighting in the north, the house was besieged by Cromwell's troops. The Lady of the Manor, Dame Joan Ferrers, had to look after the defence. She had not many men, nor a great deal of ammunition, and not nearly as much food as was necessary. She at once put all the household upon short rations, and drew up the drawbridge, barred the great gates, and prepared to hold out as long as she possibly could. She knew that the Cavalier forces might be marching in the direction of Marlowe at any time to relieve her, and that if she could keep the enemy at bay even for a few weeks the Grange might be saved. The utmost vigilance was used. Sentries were posted in the tower over the great gate, and the lady herself constantly patrolled the walls. With so small a garrison it was a difficult task, for the men had not adequate time to rest or sleep, and were soon nearly worn out. The scanty supply of food was almost at an end. Unless help should arrive within a few days, they would be obliged to capitulate. All the flour was gone, and the bacon and salted beef, and the cocks and hens and pigeons, and even the horses had been killed and eaten, though these had been kept till the very last. The worst of the trouble was that there was treachery within the walls. Dame Joan was well aware of it, though she could not be absolutely sure which of her men were disaffected, for they all still pretended loyalty to their master and to the King. Nobody, she felt, was really to be trusted, though the walls were still manned, and the cannon blazed away with what ammunition was left. If the Grange were to be saved

at all, it was imperative that a message asking for help should be conveyed to the Royalist forces. But how could it be taken? The Roundheads were encamped all round the walls, and would promptly shoot anyone who attempted to penetrate their lines. None of the garrison would be stout-hearted enough to venture.

“Sir Hugh’s eldest son was away fighting with his father, but there was a daughter at home, a girl of about thirteen, named Joyce. She came now to her mother, and begged to be allowed to take the message. It was a long time before Dame Joan would give her consent, for she knew the terrible danger to which Joyce would be exposed; but she had the lives of her younger children to think of as well, and in the end she gave her reluctant permission. Just when it was growing dusk, she took her little daughter to a secret doorway in the panelling, from which a subterranean passage led underneath the moat into the adjoining wood. This secret passage was known only to Sir Hugh and his wife and their eldest son, and it was now shown to Joyce for the first time. It was a horrible experience to go down it alone, but she was a brave lassie, and ready to risk her life for the sake of her mother, and her younger brothers and sisters. She took a lantern²³⁵ to guide her, and set off with as cheerful a face as she could show. The air was stale and musty, and in some places she felt as if she could scarcely breathe. Her footsteps, light though they were, rang hollow. After what seemed to her a very long way, she found herself in a small cave, and could catch a gleam of twilight sky through the entrance. She at once extinguished the lantern, and advanced with extreme caution. She was in the wood at the farther side of the moat, a place where she had often played with her brothers, and had gathered primroses and violets in the springtime. She could recognize the group of tall elms, and knew that if she kept to the right she might creep through a hole in the hedge, and make her way across some fields into the high road. As quietly as some little dormouse or night animal she stole along.

“Not far off she could see the great camp fire, round which the troopers were preparing their supper. She hoped they would all be too busy with their cooking to notice her. As she passed behind some bushes she suddenly caught the gleam of a steel helmet within a few yards of her. She crouched down under the shelter of a clump of gorse. But in doing so she made a faint rustle.

“Halt! Who goes there?’ came the challenge.

“Joyce’s heart was beating so loudly that she thought it must surely be heard.

“The sentry listened a moment, then levelling his pistol, sent a shot through the gorse bush. It passed within a few inches of her head, but she had the presence of mind not to cry out or move. Evidently thinking he was mistaken, the sentry paced farther on, and Joyce, seizing her golden opportunity, slipped through the hole in the hedge. Still using the cover of bushes, she made her way across three fields, and reached the road. It was quite dark now, but she knew her direction, and turned up a by-lane where she would be unlikely to meet troopers. All night she walked, guiding herself partly by the stars, for she knew that Charles’s Wain always pointed to the north. At dawn a very tired and worn-out little maiden presented herself at the gateway of Hepplethorpe Manor, demanding instant audience of Sir Roger Rivington. That worthy knight and loyal supporter of the Crown, on hearing her story, immediately sent horsemen with a letter to General Bright, of the King’s forces, who lay encamped only five miles off; and he, marching without delay for Marlowe Grange, surprised the Parliamentarians and completely routed them. The half-starved garrison opened the great gates to their deliverers with shouts of joy, and, we may be sure, welcomed the supplies of food that poured into the house later on. As for Joyce, she must have been the heroine of the family.”

“Is that all?” asked the girls, as Veronica paused and began to count the stitches in the sock she was knitting.

“All that’s in the book, and I’ve embroidered it a little. It was told in such a very dull fashion, so I put it in my own words. It’s quite true, though.”

“What became of Joyce afterwards?”

“She married Sir Reginald Loveday, and became the lady of Clopgate Towers. The tomb is in Byford Church.”

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“If she’d been shot by the trooper, I should have thought she was the ghost girl!” commented Ardiune. “I don’t quite see how we could fix that up, though. It doesn’t seem to fit. You’re quite sure she escaped?”

“Perfectly certain. How else could the Grange have been saved?”

Veronica's argument settled the question, but the girls felt that the dramatic interest of the situation would have been better suited if the story had ended with the melancholy death of the heroine, and her subsequent haunting of the Manor.

"I always heard that Cromwell's soldiers destroyed the walls and made those big holes in the gateway with their cannon-balls," said Morvyth, still only half convinced.

"So they did, but that was two years afterwards, and the children were all sent safely away before the second siege."

"It hasn't solved the mystery of the ghost girl," persisted Ardiune. "Ray, what do you think about it?"

Raymonde, lost in a brown study, started almost guiltily, and recommenced her sewing with feverish haste.

"Think? Why, it's a pretty story, of course. What more can I think? Why d'you ask me?"

"Oh! I don't know, except that you generally have ideas about everything. Who can the ghost girl be?"

But Raymonde, having lost her scissors, was biting her thread, and only shook her head in reply.

CHAPTER XX

The Coon Concert

At the end of the summer term it had always been the custom of the school for each Form to get up a separate little entertainment, at which the other Forms should act audience. This year it was unanimously decided not only to keep up the old tradition, but to extend the original plan by charging for admission, and sending the proceeds to the Blinded Soldiers' Fund. This idea appealed greatly to the girls.

"They've given their eyes for us, and we ought to do something for them!" declared Linda emphatically.

"It must be awful to be blind," sighed Muriel.

"Yes, and some of them are such lads, too! Think of losing your sight, and having your whole career ruined, when you're only nineteen or twenty, and the ghastly prospect of living years and years and years till you're quite old, and never being able to see the sun again, and the flowers, and your friends' faces, or anything that makes life beautiful! I don't think half of us realize what our soldiers have suffered for us!"

"And they're so patient and cheerful!" added Veronica. "In my opinion they prove their heroism as much by the way they bear their ruined lives afterwards as by their deeds in the trenches. It has shown what stuff British folk are made of. And you get such surprises. Often a boy whom you've known, and always thought weak and selfish and silly, will turn out to have any amount of grit in him. There's one in particular—a friend of ours. He cared for nothing before except amusing himself—the kind of boy who's always getting into debt and doing foolish things. Well, he's utterly changed; he's not like the same fellow. I think the war will have made a great difference to many of our men."

"And to our women too, I hope," said Miss Beasley, who, unnoticed by Veronica, had joined the group. "It would be a poor thing for the country if only the men came purified out of this time of trouble. 'A nation rises no

higher than its women!’ And now is Woman’s great opportunity. I think she is taking it. She is showing by her work in hospitals, in canteens, on the land, in offices, or in public service, how she can put her shoulder to the wheel and help in her country’s hour of need. I believe this war will have broken down many foolish old traditions and customs, and that people will be ready afterwards to live more simple, natural lives than they did before. The school-girls of to-day are the women of to-morrow, and it is on you that the nation will rely in years to come. Don’t ever forget that! Try to prove it practically!”

Miss Beasley seldom “preached” to the girls, but when she spoke, her few quiet words generally had their effect. Hermie and Linda in especial turned them over in their minds. As the result of their mistress’s last remark, they made a suggestion to their fellow-monitresses.

“Some of us are leaving this term, and at any rate in a few years we shall all have left, and be scattered about in various places. Wouldn’t it be nice to make a kind of League, and undertake that every girl who has belonged to this school will do her very best to help the world? It should be a ‘Marlowe Grange’ pledge, and we’d bind ourselves to keep it. If a whole school makes up its mind to a thing, it ought to have some effect, and it would be splendid to feel that our school had been an inspiration, and helped to build up a new and better nation after the war. There are only twenty-six of us here at present, but suppose when we leave we each influence ten people, that makes two hundred and sixty, and if they each influence ten people more, it makes two thousand six hundred, so the thing grows like circles in a pond. I don’t mean that we’re to be a set of prigs, and go about criticizing everybody and telling them they are slackers—that’s not the right way at all; but if we stick up constantly for all that we know is best, people will probably begin to sympathize, and want to do the same.”

Hermie’s and Linda’s idea appealed to the Sixth. They instituted the League at once, and persuaded the entire school to join. They put their heads together, and drew up a short code which they considered should explain the attitude of their society. It ran as follows:—

MARLOWE GRANGE LEAGUE
AFTER-THE-WAR RULES

1. To do some definite, sensible work, and not to spend all my time in golf, dances, and other amusements.
2. To read wholesome books, study Nature, and be content with simple pleasures.
3. Not to judge my friends by the standards of clothes and money, but by their real worth.
4. To strive to be broad-minded, and to look at things from other people's points of view as well as my own.
5. To do all I can to help others.
6. To understand that character is the most useful possession I can have, to speak the truth, be charitable to my neighbours' faults, and avoid gossip.
7. To cultivate and cherish the faculty of appreciating all the beautiful in life, and to enjoy innocent pleasures.
8. To realize that as a soldier is one of an army, so I am a unit of a great nation, and must play my part bravely and nobly for the sake of my country.
9. To remember that I can do good and useful work in my own home as well as out in the world.
10. To keep my heart open, and take life cheerfully, kindly, and smilingly, trying to make my own little circle better and happier, and to forget myself in pleasing others.
11. Not to moan and groan over what is inevitable, but to make the best of things as they are.
12. To be faithful to my friends, loyal to my King and my Country, and true to GOD.

GOD SAVE THE KING

In order to make the League a binding and lasting affair, the monitresses decided to give each member a copy of the code, and ask her to sign her name to it. For this purpose they made twenty-six dainty little books of exercise paper, with covers of cardboard (begged from the drawing cupboard) decorated with Japanese stencils of iris, chrysanthemums, birds and reeds, or other artistic designs, the backs being tied with bows of baby ribbon. After the list of rules, were appended a few suitable quotations, and blank pages were left, so that each individual could fill them up with

extracts that she liked, either cut out of magazines or written in her own hand. Most of the girls admired Robert Louis Stevenson, so the selections began with his wise and tender epitome of life:—

“To be honest, to be kind, to earn a little and to spend a little less, to make upon the whole a family happier for his presence, to renounce when that shall be necessary and not be embittered, to keep a few friends, but these without capitulation. Above all, on the same grim condition, to keep friends with himself. Here is a task for all that a man has of fortitude and delicacy.”

As Linda and Hermie could not agree whether this ideal of life or the one by William Henry Channing was the more beautifully expressed, it was agreed to put the latter’s as well:—

“To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion; to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich, to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly; to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages with open heart; to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never; in a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common—this is to be my symphony.”

As the League was to be nothing if not practical, everyone felt that the best way of upholding its principles at the present moment was to raise a good collection for the fund for the blinded soldiers. The Sixth determined to give a theatrical performance, the juniors a display of gymnastics and dancing, and the Fifth concentrated their minds upon a concert.

“It’s not to be just an ordinary concert,” said Ardiune, addressing a select committee of management; “it must be something extra special and outside, such as we’ve never had before in the school, so rub up your ideas, please, and make suggestions. I’m waiting!”

“Rather a big order to get anything entirely new!” grunted Morvyth. “I should say everything on the face of the earth’s been tried already!”

“But not here! How you catch me up!”

“There isn’t time to get up an operetta, I suppose?” ventured Fauvette.

“Hardly—in three days!”

“A patriotic performance?”

“Had one only last term, so it would come stale.”

“Then what can we have?”

“I know!” exclaimed Raymonde, bouncing up from her chair, and taking a seat upon the table instead. “I vote we be coons!”

“What’s coons?” asked Katherine ungrammatically.

“Oh, you stupid! You know! You sing plantation songs, and wear a red-and-white costume, and wave tambourines, and that sort of thing.”

“Do we black our faces?”

“We can if we like, but it isn’t necessary. We’re not to be nigger minstrels exactly. Coons are different. Of course, the songs are all about Sambos and Dinahs, but white people can sing them with quite as great effect. I believe the Bumble’s got some castanets and things put away that we could borrow.”

“So she has! Bags me the cymbals!”

“Pity nobody can play the banjo.”

“Never mind, we shall do very well with the piano.”

The committee having decided that their concert was to be a coon performance, the girls set to work accordingly to make preparations. All the songbooks in the school were ransacked to find plantation melodies, and after much discussion, not to say quarrelling, a programme was at length arranged, sufficiently spicy to entertain the girl portion of the audience, but select enough not to offend the easily shocked susceptibilities of Miss Gibbs, whose ideas of songs suitable for young ladies ran—in direct opposition to most of her theories—on absolutely Early Victorian lines.

“Gibbie’s notion of a concert is ‘Home, Sweet Home’ and ‘Cherry Ripe’, and perhaps ‘Caller Herrin’ if you want something lively,” pouted Ardiune.

“Yes, and even those have to be edited,” agreed Morvyth. “Don’t you remember when we were learning ‘Cherry Ripe’, she insisted on our changing ‘Where my Julia’s lips do smile’ into ‘Where the sunbeams sweetly smile?’”

“And she wouldn’t let us sing ‘The Blue Bells of Scotland’, and we knew it was just because it began: ‘Oh where, tell me where, is your Highland laddie gone?’”

“Don’t you know it’s highly improper for a school-girl even to mention a laddie?” murmured Katherine ironically.

“How about the blinded soldiers, then?”

“That’s another matter, I suppose.”

“Look here—let’s take our programme to the Bumble, and get her to pass it beforehand, and then there can be no criticisms afterwards.”

“Right you are!”

“I’ve got another idea,” propounded Raymonde. “Suppose, instead of having our concert in the lecture hall, we ask the Bumble to let us have it in the barn instead? It would be just twice as coony.”

“Top-hole! It would be a regular stunt!” agreed the committee.

A deputation waited upon Miss Beasley, and found her quite gracious and amenable to reason, both in respect of the choice of plantation ditties and the use of the barn as a place of entertainment. She even vouchsafed the further and most valuable suggestion that they might supply refreshments and charge for them, to help to swell the funds.

“You can send an order to the Stores at Gladford to-morrow for cakes and biscuits. Cook shall make you some lemonade, and you may have the oil stove in the barn and supply cocoa at twopence a cup.”

“May we sell sweets, Miss Beasley?” asked Raymonde tentatively.

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“Well—yes. I don’t see why you shouldn’t. You may put down chocolates with your order for cakes and biscuits, if you like.”

The delegates made a cheerful exit from the study, and hurried to communicate their good tidings to the rest of the Form.

“O Jubilate! We’ll make a night of it!” commented Katherine. “The Bumble’s turned into an absolute honey-bee!”

Great were the preparations for the event. Costumes had to be contrived—a difficult matter with only the school theatrical box to draw upon—and ten

coons to be turned out in uniform garb. The usual stock properties, such as the brigand's velvet jacket, the Admiral's cocked hat, or the hunting top-boots, were utterly useless, and the girls had to set their wits to work. They decided to wear their best white petticoats with white blouses, and to make hats out of stiff brown paper trimmed with rosettes of scarlet crinkled paper (obtainable at the village shop), using bands of the same scarlet for belts and ties.

"Of course we'd rather have had real rush-hats and ribbons, but if you can't get them you can't, and there's an end of it, and you must just make up your mind to do without!" said Raymonde philosophically.

"If I sing too hard I know I'll burst my waistband!" objected Morvyth, who always looked on the gloomy side of events.

"Then don't sing too hard, and don't take any refreshments, if you've such an easily expanding figure!" snapped Raymonde.

"We could stitch the crinkled paper over an ordinary belt, and then ²⁴⁷it wouldn't break through," suggested Valentine.

"Scarlet's not my colour!" mourned Fauvette.

"Never mind, Baby, you look nice in anything!" returned Aveline soothingly. "And your white petticoat's a perfect dream! I always said it was a shame to wear it under a dress."

The entertainment was to take place in the evening, after preparation, and on the afternoon of the day in question the Fifth Form took sole and absolute possession of the barn, turning everybody else out, even those indignant enthusiasts who were at work at the wood-carving bench.

"Mind, our tools haven't got to be touched, or we'll have something to say!" called out Daphne as she made an unwilling exit.

"I shall put them all in the box!" returned Morvyth, slamming the door.

The wood-carving bench had to serve as refreshment table, so it was cleared with scant ceremony, in spite of Daphne's protest; a clean cloth, borrowed from the cook, was spread upon it, and plates of cakes and biscuits, and packets of chocolates, were laid out as attractively as possible, with vases of flowers between.

Raymonde, who was nothing if not inventive, suddenly evolved a new and enterprising scheme.

“We must have a platform!” she decided. “Come along to the wood pile, and we’ll get some packing-cases and put railway sleepers over them. It won’t take us long!”

It turned out a more strenuous business than she had anticipated, however, for it was difficult in the first place to find packing-cases of the same height, and more difficult still to get the railway sleepers to fit neatly together on the top of them.

“I hope it’ll hold up!” said Aveline dubiously, when the erection was at last complete.

“Oh, it’ll just have to hold!” returned Raymonde in her airiest manner. “I think it’s nicer than a stiff platform, and more suitable for a barn. It looks really ‘coony’, and suggests the Wild West, and log-cabins, and all that sort of thing.”

Immediately after preparation, the coons retired to make final arrangements in the barn. The big stable lanterns were lighted and hung up for purposes of illumination, and a cauldron of water was set upon the oil cooking-stove. It was a horrible scramble, for time was short, and they still had to change their dresses. Everyone seemed in everybody else’s way, and each gave directions to the others, though nobody was in authority, and all got decidedly cross and snapped at one another.

“It’s not an atom of use sticking up that lantern unless you fill it first,” urged Valentine. “I tell you it’s almost empty, and won’t burn twenty minutes. You don’t want to perform in the dark, I suppose?”

“It ought to have been filled before!” grumbled Ardiune. “Here, give me the paraffin can.”

“Take care what you’re doing! You’re slopping into the cauldron!”

“I’m not!”

“But I saw you! We shall have to empty out the cauldron and wash it and refill it.”

“Nonsense!” interferred Raymonde. “There isn’t time. Val, is that lantern finished? Then hang it up, and come along and dress. We shall have everybody arriving before we’re half ready.”

Almost every amateur concert begins late, and this was no exception to the rule. By the time the coons had scrambled into their costumes, and Fauvette had got her best lace-trimmed white petticoat fastened adequately on to her blouse with safety-pins, and Katherine had adjusted her tie to her satisfaction, and Muriel had induced her paper hat to tilt at the right angle on her head, the audience was clamouring for admission at the door of the barn, and making moral remarks on the subject of punctuality.

“We’re awfully sorry,” panted Raymonde in excuse, undoing the padlock which the coons had left fastened, and allowing the school to tramp into the place of entertainment. “Your shillings, please! Yes, we’re taking the money first thing, instead of handing round the plate in the interval. Where’s the Bumble?”

“Just coming now, with Gibbie and Ma’m’selle.”

The barn with its dark rafters, stable lanterns, and improvised benches, certainly looked a most appropriate setting for a plantation programme, and Miss Beasley glanced round with amused interest on her arrival. She and the other mistresses were escorted to special posts of honour, and the performance began without further delay. Everybody admired the costumes; the red-and-white effect was quite charming, especially when worn by all ten alike, and the paper hats with their big rosettes gave a coquettish appearance that added to the piquancy of the songs. There could, of course, be no piano accompaniment, but the girls made up for it by a liberal clashing of cymbals, rattling of castanets, and jingling of tambourines. They were as “cute” and “coony” as they knew how to be, putting a great deal of action into the songs, and adding a few comic asides. At Raymonde’s suggestion, they had decided during the performance of “The Darkies’ Frolic” to dance a lively kind of combined fox-trot and cake-walk measure to illustrate the words. They had practised it carefully beforehand, and considered it the *pièce de résistance* of the evening. But alas! they had not calculated on the difference between the firm floor of the barn and the extremely shaky erection on which they were perched. They were only half-way through, and were capering in most approved darky fashion, when the

middle packing-case which supported the planks suddenly gave way, and the platform collapsed. Some of the girls sprang off in time, but several went down among the ruins, and were rescued by the agitated mistresses, fortunately without real injuries, though there were scratches and bruises, and at least half a yard of lace was torn from Fauvette's best petticoat.

As "The Darkies' Frolic" was the last item but one in the first half of the programme, and the performers were naturally ruffled by their unexpected accident, Miss Beasley suggested that they had better have the interval at once, and soothe their feelings with cakes and cocoa before resuming the entertainment. The little spread on the wood-carving bench looked attractive; the Stores had sent a tempting selection of cakes, and the audience was quite ready for refreshment. Ardiune, presiding at the cauldron, mixed cups of cocoa as speedily as possible, and handed them out in exchange for twopences. At the first sip, however, an expression of acute disgust spread itself over the countenance of each consumer.

"Whew!" choked Hermie. "What's the matter with the stuff? It's simply atrocious!"

"It tastes of paraffin!" proclaimed Veronica, pulling a wry face.

"There! I told you so!" whispered Valentine to Ardiune. "You have just gone and done it this time!"

There was no doubt about the matter. The contents of the cauldron were quite undrinkable, and the girls had to fall back on the small quantity of lemonade which the cook had provided. It was a most mortifying experience, especially happening just after the failure of the platform. The Sixth were looking amused and superior, the juniors were grumbling, and Miss Beasley was saying "Never mind, so long as we help the blinded soldiers;" which was kind, but not altogether comforting. The audience made up for the lack of cocoa by their consumption of confectionery, and went on buying till not a solitary cake or packet of chocolate was left upon the bench.

The second half of the programme had to be performed upon the floor, but went off nevertheless in quite good style and with much flourish of instruments. Fauvette, with her torn lace hurriedly pinned up, piped a pretty little solo about "piccaninnies" and "ole mammies"; Aveline and Katherine

gave a spirited duet, and the troupe in general roared choruses with great vigour. Everybody decided that the evening—barring the cocoa—had been a great success. The proceeds, in particular, were highly satisfactory.

“One pound ten shillings!” announced Raymonde. “Just count it over, somebody, please, to make sure I’m right! I don’t call that half bad for a Form concert. If the others do as well, we shall have quite a nice sum. Shall I give it to the Bumble now?”

“She’s gone upstairs. Besides, I believe it’s Gibbie who’s going to send off the money. You’d better keep it till the others have had their entertainments, and it can all be handed in together.”

“Right-o! I’ll take it and lock it up in my drawer. I say, it was awful fun being coons, wasn’t it?”

“Top-hole!” agreed the others.

CHAPTER XXI

The Blinded Soldiers' Fund

The examinations were drawing most horribly and imminently near, and the Fifth Form, feeling themselves for the most part ill prepared for the ordeal, were shivering in anticipation. Armed with textbooks, they made desperate efforts to pull up arrears, and stock their brains with an assortment of necessary facts. Ardiune crammed dates at every available moment, Morvyth studied the map of Europe, Valentine devoted herself to Virgil, and Magsie wept over French verbs, while the rest tried to fill up any educational gaps and holes where they knew they were lacking. The image of the Rev. T. W. Beasley, M.A. loomed large on the horizon, and his advent was hardly regarded with pleasure.

“I know I’ll be scared to death!” moaned Aveline. “If there are any viva voces I shall break down altogether. I know I shall! Directly he looks at me and asks a question, every single idea will go bang out of my head!”

“It doesn’t matter how well you know things if you’re nervous!” agreed Katherine.

“I hate the written exams!” groaned Raymonde. “They’re so long, and one gets so inky, and one’s hand grows so stiff. I never can express myself well on paper. Gibbie says I’ve no gift for composition.”

“There aren’t any J pens left in the cupboard,” volunteered Maudie. “And Ma’m’selle says it’s not worth while sending for more just at the end of the term, and we must use Waverleys for the exam. There’s a whole boxful of those.”

“Oh, what a shame! I can’t write with a Waverley!” protested Raymonde in much indignation. “It’ll spoil my whole exam. I call that tyranny! Look here! I’m not going to be done! I shall send for a fountain pen with a broad nib. I saw one advertised in a magazine.”

“The Bumble won’t let you.”

“I shan’t ask her!”

“Then how’ll you get it?”

“Oh, trust me! I’ll manage it somehow. I’m not generally easily circumvented when I set my mind upon anything. I’ve a plan already.”

“Have you? What is it?”

“Ah, that would be telling!” laughed Raymonde. “Perhaps my pen will come floating in through the window!”

“You mad creature! I don’t believe you’ll really get it!”

“Wait and see!”

The Fifth Form possessed a little upstairs room at the Grange which they called their sanctum. It held a piano, and was mainly used for practising, but the girls sometimes studied there out of preparation hours. Its principal article of furniture was a large, old-fashioned bureau, which Miss Beasley had bought among other things when she took over the house. She had given every girl in the Form one of its drawers, together with a key, so that each could have a place in which to keep any special treasures locked up.

As Raymonde sat in the sanctum that afternoon alone, trying to apply her mind to memorizing certain axioms of Euclid, Veronica came bustling in.

“You here, Ray? Miss Beasley wants some change to pay the laundry. You’ve got the money you collected at your coon concert last night; can you let her have thirty shillings in silver, and she’ll give you notes instead?”

“Certainly,” replied Raymonde, rising at once and unlocking her drawer in the bureau. “Here you are—four half-crowns make ten shillings, eight shillings is eighteen, and twenty-four sixpences make thirty shillings altogether. I’d just as soon have notes.”

“Right-o!” said Veronica. “I’ll bring them up to you later on, or send somebody with them. I hope our entertainment will do as well as yours. By the by, a queer thing happened just this minute. I saw the ghost girl again!”

“Where?” asked Raymonde excitedly.

“Peeping round the corner of the winding staircase; but she vanished instantly. I went up a few steps, but couldn’t see her. The wire door was

open, and I very nearly ran up to the attic to investigate, but I knew Miss Beasley was waiting for the change. I must rush and give it to her now, or there'll be squalls. Ta-ta!"

Raymonde did not either lock up her drawer or resume her Euclid. She stood for a moment or two pondering. Then a mischievous light broke over her face, and she clapped her hands.

"Splendiferous! I'll do it!" she said aloud; and, whisking out of the room, she ran up the winding staircase, and through the open wire door into the forbidden but fascinating territory of the attics.

The girls at the Grange were obliged to keep strictly to their practising timetable, and Raymonde was due at the piano in the sanctum from 5.30 until 6.15. At 5.40, which was fully ten minutes late, the strains of her Beethoven Sonata began to resound down the passage. Mademoiselle, passing from her bedroom, stood for a moment to listen. She was impressed by the fact that Raymonde was playing much better than usual, and performing in quite a stylish fashion the passage which usually baffled her. She almost opened the door to congratulate her pupil, but being in a hurry changed her mind, and ran downstairs instead. A little later Veronica, also in much haste, entered the room arm-in-arm with Hermie.

"Miss Beasley has sent the notes, Ray," she explained. "You needn't stop. I'll just pop them inside your drawer, and you can put them away properly when you've finished practising."

The figure at the piano did not turn her head, or attempt to reply, but went on diligently with the scherzo movement of the Sonata, bringing out her chords crisply, and executing some quite brilliant runs.

"Raymonde's improving enormously in her music," commented Hermie, as the two monitresses went back along the passage.

"Yes," agreed Veronica. "And how remarkably pretty she looked to-night! Her hair was quite curly, and she had such a lovely colour. Did you notice?"

"That room's so dark, I can't say I did, particularly. Ray's not bad looking, though I don't call her exactly a beauty!"

"She looked a beauty this evening! Fauvette will have to mind her laurels! She's always been the belle of the Form until now."

When Maudie Heywood, in accordance with the practising time-table, came at 6.15 to claim the piano, she found the sanctum unoccupied. Raymonde's drawer in the bureau was shut and locked. This fact Maudie noticed almost automatically. At the moment it seemed a matter of no consequence, though in the light of after events it was to assume a greater importance than she could have imagined.

Raymonde turned up late for preparation, looking hot and conscious, and with her brown serge dress only half fastened. She gave no excuse for her lack of punctuality, and took her loss of order mark with stoicism.

"What were you doing?" whispered Aveline, when the evening work was over and the books were being put away.

Raymonde's head was inside her desk. She drew it out, and seemed on the point of uttering a confidence. Then, suddenly changing her mind, she stooped again to arrange her papers.

"Little girls shouldn't ask questions!" she grunted.

"Oh, very well!" flared Aveline, who was very easily offended. "I'm sure you needn't tell me anything if you don't want to, thanks! I shan't force your silly secrets from you!"

"You certainly won't!" snapped Raymonde, as Aveline flounced away.

There was no time for further bickering. The juniors were giving their gymnastic and dancing display in the lecture hall, and Miss Beasley had announced that she wished the entertainment to begin promptly.

"That's a shot at us!" sniggered Ardiune. "I know the Coons started late, but we really couldn't help it. It took me ages to help Fauvette into her costume, not to speak of getting into my own as well. The Fourth are only performing in their gym. dresses, so it's easy enough for them to be punctual. I'll stump up my shilling cheerfully for the sake of the blind Tommies, but I don't expect much of a show for my money's worth."

"No more do I," agreed Katherine. "I'm fed up with Swedish drill. I confess my interest centres in the refreshments."

After all, the Fifth were agreeably surprised at the achievements of the performers. The juniors had been practising in private under the instruction of Miss Ward, the visiting athletics mistress, and had quite a novel little

programme to present to their schoolfellows. They exhibited some remarkably neat skipping drill, and also some charming Russian and Polish peasant dances, and a variety of military exercises that would almost have justified their existence as a Ladies' Volunteer Corps. It was a patriotic evening, with much waving of flags and allusions to King and Country. Even the refreshments were in keeping, for the table was decorated with red, white and blue streamers, and there were on sale little packets of chocolates wrapped up in representations of the Union Jack. The cocoa on this occasion was immaculate, and everything was served with the utmost daintiness.

“Quite a decent business for the kids!” commented Ardiune, “but not half the fun of our coon performance!”

“It was ripping in the barn!” agreed Morvyth.

There remained one more entertainment in aid of the Blinded Soldiers' Fund, that of the Sixth Form, which was expected by everybody to be the best. Miss Beasley had thrown it open to outsiders, and some of the ladies who attended the geology lectures had promised to come and bring friends. In view of this augmented audience the performers made extra-special efforts. They held frequent rehearsals with closed doors, and took elaborate pains to prevent impertinent juniors from obtaining the least information as to their plans. The wildest notions circulated round the school. It was rumoured that a musical comedy was to be presented, the male parts being taken by professional actors specially engaged from London for the occasion; then that, failing the professionals, Miss Beasley and Miss Gibbs had consented to play the two heroes, and might be expected to appear in tights, with flowered waistcoats and cocked hats. In the imagination of the gossipmongers Professor Marshall, as a Greek tragedian, and Mr. Browne, garbed as a highwayman, were to be added to the list of artists. It was even whispered that the Reverend T. W. Beasley, M.A., who was booked to arrive on Monday, had consented to come earlier, for the purpose of joining in the festivities, and would appear in the character of a humorist, and give some wonderful exhibitions of lightning changes of costume and ventriloquism. The uncertainty as to what might be expected certainly enhanced the pleasure of anticipation. Not a girl would have missed this performance for worlds.

The Sixth kept their secret well. Not a word leaked out as to the true nature of the programme. Meta, indeed, went about with rather mincing steps, while Veronica seemed to affect a truculent attitude; but whether this was the result of learning parts, or was put on with deliberate intention to deceive, the wide-awake members of the Fifth could not determine.

The entertainment was to be held on Saturday, when, as there was no preparation, the whole evening could be devoted to amusement. It was announced to begin at 6 p.m., with box office open at 5.45. The school turned up with prompt punctuality, and would have scrambled for the door, if Barbara, seated at the receipt of custom, had not insisted upon their forming an orderly and orthodox queue. She took their shillings in a business-like manner.

“Programmes—hand painted—sixpence each. Please buy one for the good of the cause!” she added.

The programmes, produced in Linda’s and Hermie’s best style, were attractive. Each had a different picture upon its cover, and all were tied up with white satin ribbon. The girls opened them eagerly, and read: 261

MARLOWE GRANGE

Dramatic Performance in Aid of the Blinded Soldiers’ Fund.

Scenes from *The Rivals*, by Sheridan.

Cast:

Sir Anthony Absolute	Veronica Terry.
Captain Absolute	Hermione Graveson.
Faulkland	Daphne Johnstone.
Bob Acres	Barbara Rowlands.
Mrs. Malaprop	Linda Mottram.
Lydia Languish	Meta Wright.
Lucy	Lois Barlow.

“So the Bumble and Gibbie aren’t in it, after all!” whispered Aveline. “I never thought they would be, nor the Professor, nor Mr. Browne either, and certainly not Mr. Beasley! It promises to be decent.”

“Hope they’ll begin promptly!” murmured Morvyth. “I say, Barbara, isn’t it time you began to dress?”

“I don’t come on till the second scene,” explained Barbara, “so I can change while they’re acting the first. That’s why they put me as doorkeeper. Go back to your seats. Visitors are arriving.”

The two front rows had been reserved for outsiders, and presently began to be filled by those who had bought tickets. Miss Beasley and Miss Gibbs took their places, Mademoiselle played an introductory fantasia upon the piano, and the curtains were drawn aside.

There was no doubt about the play being amusing; from first to last the audience was convulsed. The actresses threw themselves admirably into their parts, and rendered their characters with the utmost spirit. Veronica, well padded with pillows, made a stout and presentable Sir Anthony Absolute, and played the autocratic parent to the life. Hermie, with blue cloak, sword, and military stride, endeavoured to live up to her conception of an eighteenth-century buck, and made love with a fervour that was all the more enhanced by the sight of Miss Gibbs in the front row, sitting with pursed-up lips and straightened back. Meta, as Lydia Languish, sighed, wept, made eyes, and indulged in a perfect orgy of sentiment, while Lois acted the cheeky maidservant with enthusiasm. The best of all, however, was Mrs. Malaprop; Linda had seen the play on the real stage, and reproduced a famous actress to the utmost of her ability. Her absurd manners and amusing mistakes sent the room into a roar, and she occasionally had to wait for quiet until she could continue her speeches.

Everybody voted the evening a huge success. The visitors heartily congratulated Miss Beasley upon the cleverness of her elder pupils, and hoped they would sometimes give another open performance. The girls clapped till their hands were sore. Even Miss Gibbs, though she considered that the love-making had exceeded the limit allowable in school theatricals, expressed guarded approval.

“We’ve cleared two pounds three and sixpence!” announced Barbara gleefully to the Fifth.

“Good!” exclaimed Valentine. “And we made one pound ten, and the kids one pound seven. What does it tot up to?”

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“Five pounds and sixpence,” calculated Barbara after a moment’s scribbling on the back of a programme.

“Well, I call it a very decent result for a school of only twenty-six girls!”

CHAPTER XXII

An Accusation

On the following Monday afternoon the Reverend T. W. Beasley arrived in readiness to begin, on Tuesday morning, his task of examining the school. There was great fluttering in the dove-cot, and much anxiety on the part of the girls to catch the first glimpse of him. They had decided that, as the brother of their good-looking Principal, he would be tall, fair, and clean-shaven, with classical features, gentle blue eyes, and a soft, persuasive manner—the ideal clergyman, in fact, of the storybook, who lives in a picturesque country rectory and cultivates roses. To their disappointment he was nothing of the sort, but turned out to be a short, broad-set little man, with a grey beard and moustache, and keen dark eyes under bushy eyebrows, and a prominent nose that was the very reverse of romantic. He cleared his throat frequently in a nervous fashion, and when he spoke he snapped out his remarks abruptly, in a very deep voice that seemed to rise almost out of his boots.

“He isn’t half as nice as Professor Marshall!” decided the Fifth unanimously.

“Looks as if he had a temper!” ventured Fauvette.

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“Oh! it’s cruelty to give us viva voces! I’ll never dare to answer a question!” wailed Aveline.

“I’m afraid he’ll be strict,” admitted Katherine.

“Perhaps he’s nervous too, and scared of us!” suggested Morvyth.

“Don’t you believe it!” laughed Raymonde scornfully. “I flatter myself I’m pretty good at reading faces, and I can see at a glance he’s a martinet. That frown gives him away, and the kind of glare he has in his eyes. I’m a believer in first impressions, and I knew in a second I wasn’t going to like him.”

Aveline sighed dramatically.

“It’s rough on a poor young girl in her early teens to be put through an ordeal by a stern and elderly individual who’ll have absolutely no consideration for her feelings.”

“Feelings! You’ll have your head snapped off!” prophesied Raymonde.

“Why couldn’t the Bumble have examined us herself, or at any rate let the Professor do it?”

“Ask me a harder, child!”

“Well, I think it’s very unnecessary to have this Mr. Beasley. Bumble Bee, indeed! He’s a regular hornet!”

Whatever the private opinion of the Fifth might be on the subject of their examiner, they were obliged to hide their injured feelings under a cloak of absolute propriety. The reverend visitor was a solid fact, and all the grumbling in the world could not remove the incubus of his presence. At nine o’clock on Tuesday morning he would begin his inquisition, and the girls judged that there would be scant mercy for any sinner who failed to reach the required standard. A terrible atmosphere of gloomy convention pervaded the school. Miss Beasley was anxious for her pupils to appear at their very best before her scholarly brother, whose ideal of maidenly propriety was almost mediæval, and she kept a keen eye on their behaviour. Nobody dared to speak at meal-times, except a whispered request for such necessary articles as salt and butter; laughter was out of the question, and even a smile was felt to be inappropriate. The girls sat subdued and demure, outwardly the pink of propriety, but inwardly smouldering, and listened obediently while the visitor, mindful of his educational position in the establishment, held forth upon subjects calculated to improve their minds.

“I don’t believe Gibbie likes him either!” opined Katherine, after Monday night’s supper.

“Of course not! He beats her on her own ground. As for the Bumble, she’s quite distraught. She keeps glancing at us as if she expected somebody all the time to spill her tea, or break a plate, or pull a face, or do something dreadful. We’re not usually an ill-behaved set!”

“He’s getting on my nerves!” complained Aveline.

“The place is more like a reformatory than a school!” growled Morvyth.

When the post-bag arrived on Tuesday morning, it contained, among other letters and parcels, a small narrow packet directed to Miss R. Armitage. Miss Gibbs, whose business it was to overlook her pupils' correspondence, was in a particular hurry, as it happened, and inclined for once to scamp her duties. 267

“What’s this, Raymonde?” she asked perfunctorily. “A fountain pen, did you say? For the exams. I suppose your mother has sent it. There are two letters for Aveline and one for Morvyth. You may take them to them, and tell Daphne I want to speak to her.”

Raymonde did not stop for further interrogation. She beat as speedy a retreat as possible, delivered the message and the letters, and finished unpacking her parcel. Her Form mates, more inquisitive than Miss Gibbs, gathered round her and began to catechize.

“What have you got there?”

“Did it come by the post?”

“Why, it’s a fountain pen, isn’t it?”

“Who sent it to you?”

“Did you buy it, then?”

“It looks a jolly nice one!”

“Is it full, or empty?”

“Don’t talk all at once, children!” commanded Raymonde loftily. “I’ll answer your questions in proper order, so just behave yourselves!”

“1. It is a fountain pen, as anybody with half an eye could see!”

“2. It came by the post.

“3. Nobody sent it to me.

“4. I bought it.

“5. It is a jolly nice one.

“6. I have reason to believe it is empty. I’m going to fill it out of Fauvette’s bottle.”

“Cheek!” returned Fauvette, allowing her friend to help herself to the Swan ink, however. “What puzzles me, is how you managed to buy it.”

“Your little head, Baby, is easily puzzled,” smiled Raymonde serenely. “It’s meant to wear fluffy curls, and not to engage itself in abstruse problems. I don’t advise you to worry yourself over this, unless you can turn it to some account. If the Hornet should ask you for an original example, you might begin: ‘Let A represent a fountain pen, and B my schoolmate, C standing for an unknown quantity—’”

Fauvette, at this point, placed her hand over her chum’s mouth.

“Stop it!” she begged beseechingly. “If I get any of those wretched A B and C questions I’ll collapse, and disgrace the Form. I’ve many weak points, but mathematics are absolutely my weakest of all. If you frighten me any more, I shan’t have the courage to walk into the exam. room. Do I look presentable? Are my hands clean? And is my hair decent?”

“You look so much more than presentable that anybody but a hardened brute of an examiner would be bowled over by you utterly and entirely.”

“I’m sure he hasn’t any feelings, so it’s no use trying to work upon them,” said Fauvette plaintively.

“Joking apart, Ray, where did you get that fountain pen?” asked Morvyth.

Raymonde’s eyes twinkled.

“Little flower, could I tell you that,
I’d tell you my heart’s secret with it!”

she misquoted.

“But do tell me! I think you might!”

“The more you tease, the less you’ll find out!”

The school bell put an end to the conversation, and the girls, with straightened faces, marched to their places in the big lecture hall. The Reverend T. W. Beasley had taken full command of the examinations, and had introduced several innovations. On former occasions each Form had sat and written in its own room, but now desks had been placed for the whole school together, and were so arranged that the Forms sat alternately, a junior being sandwiched between each senior. The girls were hugely insulted. “He

suspects we'll copy each other's papers!" thought Raymonde, and flashed her indignation along to Aveline. She did not speak, but her expressive glance drew forth a reproof from the examiner. He cleared his throat.

"Any girl communicating either by speech or otherwise will be dismissed from the room!" he announced freezingly.

After that, the girls scarcely dared to look up from their papers. They studied their questions and wrote away, some fast and furiously, and others with the desponding leisure of those having very little to put down. Mr. Beasley sat upon the platform, toying with his watch-chain, and keeping his eye upon the movements of the candidates. Fauvette, finishing long before the others, ventured to raise her eyes as high as his boots, and let them rest there, marvelling at the size and thickness of the footgear, and congratulating herself that she could wear number three.

The morning wore itself slowly away. When the school compared notes at 12.30, the girls agreed that they had never in their lives before been given such an atrocious and detestable set of examination papers. The Sixth had fared as badly as the Fifth or the juniors, and even monitresses were loud in their complaints. Certain viva voces taken in the afternoon confirmed their ill opinion of their examiner.

"He glares at one till one's frightened out of one's wits!"

"And he hurries so—one hasn't time to answer!"

"And he takes things in quite a different way from what Gibbie does."

"He's no need to be sarcastic!"

"Sarcastic, did you say? I call him downright rude!"

"He evidently doesn't think much of our intellects!"

"Well, we don't think much of him, anyway!"

"I believe he uses pomatum on his hair," confided Fauvette in a shocked whisper.

"My dear, I believe it's bear's grease!" corrected Morvyth scornfully.

"This is the most painful week I've ever had to go through in all my life," bleated Aveline. "Even if I live through it—and that's doubtful—I shall be a

nervous wreck. They'll have to send me for a rest cure during the holidays. I'm not accustomed to be cross-questioned as if I were a criminal in the dock!"

"It's a witness, child, you mean," amended Raymonde. "Criminals don't generally give evidence against themselves. But we understand you, all the same! For two pins I'd sham utter ignorance, and give him some very surprising answers. Yes, I would, if Gibbie or the Bumble didn't stick in the room the whole time! That's the worst of it. They'd know in a second that I was only having him on." 271

As the week progressed, the school considered itself more and more ill-used. The fact was that the Reverend T. W. Beasley was accustomed to university students, and could not focus his mind to the intellectual range of girls of thirteen to seventeen. Moreover, he was by nature a reformer. He liked to give others the benefit of his advice, and he had much to say in private to his sister upon the subject of her pupils' lessons and general management. Perhaps poor Miss Beasley had not expected quite so much criticism. She was accustomed, nevertheless, to defer to her brother's opinions, and she listened with due humility, though with much inward perturbation, while he laid down the law upon the education of women. Miss Gibbs, who was a born fighter, was inclined to argue—a disastrous policy, which so nearly ended in what are generally termed "words," that her Principal was obliged to ask her (privately) to allow the visitor to state his views uninterrupted.

The school was so taken up with the stern business on hand, that such delights as coon concerts and theatricals were quite in the background. On Thursday afternoon, however, Veronica sought out Raymonde.

"I want your money for the Blinded Soldiers' Fund," she said. "I've given in ours, and so have the juniors. Miss Beasley says when she has it all she'll write a cheque for the amount, and send it to the secretary."

"But Miss Beasley has our money already," objected Raymonde. "Don't you remember? She said she wanted some change, and you came and asked me for it." 272

"So I did, and brought you back notes instead."

Raymonde shook her head.

“You certainly didn’t.”

“What nonsense, Ray! You know I brought them,” protested Veronica indignantly. “You were practising, and I said: ‘Don’t stop, I’ll put them inside your drawer.’ Hermie was with me at the time.”

A conscious look spread over Raymonde’s face. She blushed hotly.

“Was it last Friday?” she asked quickly.

“Of course it was Friday. The notes must be in your drawer. Have you the key? Then come along, and we’ll go and find them.”

Raymonde unwillingly followed Veronica upstairs. Her manner was embarrassed in the extreme. She unlocked her drawer in the bureau, and turned out the possessions she had there, but no notes were among them.

“What’s become of them?” demanded Veronica sharply.

“I—I really don’t know!” faltered Raymonde.

“Then you must find out. As treasurer for your Form, you are responsible.”

“You’re sure you put them in my drawer, and not in anybody else’s?”

“Certain. It was the bottom one on the right-hand side, and it was open just as you left it when you gave me the silver. I couldn’t be mistaken.”

Raymonde flung herself down on a chair, and buried her face in her hands.

“I want to think,” she murmured.

Veronica gazed at her with growing suspicion.

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“I’m sorry, but it’s my duty to report this to Miss Beasley,” she remarked freezingly.

“Oh, no, please!” pleaded Raymonde, starting up in great agitation. “Can’t you give me just a few days, and then—well perhaps it will be all right. Leave it over till Saturday.”

“It will be all wrong!” said the mistress sternly. “I can’t understand you, Raymonde, for either you have the money or you haven’t. If you have, you must hand it over; and if you haven’t, we’ve got to find out where it’s gone. That’s flat! So come along with me at once to the study.”

The Principal, on being told the facts of the case, was astonished and distressed.

“There may possibly be some misunderstanding,” she urged. “Before anybody is accused we will make sure that the notes were not placed in a wrong drawer. Tell every member of the Fifth to come at once to the practising-room, and bring her keys. You will go upstairs with me, Raymonde.”

Veronica’s message spread consternation through the Form. The girls trooped to the sanctum with scared faces. They found Miss Beasley there, looking very grave, and Raymonde, her eyes downcast and her mouth set in its most obstinate mould, standing by the bureau.

“I wish you each to unlock your drawer in my presence,” said the Principal. “The money collected at your concert is missing, and perhaps it may have been misplaced.”

In dead silence the girls complied, every one in turn showing her possessions. There were certainly no notes among them. Miss Beasley turned to Veronica. 274

“What time was it when you took up the money?”

“About five minutes to six, Miss Beasley. It was just before I went into preparation. Hermie was with me.”

“Did you leave the drawer open or shut?”

“I shut it, but did not lock it. Raymonde’s keys were dangling in it. I thought she would lock it for herself when she had finished practising.”

“Who came into the room next? Maudie Heywood? Then, Maudie, did you notice the keys hanging in the drawer when you arrived at 6.15?”

“No, Miss Beasley, they were certainly not there.”

“Thank you, girls, you may go now. Veronica, tell Hermie to go to my study and wait for me. Raymonde, you will stay here. I wish to speak to you alone.”

The Principal waited until the door had closed on her other pupils, then turned to the white-faced little figure near the bureau.

“Raymonde, this is a sad business,” she said solemnly. “You had better confess at once that you have taken this money.”

CHAPTER XXIII

A Mystery Unravelled

Raymonde started, and faced the Principal with flaming eyes.

“I didn’t! I didn’t!” she protested.

“Then where is it?”

“That I don’t know.”

“Perhaps you will explain,” continued Miss Beasley, watching her searchingly, “how it is that you were seen at Marlowe post office on Friday afternoon, and that you bought a postal order for twelve and sixpence. Oh, Raymonde, you may well blush! Mrs. West was calling only an hour ago, and told me that she had seen you in the shop. She asked if I knew about it, or if you had been there without leave. Why did you get a postal order?”

Raymonde was silent for a moment. Then:

“To send for a fountain pen,” she stammered.

“You admit that you visited the post office? Now, I know that you had finished all your pocket-money. You drew the last of your allowance from me on the day of your concert.”

“I had a pound-note of my own, put away in my handkerchief case. My uncle gave it to me last holidays.”

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“If that is so, then where is the money for which you were treasurer?”

“I don’t know.”

“Raymonde, I can’t believe such a story. You’re not telling me the truth!”

“Indeed, indeed I am!” burst out Raymonde. “Oh! what shall I do? I can’t explain, and I can’t say any more. If you’d only wait a few days!”

“Indeed I shall not wait,” returned the headmistress coldly. “The matter must be investigated at once.”

Miss Beasley, greatly upset by such a happening in her school, consulted her brother as to her best course to pursue. On learning the circumstances he took a very grave view of the case.

“There’s little doubt of the girl’s guilt,” he declared. “She evidently yielded to a sudden temptation. She wanted a fountain pen in time for the examinations, and she borrowed the notes which had been left in her charge, in order to send for it. Probably she wrote home for more money, and expected to be able to replace it, and that is the explanation of her asking for a few days’ grace. It seems to me as clear as daylight, and I should deal with her as she deserves.”

“May I ask one question?” said Miss Gibbs, who also had been called to the conclave. “How is it that Mrs. West affirms that she saw Raymonde in the post office at six o’clock on Friday, while Veronica and Hermie declare that at five minutes to six she was sitting at the piano in the practising-room? It is not possible to reach the village in five minutes.”

Miss Beasley started. This aspect of the matter had not occurred to her. 277

“It’s very perplexing!” she murmured.

“Raymonde has been troublesome,” continued Miss Gibbs, “but I have always found her scrupulously straight and truthful. Such a lapse as this seems to me utterly foreign to her character.”

“You never know what a girl will do till she’s tried!” commented the Rev. T. W. Beasley. “Better expel her at once, as a warning to the others.”

“Give her a chance!” pleaded Miss Gibbs. “The evidence is really so unsatisfactory. Wait a day or two, and see if we can sift it!”

“I wish I knew what is best!” vacillated the Principal. “It is so near the end of the term that it seems a pity to send Raymonde home till next week, when she would be going in any case. I will call at the post office, and make enquiries as to the exact time she came there last Friday. I think I won’t decide anything before Saturday.”

Miss Beasley stuck to this determination, in spite of her brother’s protests against over-leniency and lack of discipline. She excused herself on the ground that she did not wish to disturb the examinations, which were to continue until Friday evening. Meanwhile Raymonde was in the position of

a remanded prisoner at the bar. She was not allowed to mingle with the rest of the school. She was conducted, under Mademoiselle's escort, to her place in the examination hall, but spent the remainder of her time in the practising-room, which served as a temporary jail. Her meals were sent up to her, and no girl was allowed, under penalty of expulsion, to attempt to communicate with her. She was not permitted to go to the dormitory at night, but slept on a chair-bed in Miss Beasley's dressing-room.

Naturally the episode was the talk of the school. Its interest eclipsed even the horror of the examinations. It seemed a mystery which no one could disentangle. The girls remembered only too well that Raymonde had been very secretive about how she had obtained the fountain pen; but, on the other hand, witnesses declared that they had seen her both at the post office and in the practising-room, when she certainly could not have been in two places at once.

The Fifth decided that the Reverend T. W. Beasley must be at the bottom of it. There had never been any disturbances before he came to the school, and since his arrival everything had been unpleasant, therefore he must be distinctly responsible for Raymonde's misfortunes; which was hardly a reasonable conclusion, however loyal it might be to their friend. The Mystics talked the matter over in private, and suggested many bold but quite impracticable schemes, such as subscribing the missing money amongst them, or throwing up a rope-ladder to the sanctum window for Raymonde to escape by, neither of which plans would have cleared her character.

Raymonde herself preserved an extraordinary attitude of obstinacy. She utterly refused to give any more explanations. She did not cry, but there was a grey misery in her face that was worse than tears. She walked in and out of the examination hall with her head proudly erect. Her comrades, with surreptitious sympathy, glanced up as she passed, but under the lynx eye of their examiner were unable to convey to her the notes which several of them at least had prepared ready to pass under the desk.

On Friday afternoon Raymonde was sitting alone in the practising-room, when the door was unlocked and Veronica entered with a tray.

"I've come to bring your tea," explained the monitress. "I don't really know whether I'm supposed to be allowed to talk to you, but Miss Beasley didn't

tell me not to, so I shall. Look here, Ray, why don't you end this wretched business?"

"I only wish I could!" groaned Raymonde.

"But you can. There's something behind it all, I'm sure. Take my advice, and explain it to Miss Beasley. She'd be quite decent about it."

Raymonde shook her head sadly and silently.

"Yes, she would, if you'd only confess. I can't understand you, Ray. You were always a madcap, but you never did anything underhand or sneaky before; even when you were naughtiest you were quite square and above-board."

"Thank you!" smiled Raymonde faintly.

"I can't think why you should have changed, and conceal everything! Ray, I appeal to your best side. You signed our Marlowe Grange League, and seemed quite enthusiastic about it at the time. Won't you try to live up to it now?"

Raymonde rose to her feet. In her eyes were two smouldering fires.

"You can't understand!" Her voice was trembling with passion. "It's exactly because I signed that paper and promised to be faithful to my friends and to speak the truth, that I'm in all this trouble. No, I tell you I won't explain! If you think so badly of me that you won't believe my word, it's no use ³⁵⁰my speaking to you. Oh! I hate everybody, and I hate everything! I wish I could go home!"

"Better stay and clear things up!" said Veronica. "If I could do anything for you, I would."

"Would you?" asked Raymonde with a flash of hope. "Could you possibly get a letter posted for me?"

Veronica shook her head.

"I daren't!" she said briefly. "Miss Beasley trusted me to bring up your tea, and I mustn't forget I'm a monitress. I shall have to tell her that I've been speaking to you. I ought to go now. Good-bye!"

Raymonde drank her tea, but left the bread and butter untouched. She was not hungry, and her head ached. The whole of her gay, careless world seemed to have crumbled to ashes. She wondered what her chums were thinking of her. Did they, like Veronica, mistrust her conduct? She knew that her behaviour was extraordinary. A sense of utter desolation swept over her, and, pushing aside the tea things, she leaned her arms on the table, with her hot face pressed against them.

From this despairing attitude she was aroused by Miss Gibbs, who five minutes later came to fetch the tray.

“Don’t give way, Raymonde!” said the mistress, laying quite a kindly hand on the girl’s shoulder. “There’s to be proper enquiry into this matter tomorrow, and I, for one, trust you’ll be able to clear yourself. Keep your self-control, and be prepared to answer any questions that are put to you then. Remember there’s nothing like courage and speaking the truth.”



“THE DOOR OPENED WITH A FORCIBLE JERK, AND A STRANGER ENTERED”

Raymonde raised herself slowly, hesitated for a moment, then fumbled in her pocket.

“Miss Gibbs,” she faltered, “I’d love to tell you everything, but I can’t. I wonder if you’d trust me enough to send off this letter without opening it, or asking me what I’ve written in it?”

The mistress took the envelope and examined it. It was addressed to Miss V. Chalmers, Haversedge Manor, near Byfield. She looked into Raymonde’s eyes as if she would read her very soul. Her pupil bore the scrutiny without flinching.

“It is a most unwarrantable thing to ask, but I will do it,” replied Miss Gibbs. “I hope my confidence in you will be justified.”

At 9.30 on the following morning a trap arrived at the Grange to convey the Reverend T. W. Beasley and his Gladstone bag to the railway station. A row of heads peeping from behind the curtains in the upper windows watched him depart, and exhibited manifestations of intense satisfaction.

“There! He’s actually gone!”

“Only hope he won’t miss his train and come back!”

“No, no! He’s in heaps of time, thank goodness!”

“Glad he isn’t staying the week-end!”

“He’s got to preach somewhere in aid of something on Sunday.”

“May he never come here again, that’s all!”

Perhaps in secret Miss Beasley was equally relieved. She had passed a strenuous week, and had possibly arrived at the conclusion that she was, on the whole, capable of arranging her own school to the satisfaction of herself and the parents of her pupils. She considered that she understood girls better than a bachelor university don, however great his literary attainments, could do. The experiment had not been altogether a success, and need not be repeated. She sighed as she waved a last good-bye and turned into the house.

An urgent matter, which she had put off until her brother’s departure, must now claim her attention. She ordered the entire Fifth Form, together with Hermie and Veronica, to repair to the practising-room, where Raymonde was still kept prisoner.

The girls marched in as quietly as if they were going to church. Their Principal sat by the table, with two little parallel lines of worry on her usually smooth forehead, and a grieved look in her grey eyes.

“It is very distressing to me to be obliged to make this enquiry,” she began, “but it is absolutely necessary that we find out what has become of those missing notes. I put you all on your honour to tell me what you know. Can any girl throw any light on the matter?”

She looked anxiously and wistfully round the little circle, but nobody replied. Raymonde sat with downcast eyes, and the old obstinate expression on her face. The eyes of all the other girls were focused upon her.

“I am most loath to accuse anyone of such a dreadful thing as taking money,” continued Miss Beasley, “but unless you can offer me some explanation, Raymonde, I shall be obliged to send you home. The facts look very black against you. You were treasurer, and cannot produce the funds; you were seen buying a postal order, and you received a handsome fountain pen by post.”

“If you please, Miss Beasley,” interposed Veronica, “how could Raymonde be buying a postal order when Hermie and I saw her practising here?”

“It is most puzzling, I allow; but both Mrs. Sims the postmistress, and Mrs. West, who happened to be buying groceries in the shop, agree emphatically that it was Raymonde who came to the counter. They say that she was not in school uniform, but wore a green dress and a small cap.”

“Raymonde has no green dress!”

“But she has admitted to me that she bought the postal order.”

The girls looked at their chum in consternation. Raymonde buried her face in her hands.

At this critical juncture there was the sound of a scrimmage outside in the passage, and a loud excited voice was heard proclaiming:

“I will go in! I tell you I’ve come to see Miss Raymonde Armitage, and it’s important. Miss Beasley there? All the better! I want to speak to her too. Will you kindly move out and let me pass? Oh, very well then—there!”

The door opened with a forcible jerk, and a stranger entered unceremoniously. She was a damsel of perhaps fifteen, slim, and very pretty, with twinkling brown eyes and curly hair and coral cheeks. She wore an artistic dress of myrtle-green Liberty serge, with a picturesque muslin collar, and had a chain of Venetian beads round her white throat.

The school gazed at her spellbound, almost aghast.

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“The ghost-girl!” murmured Veronica faintly sinking into a chair.

“Violet!” exclaimed Raymonde in tones of ecstasy.

“Yes, here I am, right enough!” announced the stranger. “Cycled over directly I read your letter. Stars and stripes! You’ve got yourself into a jolly old mess! Hope they haven’t tortured you yet! I suppose they still use the rack and the thumbscrew in this benighted country? Cheero! We’ll pull you through somehow!”

Then, catching the Principal’s amazed and outraged expression, she continued: “Sorry! Are you Miss Beasley? I ought to have introduced myself. I do apologize! My name’s Violet Chalmers, and I’m an American.”

She proclaimed the fact proudly, though her soft r in “American,” and slightly nasal intonation, would have established her nationality anyway.

“May I ask your errand?” said the head mistress rather stiffly.

“Certainly. I’ve come to help Raymonde out of a scrape. I never dreamed she’d be landed in such a queer business as this. I say, Ray, will you explain, or shall I do the talking?”

“You, please!” entreated Raymonde.

“Well, as I’ve just said, I’m an American. We crossed the herring-pond just before the war started, and we’ve been stuck in this old country ever since. Before you all came to the Grange we rented the place for a year, and a time we had of it, too, with rats and bats, and burst pipes, and no central heating or electric light! Mother went almost crazy! Well, last Easter, when I was staying at the seaside, I met Raymonde, and we chummed no end. She told me that her school was moving in here, and I bet her a big box of Broad Street pop-corns I’d turn up some time in the house and astonish the girls. I only bargained that she wasn’t to let any of them know beforehand of my existence. Well, I guess I kept my word. I joined in a game of hide-and-seek one dark afternoon, and I reckon I passed off as a first-class ghost. Didn’t I chuckle, just! You wonder how I got in without anybody seeing me? Why, I’d discovered the secret passage that leads, from a sliding panel in the attic, right under the moat into a cave inside the wood.”

“Joyce Ferrers’ passage!” exclaimed the girls.

“The very same. I rode over on my bicycle—we’re staying only eight miles away—left it inside the cave, lighted my lamp, and strolled up to the attic as easily as you please. There was the whole school tearing around like mad, so I scuttled round too, and scared you just some! It was so prime, I guessed

I'd try it on again. That was yesterday week. I'd luck enough to catch Raymonde, and she was a sport that day too. We changed clothes, and I came downstairs here and did her practising for her, while she explored the secret passage and did a little shopping on her own account in the village."

"Then it was you, and not Raymonde, whom we saw sitting at the piano!" exclaimed Veronica.

Violet nodded.

"Exactly so! I guessed I was going to be found out, and daren't turn my head when you spoke."

"Did you see the notes put into the drawer?" enquired Miss Beasley. 286

"No, but I saw them afterwards, lying just on the top of some other papers. I locked the drawer before I left the room, and put the bunch of keys inside the pocket of Raymonde's dress, which I had on. I meant to tell her about it, but I forgot. She was in such a hurry when she came back, and said she'd be late for prep., so we each scrambled into our own clothes, and she tore off downstairs, and I went home."

"This, unfortunately, does not bring us any nearer to the solution of the puzzle—what has become of the notes?" said Miss Beasley.

"Raymonde couldn't have spent them in the village, when she had gone out before they were put there!" ventured Veronica.

"And I certainly didn't abscond with them!" declared Violet. "Though I really believe Ray thinks so. Confess you do, old sport!"

Raymonde blushed crimson.

"I thought you'd taken them for a joke," she said in a low voice.

"Is that why you refused to explain?" interposed the Principal quickly. "You were afraid of getting your friend into trouble?"

"Yes, Miss Beasley."

"But what's become of the wretched notes?" asked Violet; "They must be somewhere. Have you looked properly through this old bureau? I know these queer shallow drawers by experience, and things sometimes slip over

the backs of them. Have you had the drawer right out? It's stuck, has it? Oh, it probably only wants a good pull! Lend me your key! Here goes!"

Violet exerted all her strength in a mighty tug, and the drawer tumbled out with a jerk. She put in her hand and felt about in the space behind. There was a large hole in the back of the bureau, and her fingers went through it into a cavity in the wall.

"There's something queer here!" she exclaimed, drawing out a round ball of shreds of paper. "Mrs. Mouse's nursery, if I don't mistake! Sorry to intrude, but we'll take a peep at the children!"

Very gingerly she pulled aside the torn pieces of paper, and disclosed to view four little atoms not much bigger than bluebottles.

"Baby mice!" squealed the girls.

"Shame to disturb them, but I've got to examine their cradle. Ah! what d'you make of this, now? If it isn't a piece of a ten-shilling note, I'll—I'll swallow the babies!"

"You are most undoubtedly right!" declared Miss Beasley, picking up the shreds of paper and trying to piece them together. "The mouse must have taken them out of the drawer to help to build her nest."

"Rather an expensive nursery!" chuckled Violet. "Well, I guess we've proved who's the thief, anyway!"

"I am extremely obliged to you," said Miss Beasley. "But for you, the matter might always have remained a mystery."

"And please forgive me for interfering. It was cheek, I know, to turn up in the attic, but I couldn't resist the secret passage. I think this old place must be ripping as a school. I want to come next term. We'd intended to go home to New York in September, but Dad heard this morning he'd have to stay here another couple of years on business, so he said he guessed I'd best settle down and learn to be a Britisher. Would you have me here?"

"That depends on whether your father wishes to send you to me or not."

"Oh! Dad'll let me do anything I like, so it's as good as settled. I'll arrive with my boxes in September. Look here, it's cheek again, but will you please not scold Raymonde for all this affair? It was mostly my fault."

“Raymonde had no business to change places with you, and go to the village without leave,” said Miss Beasley, eyeing her pupil reprovably. “But I think she has been punished enough. She may take you downstairs now, and ask Cook to give you some cake and a glass of milk before you cycle home again.”

“Thanks ever so! I came without my breakfast. I’m real hungry now. I’ll talk Dad over, and get him to write to you about my coming to school here. I’m dead nuts on it. Good-bye!”

“Well,” murmured Veronica to Hermie, as Violet, with a final squeeze of the Principal’s hand, made her smiling exit; “well, all I can say is that if this American girl comes next September there’ll be lively doings! Raymonde’s bad enough—but to have two madcaps in the school! I’m thankful I’m leaving!”

“I pity the monitresses!” agreed Hermie.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MADCAP OF
THE SCHOOL ***

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