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THE YOUNGEST GIRL

IN

THE SCHOOL

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BY

EVELYN SHARP

AUTHOR OF 'THE MAKING OF A SCHOOLGIRL,' 'WYMPS,' ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. E. BROCK

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TO

THE PROFESSOR

ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

IN A LONDON SCHOOLROOM

‘It’s no good,’ sighed Barbara, looking disconsolately round the room; ‘we shall never get straight in time. Don’t you think we had better leave it, and let Auntie Anna see us as we really are? She will only be disappointed afterwards, if we begin by being tidy; and I don’t like disappointing people, do you?’

There was a shout of laughter when she finished speaking, and Barbara frowned. She never knew why the boys laughed at her when she tried to explain her reasons for doing things, but they always did.

‘Is that why you have put on your very shortest frock?’ asked Wilfred, who was brewing something in a saucepan over the fire. ‘I believe you think that if Auntie Anna saw you for the first time in your Sunday frock, she might suppose you were a nice, proper little girl, instead of—’

Barbara seized the sofa cushion and aimed it at him threateningly. ‘Instead of what?’ she demanded.

Wilfred was at a disadvantage, owing to his position as well as to the precious quality of the liquid in the saucepan; and he felt it wiser to make terms. ‘Well,’ he observed, ‘you might at least have put on a longer frock for the credit of the family; now, mightn’t you?’

Barbara looked down at her blue serge skirt, edged with certain rows of white braid that only made it look shorter; and she gave it a pull to make it fall a little lower over the slim black legs that appeared beneath it. ‘It’s not my fault that I have just come from a gymnastic class,’ she protested. ‘Besides, my Sunday frock is only two inches longer! What difference does two inches make, even if we *have* got an aunt coming? You’re so particular, Wilfred.’

‘Stick to your chemicals, Will, and leave the Babe alone,’ growled Egbert, who was trying to read a novel on the sofa and found the conversation

disturbing.

It was not often that the eldest of the family troubled himself about the disputes of the others, and Barbara was encouraged to go on. ‘Besides,’ she added, ‘there isn’t time to change now. Auntie Anna will arrive directly; and who is going to tidy up the schoolroom if I don’t?’

Certainly, no one responded to her appeal. Egbert and Wilfred became suddenly and suspiciously interested in what they were doing, while the two other boys, who were seated on the edge of the table, continued to swing their legs lazily backwards and forwards without making an effort to help her. Barbara turned upon them reproachfully.

‘It is perfectly horrible of you to sit there laughing, when a strange aunt and a strange daughter may be here at any minute!’ she declared. ‘I think *you* might do something, Peter.’

‘Not much!’ laughed Peter, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow of fifteen or so. ‘It’s good for little girls to do things, and keeps them from growing out of all their clothes.’

‘Chuck it, Babs!’ advised the younger of the two. ‘What does it matter whether she thinks we live in a pig-sty or not?’

Barbara looked at them doubtfully, then picked up a pile of ragged music and staggered across to the cupboard, shot the music into it, and closed the door just in time to prevent her load from recoiling upon her. A derisive chuckle from the boys on the table greeted her first attempt at tidying up; but she went on resolutely.

‘Visitors have no business to come and see people at a day’s notice like this,’ she complained, as she swept a handful of rusty nails, empty gum bottles, and other evidences of past occupations into a crowded waste-paper basket.

Christopher stopped laughing as she said this, and a change crept over his pale, rather delicate features. ‘When the visitor is an *aunt*,’ he said with energy, ‘a day’s notice is more than enough.’

He associated the aunt in question with certain reforms that had taken place from time to time in the household; and he had never forgiven her for inducing their father, just two years ago, to dismiss the nurse they had all adored and to send Robin and himself to a hated day-school. There was no

knowing what innovations they might not be forced to accept, now that she was going to descend upon them in person.

Peter chuckled again. Most things to Peter were an occasion for a chuckle. ‘That depends on the spirit in which she comes,’ he remarked, and he turned his pockets graphically inside out. ‘An aunt who has a big place in the country, and can afford to travel about in beastly holes like Munich and the Italian lakes—’

‘And can pick up other people’s daughters and adopt them,’ chimed in Christopher, ‘just because their fathers died fighting in the Soudan and their mothers died–how did their mothers die, Egbert?’

‘Penniless,’ grunted Egbert, in response to the kick his book had just received. ‘That’s why the kid got adopted, of course.’

‘Well,’ proceeded Peter, putting his pockets back and nodding wisely, ‘if an aunt like that doesn’t behave decently to her deserving nephews—’

‘And niece,’ added Babs from the back of the sofa, where she had just deposited a bundle of old schoolbooks.

Peter went on unabashed. ‘To her deserving nephews and undeserving niece,’ he said, smiling, ‘then she’ll be an awful old dragon!’

‘There’s something in that,’ observed Wilfred, taking the saucepan over to the window for inspection. ‘Perhaps she’ll give me those new retorts and things I want for my laboratory–if I ever get a laboratory,’ he added with a sigh.

‘Perhaps she’ll send me straight to college without expecting me to grind for a musty old scholarship,’ said Egbert, condescending to take a share in the conversation.

‘If she asks me down to Crofts for the shooting, that will be good enough for me,’ observed Peter, drawing a long breath of anticipation.

Barbara came slowly into the middle of the room and stood there, quite unconscious of her rumpled hair and of the streak of dust that was smeared across her face. ‘I wonder what Auntie Anna will do for me?’ she murmured, more to herself than to the others. ‘I hope, I do hope it will be something new and interesting and beautiful!’

Christopher overheard her, and roused himself. He slipped off the table and walked to his favourite position on the hearthrug, giving an unnecessary pull to the child's hair as he passed her, which was an attention, however, that she showed no signs of resenting. Babs never resented anything that Kit chose to do to her; besides, she wanted to hear what he was going to say. Whenever Kit stood like that, with his back to the fire and his legs rather wide apart, he was always going to say something. The odd thing was, that there was something so convincing in his way of saying it that the family generally listened.

'Don't you fret yourselves, any of you,' he said decidedly. 'Auntie Anna isn't going to make things pleasant for anybody in this house–not she! Hasn't she persuaded father to do whatever she likes, all our lives?'

'What is she going to make him do now, then?' asked Wilfred, who did not mean to give up his dream of a laboratory without a protest.

'First of all,' said Christopher, with an air of confidence, 'she'll see that Egbert has a crammer next summer holidays; and he'll either have to get that scholarship, or he doesn't go to Oxford at all! She'll talk about discipline, and things like that. Aunts always do talk about discipline, when it's for other people's children.'

'I wish you'd shut up,' grumbled Egbert, returning to his book. 'How is a fellow to read when you're making such a clatter?'

'Then there's Peter,' continued Christopher, calmly. 'Of course she'll say he's much too young to be trusted with a gun, though he is such an overgrown, hulking chap; and why isn't he in the fifth instead of the upper fourth, at *his* age?'

'What do you know about it, you youngest-but-two?' shouted Peter, wrathfully.

Kit peered at him through his spectacles, and went on as impudently as ever. He was never afraid to speak his mind, for none of the others would have dreamed of laying a finger, except in fun, on the one brother who was not strong enough to defend himself; and Kit knew this, as well as he knew his superiority over them in the matter of brains. The only wonder was that the knowledge had not made him a prig. Perhaps it would have been

difficult, though, in the hurly-burly of the Berkeley family, for any one to have been a prig.

‘As for Wilfred,’ he resumed, ‘she’ll upset all his ambitions before he can turn round. Do you suppose she’ll encourage his messing about with things in saucepans, just because he wants to be a doctor? Not she! She’ll talk about some rotten business in the City instead. Aunts always know millions of places in the City where they can shove their unwilling nephews.’

‘Oh, I say, dry up!’ objected Wilfred, who was already sufficiently depressed by the discovery that the brew in the saucepan was not a success.

‘Then she’ll pack Robin off to a preparatory at Brighton–never knew an aunt yet who didn’t want to send you to a preparatory at Brighton!–and she’ll do the same to me, only she’ll choose a beastly inferior place, where I shall be looked after by some *woman*,’ concluded Christopher, in a tone of scorn. Then he caught sight of Barbara, who was still standing thoughtfully in the middle of the room; and he shook his head at her pityingly. ‘After that, having cleared the house of boys, she’ll turn her attention to the Babe,’ he said, and paused rather abruptly.

Barbara woke up from her reflections with a start. ‘Yes, Kit?’ she said questioningly. ‘What will Auntie Anna do to me?’

Kit’s expression of pity became exaggerated. ‘To begin with,’ he said, with a deep sigh, ‘she’ll let down your frocks, and tie back your hair, and never let you go anywhere alone, not even to the pillar-box at the corner!’

The other boys began to laugh afresh.

‘Think of the Babe with her hair bunched up on the top, and fastened with a bit of ribbon! She’ll look exactly like a French poodle, won’t she?’ scoffed Peter.

‘She’ll have to hold up her skirt in the street, and step in and out of the puddles like this!’ added Wilfred, taking the end of his coat between his thumb and finger, and prancing round Barbara on tiptoe.

Egbert shut up his book, and joined lazily in the general derision. ‘Poor little Babe! will it have to turn into a young lady, and stop talking slang, and learn about box-pleats and false hems and *tucks*?’ he jeered softly.

Barbara turned her back on the others, and once more appealed to Christopher. Teasing was not the kind of thing that roused her; she had grown accustomed to it, long ago. ‘What else, Kit?’ she demanded impatiently. ‘There’s something else, isn’t there?’

Christopher nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said ominously, ‘there’s something else. But I’m not going to tell you what it is.’

‘Yes,’ said Egbert, stretching himself, ‘of course there’s something else, Babe. We all know what it is, but we’re not going to tell you either.’

Babs looked swiftly from one to the other. ‘I know!’ she said, shaking the hair out of her eyes. ‘It’s–school!’

Kit nodded again. ‘That swagger place near Crofts, where the adopted kid has been,’ he continued in a solemn tone.

The others copied his manner, and looked at her with a ridiculous pretence of concern. ‘Poor Babe!’ they said in a chorus.

Barbara again shook the hair out of her eyes with a defiant gesture. Then she spun round lightly on her toes, and surprised everybody by laughing scornfully. ‘What a fuss you’re all making!’ she cried. ‘Don’t you know I am simply *longing* to go to school?’

Judging from their expressions, the Berkeley boys certainly did not know anything of the kind. Even Christopher was puzzled at her curious way of taking his prediction. ‘You’re putting it on, Babs!’ he said doubtfully.

Barbara stopped spinning round, and faced them all breathlessly. ‘I’m not, honour bright!’ she declared. ‘I have always wanted to go to school; I have always longed to have some real friends of my own, and to be with people who are not trying all the time to be funny. You don’t know how tiring it is to be scored off from morning till night. I want a change; I want to do regular, proper lessons, and to get to the top of the school, and to have every one looking up to me! Then, they play games at school, *real* games, instead of the stupid ones we play in the square, that only graze your knees. Girls are nice and jolly and quiet, and they understand you, and they don’t bother you to do things when you’d sooner read. Of course I want to go to school, *dreadfully*!’

She paused for breath, and Egbert whistled. ‘Well, I’m bothered!’ he remarked. He had never pretended to understand his little sister, but he

could not help being astonished at this totally new side to her character. Peter took refuge as usual in a laugh; and Wilfred stared silently. But Kit looked more solemn than ever.

‘I’m disappointed in you, Babs,’ he said. ‘I should never have thought that you wanted to be a young lady, never!’

‘But I don’t, Kit!’ answered the child in a troubled tone. ‘I want to do something new, that’s all. I–I’m sure father will understand what I mean, if he sends me to school,’ she added, with something that sounded like a shake in her voice.

‘Ah–father!’ replied Christopher, gruffly. ‘Father will not be here, you see.’

A sudden silence came over them; and Barbara turned to the window and flattened her nose against the glass pane, and blinked her eyes with all her might. There was nothing to be seen outside but the blank wall that usually limits the view from the back of a London house; but the child with the untidy brown hair, and the small impish face, and the slender long legs, was able, for all that, to see pictures out there. She always saw pictures when she was excited about anything; and just now she was thrilled with a new dream–a dream of the place that her imagination named ‘school.’ She had always hidden from the boys how much she wanted to go to school; and it was only this afternoon, when their derision provoked her into it, that she had let them have a guess at her real feelings. They had not understood her a bit, as she knew they would not; but that did not matter. Her father would understand, though she never told him much, either, and he had to guess for himself what went on in the quaint little mind of his only daughter; but then, Barbara had a shrewd idea that he always guessed right, and that came to the same thing, really. Just as she was comforting herself with this assurance, the miserable consciousness returned that he was going away, and she would be left at the mercy of a strange aunt; and she found herself staring at nothing but a dismal brick wall, with eyes that were blinking to keep back the tears.

Peter was the first to break the pause that had settled with a kind of gloom on the old London schoolroom. He was always on the alert to resent anything that cast a shadow over the light gaiety of existence.

‘I say, look here,’ he began, giving himself a shake as if to get rid of an unpleasant impression; ‘don’t be so jolly blue, all of you! Father will only

be away six months; he said so himself. And as for Auntie Anna, how do we know she isn't quite a decent old lady? Some old ladies are awfully sporting. Do you remember Merton major's aunt, Will? She used to give him whopping tips, whenever she came to see him; and he said he quite liked her!'

Christopher persisted in his gloomy view of the situation. 'Our aunt is not the same as anybody else's aunt,' he said. 'And then, there's the adopted kid.'

'Yes,' admitted Peter, 'no doubt she'll be a trial. Five years at a girls' school and a year abroad doesn't give anybody a chance, does it?'

'Oh!' said Barbara, in a disappointed tone, 'I did hope *she* would be nice!'

'Wonder if she'll mind the smell of chemicals,' observed Wilfred, sniffing cautiously at the saucepan he still held in his hand.

'Of course she will,' answered Christopher. 'She'll hate the whole jolly lot of us, because we're boys; and she'll disapprove of the Babe.'

The boys broke into a laugh. There was something irresistibly funny to them in Christopher's serious way of looking at things. But Barbara was much too worried over his last remark to join in the laugh against him.

'Kit,' she begged anxiously, 'why is the adopted kid going to disapprove of me?'

The air was full of startling discoveries this afternoon, and the idea that the 'adopted kid,' for whom she had already formed an imaginary attachment, was not going to like her, was a great shock to her. But before Kit had time to speak, a loud ring at the door-bell drove the words out of his mind and startled the rest of them into an agitated expectancy.

'That's her!' groaned Kit, and he dropped on the sofa and plunged his head into the cushion, as if he wanted to stifle even the thought of the dragon who was coming to work such havoc in the family. His words were proved by the sudden arrival of Robin, who had been posted as scout on the back staircase, and who now flung himself into their midst. He was in far too great a hurry to look where he was going; and he tripped over the saucepan, which had been set down casually near the door, and fell full length into the room.

‘Heigh-ho, Bobbin!’ said Peter, cheerily, as he picked him up again; for, in spite of his nine years, there was always the chance that Robin might be going to cry. But, on this occasion, Robin was too full of news to trouble himself about possible bruises.

‘She’s come; I’ve seen her!’ he gasped. ‘There’s a carriage an’ pair, big spanking chestnuts with red rosettes; and a man–a man with pink tops to his boots and a brush at the side of his hat—’

‘Get on, Bobbin!’ urged Egbert, impatiently. ‘We’ve all seen a carriage and pair before. What about the dragon?’

‘Saw her too!’ said Robin, panting for breath. ‘Got a long black silk thing on, and a bonnet that’s rather like a hat, with pink feathers in it, and a walking-stick with a blue knob to it, an’ white kid gloves,–no, I mean grey kid—’

‘Oh, get on, do!’ interrupted Egbert again. ‘Never mind about her clothes, stupid! What is she *like*?’

‘Don’t know what she’s like,’ said Robin, a little sulkily. ‘Couldn’t see everything from the back staircase, could I? There was a girl with her,’ he added, as a concession to the general curiosity.

‘The adopted kid!’ exclaimed the others in a chorus.

Babs pressed forward eagerly. ‘Does she look nice, Bobbin? Is she tall or short? Are her dresses *quite* long, and is her hair done up?’ she cried, pouring out her questions in a jumble.

‘Oh, yes; her skirts trail all along the ground for miles,’ answered Robin. ‘And she sort of rustled like tissue paper. Didn’t see her face, ’cause it was all tied up in a veil,–but she’s awfully tall,’ he added, looking round the circle with his head poised on one side. ‘She’s taller’n any of us–even Egbert,’ he concluded viciously, remembering his recent snubbing.

Egbert put out a long arm, laid the boy dexterously on the flat of his back in the middle of the floor, and pinned him there with his foot. ‘Say that’s a cram!’ he commanded in a stern voice. ‘Say I’m a head taller than the adopted kid, or else I’ll—’

What he would have done to him remained unheard, for Robin set up a wail that completely drowned the end of his sentence. The other boys only

shrugged their shoulders; the thing seemed to them a necessary incident in the education of a younger member, and they were not going to interfere. But Barbara sprang forward passionately. That was the kind of thing that did rouse her.

‘Leave him alone, Egbert!’ she cried, but she did not wait to see whether he would. She scarcely supposed that he would stop teasing any one for her; besides, she never stayed to think, when once anything had roused her. So she put her head down and made a charge straight at the offender; and Egbert, being unprepared for the attack, fell backwards over the footstool, with his small sister on the top of him, while Robin wriggled free of them both and set up a louder howl than before in his surprise and dismay.

In the middle of the hubbub the door opened; and a voice, that attracted their attention at once because it was strange to them, made itself heard through the tumult.

‘Is there anybody here who is called Babs?’ asked the new-comer.

CHAPTER II

A WITCH IN A STEEPLE-HAT

Barbara picked herself up and looked towards the door. A girl of about eighteen stood there–an exceedingly pretty girl in a pretty frock, as the Berkeley boys might have noticed if they had been given to noticing things of this kind. But her regular features and her pink-and-white complexion and her reddish-brown hair made very little impression upon them, and they only saw that she was dressed in a grown-up manner that was rather against her than otherwise. They decided, with the hasty judgment of a large family, that she was much too grand to be treated as a companion; and they prepared, quite unnecessarily, to resent any attempt of hers to be patronising.

Nothing was further from Jill's mind than to be patronising. She had never patronised any one in her life, not even the younger children at school, who always expected to be patronised; and she was not likely to begin now, with a set of schoolboys who frightened her out of her wits. For she had never had anything to do with boys before, and she had been dreading this moment ever since her return from abroad. She fully expected they would play practical jokes upon her, as the schoolboys in books always did; and she was not reassured by the uproar that met her ears when she opened the schoolroom door. It was ridiculous that she should feel shy, after travelling about for a whole year and meeting all sorts of people; but as she stood rather helplessly in the doorway, she certainly found that she was too shy to make the first advances.

The boys hesitated, and waited for one another to begin. Egbert, who could not forget that he had just been rolling on the floor, was brushing himself down and looking self-conscious; and it was Christopher who remembered his manners first and came forward with his hand out.

'How do you do?' he began in his solemn, precise way. 'Won't you come and sit down? There's an arm-chair over here, and a cushion too–

somewhere. Clear out, can't you, Peter? I believe we can even rise to a footstool, if it isn't lost. You might look for it, Bobbin, instead of staring like a stuck pig!' He installed her in the arm-chair and placed himself in front of her, slightly bending forward, as he had seen his father do when there were visitors in the drawing-room; and although the result was rather funny when Kit did it, he managed to make Jill feel a little more at home. 'I suppose you are Auntie Anna's daughter,' he continued politely, 'but we don't know your name. I don't think we have ever heard it.'

'I am Jill Urquhart,' answered the girl. She swept a glance round at the others, who stood listening, and made a little gesture of dismay. 'What a lot there are of you!' she exclaimed, without thinking. 'I shall never remember all your names!'

It was an unlucky beginning, for they at once put down her remark to affectation and counted it against her. They were so used to their numbers themselves, that they could not understand any one else being overwhelmed by them. Peter looked mischievous.

'It isn't so confusing as it looks,' he hastened to tell her. 'We all answer to our names, and you will find us warm-hearted and obedient.'

Jill glanced at him innocently. 'Why,' she said with a little laugh, 'you talk as though you were all dogs!'

Peter was left staring, and the others tittered. By her perfectly natural remark she had turned the scale in her favour and convinced them that there was stuff in the 'adopted kid' after all. Quite unconscious of having said anything funny, though, Jill waited till they stopped laughing, and then turned again to Christopher. 'Won't you introduce me?' she asked.

Kit nodded towards Egbert, who had finished brushing himself down and was waiting to shake hands. 'That is Egbert, who is just waking up to the fact that you're here,' he announced. 'You will find him rather superior, I am afraid, but we put up with him because of his age and position. Pass along, please!'

Egbert shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly. 'It's only Kit's way,' he explained to Jill; 'everybody gives in to Kit.'

Jill smiled. 'Kit's way' had made her forget her shyness, and she was already interested in the delicate-looking lad, with the thin, clever face, who

had so promptly taken her under his protection.

‘The next is Wilfred,’ continued Christopher. ‘He is responsible for the unsavoury saucepan that has just been upset on the carpet. He thinks he is going to be a doctor, so he is always making experiments. Of course, he isn’t going to be a doctor, really; the house can’t run to it; but we let him have his fancies. Then comes Peter, whom you have just sat upon. Peter can’t help being funny, so you must try and bear with him. There are so few jokes in this family that perhaps we have encouraged him more than we should.’

‘Wait till she’s gone, that’s all!’ threatened Peter in a whisper, as he passed by after shaking hands with Jill. Christopher looked at him over his spectacles, and went calmly on.

‘I’m next on the list, and my name is Christopher, changed by the vulgar into Kit,’ he was proceeding, when Egbert made a spirited interruption.

‘He is our genius,’ he said, with a flourish of his hand towards the spokesman. ‘We are all very proud of him, for although only thirteen, he has the wisdom and intelligence of one twice his age. He is the only member of the family who can spell, and—’

‘Oh, dry up!’ muttered Kit, but his remonstrance was drowned in the approving jeers of the others. The genius had had it all his own way for about ten minutes, and it was satisfactory to see him ‘scored off’ in his turn. Kit tried to resume his dignified attitude in front of Jill, but the attempt was not particularly successful. It was always impossible in the Berkeley family to remain dignified for long.

‘Are you sure you have got them right so far, or shall I write them down?’ he asked, with so much gravity that Jill looked at him rather suspiciously. He met her glance through his spectacles without wincing, and the others tittered again. They were still a little doubtful about this new cousin of theirs, who was so unlike any one who had come their way before; and it was rather a relief to pretend to be amused.

‘The last of the boys is Robin, or Bobbin if you prefer it,’ continued Kit, glibly. ‘He is the youngest of us all, and the most ill-used. Indeed, when you came in just now, you may have seen the Babe trying to rescue him. That

reminds me! I have left out our only girl. She comes between me and Bobbin, and here you may perceive her–the Babe!'

Barbara came slowly round from her hiding-place at the back of the sofa, and stood face to face with Jill. There was rather a wistful look on the small countenance just then; for in all her dreams of the wonderful cousin who was going to be her first girl-friend, Babs had never imagined anything like this grown-up, elegant creature, who did her hair like the ladies in the park and wore her watch dangling from her wrist. The child's heart sank as she suddenly thought of her short gymnastic frock, and her rumpled hair, and her dirty hands. As for Jill, she stared down at the little person in front of her, and could not help smiling. Whenever she had particularly dreaded being plunged into this family of boys, she had always consoled herself by remembering that there would be one girl among them to take her part. Now, as she looked at the rough little tomboy before her, with her elf-like face and figure, and her bright eager eyes, she had to own again to herself that a large family was a difficult thing to understand.

'So you are Babs,' she began, not knowing what else to say. Then she remembered her errand, and added hastily, 'Will you please go and see mother? She is in the library with Uncle Everard.'

Barbara escaped and sped along the hall, full of relief at having got away from the uncomfortable grown-up feeling that seemed to have come into the schoolroom with Jill. She even paused outside the library door, in her quaint, inconsequent way, to ask herself why Jill seemed so much more grown-up than the nice old gentlemen who came to see her father, with their pockets full of chocolates for her; and she supposed it was because they were really old, while Jill was only grown-up, which was far more alarming because it was so much more mysterious. But hardly had she settled this question in her mind than a fresh one presented itself to her. How was she to know that this other stranger, who was waiting in there to see her, was not also going to stare at her and smile, as Jill had done? Babs gave a troubled sigh, and opened the door with a heavy heart.

A little old lady sat on the sofa beside her father, with her hand in his. She was not beautiful by any means; her back was bent–like an old witch's, Barbara thought–and she had a nose that might have been described as hooked, and a mouth that turned down at the corners and gave her almost a sour expression. But she had two small, keen black eyes, that took all the

ugliness out of her face; sometimes they shone and sometimes they softened, but more often still they twinkled, as they did now, when her little niece stole timidly into the room. The moment the child looked up and met those eyes, she felt she was looking at her father's sister. If she had but known it, the same eyes, too, were gleaming back at the old lady from the middle of a bush of tangled brown hair.

'So this is your tomboy, is it?' said Mrs. Crofton, bluntly. 'Come here, child, and don't stand shivering there. Do you think I am going to do anything to you?'

Barbara's unusual timidity vanished at the sound of that voice. It was sharp and abrupt and determined, but it rang true, and there was nothing in it to frighten anybody.

'I'm not afraid,' she said, returning the old lady's gaze frankly; 'I am hardly ever afraid of people. Am I, father?'

Mr. Berkeley chuckled in an amused manner. He had been very curious to see this meeting between his wild little daughter and the sister who had managed his domestic affairs for him since the death of his wife. By nature a student, he lived most of his life in his library and in himself, and only woke up now and then to the fact that he had six growing children, who probably needed something besides the affection it was so easy to give them. In these waking moments he would write off to his sister, Mrs. Crofton of Crofts, for whose judgment he had quite a pathetic regard, and would carry out to the letter every suggestion she chose to send him. Only once had he ignored her advice, and that was when she had proposed a governess for Barbara; for he had passed over this idea in silence, and the child had continued to run in and out of his library, reading what books she pleased, and ordering her own upbringing in a way that seemed to him eminently satisfactory. For that matter, his library was open to any of his children at any time that they chose to invade it; and they interrupted him fearlessly as often as they pleased, without provoking anything worse than a good-humoured growl from him, that was never to be taken seriously for a moment. Probably this was why the tie between them and their father had come to be a friendly as well as an affectionate one.

Just lately, something had happened to change the haphazard course of affairs in the old London house. That autumn, Mr. Berkeley had brought out

a philosophical work on which he had been engaged for years, and although it had only had a limited success in England, it had made a great sensation in America. The result was an invitation to conduct a lecturing tour in the States, which would take him abroad for something like half a year. Mr. Berkeley had the vaguest notions as to the amount of protection his children needed, but he had a sort of idea that children left in charge of a housekeeper would be considered neglected, and he did not want his children to feel neglected. As usual, he referred his dilemma to Mrs. Crofton, who replied promptly from the Riviera, saying she was on her way home to Crofts, and would stop a week in town to settle his affairs for him. This he forgot to mention to the children until the day she was to arrive, and then, in his innocence, considered their dismay as one of the peculiarities of youth.

'So you are not afraid of me, eh? Then why won't you give me a kiss, I should like to know?' demanded Auntie Anna, as Barbara held out her hand in a boyish fashion.

The child looked surprised, and offered an unwilling cheek. 'We don't often kiss in our family,' she explained; 'only when the boys go back to school, or when somebody has banged somebody else on the head, or when it's a birthday and presents. But that isn't often, you see.'

Mrs. Crofton of Crofts smiled, and her brother pulled his daughter down between them on the sofa.

'You must forgive her appearance,' he said apologetically. 'We haven't anybody to teach us to be ladylike, have we, Babs?'

The old lady put her finger under Barbara's chin, and turned the small face round, and looked into it keenly. 'What's the matter with her appearance?' she inquired quickly. 'Don't be a goose, Everard! Now, child, tell me! Do you want to go on being a boy for ever, reading all sorts of books you have no business to read, and banging people on the head when they offend you, and looking alarming old ladies in the face without flinching; or do you want to be combed and brushed and smoothed into a young lady, and taught to rave about art and music and poetry, and told to look down when you are spoken to, and never to answer back if the truth is unpleasant? Hey? Which is it to be?'

Barbara was looking puzzled. ‘I don’t think I know what you mean,’ she said. ‘Do you mean that I *must* be either me or–or Jill?’

‘Well, supposing we put it that way,’ replied Mrs. Crofton, smiling again. ‘Which do you choose to be?’

Barbara did not stop to think about it. ‘I don’t want to be either, thank you,’ she said decidedly. ‘I would *much* rather be like you or father.’

Mr. Berkeley chuckled once more, and his sister struck her cane on the ground and laughed heartily. ‘A pretty mess you’ve made of your daughter’s education, I must say,’ she remarked. Then she turned again to Babs. ‘Well, child, I see you are going to be like your father in any case; and as for me–well, we’ll see if we can’t prevent such a terrible result as that. And now, I want you to pretend that I am a fairy godmother. Do you think you can?’

Barbara nodded, and her small black eyes glistened. It was not difficult to do that. Already the bonnet with the pink feathers had turned into a steeple-hat, and the black silk mantle into a scarlet cloak, and the blue-knobbed cane into a broomstick. The little impish face was aglow with delight as the old lady went on:

‘Now, I’ve just come down the chimney with a bang, and I am going to give my goddaughter the wish that she wishes most in all the world. But mind–if I have a suspicion that what she asks for is not what she really wants–bang! up the chimney I go again!’

Barbara took a flying leap into the middle of the room, and spun round with her favourite movement on the tips of her toes. Her heart was thumping wildly with excitement at finding herself in the middle of a real fairy story; and when she at last stood still again, she was almost too breathless to speak.

'May I–may I have all that?'

'Please,' she said, clasping her hands tightly together, 'I want to go to school, a real girls' school, where there are crowds of girls, and crowds of lessons, and crowds of story-books with nice endings, and crowds of awfully jolly games that don't pull your hair about and don't give you bruises. May I–may I have all that?'

Auntie Anna once more struck her cane upon the ground. 'That shows how much you know about your own daughter, Everard!' she said, which was a remark that Barbara never understood. 'You may have all that, little goddaughter, every bit of it!' she announced to the expectant child; 'and what is more, you shall have it in a week's time. Hey-day! Where are you

off to in such a hurry, if you please, and why am I allowed a kiss all at once, eh? It isn't a birthday, is it?'

For Barbara had rushed impetuously to the door, and then scampered back to kiss the face with the hooked nose that peered out from beneath the steeple-hat. 'Of course I kissed you,' she cried, 'because–because you're such a brick, you see!' She paused half-way in her second journey to the door, and looked back doubtfully at the old lady on the sofa. 'May I ask you something else?' she said.

'Anything you please,' answered Auntie Anna. 'That's what I'm here for; eh, Everard?'

'Then–then–are you going to do anything for the boys too?' stammered Barbara. 'I–I don't think it's quite fair to keep all the niceness to myself, you see!'

'That depends on what the boys want,' replied the old lady, gravely. 'Do you think you can give me any idea?'

Barbara puckered up her eyebrows, and counted off the names on her fingers. 'First there's Egbert,' she began; 'he wants to go to Oxford without having to get a scholarship first. Then there's Wilfred; he wants to be a doctor, but Kit says there isn't money enough and he's got to get over it. Do you think you'll be able to make Will into a doctor? And Peter wants lots of shooting; he says he doesn't mind about anything else, only Kit says he isn't old enough, and you won't trust him with a gun. Kit hasn't seen you yet, you see. Then there's Kit—'

'That's enough for the present!' cried Mrs. Crofton, who was leaning back, convulsed with laughter, among the sofa cushions. Mr. Berkeley again drew his daughter towards him.

'You are revealing all the secrets of the prison-house, little girl,' he remarked.

Barbara looked from one to the other. 'Auntie Anna did ask me,' she said reproachfully.

'To be sure I did,' answered the old lady, recovering herself with an effort, 'and I am delighted to hear some of the things I am expected to do. But you must allow that even a fairy godmother has a hard time of it occasionally, and it is a little difficult to provide for all her godchildren at once, you

know. However, you shall hear what is going to happen in a week's time, on the very day that this naughty father of yours takes himself off to America; and if you approve of it, we can see about the other things later on. Is that a bargain, eh?'

'Oh! What else is going to happen in a week's time?' asked Barbara, eagerly. By this time she was prepared for any dream to come true. Her faith in the old lady who was playing at fairy stories was complete.

Mr. Berkeley answered her. 'Auntie Anna is going to carry you all off to Crofts for the whole six months that I am away,' he told her; 'and you are going to Jill's school at Wootton Beeches, which is only ten miles off. So Kit and Robin will be able to come over and see you sometimes, when the others have gone away, for they are going to have a tutor and stay at Crofts with Auntie Anna and Jill. Isn't that a fine idea?'

Barbara was speechless with rapture. The expression on her face made them laugh once more. Then she gave a kind of war-whoop that might have been heard in the schoolroom, and bounded again towards the door. 'I simply can't bear it another minute,' she gasped. 'I *must* go and tell the boys.'

'Bear it just one more minute, and hear what else I have to say,' begged Auntie Anna, raising herself with the help of her stick, and walking slowly after her excited little niece. 'Can you ride bicycles, all of you?'

The child shook her head. 'Only Egbert,' she said; 'and that is because he stayed with a chap, last holidays, who lent him one. Bicycles are too jolly expensive for this family, you know,' she added quaintly.

Auntie Anna stood still and pointed the blue-knobbed cane impressively at the child, who stood waiting. 'What do you say to a bicycle apiece all round,' she began, 'and—'

But Barbara did not wait to say anything. Back along the hall she scampered with all her might, and flung herself panting into the schoolroom. She burst out at once with a rapturous medley of news.

'Boys, boys!' she shouted at the top of her voice; 'the dragon isn't a dragon, she's like a fairy godmother out of a story-book! And she's going to send me to the adopted kid's school, and everybody is going to live at Crofts till father comes back, and there's going to be bicycles *all round*–no waiting 'cause you're the youngest, Bobbin!–and—'

Suddenly she paused and stammered, and paused again. Finally, she stood silent and uncomfortable, with the excitement and the thrill all gone out of her. She had quite forgotten Jill; and Jill, enthroned in the one arm-chair, with the one cushion at her back and the one footstool at her feet, was looking as though she was not there to be forgotten.

'I've just been telling the boys all about it,' she remarked.

Barbara stared. It put the finishing touch to her distrust of Jill, that she should have told anything to the boys–*her* boys–before she had time to tell them herself.

'I–I think it's a shame!' she exclaimed hotly, and she bit her lip to keep from crying.

'Hullo, Babe! What's up?' asked Peter, in surprise.

Jill slipped out of the arm-chair, and laid her hand on the child's shoulder. 'I'm so sorry, Babs,' she began softly; 'I really didn't know—'

Barbara looked up at her doubtfully. The tone was kind, but then, why did she go on smiling in that irritating way? 'You don't understand,' she said, and twisted herself free from Jill's grasp, and did not speak again until she was gone.

The boys took no notice of her; they always left the Babe alone when she was in one of her odd moods. But Jill, who had really meant to be kind, went away feeling puzzled. She had got over her first shyness of the boys in a very few minutes, for they were evidently trying to be friendly in their blunt, boyish fashion; but Barbara baffled her. There was something antagonistic in the child's manner; and Jill, who had always been accustomed to meeting with affection wherever she went, did not quite know what to make of her. Of course it was ridiculous to worry herself about a tomboy of eleven who chose to be sulky; but it was the first time any one had refused to make friends with her, and Jill was a little hurt about it.

'You're spoiled, my dear,' remarked her mother, as they drove away from the Berkeleys' house; 'and it is I who have spoiled you. I'm a silly old woman, but I never could bear to deny you all the sympathy you asked. I was afraid, you see, that you might think the world was not a nice place to be in.'

‘I’m glad you spoiled me, and I think the world *is* a nice place to be in,’ answered Jill, laughing. ‘But what has that to do with Barbara’s not liking me?’

‘Well, you can’t expect every one to like you,’ said the old lady, in her brusque way. ‘Babs will like you well enough when she finds that she is still the Babe of the family, in spite of your being there.’

‘But–but I don’t like to feel that there is anybody anywhere who doesn’t like me,’ complained Jill, with a little pout.

‘No more does the Babe, I expect,’ said Mrs. Crofton, smiling. ‘However, do your best to understand the poor little soul; she has not had much spoiling, and I should like you two to be friends.’

‘Oh!’ cried Jill, laughing again as she recalled the funny little figure that had come bounding into the schoolroom with such a yell and a clatter. ‘But she really is rather impossible, mother dear!’

‘Quite,’ responded the old lady, drily; ‘but she has amazing possibilities, and I thought you might perhaps like to find them. Well, what about the others?’

‘Oh, I like them,’ said Jill; ‘though I wish they would not all talk at once; it’s so confusing. And I’m a little afraid of them, too. You never know why they are laughing at you; and if you take them seriously, they laugh more than ever. Whatever you do, they laugh.’

‘Large families are always like that,’ chuckled Mrs. Crofton.

‘Large families are rather exhausting then, aren’t they?’ said Jill. ‘The boys are rather rough too, and they seem so proud of having scars on their hands, and of being able to see a pig killed without feeling bad–at least, Peter was. Kit is different from the others: I like Kit. And they *are* frank! They were not ashamed of calling me the “adopted kid” to my face; and they even owned to having nicknamed you “the dragon”!’

The old lady laughed. ‘So I am, as far as they know!’ she replied. Then she patted the girl caressingly on the hand. ‘My dear, it does us all good to be with people who are frank, even if they are a little rough with it. And I want you to help me to put as much love and gentleness as we can into the Berkeleys’ lives, for it strikes me that spoiling is what this large family wants.’

‘Then it’s what this large family will certainly get, if *you* have anything to do with it,’ answered Jill, softly.

In the schoolroom they had just left, the criticisms were brief and to the point.

‘She’ll do,’ said Peter, condescendingly, ‘when she’s got over that silly way of gaping at us, as though we were beasts at the Zoo.’

‘She’s stunning to look at, and her clothes are just ripping,’ said Egbert, the eldest; ‘but, of course, you kids couldn’t be expected to notice that.’

‘Oh, you think you’re everybody, just because you stayed with a chap last holidays who had a grown-up sister who called you *Mr.* Berkeley,’ cried Wilfred.

Robin said he liked her soft way of speaking, and she reminded him of Nurse, which set them all laughing, as they recalled that homely-looking person in cap and spectacles. Christopher put in his opinion, when they had all had their say.

‘She wants knowing,’ he said briefly. ‘There’s too many of us in a lump to let her give herself away. When she takes us separately, or in pairs, we shall get on as right as rain. And she really does know something about stamps.’

But the Babe, who sat away in a corner by herself, said nothing. She had forgotten Jill for the moment, forgotten her own fit of jealousy and her shyness of the interloper, and she did not even hear what the others were talking about. She was going to school at last, and nothing else was of any consequence. Indeed, all through the week of whirl and preparation that followed, Barbara went about in a kind of dream. She could hardly yet believe in her good luck. A few short days ago things had seemed likely to go on for ever in the same uneventful way, except that they were going to be made dreary for a time by the absence of the father she adored; and now, just through the coming of an old lady, whom she had been prepared to hate, this amazing change in her future was going to take place. To an imaginative little person like Barbara, it was useless to pretend that there was nothing out of the ordinary in this. She had lived for years in a fairy world of her own, where Kit was a fairy prince and her father a nice old magician, and where numbers of charming princesses, the schoolgirls of her imagination, were ready to sympathise with her whenever the boys had

been teasing her more than usual. It was surely to this kingdom of her fancy that a fairy godmother, who had once been a dragon, properly belonged; and all through that week, Barbara wandered in her imaginary kingdom with this new inhabitant of it, pointing out all its beauties to her, and even assuring her that the magician would cure her rheumatism if she were to ask him nicely. 'Only, you must not make her back *quite* straight,' she whispered privately to the magician, 'because she wouldn't be a proper fairy godmother if her back were straight!' She also added strict injunctions to the keeper of her gates, that a certain grown-up cousin, who might be known by her tiresome way of smiling at people, was not to be admitted under any circumstances into her fairy kingdom. 'It would never do,' thought Barbara, seriously, 'to have any one in my kingdom who wanted to laugh at me.'

Meanwhile, the busy preparations went on around her. It was not an easy thing to move a family of six from the home in which they had passed the whole of their lives, especially when their aunt, in the large manner which characterised everything she did, insisted on allowing them to pack whatever they wished.

'We are only young once,' she represented to a distracted housekeeper, 'and possessions are very precious when we are young. Let them bring everything that will help to make the place seem like home to them; there is plenty of room at Crofts. Get tired of the things? Of course they will! We can't expect them to be wiser than the grown-ups, can we?'

So Wilfred packed explosive liquids in bottles, and Peter packed cricket stumps and hockey clubs, and Christopher found room among Egbert's collars and ties to stow away microscope-slides and setting-boards and birds' eggs, and Robin brought innumerable contributions in the shape of torn picture-books and old toys that the others had discarded long ago. None of them ever forgot that last week in their London home; for besides the exquisite joys of packing up, there were also delightful expeditions up to town with Auntie Anna, ostensibly to buy clothes, but in reality to afford amusement to an old lady who had never enjoyed her life so much before; and whether they went alone with her, or in such numbers that the brougham was as full as it could be, the afternoon always ended with a magnificent tea without limitations–'Even ices to finish up with, and no one

saying nothink about your makin' yourself ill 'cause you mixed things!' as Robin proclaimed on his return home from one of these expeditions.

Then there was the buying of the six bicycles; and even Barbara forgot for the moment all about school and everything else for the sake of her new two-wheeled possession, soon to be invested in her mind with magic properties and converted into a fairy messenger in her fairy kingdom. She was less patient over the purchase of her school outfit, which kept her standing at the dressmaker's for whole half-hours together, when she might have been trying her bicycle round the square; and she wondered why it was necessary to have such quantities of clothes, just because she was going to live at school instead of at home. Surely, if her present wardrobe was good enough to pass the critical examination of five brothers, it need not be improved to meet the friendly gaze of a parcel of girls! However, Auntie Anna insisted on more clothes; and Auntie Anna was a witch, so she ought to know. And since she did not take the dressmaker's part, but even allowed Barbara to have her own way as to the shortness of her skirts, with an added inch or so to satisfy the scruples of the dressmaker, it was impossible to grumble very much at the precious time that was being wasted.

So the week drew swiftly to a close, and the day of departure came at last.

CHAPTER III

BARBARA'S DREAM

Once more, Kit stood with his back to the fireplace, and prepared to address the family. It was just half an hour after Mr. Berkeley had left, and they were all assembled rather sorrowfully in the old schoolroom. In another ten minutes their own cabs would be at the door, and they too would be on their way to a new life. Altogether, it was a solemn moment, and the genius of the family could not resist the temptation to make a speech.

'Boys,' he began, nodding his head with mock importance, 'it is my opinion that Auntie Anna is a jolly wise old lady!'

'What's that to do with father going away?' asked Barbara, rubbing her eyes furiously. She had had her cry on the back staircase, and she felt safe for the moment against a further display of weakness.

'It's got a lot to do with it,' rejoined Kit. 'Didn't she take us all to the pantomime, last night–father, too? I suppose you think that was just to amuse herself, don't you? Well, it wasn't. It was because she was afraid of our sitting together at home, and saying it was father's last evening, and–*blubbing*.'

This he said severely, looking at the weaker members, Babs and Robin, as he spoke. They bore the test heroically, and the orator went on.

'And why,' he inquired, 'did she give us only a week to pack up, and buy clothes and things, when there's ten days more before you other chaps go back? Of course there's the Babe's school, but that could have waited. Girls' schools never matter.'

'Well, *why*, most precocious of kids?' asked Egbert, with lazy tolerance. Certainly, no one but Christopher would have been allowed to say so much uninterrupted. But then, even Egbert had a kind of secret admiration for his clever young brother, though he did not pretend to understand him.

‘Well,’ continued Christopher, ‘if we’d had more time to think about it, we might not have been so keen on going to live in another person’s house. And, naturally, Auntie Anna didn’t want any ructions over it.’

‘Oh, stop it, Kit! What a lot of rot you are making up!’ objected Peter, impatiently. Of the three elder boys, he was nearest in age to Kit, and was consequently less inclined to tolerate him.

‘Everything points to it, if you’re not too thick-headed to see,’ retorted Kit, crushingly. ‘Look at the way we’re being rushed out of the house, directly father has turned his back. Isn’t that to give us something to think about, so that we shouldn’t mope about the shop, and *fancy* ourselves? Of course,’ he added blandly, fixing his spectacles on his nose and staring at Peter, ‘*some* people don’t need anything to set them grinning again.’

‘Christopher, my son, you are a clever child, but your impudence simply isn’t to be borne,’ said Peter; and he stooped down and lifted the fragile figure of the orator high in the air, and set him down lightly outside the door. Kit rearranged his tie, put his spectacles straight, and peered up at the unappreciative listener who towered above him.

‘As I was saying,’ he resumed gently, ‘Auntie Anna can give us all points when it comes to being ’cute.’

The next day or two proved the truth of what, in his shrewd way, he had already guessed for himself. Yet the Berkeleys were hardly to be called unfeeling, because they appeared to take their father’s departure so coolly; for it would have been difficult to remain unhappy long, when there were so many delightful things to distract them. Besides their excitement, town-bred as they were, at finding themselves in a real country-house, with an oak staircase, a secret room, and a ghost story, there were separate joys waiting for each one of them as well. There was a horse for Egbert to ride to hounds, and a well-stocked library for Christopher to bury himself in, and a lumber-room for Wilfred to turn into a laboratory; while Peter was allowed, the very first day, to go out shooting with the keepers, and Robin promptly became the pet of all the men on the estate, and spent long, happy hours with them down at the stables and the farm. If there was any one in the family who was not perfectly content, it was Barbara.

No doubt, she would have been quite as absorbed as the others were in their new home, if she had not been going to another one herself the very next

day. As it was, she found it a little difficult to share their enthusiasm since she had a private enthusiasm of her own. But the boys did not understand this at all. They were very affectionate to her in their rough, undemonstrative way, and they were always telling her that she would be sure to 'pull through all right'; for they naturally supposed that she wanted the kind of pity they wanted so much themselves at the stated, horrible periods when they went back to school. But as to grasping her notion that she was going to enjoy life at Wootton Beeches, that was not to be expected of them. So Barbara felt that her interests, for the first time in her life, were not the same as theirs; and a queer sort of feeling crept over her, that changes–even nice, interesting changes–occasionally had something strange and uncomfortable about them. She grew so perplexed over it, at last, that she even went to Jill for sympathy. Jill was at least a girl, and Jill had been to school, in the same delightful place to which she was going on the morrow; and Jill at least ought to know whether the boys' idea of school was right or wrong. So, just after tea, on her last evening at Crofts, the child swallowed her natural distrust of her cousin, which, after all, had arisen chiefly from their mutual shyness of each other, and started in search of her.

Jill was in the conservatory, arranging the flowers for the dinner-table; and Barbara's shyness returned, as the trim, neat figure came walking towards her, along the rows of chrysanthemums. She glanced down at her crumpled pinafore and sighed desperately. Being dragged up a dusty ladder into a cobwebby lumber-room by Wilfred had not proved the best of treatments for a pinafore that really had been clean a couple of hours ago. But Jill suddenly came out in a new light. With no teasing schoolboys to overhear her, she felt that here, at last, was a chance of making friends with her odd little tomboy of a cousin.

'Have you come to help me with the flowers?' she asked, with such a friendly smile, that Babs cheered up at once. She forgot all about her crumpled pinafore, and went straight to the point.

'No, I didn't come for that,' she answered simply. 'I came to ask you about–about school.'

'Ah!' said Jill, suddenly picking chrysanthemums at a great rate. 'Supposing you tell me what you think about it yourself?'

Her mother's words were running in her head: 'Do your best to understand the poor little soul!' and Jill wondered what she could tell her that would not upset her notions of school too cruelly.

'Oh, well,' replied Babs, 'of course, *I* think it's going to be beautiful; but the boys–the boys are so funny about it, and it's made me all in a muddle inside. Do you think the boys *know*?'

'Perhaps not,' said Jill, and she strolled away along the rows of chrysanthemums. It seemed a shame to spoil the child's illusion; and yet, when she thought of this quaint little untrained object being dropped in the middle of the girls at Wootton Beeches—

Barbara had followed her up closely, and she suddenly interrupted her reflections. 'You know what a girls' school is like, don't you, Jill?' she continued appealingly. 'I wish–I *do* wish you would tell the boys they are all wrong about it. They *are* wrong, aren't they?'

There was a suspicion of a doubt in the last words that struck Jill as being rather pathetic. She put her bunch of chrysanthemums down, and drew Barbara towards her. 'You see, Babs, it is like this,' she said slowly; 'school is very nice, if you do not mind things being strange at first, and if you can bear being laughed at, and—'

'Why, that is quite easy!' interrupted Babs, with a smile. 'The boys have teased me always.'

'Yes,' said Jill, doubtfully; 'the boys have teased you; but that is not quite the same thing. Girls–girls are not boys, you see.'

'Oh no, I know they're not!' replied Barbara, happily. 'Girls are quiet and kind and gentle; and they always understand you, and they are ready to make friends directly they see you. I think I know what *girls* are like.'

She was thinking of the princesses in her fairy kingdom; and another little smile flickered across her face. Jill glanced at her for a moment, and then suddenly made up her mind how to act.

'Look here, Babs,' she began, smoothing the mop of tangled hair with her hands; 'you go on thinking that girls are like that, and you'll get along all right!' Barbara wriggled away from her before she had time to say any more, gave her a swift look and a smile of gratitude, and darted off in

search of the boys. ‘They’ll be very stupid if they don’t see what a babe it is,’ added Jill to herself.

At the door of the conservatory, however, the small figure in the crumpled pinafore came to a sudden standstill.

‘I say, Jill,’ the child blurted out, and she clutched a handful of pinafore to give herself courage; ‘I–I want to tell you something.’

‘Do you?’ said Jill, smiling.

‘I want to explain that I hated you at first, because I thought you were going to make the boys like you better than me,’ Babs went on breathlessly. ‘And you frightened me too, because you laughed in such a funny way, just as if you were sneering at me for being in a muck. I thought, perhaps, it was because you were so grand, and your clothes were so grand, and all that; but I couldn’t help being in a muck, because I always am in a muck, you see; and so, you see–you see—’

'Look here Babs,' she began, smoothing the mop of tangled hair

'I see,' said Jill, quietly; and she looked quite thoughtful for a minute or two. Babs came a step nearer.

'I don't hate you now,' she said frankly. 'For one thing, the boys don't like you better than me, after all. They don't even like you so much as they thought they were going to. But *I* think you're awfully nice,–almost as nice

as Kit and Nurse and father,–and I shall go and tell them so, now; and then, perhaps, they won't say you are young-ladyish any more!'

There was a vision of slim black legs and white pinafore disappearing across the hall, and Jill could not help laughing. 'I must catch the post, and write to that child Jean,' she decided, after a moment's reflection. 'It won't be so bad for the poor little mite if she has some one to show her round.'

Late on the following afternoon the 'adopted kid' found another chance of making her way to Barbara's heart. Barbara had wandered into the library, with a whole hour to spare before the carriage should come round to drive her to school; and, rather to her surprise, she discovered Kit there, sitting huddled up in the arm-chair, with his shoulders up to his ears. She had thought that all the boys were out ratting, and she had not expected to see any of them until they came in at tea-time to bid her farewell. She was feeling rather doleful, now that the important moment was so near, for she realised that if she was going to everything that was new and delightful, she was also going away from the boys for the first time in her life. It did not cheer her to find Christopher sitting over the fire with an attack of asthma.

'Kit!' she cried in distress. 'I didn't know you were ill!'

Kit crouched closer to the fire and growled. Asthma always had a bad effect upon his temper, and to-day he had a grievance as well.

'Of course you didn't know,' he muttered. 'You never know anything now. Can't think what's come over you lately.'

Barbara reddened, and the tears welled up in her eyes. No one could hurt her so easily as Christopher. 'I'm awfully sorry, Kit. I suppose I've been thinking about school,' she said; and she dropped the poker with a bang that made him wince.

'Lucky for you to be able to go to school,' answered Kit, crossly. 'Look at me! Just because of that journey on Wednesday I've got to coddle like an old woman.'

Barbara stood gazing at him helplessly. Her heart was full of pity, but no one had ever taught her how to show it. 'Poor old boy!' she said awkwardly. 'Would you like me to tell you a story?'

'Not I! How can you think of a story when you're full of that stupid school?' was the surly answer.

‘But I’m not thinking about school now, Kit,’ persisted the Babe, becoming tearful.

‘Oh, never mind. Don’t cry, whatever you do; I’ve got such a headache,’ said Christopher, hastily.

‘I’m n–not crying; I never cry,’ stammered Barbara, in a shaky voice. ‘I–I want to do something for you, only you won’t tell me what to do.’

Kit answered her with a violent struggle for breath, and the child felt more helpless than ever. It was just as she was making a feeble attempt to raise him in his chair that Jill came in.

‘You poor fellow!’ she exclaimed, taking in the whole scene at once. ‘Here, Babs, give me that piece of brown paper, and run and fetch his medicine, will you? Poor boy! Poor Kit!’

She knelt beside him and supported him with her arm, while she wafted a smouldering tuft of brown paper in front of him. ‘Now, fetch some cushions out of the drawing-room,’ she commanded, when Barbara returned with the medicine; and, delighted at being given something to do, the child sped away on her errand. When she came back with her arms full of cushions, Jill had a delightful plan to unfold.

‘Ring the bell for the lamp, Babs,’ she said, in her soft voice, which was already soothing Christopher’s nerves; ‘and we’ll have tea together before you go. Shall we, Kit, dear?’

‘It’s awfully good of you,’ he answered weakly. The attack was passing off, and he was visibly cheering up. By the time tea was brought in, he was sufficiently recovered to take the lead in his usual determined manner; and Jill humoured him by giving in to him meekly, even consenting, under his guidance, to toast slices of plum-cake at the end of a penknife.

‘It’s very extravagant, when it’s Auntie Anna’s plum-cake instead of the stale stuff cook used to make; but as it’s the Babe’s last evening we may be extravagant, mayn’t we, Jill?’ argued Christopher. ‘Now, Babs, you melt the butter; and for goodness’ sake do remember you’re not at home, and don’t smash the plate.’

His reminder did not wholly make the desired effect upon Babs, for when the boys returned from the farm in a noisy tribe, flushed with the glory of

slaying, they found the ‘adopted kid’ scrubbing her gown with a clean handkerchief, while Babs hung over her, covered with confusion.

‘Don’t worry yourself, child,’ Jill was saying consolingly. ‘A lump of butter, more or less, doesn’t make any difference to a frock I’ve worn all the winter.’

‘It just slid off the plate when I wasn’t looking,’ said Barbara, penitently. ‘I can’t think why it didn’t slide on to my frock instead of yours.’

A chorus of merriment rang from behind.

‘You ridiculous Babe!’ shouted Peter. ‘Why, the butter is *tired* of being spilled down your frock.’

Jill jumped to her feet, and blushed a little. As Kit had predicted, she found it much easier to get on with her cousins when she took them ‘separately, or in pairs’; and she was not used yet to facing them all at once. The sound of wheels outside gave her an excuse for escape, and she put her arm hurriedly round Babs.

‘Come upstairs and put on your hat,’ she suggested, and the two girls hastened out of the room.

Auntie Anna saw to it that the farewells were not prolonged, and Barbara found herself whirled into the covered wagonette with her last words only half said. Kit was allowed time to whisper a gruff apology for being cross with her before tea, but the others had to follow her to the front door to shout their good-byes after her.

‘Don’t get the blues because *we* are not there!’ cried Wilfred.

‘I’ll write great lots of times,’ declared Robin, who was in tears. ‘I won’t even wait for the lines to be ruled, Babs dear. You won’t mind the spelling, will you? ’Cause it saves so much time if you don’t.’

‘Cheer up!’ was all Egbert said; and Barbara wondered if she was very hard-hearted, because she was not half so wretched as they all expected her to be. Peter even made her laugh outright, as he sprang on the step of the carriage, and went a little way down the drive with them.

‘Don’t funk it, old girl!’ he shouted through the window. ‘And just send for us, if anything goes wrong!’

‘Be off with you!’ said Auntie Anna, shutting up the window; and that was the last that the Babe of the Berkeley family saw of the boys who had been her only companions through life.

She had plenty to think about in her long drive in the dark; and Auntie Anna was wise enough to leave her alone most of the time. A little more than an hour later, however, when the carriage made a sharp turn and drove through some gates, the old lady roused her by a touch on the arm.

‘We are just there, little woman,’ she said in her quick, abrupt way. ‘Not afraid, eh?’

‘Oh no!’ answered Barbara, smiling. ‘I–I’m just excited.’

Mrs. Crofton kissed the eager little face, on which the light shone as they approached the house.

‘That’s right,’ she said, looking pleased. ‘Always be a truthful little girl, and don’t mind if you find you are not like other people.’

Then the horses stopped, and a blaze of light shone down a flight of steps to the carriage door; and Babs, feeling suddenly very small and unimportant, in spite of the extra inch or two on her new serge frock, followed the old lady into the great wide hall of Wootton Beeches.

Her dream was coming true at last.

CHAPTER IV

HOW IT CAME TRUE

Half an hour later, Barbara was being led across the hall by Miss Finlayson, to be introduced to her school-fellows in the playroom. It puzzled her a little to see how calm and unconcerned the head-mistress was looking. Did she not know what a thrilling moment this was to her little new pupil, who tripped along by her side? As Babs was puzzling over it, they reached the baize door on the opposite side of the hall, and Miss Finlayson stooped and fastened it back, disclosing a long passage beyond. At the end of the passage was another door; and through this other door the murmur and hum of many voices drifted to the ears of the excited child. She could hardly contain her impatience; and she wondered why Miss Finlayson did not go on, instead of being so particular about the fastening of the baize door. She even took a step forward in her eagerness; but a hand was suddenly placed on her shoulder, and Barbara glanced up and met the half-amused gaze of the lady who had just seemed so indifferent to her.

Miss Finlayson had a way of looking at a girl that generally made a friend of her at once. Her eyes were a peculiar shade of blue-grey that gave them, as a rule, a cold expression; but they were also capable of a glimpse of humour that completely altered and softened them, and it was the discovery of this quality in them that changed Barbara's impatience all at once to curiosity.

'One moment, little girl, before you go through that door over there,' began Miss Finlayson, and her face was still grave in spite of the betraying twinkle in her eyes. 'Tell me, have you ever known any girls before?'

'Only Jill,' answered Barbara, wondering why she was being asked such an odd question.

'Ah!' said Miss Finlayson. The child caught the change in her tone, and went on quickly.

‘I know Jill didn’t approve of me at first,’ she said, in her small, anxious voice; ‘but she does now, I think. Besides, Jill is grown-up, you see; and I don’t think it counts if you are grown-up, does it? I’ve never met any real, nice, friendly girls before, who don’t tease you, or bully you, or anything like that. That’s why I wanted to come to school.’

‘Ah!’ said Miss Finlayson again. Then she put out her hand and patted the cheek of her little new pupil. ‘Do not be unhappy if you find you are not like the other girls,’ she said, just as Auntie Anna had done; ‘and come to me, if everything else fails and you cannot stand by yourself. Only, remember–you are not in the nursery any longer: you have come here to learn how to grow up straight and strong and healthy, just as a plant learns; and I am only the gardener to give you a prop, when you have been in too great a hurry and are trying to grow too fast. Do you think you understand?’ Her voice changed again, and a laugh came into it as she added brightly: ‘Come along now, and be a happy little girl. You will find that most of us are happy in this house.’

She took Babs by the hand, and raced her along the passage to the door at the end, then turned the handle and pushed the child gently into the room.

‘Girls,’ said the head-mistress, in the sudden lull that followed her entrance, ‘here is a new schoolfellow for you.’

Then all the voices broke out again, and Miss Finlayson nodded to Barbara, and went away. It was one of Miss Finlayson’s theories, that a new girl should be left to fight her way by herself; but as she retreated slowly along the passage this evening, she could not help feeling a little anxious about the child with the small, eager face, whom she had just launched into a strange and unfriendly world.

Barbara took two quick steps forward, as the door closed behind her, and stood there waiting. She had acted this scene over and over again in her mind, and she had always made her entrance like this; after which a girl, whose face was plump and ordinary, and whose legs were of the right proportions, and whose hair was smooth and under proper control, had always come towards her with a welcoming smile and had led her up to the other girls, who all had welcoming smiles too. And everybody had listened to her while she talked about her home and her father and the boys; and nobody had laughed and nobody had teased, and nobody had told her to

‘shut up.’ It had been a very favourite scene in her dream of school, and she waited eagerly for the other actors in it to come forward and do their part. But no one moved.

The room in which she found herself was certainly not like the one she had imagined. It was long and low and prettily shaped, with two wide bow-windows thrown out on one side of it, and a great square fireplace taking up most of the wall that faced the doorway. Next to the fireplace was a curtained archway, which evidently formed the entrance into another room, judging by the buzz of laughter and conversation from beyond that the thick red curtain failed to stifle. The bookshelves on the two remaining walls were made of plain oak; so were the desks and chairs that stood neatly arranged round the room in rows. There were also plain oak benches in the warm chimney-corners, and plain oak window-seats in the bowed recesses, while the floor was made of the same wood and was left quite bare, except for a rug in front of the hearth. A pot or two of chrysanthemums, some blue china on the over-mantel, and one or two hammered metal lamps that hung from the beams in the ceiling, were the only ornaments in the room; and the whole effect was so simple and so clean that Barbara, fresh from the dingy old schoolroom in which she had passed her life until now, was obliged to forget everything else for the moment and just stare round her. Then her eyes rested again on the girls who were scattered in groups about the room, and the expectant look on her face became a little wistful.

There seemed to be thirty or forty of them all together; and from the noise on the other side of the curtain Babs concluded that there were as many, or more, in the room beyond. They all talked without ceasing,–all at once, it seemed to Barbara,–about their Christmas holidays and their Christmas presents, about the parties they had been to and the pantomimes they had seen, about the girls who were not back and the girls who were, about everything, in fact, except the child by the door, who had been waiting all her life for this moment. What did it matter to them that she should go through a few seconds of embarrassment? They had all been through the same, in their time; and it was not to be supposed that they should make things any easier for future generations of new girls. So they went on babbling about their own affairs, and Barbara went on expecting some one to come and put an end to her discomfort. But nobody came.

Slowly, she began to feel conscious, just as she had done when she first met Jill, that there was something odd about her appearance. In spite of the extra inch or two on the bottom hem of her frock, and the temporary smoothness that a vigorous application of a wet brush had produced on her hair, Babs saw with a kind of dismay that she was not made in the same pattern as the crowd of neatly dressed girls before her. None of them wore her hair loose and curly like her own, and none of them looked as though she did not know what to do with her hands. If only she could have held on to something, Barbara felt sure she would not have felt so shy or so helpless. There was a chair only two yards off; but something kept her standing where she was, and she did not even reach out her hand to it.

The girls continued their conversation, and forgot all about the new-comer that Miss Finlayson had brought in. Most of them stood facing the fire and had not even looked at her; and the others, who glanced now and then towards the door, only shrugged their shoulders and wondered why the stupid child did not sit down, instead of standing still in that purposeless manner. They did not mean to be unkind, but how were they to know that she was fighting through her first disillusionment?

All at once, a diversion was made by two children from the other room, who came tumbling through the curtain and nearly upset a tall fair girl who was the centre of the group round the fire.

‘Look where you are going, Angela Wilkins!’ said the fair girl, sternly. ‘What are you children doing in here, I should like to know?’

‘Please, Margaret, don’t be cross, and *do* let me explain,’ begged Angela Wilkins, suppressing an inclination to giggle, and pouring out her words hastily. ‘Jean has had millions of letters from Jill Urquhart, and she says—’

‘It wasn’t millions, Angela, it was only one,’ corrected her fellow-culprit from behind.

‘And what business has Jean Murray to hear from Jill Urquhart?’ demanded the fair girl.

‘I’m sure I don’t want to hear from her,’ grumbled the other girl, whom Angela pushed forward to answer for herself. ‘She only writes to me when she wants something. I don’t call that *writing* to a person.’

‘She’s got a sister coming here this term, and she says everybody has got to look after her, or something like that,’ chimed in the irrepressible Angela.

‘It isn’t a sister, it’s a cousin. And she hasn’t asked everybody; I wish she had. She’s asked *me* to look after her, and that’s a very different thing,’ complained Jean Murray, looking distinctly aggrieved.

‘Yes,’ added Angela, breathlessly; ‘why should Jean be bothered with all the new girls who happen to be people’s cousins?’

‘She isn’t,’ said Margaret, curtly. ‘It’s only one new girl; and if she is a cousin of Jill’s, Jean ought to be very proud of being asked to look after her. Do stop exaggerating, Angela; and go away, both of you!’ Then just as the children slunk off subdued, she recalled them and made a gesture towards the door. ‘There’s a new girl over there now, I believe,’ she continued indifferently. ‘You’d better see whether she’s the right one; and if she is, bring her to me.’

She turned again to the fireplace, and the two girls made their way towards the other end of the room, where Barbara still stood unnoticed. She saw them coming, and heaved a sigh of relief. Things were a long while happening in this school; but it was something if they happened in the end. She glanced at their two faces as they came nearer, and felt disappointed when the one with the cross expression addressed her first.

‘I say, what’s your name?’ began Jean, ungraciously.

‘Barbara,’ answered the child, faintly. Her dream seemed more improbable than ever, in the presence of this small stranger with the aggressive manner.

‘Barbara what?’ asked Jean, impatiently.

Babs stared, and added her surname unwillingly. At home, when people spoke like that, they had to do without an answer.

‘That’s the one,’ grumbled Jean to her companion. Then she addressed Barbara again. ‘How old are you?’ she asked, in the same abrupt way.

‘Eleven,’ answered Babs, obediently. ‘How old are you?’

It was Jean’s turn to stare. ‘What business is it of yours?’ she exclaimed. After a moment’s consideration, however, she found a satisfactory reason for replying. ‘I’m a year older than you, anyhow,’ she added triumphantly,

‘so you’ll be the youngest in the school now, and you can take off the head girl’s boots.’

Before Barbara had time to realise this penalty, or privilege, belonging to her youth, Angela Wilkins, who had been silent for quite a surprising length of time, suddenly attacked her afresh. ‘Are you really Jill’s cousin?’ she asked, with a giggle.

Babs nodded; but Angela did not seem convinced. ‘You’re not a bit like her, are you? Jill Urquhart is so pretty and graceful and all that,’ she observed with engaging frankness, and then giggled again.

Barbara said nothing; it was certainly unnecessary to agree with such a very obvious statement. Jean Murray, who had also been examining her closely in her turn, evidently seemed to think a further snubbing was required of her.

‘You’re frightfully tall for your age,’ she remarked disapprovingly, as though Barbara were somehow to be held responsible for her height. ‘If I had straight spiky legs like yours, I should have my dresses made longer.’

‘No, you wouldn’t, if you had five brothers always wanting you to do things,’ retorted Barbara, promptly. It was saddening to find that, even here, people were prepared to make remarks about the slimness of her legs.

Angela was so surprised at her sudden show of resistance that she forgot to giggle.

‘I say, you’d better not speak like that to Jean Murray,’ she said in a warning tone, glancing as she spoke at Jean, as though she expected her to take immediate measures for the suppression of the new girl. ‘She’s been the youngest for so long that naturally she’s inclined to be jealous, now you’ve come to take her place. Of course she has to pretend she’s glad, but you can’t expect her to like the idea of somebody else taking off the head girl’s—’

‘Oh, if that’s all,’ said Barbara, indifferently, ‘I don’t want to take off anybody’s boots, thank you.’

‘You’ll have to, whether you like it or not,’ interposed Jean, who had been listening quite complacently to Angela’s description of her feelings. ‘Come along now, and see Margaret Hulme; and don’t be such a month about it, or else we shall catch it for stopping in here so long.’

‘Who is Margaret Hulme, and why have I got to go and see her?’ asked Babs, hanging back a little. It was so perplexing to have to do things without being given any reason for it.

Both the girls opened their eyes wide. ‘Why, she is the head girl!’ they explained, as if that were reason enough for anything; and without waiting for any more objections, they pulled her across the room to where the fair girl still made the centre of the group round the fire. She kept them waiting for some seconds before she condescended to notice that they were there.

‘Didn’t I tell you to go back to your own playroom?’ she demanded presently. Then her eyes fell on Barbara, and she scanned her critically up and down.

‘This is Jill Urquhart’s cousin,’ explained Jean, hurriedly, and she gave Barbara an unexpected push that sent her stumbling, with her usual lack of good fortune, right against the head girl.

‘Take care, child!’ said Margaret, frowning. And while Babs stammered out some apology, she turned to the other girls behind her and said something that made them all laugh.

‘She’s only eleven, though she’s so awfully tall; and her name is Barbara Berkeley,’ volunteered Angela, peering over the shoulder of the new girl.

‘Who spoke to you?’ inquired the head girl, sarcastically, looking back again. She once more scanned Barbara all over, and smiled in an annoying manner to herself. ‘However did Jill manage to have a cousin like you?’ she asked; and the other girls laughed more than before.

‘I don’t know,’ said Barbara, with a touch of scorn in her voice. The mysterious way in which the head girl and her admirers were laughing at her was very different from the frank teasing she was accustomed to; and it gave her a sudden wish to assert herself. ‘I never pretended to be like Jill, or like any of you! I–I don’t think I want to be like you, either. In my home, we don’t laugh behind people’s backs.’

She caused quite a small sensation in the group round the fire. One or two began to titter afresh, and then stopped, waiting for the head girl to take the lead. The head girl was equal to the occasion.

‘It is very certain, then, that you have stayed in your own home quite long enough,’ she remarked coldly, and resumed her conversation with her

friends.

The two children dragged Barbara through the curtain into the next room.

‘Well, you *have* got some cheek!’ gasped Jean Murray, staring at her. ‘Lucky for you that you’re a new girl! If it had been *me*, Margaret Hulme wouldn’t have spoken to me for a whole day.’

The enormity of such a punishment did not for the moment impress Barbara much. What she did notice was that her passage of words with the head girl had broken the ice of her introduction to the junior playroom, especially with the aid of Angela’s highly coloured account of it.

‘You never saw such a thing!’ she was exclaiming rapidly to the circle that formed round her. ‘There was Margaret, looking like a dozen thunder-clouds rolled into one, and there was the new girl, grinning from ear to ear, not caring a bit what anybody thought of her and just standing up to the head girl as if she was in the First herself.’

The new girl barely recognised this description of herself; but as it made her an object of curiosity, if not of sympathy, in the junior playroom, she did not feel inclined to correct the picture that the red-haired, freckled little chatterbox was painting of her. Anything was better than being left out in the cold again. It struck her too that the girls in the junior room were far less inclined to laugh at her than the elder ones had seemed; and it raised her fallen spirits a little to find that the children who were now strolling up to her, with inquisitive glances at her hair, her clothes, and everything else about her, seemed disposed, in spite of their calm curiosity, to show her a kind of rough friendliness. They were more like boys, these smaller people in the junior playroom; and Barbara, though still failing to realise her child’s ideal of girls, felt a faint kinship with their straightforward method of addressing her.

‘No nickname?’ they asked, when she had again admitted her name and her age.

‘Oh, yes,’ answered Barbara, unsuspiciously, ‘the boys always call me the Babe, or—’

The peals of laughter that interrupted her puzzled her a good deal. It was very queer that, wherever she went, people always laughed at her. It was

some moments before their glee over the nickname, that so exactly suited the childish impression she produced, began to subside.

‘Have you got a nurse?’ asked Angela, who had laughed louder than any one.

‘No,’ said Barbara, simply, not seeing that this too was meant to be a joke. ‘She left, two years ago.’

‘Well, you ought to have one,’ retorted Jean, brusquely. ‘She might teach you how to comb your hair.’

‘And let down your frock,’ added two or three voices together.

‘What’s the matter with my frock?’ asked Babs, opening her eyes. ‘It’s nearly two inches longer than any frock I ever had before.’

The laughter began afresh, and Barbara gave up trying to explain things. She was a little hurt, in reality, and was afraid of showing it; for it would never do, after being teased by five brothers all her life, to be ruffled by the laughter of a few schoolgirls. All the same, there was something in their way of laughing at her that hurt, and she did not care to provoke them into doing it any more.

The loud ringing of a bell brought her a sudden respite, by clearing the room of her tormentors. They poured hastily out of two large doors, that slid back in the wall and revealed another square hall beyond, similar to the one at the front of the house. The wide staircase up which the girls were trooping evidently led to their bedrooms, for Barbara, left deserted and forgotten in the playroom, could hear them, directly afterwards, moving about overhead. As she waited there alone, wondering what she was supposed to do next, Jean Murray came hurrying back into the room and looked round for her.

‘Oh, bother!’ she said, in her ungracious manner; ‘what a nuisance you are! I wish you’d do things without waiting to be told.’

Babs explained submissively that she was quite ready to do things if she only knew what to do; but Jean still grumbled.

‘Any one with any sense would know,’ she declared, hastening out of the door again as she spoke. When she was half-way across the hall, she

shouted, without looking back, ‘Can’t you come along? There’s only a quarter of an hour to dress for supper.’

Babs hurried after her, and managed to keep her in sight up the wide staircase and along the gallery at the top. There were doors all round the gallery, and at one of these, marked number twelve, Jean stopped and waited impatiently.

‘What a time you are,’ she complained, when Barbara caught her up.

‘I’m very quick, when anybody doesn’t take such an enormous start,’ answered Barbara, panting. ‘I can beat Peter twice round the Square and up to the gate, *easily*! And you’re not in it with Peter.’

Jean looked at her, and her expression was not a pretty one. However, she only jerked her head at the door in front of them, and told Babs it was her bedroom. ‘Finny said I was to show you,’ she added. ‘Don’t know, I’m sure, why everybody thinks I’ve got to show you things. And you’d better look sharp and dress, because when you’re ready you’ve got to cut along to number two and do the head girl’s hair. It’s always the business of the youngest in the school to do the head girl’s hair. See?’

‘But I don’t know how to do anybody’s hair,’ began Barbara, in a fever of dismay. But Jean had already scampered out of hearing; and with her responsibilities weighing heavily upon her, the new girl turned the handle of her bedroom door and went forlornly in. It was a simple little room, very clean and fresh-looking, with everything there that she wanted and nothing that she could do without. The pretty coverlets on the bed and the dressing-table and the muslin curtains that draped the oaken window-sash gave it a look of homely comfort, while harmonising with the plain green colour of the walls and the blue frieze and carpet. As Barbara walked across her small domain and pushed aside the blind to peep out into the clear starlit night, a moment’s rest came to her perturbed little mind. The tiny bare room was all hers, and the feeling of privacy and possession was very comforting.

A door in the wall told her there was a room leading out of hers, and the sound made by some one moving rapidly about in it reminded her again of her present woes and of the necessity for dressing as quickly as possible. Her relief at not being obliged to sleep with the other girls was forgotten in her returning consciousness of having to live with them, and to do their hair and to button their boots. With desperate haste she struggled out of her

serge frock and into a muslin one, that had a strange new method of fastening that was extremely baffling; and five minutes later, trembling, uneasy, and flushed with the hurry of her speedy toilet, she stood knocking at the door of number two.

'It's me,' she said feebly, in response to the curt inquiry from within. Her inadequate explanation was followed by a few quick steps on the other side of the door, which was then flung open with an impatient movement; and the head girl, putting hairpins rapidly into her hair as she stood, was looking down at her sternly.

'You should go to one of the younger ones, if you want to know anything,' she said crossly. 'Where's Jean Murray?'

'It was Jean Murray who told me to come,' answered the child, looking a pathetic little object in her half-fastened muslin frock, with her hair standing out wildly round her head. 'I'm sure I didn't want to come; I don't know how to do anybody's hair; I told her so. But she said it was because I was the youngest, and—'

'What *are* you talking about, child?' interrupted Margaret. Her mystified look was lost on Babs, however, as the child stared down in much misery and confusion at the little steel buckles on her new evening shoes. She went on unhappily with her stammering confession.

'She said I'd got to do the head girl's hair because I was the youngest, and I was to make haste, or I shouldn't be in time. I did make as much haste as I could, *truthfully*,' she added, looking up timidly at her frowning questioner; 'but there were such a lot of hooks on my new frock, and I'm not used to hooks. I've always had buttons before, you see.'

One or two of the neighbouring doors had opened by this time, and quite a small audience was assembling to hear Barbara's attempt at explanation. A giggle that swelled into a laugh brought dismay once more into her heart; and a suspicion that she had been hoaxed slowly dawned upon her.

'Isn't it true?' she cried, turning upon them desperately. 'Haven't I got to do the head girl's hair?'

'You'd better do your own first, I should say,' observed one of the onlookers, carelessly; and the others laughed again.

The head girl silenced them peremptorily. ‘Don’t, Ruth!’ she said. ‘It’s only a babe, after all. You others had better go downstairs; the supper-bell will ring directly.’

The gallery slowly emptied itself, except for the little group of three that still stood outside the head girl’s door. The offending Ruth turned to Barbara; she had a good-natured face, and was looking penitent.

‘Come here, child, and let me fasten your frock properly,’ she said; ‘you’ve done it up all wrong.’

Barbara turned her back to her willingly. ‘It’s awfully bricky of you,’ she said warmly; ‘I’ve never done up my own frock before, and this one was so complicated, somehow.’

‘You must come to me when you want your frocks fastened,’ answered her new friend. ‘I sleep next door to you, and I always help Angela, whose room is on the farther side of mine. You’ve only got to tap at the door between, when you are ready. But you mustn’t speak in the morning before breakfast, or in the evening after prayers, because that is against the rules.’

She fetched a brush and tried to reduce the tangled hair under her hands to a certain degree of order. Margaret Hulme had disposed of all her hairpins by this time, and was closely watching a door on the other side of the gallery. When it at last opened she straightened herself and prepared for action.

It was Jean Murray who came out of it, rather cautiously at first, then with a pretence of great unconcern. But her jaunty air completely deserted her when she saw the little group outside the head girl’s door, and she tried to slink away towards the stairs unnoticed. Margaret called her back authoritatively, and Jean came slowly and unwillingly round the gallery.

‘Now,’ said the head girl, when she was within easy hearing, ‘just you apologise to Barbara Berkeley for hoaxing her just now. If you think there is anything funny in telling an untruth, I’m sorry for your sense of humour, and you’d better not do it again in this house. Now then, make haste about it.’

Barbara tried impetuously to interfere, but Ruth Oliver held her back. ‘Hush!’ she whispered. ‘Leave it to Margaret.’

Jean was shifting from one foot to another, and her mouth began to quiver. ‘I didn’t know she’d be such a stupid as to believe it,’ she muttered.

‘My dear child,’ said the head girl, blandly, ‘nobody supposed you were any judge of character. So it would clearly be wiser not to play that kind of joke on any one in future, wouldn’t it? Are you going to apologise or not?’

Jean reddened, and a lump rose in her throat. Her worship of the head girl was the most genuine thing about her, and she was suffering keenly under her disapproval. But an apology to a new girl, especially to one who had come to rob her of all her privileges, was next to an impossibility. Barbara saved the situation.

‘I don’t want anybody’s apologies,’ she cried. ‘I’m not cross, and I don’t know what you’re all talking about.’ She wriggled away from the friendly grasp of Ruth Oliver, and sped round the gallery till she came to the head of the stairs. Arrived there, the temptation of a long, broad, shining baluster-rail was too much for her; and in another moment the little elf-like figure in the fresh muslin frock was astride of it and flying down to the hall, with her hair once more in rebellion round her face. The exhilaration of the brief rush downwards sent all her troubles out of her head, and she uttered a war-whoop of delight as she landed with a thump on the mat at the bottom. The elder girls, who were just streaming across the hall in response to the supper-bell, stopped and stared aghast. Certainly the new girl was the most impudent of her species, and meant to make her entry into the establishment of Wootton Beeches with a flourish! But Margaret Hulme, it was rumoured, had taken her up; and that meant that the elder girls were no longer in a position to criticise her.

CHAPTER V

THE INK BOGIES

Barbara's disappointment had lost some of its bitterness by the time the seven o'clock bell woke her on the following morning. Perhaps, after all, it was her own fault that things had not turned out so delightfully as she had expected. Even the boys used to call her clumsy and stupid sometimes; so why should she expect any more tolerance from her school-fellows? Anyhow, here was the beginning of another day, and there was still plenty of time for her dream to come true.

It did not seem much like coming true, though, as she stood in the juniors' room after breakfast, jostled from right to left by the girls who were on their way to the different classrooms, and wondering when somebody would come and tell her where she was to go. She wished rather sadly that everybody in this school would not expect her to know things by instinct.

'Do *you* know where I am to go?' she begged, catching hold of Jean Murray as she hurried by. Babs had forgotten, if, indeed, she had ever realised, that Jean looked upon her as an enemy.

'Go and ask one of the seniors,' retorted Jean, shaking her off. 'You're much too high and mighty to have anything to do with us.'

'What is she talking about?' asked the amazed Barbara, looking after her.

'Well, it isn't likely she can forget all at once that you got her a scolding from Margaret Hulme,' explained Angela, who was hurrying as usual after her friend, like a shadow.

'*I* got her a scolding? What do you mean?' cried Babs.

'Oh, it's all very well to be so innocent,' snorted Angela; and she disappeared too.

Barbara sighed and remained where she was, till she was moved on again.

‘Do get out of the way,’ complained some one else; ‘you’re right in front of my bookshelf.’

Barbara sprang aside hastily, and caught her foot in the leg of a desk and fell down.

‘I don’t mind moving,’ she said, getting up again and rubbing her elbow, ‘but I do wish I knew where to move to.’

‘Can’t you find out?’ asked the owner of the bookshelf inconsistently, as she rushed off with her arms full of books.

Barbara sighed again. Try as she might to make the best of things, it was a little tiring to be such a universal object of complaint.

‘Hullo, Babe! You ought not to be here,’ said a cheery voice from the seniors’ room, and Ruth Oliver put her head round the red curtain. ‘This is only the playroom, you know, and, except for preparation or for fetching your books between the classes, you are never supposed to use it in lesson-time. The classrooms are upstairs.’

‘I know I oughtn’t to be here,’ answered Babs, ruefully. ‘I never am where I ought to be.’

‘But Finny sent for you, ages ago,’ said Ruth, looking astonished. ‘Didn’t Jean tell you? She’s a young horror, that Jean. Never mind, come along with me, and I’ll show you the way.’

She hurried the child through the baize door into the front hall, and pointed out a room that was close to the foot of the stairs. ‘That’s Finny’s study,’ she said hastily. ‘You’d better look sharp. Good luck to you!’ She gave her an unexpected kiss that promptly secured her the child’s allegiance from henceforth, and ran off with her books under her arm.

Barbara entered the room, and looked round for Miss Finlayson. Only the head girl was there, however, sitting at the table with a frown upon her face.

‘You ought to have been here before this,’ she began reprovingly. ‘Miss Finlayson couldn’t wait any longer, so I’ve got to miss the history lecture and examine you, instead of her. Why couldn’t you come, directly Jean told you?’

Barbara turned a little red and tried to look unconcerned, in which she signally failed. ‘I think,’ she said, ‘that you’d better ask Jean.’

Margaret looked at her sharply, and muttered something that sounded uncommonly like ‘Little beast!’ which seemed to the child rather more than she deserved, considering that it was really Jean’s fault and not hers at all. She was rather surprised at the head girl’s next words, which seemed quite gentle by comparison.

‘Why, you look blue with cold, child,’ she remarked, and drew her round by the fire. ‘Now, stand there, and tell me what history books you have been using.’

‘I haven’t used any,’ answered Babs. ‘I haven’t had any history lessons, you see.’

‘Do you mean to say you know nothing about the history of England–nothing about wars or kings or laws, or any of those things?’ inquired Margaret, raising her eyebrows.

Barbara’s face brightened. ‘Oh, yes,’ she said, ‘I know all about *them* from father, and the British Museum, and books. I didn’t know that was history.’

Margaret was a little puzzled. The examination of this new girl looked as though it were going to present difficulties. ‘What kind of books?’ she asked doubtfully.

‘Lots of kinds,’ answered Barbara, glibly. ‘Napier’s *History of the Peninsular War*, and somebody else’s *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, and another one called *The Four Georges*, and–and–oh, that long stuffy one, cut up into volumes, with ever so many funny words in it, called *Cromwell’s Life and—*’

‘That’s enough,’ cried Margaret, and she looked in amazement at the small animated face of the new girl. ‘I–I think that will do for history,’ she went on hastily. ‘Now, what about geography? I suppose you know the elements, so I won’t—’

‘What’s elements?’ interrupted Babs.

‘Well, the beginning part,’ explained the head girl–‘the part that tells you the meaning of islands and volcanoes and earthquakes, and what the world is like inside, and things about the moon and the—’

‘But all *that* is in Jules Verne’s story-books,’ remarked Babs. ‘Of course I’ve read Jules Verne. Is that what you call elements? I like elements, then,

especially the *Journey to the Centre of*—'

'Oh, I say, do stop,' interrupted Margaret, biting her lip. She was divided between perplexity and amusement, and she wished that the head-mistress had stayed to examine this extraordinary imp of a child herself. 'Haven't you used any real geography books?' she asked presently.

Barbara looked vague.

'Do you know the map of England, for instance?' pursued Margaret, rather desperately.

'Oh, yes, I know the map of England,' answered the child, confidently. 'It's so easy to find, because it's pink. I know America too, because father has gone there to lecture, and he won't be back for ever so long, not till—'

'Hush!' said the head girl. 'Tell me what arithmetic you have done.'

'Let me see, that's figures without letters, isn't it?' inquired Babs. 'I'm afraid I can only add up, because Bobbin hasn't got any further yet; he's backward in sums, you see, and I've only learnt mine through helping him with his prep. Sometimes, I wish he'd get on a little faster, because I'm getting so tired of—'

'Then you mean to say,' interposed Margaret, rather impatiently, 'that you can only do simple addition?'

'That's in arithmetic,' Barbara hastened to point out. 'I've got as far as fractions in the funny sums that Kit does out of the other book; they're much easier, because they have letters dotted about to help you. I always do Kit's sums, when he has asthma; but he says I'm very slow. Then there's the nice interesting book with pictures of triangles and things; we've got up to—'

'Oh, don't!' said Margaret, and Barbara paused, a little surprised. Why did people ask her questions if they did not mean her to answer them? Margaret was drumming her fingers on the table and looking a little worried. 'Have you learnt any languages?' she asked suddenly. 'I mean, anything besides French–German, for instance?'

'No, I haven't learnt any German, and I don't want to, thank you,' said Babs, decidedly. 'Ever since the German band complained to father, because Peter tried to stop their noise by shying potatoes at them from the

window, we've all made a vow never to learn their beastly language. And I don't know any French either; no more does father. I know Latin up to the deponent verbs, though,–deponent verbs *are* catchy, aren't they?–and I've begun Greek with father. I'm afraid that's all the languages I—'

'Well, you are a curiosity!' declared Margaret, giving up the attempt to hide her amusement. 'So you've never had a governess at all? Nor been to classes?'

'I've been to a gymnastic class,' said Barbara, eagerly. 'It's the only thing I can do properly. Have you got a gymnasium here?'

She clapped her hands when Margaret nodded, and bounded towards the door. 'Mayn't I go and try it *now*?' she asked in a disappointed tone, when the head girl called her back.

'There's plenty of time for that,' said Margaret, reminding her with a frown that she was only a new girl and was there to be examined; 'I've got to settle first what class you had better go into. But I'm sure I don't know what I am to say to Finny about you.' She sighed, and looked at Barbara as if for inspiration. Barbara was quite equal to the occasion.

'You'd better put me in the bottom class, I should think,' she advised pleasantly; 'you don't know what my spelling is like yet.'

'Thanks,' said Margaret, drily; 'I've no doubt you are quite competent to examine yourself, and to teach all your betters into the bargain, but that doesn't help me just now.' She drummed her fingers on the table again, and Barbara waited and went off into a kind of dream as she stood there. She was aroused by an exclamation from the head girl. 'I know,' she was saying in a relieved tone. 'Can you write compositions, child? I mean, make up things in your head and write them down?'

Barbara smiled. Certainly, that had nothing to do with lessons. She had scribbled over every piece of paper she could find, ever since Nurse had first taught her to form her letters. 'I can do that all right,' she said. 'All except the spelling,' she added as an afterthought.

Margaret paid her no attention. She was occupied in carrying out her happy idea for concluding the examination of the new girl and leaving herself free at the same time to go to her history lecture. 'Look here,' she said, spreading some paper rapidly on the desk in front of her; 'come and sit in

this chair and write about anything you like. You'll have a good hour and a half before the interval for lunch; and then Miss Finlayson will come and look at what you've written, and she will settle what class you can go into.'

'But what shall I write about?' asked Barbara, when the head girl had installed her at the table and was hurrying out of the room.

'Anything you like; it will be all the better test if I don't give you a subject,' said Margaret; and she escaped before the child had time to say any more. She felt a little mean about it, for she was positive she could not have done it herself; but she consoled herself by the reflection that the new girl was queer enough for anything. Besides, she did not want to miss the whole of her history class for the sake of examining a child who was ignorant of all the things that other children knew, but had picked up the most extraordinary bits of knowledge by herself. So Babs was left to face the difficulty, for the first time in her life, of writing something within a given time.

It was certainly not easy to think of anything to say, in this unfamiliar, austere little room, with a blank sheet of paper staring at her, and some one preparing to pounce upon her presently, to criticise what she had done. In the library at home such a chance as this would have filled her with joy, and the paper would have been covered in a few minutes with a medley about giants and princesses and dragons, to be told later on to Kit and Bobbin when they clamoured for a story. But here it seemed impossible to get a single word on to her sheet of paper, and she looked at the clock in despair, and wondered what would happen to her when Miss Finlayson returned and found she had written nothing. She plunged her pen desperately into the ink at last, and wrote the first thing that came into her head. It was a title she remembered noticing on the back of a book with a smart cover–one that had lately been added to her father's library. She did not know what it meant, and she was not sure what she was going to say about it, but it sounded more like the kind of thing to choose for an examination than one of her fairy stories would have been. Then, just as she had written the heading very crookedly across the top of the page, she found that the pen she had picked up was a quill, and possessed the most entrancing capacity for making splutters. It was the first time she had happened upon a quill, and the discovery was too delightful to be neglected. So she spent the next ten minutes in adorning her paper with fantastic ink shapes, that she named

bogies on the spot and wove into a fairy story about an enchanted princess, who had to write a composition in an hour and a half. When this exciting occupation began to pall, she was seized with a sudden desire to explore, and began wandering restlessly round the room. There was very little to examine besides books; but books were always good enough for Barbara, and she became very quiet and absorbed as her inky forefinger travelled slowly along the bottom shelves, until she had exhausted the outsides of all the volumes that came within her reach. Then she stood back, with her hands behind her, and stared up at the ones above her head; and a familiar name, printed in dull gold letters on the back of a solid volume in russet brown, suddenly made her heart leap.

'Father's book!' she gasped. 'There's father's book! And I've been in this stupid place all this time, and never discovered it till now! Oh, I must get father's book!'

There was a sob in her throat when she found that even a footstool, placed on the highest chair in the room, did not mount her up sufficiently to reach the precious volume. Her bright little eyes travelled quickly round the study, to embrace all its resources, and she very nearly uttered one of her wild war-whoops of delight when she spied a step-ladder half hidden in a dark corner. It did not take her a minute to stagger with it across the room and to fix it, more or less securely, against the bookshelf. After that, there was no sound in the little study except the ticking of the clock and the rustling of leaves, until the door opened sharply and the owner herself walked in.

For a moment Miss Finlayson thought the room was empty. Then she saw the small figure with the big book, perched on the top of the ladder; and the quaintness of the picture made her smile irresistibly. 'What are you doing, Barbara?' she asked.

She spoke as softly as she could, but the sound of her voice was quite enough to startle the unconscious child. She dropped the heavy book with a thud, and would have lost her balance and plunged after it, had not Miss Finlayson been prepared for the contingency and put out an arm to save her. Babs caught at it wildly, and found herself lifted down and placed on the floor in safety.

Miss Finlayson had stopped smiling, but she did not look very angry. 'What were you doing up there, Barbara?' she repeated gently.

‘I was reading father’s book,’ answered Barbara, rubbing her eyes. ‘I didn’t know it was there, till I looked up and saw it; and then I just climbed up and got it. I think I must have been reading a great long time, because I’ve got such an ache just there.’ She curled her hand under her arm and thumped the middle of her back. ‘Do you ever get an ache in the middle of your back when you’ve been reading?’ she inquired earnestly.

Miss Finlayson did not answer immediately. She stooped and picked up the fallen book first, and replaced it on the shelf. Barbara began to wonder if she was angry, and if that was why she had such an odd, serious look on her face.

‘And do you like your father’s book, Barbara?’ she asked presently.

‘I think it’s the most beautiful book in all the world,’ answered Barbara, without hesitation.

Miss Finlayson was a little startled, but she did not show it. ‘Then I wonder if you can explain it to me,’ she went on; ‘for, do you know, I find some of it rather difficult to understand?’

Barbara threw back her head and laughed merrily. ‘But I don’t understand *any* of it,’ she cried. ‘You have to be grown up to understand it, father says. And I’m not grown up yet, you see.’

‘No,’ agreed Miss Finlayson. She was looking distinctly relieved, and the twinkle had come back again into the depths of her eyes. ‘I shouldn’t worry about that, though, if I were you,’ she continued, sitting down and taking the child on her lap. ‘Some day, when you are quite grown up, you will be able to understand it; and then we can read it together and help each other over the difficult parts. What do you say to that?’

‘I think it will be beautiful; but it’s a very long time to wait,’ sighed Barbara. ‘When do you think I shall be quite grown up? Jill is grown up, and she is eighteen. Shall I be grown up when I am eighteen?’

‘We will wait and see,’ said Miss Finlayson, but somehow her tone was not encouraging. ‘Meanwhile,’ she went on, patting the hand that was fearlessly lying in hers, ‘supposing we make a bargain that neither of us will read your father’s book until we can read it together? You see, if you were to go on reading it now, you might understand it in quite a wrong way, and then you would never be able to help me over the difficult parts.’

Barbara thought about it for a moment or two. ‘But *you* will have to do without father’s book all those years!’ she exclaimed suddenly.

‘I have read it once, you see,’ said Miss Finlayson, gravely; ‘I think I can manage to wait, if you will wait too.’

Barbara still looked doubtful. ‘Do you really think I shall be able to help you over the difficult parts?’ she asked.

Miss Finlayson smiled mysteriously. ‘Perhaps,’ she said. ‘One never knows.’

‘Then I’ll wait till I’m grown up before I read it again,’ decided Barbara. ‘It would certainly be a pity to spoil father’s book by understanding it all wrong.’

‘Or by dropping it from the top of other people’s ladders,’ observed Miss Finlayson. That was all the reproof she gave her; and then she turned briskly to the writing-table. ‘Isn’t there something you have written for me?’ she asked.

Barbara jumped away from her in dismay. ‘I quite forgot!’ she said penitently. ‘I did begin to write something, and then–and then—’ She struggled in vain to remember what had happened, and gave it up with a sigh. ‘I don’t know what I did, but I know I never wrote any more than this,’ she added, and produced the sheet of paper in a shamefaced manner.

Miss Finlayson took it, and glanced at the title that was written crookedly across the top of the page. ‘A Comparrisson of the Possition of Women, now and in the eighteenth century,’ was what she read. Below that came quantities of smudges and blots, and at the bottom of all was inscribed: ‘These are the ink bogies that came and wrote the Princess’s compossition for her, and saved her from the awfull anger of the cruel old witch called Finny.’

Miss Finlayson read this over more than once, then she folded up the sheet of paper very carefully, keeping her face averted all the while. Babs was sure she had been very naughty, and she was seized with a panic lest the head-mistress should be too angry this time even to speak to her.

‘I–I know it was very naughty of me,’ she confessed anxiously; ‘I couldn’t think of anything to say about it, and the pen made such beautiful bogies, and–and–are you *awfully* furious?’

Miss Finlayson had to look at her, then; and she made a last effort to keep grave. The next moment the little room was filled with her laughter.

‘My dear little girl,’ she exclaimed, ‘I am afraid I am not a bit furious. The fact is–the ink bogies *have* saved the Princess!’

CHAPTER VI

THE BOOTS OF THE HEAD GIRL

‘I’m going to be in your class for everything except Latin and mathematics,’ shouted Barbara, flying into the juniors’ room just before dinner. It seemed to her of the first importance that everybody should know which class she was to be in, and she was distinctly surprised when Jean Murray, whom she had addressed, turned her back on her and began talking loudly to some one else. ‘Don’t you hear?’ persisted Babs, coming round in front of her again. ‘I’m going to be in your class for everything except—’

‘Sneak!’ burst out Jean Murray, unable to control herself any longer. ‘Tell-tale! You oughtn’t to be in anybody’s class, you oughtn’t!’

Barbara stood stockstill, and looked at her. All the courage she had regained from her peaceful morning in Miss Finlayson’s study dwindled away again, and left her hopeless of propitiating these strange schoolgirls, who seemed determined on being cross with her whatever she did. Angela knocked roughly against her at the same instant, and surprised her at last into a remonstrance.

‘What have I done?’ she demanded. ‘Won’t anybody tell me what I have done?’

No one answered her. The alliance of Jean and Angela, though Jean was the youngest and Angela the most empty-headed of all the children there, meant the existence of a strong party in the junior playroom; and the poor little new girl stood a very small chance of asserting herself against it. They were much like sheep, both in the upper and the lower playrooms at Wootton Beeches; and the party that followed Margaret Hulme in one room was like the party that followed Jean in the other. In both cases it only needed some one a little stronger than the rest to be the leader; and Jean, in spite of her inferiority in age, supplied the strength, or what her school-fellows mistook for it, in a certain doggedness of temper that pulled them along in her wake.

Most of them found it so unpleasant to be in her bad books, that she had very little difficulty in managing them.

Barbara turned appealingly to Angela. ‘Why is Jean so cross with me?’ she asked. ‘I haven’t done anything to her, have I?’

‘Not done anything?’ echoed Angela, looking over her shoulder for Jean’s support. ‘Why, you went and told Margaret Hulme that Jean hadn’t given you Finny’s message, and—’

‘Sneak! Tell-tale!’ sneered Jean again.

Barbara suddenly looked immensely relieved, and smiled in a friendly manner at the enemy. At least this was a misunderstanding that she could clear up. ‘Is that all?’ she cried. ‘No wonder you were cross, if you thought that. Of course I never said a word about it to Margaret Hulme, or any one else; I suppose she guessed, or something. But why didn’t you give me the message? It would have saved such a lot of bother, wouldn’t it?’

‘Well,’ gasped Jean, as though words almost failed her, ‘I never heard such wicked story-telling!’

‘Nor I either,’ chimed in Angela, putting her arm round Jean’s waist. ‘She’s done nothing but tell crams ever since she’s been here. Come away, Jean, dear; she isn’t fit to be argued with.’

The pair of them marched off, consumed with righteous wrath, to the other end of the playroom. Babs, overwhelmed with the incredible idea that any one should suppose her capable of telling an untruth about anything, waited speechlessly for some one to interfere and take her part. But those of her school-fellows who had been listening to the dispute hastily followed the example of their leader, and ignored her entirely. They did not stop to think whether they were being just; if the new girl told stories–and Jean Murray said she did–it was certainly their duty to teach her a lesson. When they looked for her presently, to see how she was bearing their displeasure, they found she was no longer there.

Upstairs, in the small, bare bedroom, the one spot where she felt safe from the intrusion of horrible wicked people with horrible wicked thoughts in them, the forlorn little new girl was covering page after page of the ruled note-paper Auntie Anna had given her, with an ill-written, ill-spelt account of her woes.

‘Dear, dear boys,’ she wrote; ‘I am very misserable. Everything is horible. At least, that is not quite true. Finny is nice she is like Auntie Anna and Nurse, and I’ve got a bedroom of my very own we all have but mine is one of the nicest becourse it comes at the corner of the house and looks over a wall into the orchard and there’s a plant with bunches of red beries that climes round my window and nobody else has red berrys round their window but only me. Finny has lots of ripping books in her study and she has father’s book and she is very nice but the girls are beests I hate girls! Girls tell stories and they say you do things when you don’t and they are awfull beests. They laugh at you every time you open your mouth but I don’t mind their siliness so much it’s their untruthfull hatefullness that I hate. I have never been so miserable I wish father had never gone to that beestly America and I wish Auntie Anna would come and fetch me back again. Do do ask her to come and take me away from all those hatefull girls, tell her how miserabble I am you don’t know any of you what it is to be really misserable, etc. etc.’

She had reached about the fifth page of this wild epistle when her door flew open; and Ruth Oliver looked in, with a perturbed look on her good-humoured face.

‘Why, there you are!’ she exclaimed. ‘Didn’t you hear the dinner-bell? We’re half-way through the first course. Whatever are you doing?’

Barbara began folding up her letter and forcing it with trembling hands into an envelope. ‘I’ve been writing home,’ she said, and her voice quivered. Of course, everything she did was wrong; but what did dinner matter when there was her letter home to be written?

‘My dear child, we’re not allowed to write letters except on Wednesday afternoons. Make haste and put the thing away, do,’ said Ruth, impatiently. The sudden look of distress on the child’s face touched her, and she added more kindly–‘Well, well, bring it downstairs with you, Babe, and perhaps Finny will give you leave to send it to-day. Only, do *come*.’

Miss Finlayson not only gave her leave, but even offered to deliver the letter herself, as she happened to be going to pay a call near Crofts that same afternoon. It consoled Babs a little to feel that the boys would not have to wait until the morning to learn how miserable she was; at the same time, her present situation was no easier to bear, for all the younger girls

took a thoughtless pleasure in talking at her, whenever Jean was present; and it was not nice to be with people who made remarks about her, and yet pretended all the time that she was not there. The early part of the afternoon at Wootton Beeches was given up to playing games in the nine-acre field, which was marked out, during the winter, into hockey grounds; and here Babs found herself, soon after dinner, strolling aimlessly along by the hedge and wondering what there was about her that made eighty-seven girls detest her so heartily. When she suddenly remembered how much she had looked forward to playing real games with real schoolgirls, her disappointment was too much for her, and the tears rolled rapidly down her cheeks.

'Why, here's the new girl, Barbara Berkeley. She'll do,' said a brisk voice behind her, and the games-mistress descended upon her with a hasty request 'not to hide away in corners when she was wanted.'

'I didn't know I was wanted,' explained Barbara, following her up the field. 'I never am wanted, you see.'

'Nonsense! Everybody is wanted at this school,' replied the games-mistress, who had a warm complexion, a breezy manner, and a vigorous step, all of which, aided by her name of Burleigh, had secured her the nickname of Hurly-burly. It never occurred to her that the new girl was suffering from anything worse than the ordinary depression natural to her newness, and she decided immediately that the best thing to cheer her up would be to make her run about. In the eyes of Miss Burleigh, running about was a cure for most things. 'Here, Charlotte Bigley!' she called loudly; 'you ought to have looked after this child instead of letting her escape. She'll do to play forward on your side. Just put her where you like, and let's begin.'

There was not much chance, when Miss Burleigh was about, of letting private feuds spoil the game of hockey; and under the influence of her infectious gaiety, the girls even began to show Babs a certain amount of friendliness. Perhaps the fact that Jean Murray was bicycling round the cinder-track, instead of playing hockey, may have had something to do with their change of manner, but Babs did not inquire into that. It was enough for her that she was allowed, for the first time in her life, to run about in the open air without a hat; and she reddened with pleasure when Charlotte Bigley, the captain of her side, actually complimented her on the way she ran. Charlotte was the oldest of the junior girls, and she was going to be moved into the upper Third next term; so she always professed to be rather

superior to the leadership of Jean Murray–especially when Jean Murray was out of the way.

‘You’ll make a very good right wing, when you’ve learnt to pass the ball inside instead of poking at it,’ she observed condescendingly, at half-time.

A very little was enough to send up Barbara’s spirits with a bound, and when the bell rang at four o’clock for preparation, she ran indoors with as buoyant a step as the rest, and even whistled gaily to herself as she unlaced her boots in the large cloakroom, where the girls were taking off their outdoor things. Angela happened to overhear her, and at once took upon herself to quench this unseemly appearance of cheerfulness, and to remind her that she was still only a new girl.

‘You’d better look sharp and take off the head girl’s boots, or you’ll catch it,’ she advised her in a threatening tone.

Barbara stopped whistling and became suspicious. ‘Last time I was told to go and do things for the head girl, it was all humbug,’ she said. ‘I’m not going to be taken in twice, so you shut up!’

Angela under the protection of Jean, and Angela by herself, were two very different beings. The unexpected resistance made by Babs was quite enough to change her bullying tone into an injured one, and she began to edge off towards the other girls. ‘This isn’t humbug, anyhow,’ she said in a milder tone. ‘If you don’t believe me, go and see; that won’t hurt you, whether it’s true or not. Of course, if you *want* to make Margaret jump on you, it doesn’t matter to me.’

There was certainly something in what she said, and Barbara heaved a sigh for the complications of school life. It was so silly, she felt, so extremely silly to make such a fuss about the displeasure of the head girl, and to avoid it by doing such stupid things for her. Why couldn’t the head girl take off her own boots, like every one else? However, it did not matter much, one way or the other; and Babs would have taken off anybody’s boots to secure a little friendliness in this most unfriendly of assemblages. So she threaded her way through the crowd of girls to where Margaret Hulme stood talking with the enthusiastic hockey players who formed the first eleven. She had not begun to take off her boots, Babs noticed, so perhaps it was true after all, and the head girl was really waiting for some one to come and do it for her.

‘Ruth would make a splendid half-back if she’d only learn to strike better,’ Margaret was saying earnestly; ‘and if Winifred wasn’t so frightened of tackling, we should have quite a–what is it, child?’

‘Please, I’ve come to know if you want your boots unlaced,’ said Barbara, rather faintly. She was fully prepared to be laughed at again for her pains; and, indeed, it did seem a most ridiculous suggestion to make to any one. But the head girl treated it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

‘Of course I do. Do you want to do them to-day?’ was her reply, and she immediately put her right foot a little forward and went on talking to her eleven.

‘Oh, but I don’t *want* to take them off,’ cried Babs, eagerly. ‘I only thought—’

But Margaret was too deep in her conversation to pay any attention to the youngest girl in the school; and Barbara knelt down unwillingly and struggled with a stubborn knot in a muddy bootlace. She had hardly begun her unattractive task, when some one dropped suddenly beside her on the floor and laid a hot hand on hers.

‘You leave the head girl’s boots alone!’ said Jean’s voice in her ear. ‘It’s just like your interfering ways, to come sneaking up to her when I wasn’t looking. Go away and mind your own business!’

Now, Babs had just been resenting deeply the absurdity of her position at the feet of the head girl. She did not want to take off anybody’s boots, and she thought it an exceedingly stupid thing to do. But to give up her task because some one came and got cross about it, was quite another matter. A lurking spirit of mischief, helped by the exhilaration she still felt after her two hours in the open air, made her retain her hold on the knot in the head girl’s bootlace.

‘I am minding my own business,’ she retorted stoutly. ‘Ever since I’ve been here, you and Angela have dinned the head girl’s boots into my ears till I’m sick of hearing about the stupid things. Now I’m here, I’m not going to stop till I’ve done them; so you’d better go away yourself.’

'What in the name of wonder are you children doing down there?'

Jean glanced at her furiously, and Barbara tugged away at the bootlace and began whistling again, to show how little she cared whether Jean was angry or not. Above their heads, the gossip went on busily about the style of the first hockey eleven.

'How about our chances against the Wilford club next month?' some one was asking.

'As to that,' said Margaret, with confidence, 'if we only keep our heads we shall have no difficulty whatever in standing—'

She did not finish her sentence, for at that instant a violent onslaught on her right foot put a comical end to it by nearly upsetting her balance. She just

saved herself by seizing the arm of the nearest girl, and the hockey gossip came to an abrupt finish.

‘What in the name of wonder are you children doing down there?’ demanded Margaret, wrathfully. The knot had come undone by this time, and Jean was tugging at one end of the bootlace, while Babs, with an elfish glee shining in her bright little eyes, was keeping a firm hold on the other end.

‘You go away,’ Jean was gasping in a choked voice. ‘I’ve done this for two years, and I’m not going to give up doing it now.’

‘You told me yourself I’d got to do it, and I’m not going away till it’s done, so there!’ laughed Barbara, in reply.

She made another dash at the foot between them, and the head girl again nearly lost her balance. ‘Stop quarrelling, and leave my foot alone, you naughty little wretches!’ cried Margaret, stamping her disengaged foot vigorously. Jean, with two years of discipline behind her, awoke suddenly to the voice of authority and started to her feet, covered with terror at the enormity of her offence. But Babs uttered a yell of delight at finding the victory so easily won.

‘Why don’t you unlace somebody else’s boots?’ she shouted defiantly to her adversary. ‘There’s lots of boots round here waiting to be unlaced.’

Margaret stooped down and lifted her up bodily, and set her on her feet beside Jean.

‘Now,’ she said sternly, ‘what do you both mean by behaving in this disgraceful manner?’

Neither of them answered her. Jean hung her head and looked as if she were going to cry every minute, and Barbara waited to see what would happen next. It did not seem to her that she had done anything so very dreadful, and she wondered why no one saw how funny it all was. Ruth Oliver was looking the other way, so she could not see her face; but the rest of them seemed just as serious about it as the head girl herself.

‘Haven’t you anything to say for yourselves?’ demanded Margaret.

Hot, angry tears began to well up into Jean’s eyes. She never knew she could have hated any one so much as she hated this new girl for coming

between her and Margaret Hulme. Barbara caught sight of her tears, and the desire to laugh suddenly left her.

‘You see, we didn’t know who had got to unlace your boots,’ she explained hastily. ‘It isn’t that it’s such an awfully jolly thing to unlace people’s boots, but—’

‘Oh, that’s it, is it?’ interrupted Margaret, crushingly. ‘Then you needn’t be in the same difficulty any more on my account, for in future I shall unlace my own boots. Now, go away and do your preparation at once, and don’t let me see either of you again for the rest of the day.’

Babs went off obediently to find her books, and she puzzled greatly as she went over the displeasure of Margaret Hulme. ‘Such a fuss to make about *boots*,’ she remarked to Charlotte Bigley, whose bookshelf was next to hers. But even Charlotte was not proof against the furious account of the matter that Jean Murray had just been giving to a sympathetic circle of friends; and Barbara soon found that she had quite lost the little popularity she might have gained in the hockey field by her behaviour over the head girl’s boots.

‘I think she must be mad,’ declared Angela, in the buzz of conversation that preceeded the call for ‘Silence’ from the presiding French teacher. ‘She looked as though she wanted to kill Jean. I was looking at her all the time, and I was quite frightened. She ought to be watched, I’m certain she ought.’

‘She ought not to be spoken to by any one,’ wailed Jean, hiding behind an open atlas to avoid the scrutiny of Mademoiselle, who sat in the archway between the two playrooms. ‘Perhaps, if every one leaves her alone she’ll learn how to behave like other people.’

Left alone she accordingly was, since Jean Murray had so decreed it; and this time there were no half-measures about it. At tea-time, and again at the supper table, the girls on either side of her turned their backs upon her and talked busily to their other neighbours; and in the playroom afterwards she found herself just as scrupulously avoided. It was decidedly an uncomfortable state of things for the new girl, as it was meant to be by those who were responsible for making it; but somehow the new girl did not seem to mind it half so much as they would have expected. All the evening she sat in the corner of the juniors’ room by herself, and any one would have said from the look on her face that she did not care whether the others spoke to her or not. Now and then she smiled, as she sat there with her

elbows perched on her knees and her chin supported on her hands; and the whole time her look of supreme unconsciousness never left her.

‘She’s hardened, that’s what she is,’ declared Jean, glancing in her direction. This she said to keep up her own resentment against the new girl, which was unaccountably beginning to cool.

‘She thinks it’s grand to pretend not to care,’ added the faithful Angela. This, indeed, was the prevailing opinion among the children of the junior playroom; and it was not comforting to their pride.

All the while, Barbara guessed nothing of the comments she was provoking by her manner. It was enough for her that she had got away once more into her fairy kingdom, and that Kit and the magician and the old fairy godmother had just turned out all the princesses who were called schoolgirls, and had shut the gates in their faces.

It was a very weary little new girl who went up to her bed that evening after prayers. She was almost too tired to think over the events that had been crowded into the last twenty-four hours, almost too sleepy to realise that this was the close of her first day at school, the day she had thought would be the happiest day in her life. Perhaps it was a good thing she was not able to think too much about anything, at the end of that first day at school. The moment Fräulein had turned out her light, she went off into a dreamless sleep that might have lasted unbroken till the morning, had not something occurred most strangely to break it.

She did not hear the small pebbles that were thrown up, one after another, at her window; it would have taken more than that to rouse her from her first sleep, though once a handful of mould and gravel that scattered itself all over the glass panes made her stir uneasily and murmur something sleepily. It was just after this that some one began calling ‘Coo-ey’ softly, on two particular notes; and after this had been repeated two or three times, it gradually worked itself into the waking dream of the little new girl. At the fourth time, she was wide awake and listening with all her might. Another repetition of it, followed by a gentle whistle that only Peter knew how to blow through his fingers, took her with a flying leap to the window. The moon outside was flooding the world with light and revealing every secret in the landscape for miles: it flooded the big nine-acre field beyond the orchard; it flooded the orchard itself, and the wall that ran along it, just

under her window; and it showed her five boys sitting astride on the top of the wall, and five–no, *six* bicycles leaning against the bottom of the wall.

Barbara pushed open the lattice window as wide as it would go, and leaned out breathlessly. Her finger was on her lips, and she shivered from head to foot with cold and the fear of being overheard. Supposing that any one were to find out they were there, and should send them away before she could get to them?

The five of them made frantic signs of welcome, as soon as they saw the familiar dark head appear at the window. In spite of the graphic description contained in her letter, they were beginning to be afraid of having besieged the wrong window. Then Kit waved a screw of paper and made more signs, and the dark head vanished from view again. It did not take a minute to turn out all the contents of her corner drawer, and to find the ball of string that Robin had given her for a parting present, and then to fling the end of it down to Kit, who tied on his screw of paper and nodded at her to haul it up.

The moonlight was bright enough to enable her to read the few short pencilled lines without much difficulty.

‘We’ve come to the rescue,’ she read. ‘Auntie Anna has gone away till to-morrow, so we could not wait until then, knowing you were so jolly blue. Come down quickly; there’s a window under yours that you could get through all right.’

Barbara struggled with desperate haste into her pink dressing-gown, thrust her bare feet into a pair of woolly slippers, and glided to the door. In her haste and her half-awakened condition a more elaborate costume than that, considering the urgency of the occasion, seemed quite unnecessary to her. Along the silent gallery she pattered, and down the wide staircase, then through the two empty playrooms into the front hall. She knew the window the boys had meant; she had noticed the red berries tapping against the glass, as she passed it on her way to Finny’s study the morning before.

As she sped across the moonlit hall, she did not see that the study door was ajar and that a chink of light shone out from it. All her attention was absorbed in the one thought that the boys were going to take her away from this houseful of unfriendly strangers, and that she would never have to face them and their taunts again.

She clambered on to the window-seat, and unfastened the shutter. That was easy enough, but the bolt of the window baffled her for some seconds. When she did manage to shoot it back, the noise it made filled her with apprehension. In her terror lest she should have been overheard, she did not pause another instant, but threw up the sash and hastily put one slippered foot on the ledge. Once outside and on her bicycle, the boys would take care that no one overtook her; and she would be free at last!

Panting with excitement, she stooped through the open window and prepared to draw her other foot after her. But before she had time to do so, a light step had crossed the hall and an arm was flung round her from behind.

‘Barbara!’ exclaimed Miss Finlayson. ‘*Barbara!*’

CHAPTER VII

AN IMPROMPTU SUPPER PARTY

The disappointment was too much. Barbara covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

‘Let me go, do let me go!’ she cried, struggling to free herself. ‘It can’t make any difference to you whether I run away or not, and it does matter to me and the boys!’

‘Barbara!’ repeated Miss Finlayson, very quietly indeed. But the child did not seem to hear.

‘Why won’t you let me go?’ she sobbed passionately. ‘I can’t stop any longer in this horrible place. Nobody wants me here, nobody! Do, do let me go back with the boys.’

Miss Finlayson put her other arm for a moment round the little figure in the pink dressing-gown, and she kissed the only place on the hot, wet cheek that was to be seen. Then she stepped backwards and left her free.

‘You can go, Barbara, if you want to,’ she said, just as calmly as before.

Babs uncovered her eyes and looked at her incredulously. Now that she was free to go the inclination to run away seemed to have left her. Outside, the boys were waiting and wondering why she did not join them. They could just see something at the open window, but the shadow cast by the orchard wall made it indistinguishable. Miss Finlayson shot one glance outwards, that took in the row of figures at the top of the wall, and the row of bicycles at the bottom of it; then she waited passively for Barbara to make up her mind. But this was precisely what the child could not do.

‘Wouldn’t you–wouldn’t you *mind*?’ she stammered at last.

‘Would it matter to you if I did?’ asked Miss Finlayson.

Babs stood still, in a miserable state of indecision, with one foot still on the window-seat, and the other placed on the ledge outside. She was beginning

to feel exhausted by the excitement she had gone through, and she gave a weary yawn that turned into a shiver. Miss Finlayson promptly put an end to the situation by lifting her back into the hall. Directly she did so, a series of thuds in the neighbourhood of the wall, followed by the crunch of footsteps along the gravel path, sounded from without, and the tops of five heads suddenly appeared at the open window.

'If you please,' said a voice, pleadingly, 'it is our fault that the Babe is trying to escape. You won't rag her for it, will you?'

'Five heads suddenly appeared at the open window'

'She never knew we were coming, till we came,' added another voice. 'We made up the plan because we heard she was jolly unhappy.'

'We couldn't possibly let her be unhappy another minute, or else we might have waited till Auntie Anna came back,' chimed in a third.

Then followed a disappointed cry in Robin's shrill tones. 'But *isn't* she going to escape, after all?'

Miss Finlayson waited till they had finished speaking, and her large clear eyes were brimming over with fun.

'Of course she is going to escape, if she wants to,' answered the head-mistress; 'but at present she seems to be in some doubt about the matter. Supposing you come in and wait by the fire, while she thinks it over. You might help her, perhaps, to make up her mind. Will you climb through the window, or shall I unbolt the front door?'

Naturally, a rescue party five strong could not do anything so tame as to walk through a front door; so although the window was four or five feet from the ground, Robin was hoisted up first by Peter's strong arms, and then they all scrambled after him, one by one, till the little procession was ready to follow Babs and her captor into the warm, cosy study. Certainly, no one could have said that Miss Finlayson's room looked stiff or austere at night, when the curtains were drawn and the fire had burned down to a rich red glow.

There was something like an uncomfortable pause, as soon as they found themselves assembled there, with the light full on their faces. It was true that the expedition had not failed, and that the Babe was as free to escape now as she had been before Miss Finlayson came upon the scene; but, for all that, none of them could help feeling that Miss Finlayson, so far, had the game in her own hands, and that they were only making themselves look ridiculous. For they could all see that her face was overflowing with merriment, as she stooped down and poked the fire into a blaze.

Egbert cleared his throat, and tried to relieve the awkwardness of the position by making some sort of an apology. He knew quite well that, being the eldest, he ought to have suppressed the plot in the very beginning.

'I am afraid you will think us rather mad,' he began, 'but the Babe's letter put us all on our mettle; and we thought–that is, some of us thought she ought to be rescued. Of course, we hadn't seen you then,' he added desperately. Any apology for the rescue party certainly involved the most unflattering insinuations about his hostess; and Egbert in his confusion thought exceedingly bitter things about Kit and Peter, who had dragged him against his will on this wild adventure.

‘It was awfully nice of you to think of me,’ murmured Barbara, but her tone was not so enthusiastic as it might have been. If only Finny would stop being so obliging about it, she was sure she would find it so much easier to run away.

‘Exceedingly nice!’ echoed Miss Finlayson, warmly. ‘I am only sorry there should be this delay in carrying out your plan. However, that is no reason why we should not have something to eat, while Barbara is making up her mind. It must be nearly midnight, and I am starving. Will one of you come and help me to forage?

Egbert volunteered, with a feeling of relief at having something to do; and he followed her out of the room. The moment the door closed, the children’s tongues were loosed.

‘Dear, dear Babs,’ cried Robin, dancing round her gleefully; ‘you will come away from the horrid, cross old thing, won’t you?’

‘Finny isn’t cross, Bobbin; it’s the others,’ remonstrated Babs.

‘Why, of course you’re coming, aren’t you?’ said Peter, who was impatient to have done with this inaction and to carry out the glorious rescue they had planned. The worst of it was that half its gloriousness seemed to have subsided before the pleasant manners of the head-mistress.

‘I should think she was coming, indeed!’ declared Wilfred. ‘You don’t suppose I’m going to lose two hours of bed for nothing, do you?’

Christopher, who had been silently observing Barbara all the while, shook his head slowly. ‘She won’t come,’ he said gruffly. ‘They’ve made her different already.’

A vague feeling of uneasiness crept over Barbara. Kit was always right; *was* she different already? She gave herself an involuntary shake. ‘Never mind about me!’ she exclaimed. ‘Tell me about Crofts, and what you’ve been doing since I left, and—everything. Do you mean to say your cold is better already, Kit?’

‘Ah!’ Wilfred hastened to tell her; ‘that’s because of the new doctor.’

‘There’s a new doctor just settled in this part of the world,’ explained Peter. ‘Your Finny thinks an awful lot of him, and that’s why Auntie Anna sent for him last night, when Kit got bad, instead of going to the old-fashioned chap

who lives round the corner at Crofts. *We* don't think anything of him at all, though; do we, boys?'

'He *is* a funny man,' commented Robin.

'He's a beast,' said Kit, conclusively.

'He's a clever beast, anyway,' protested Wilfred, feeling bound to support the profession. 'He's done you an awful lot of good already, Kit, and he lets you go out as much as you like. It's the modern treatment, or something.'

'Why is he a beast, Kit?' asked Barbara, sympathetically. The world had convinced her so strongly, since yesterday afternoon, of its possibilities in the way of beasts, that she felt sure Kit was right about it.

'He grunts at you as though you weren't fit to speak to; and he isn't a bit sorry for you, as old Browne used to be, but he seems to think you are making it all up,' said Christopher, in an injured tone.

'He doesn't like boys; that's at the bottom of it,' added Peter. 'He looked black as thunder because we were rotting in the library with Kit, and he cleared us all out before he'd even look at his tongue.'

'And he never sent for a silver spoon, nor nothing,' cried Robin, in much excitement. 'How did he 'xamine your throat, Kit, if he hadn't got a silver spoon?'

'Shoved a thing like a skewer down, that he took out of his pocket,' said Kit, contemptuously. 'His pocket was full of rotten skewers and things.'

'That's the modern treatment,' said Wilfred again.

'Modern treatment be hanged!' remarked Peter, with a laugh. 'Jill hates him too; he treated her as if she was about ten years old.'

'Jill's furious because Auntie Anna has asked him to dinner next week; and we shall have gone back by then, so she'll have him to herself all the evening,' chuckled Wilfred.

'How is Jill?' asked Barbara, as soon as she could get in a word.

There was a little pause. 'She's all right,' said Christopher, indifferently, after a moment or two.

'Kit likes her *awfully*,' proclaimed Robin, with his head on one side.

‘So does Peter,’ added Christopher, hastily. ‘He was awfully gone on her this morning, because she mended his cap when no one was looking.’

‘I don’t think she means to be young-ladyish, really,’ remarked Wilfred, patronisingly. ‘Last night, when you kids had gone to bed, she sang to Egbert and me. She can sing!’

‘Now, why didn’t she sing to us before?’ demanded Peter. ‘That’s where she’s so awfully rum.’

‘She hasn’t been properly trained, that’s all,’ said Christopher.

‘Why, she’s studied under the best master in Paris!’ interrupted Wilfred.

‘You goat! I meant *her*, not her singing,’ snapped Christopher.

‘Oh, well, we all know why *you* like her,’ retorted Wilfred. ‘It’s because she came and sucked up to you by offering to read aloud to you, before Dr. Hurst said you might go—’

‘I never said I did like her,’ disputed Kit.

The door opened before they settled the matter; and the foraging party returned, laden with spoil.

‘I brought everything I could find that looked interesting,’ announced the head-mistress. ‘You must be ravenous after riding all that way; and I’m sure I am, though I’ve done nothing but sit by the fire all the evening and make time-tables. You might clear them out of the way for me, will you, Robin? And you, Wilfred, can move the other things on to the floor, or anywhere else you like. Will you hold this tray, Peter, while I lay the cloth? No, I don’t want you, Christopher, thank you. Can’t you see that Babs is bubbling over with news for you? Go and keep her company by the fire till supper is ready.’

It was very queer that she should know all their names like that, and Egbert declared afterwards that he did not think he had told her anything about them, though somehow she had kept him talking all the time they were foraging in the larder. She had found out as much as she wanted to know, however, and she found out a good deal more before supper was over. There was something about her that made them all talk to her as if she were an old friend of theirs instead of the stern jailer whom they had come to defy. Not that she allowed them for all that to have the conversation to themselves,

for she chatted away herself as busily as possible; and she made jokes about her impromptu supper until even Egbert felt at his ease.

‘Can any one cut up his chicken without a knife?’ she asked. ‘There’s a knife short, but it doesn’t do to be too particular on an occasion of this sort, does it? Ah, of course, you have one in your pocket, Peter; I am used to girls, you see, and a girl never has anything in her pocket except a handkerchief, and that is generally half out of it. Now, who is going to carve the beef? Not I, indeed! I have carved the beef in this household for twelve years, and you needn’t suppose I’m going to miss such an opportunity as this of being idle. Do you know, there have never been five gentlemen together at my table since I became a schoolmistress? Think of that, Barbara, and do not wonder that I know more about girls than tomboys. I’m sorry there isn’t a salad, but there’s real chutnee from Bombay and not the other place–wherever that may be. An old pupil sends me my chutnee; and I always keep it for grand occasions, like this and the break-up party. Will you come to our next break-up party? That depends, I suppose, on whether Babs stops here or not. Ah, well, she will have made up her mind by that time, won’t she? I’m afraid I must forbid you cold pie, Kit, it’s poison to asthma; besides, here are real, stiff, stewed pears. Don’t you like stewed pears that are stewed *stiff*?’

Barbara sat on the hearthrug with Kit, and she tried hard to determine whether she should run away or not. With Finny revealing herself in this wonderful new light, and Kit sitting beside her in the comfortable firelight and sharing her plateful of stewed pears, the problem was more than she could solve for herself. If this was school, she should like to stay here always; and if it wasn’t, well, she felt too lazy in the present delicious state of things to worry herself any more about it.

Supper came to an end at last, and Miss Finlayson glanced at the clock. Egbert took the hint, and pulled Christopher away from the bookshelves, which he had begun greedily to examine.

‘I think we must be going,’ said the eldest of the five, politely; and then he stopped short. The absurdity of the situation upset his dignity again, and he stood there fingering his cap nervously.

‘What about Babs?’ asked Miss Finlayson; and her eyes twinkled and shone till one might almost have supposed them to be filled with tears.

The boys looked towards the fireplace; but Miss Finlayson was standing in front of it, and the little figure in the pink dressing-gown was hidden from view. The head-mistress, at all events, had come to the conclusion that the problem was too difficult for Barbara to solve.

‘Yes, what about the Babe?’ said Egbert, glancing round at the others.

‘We did come to rescue her,’ maintained Peter, ‘and I do think—’

‘Isn’t Babs coming?’ interrupted Robin, in tones of amazement. It seemed a great waste of time to come all this way, and not to rescue anybody in the end. Of course, there was the supper to be taken into consideration; but it would be contrary to all precedent in the Berkeley family, if the boys were to let themselves be influenced by *supper*.

‘She’d be an idiot if she did come,’ muttered Wilfred, under his breath. He, undoubtedly, had been influenced by the supper.

Christopher pushed a chair on one side with a quick, impatient movement. ‘She won’t come,’ he said once more. Then he caught a look from his hostess, and reddened slightly. ‘Perhaps she had better stay,’ he added, with an effort.

‘Thank you, Kit,’ said Miss Finlayson, with a nod and a smile at him. Then she turned to the others again. The look of amusement never left her face once. ‘Will some one ask the Babe what she feels about the matter?’ she suggested.

She moved on one side to give them the opportunity. But the question was never put. Babs had stopped trying to make up her mind; and the little girl in the pink dressing-gown was lying curled up on the hearthrug, fast asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DISENCHANTMENT OF A BEAST

Barbara was stretched, face downwards, on the floor of the junior playroom. It was Wednesday evening, about ten days after the rescue party had invaded Wootton Beeches; and she was trying, with the aid of much ink and a footstool for a writing-desk, to answer Kit's last two letters, and to send him all the news she had accumulated since that important occasion. Over her head buzzed the desultory conversation of her fifty-five companions, who still gloried in ignoring her; but she heeded them no more than they had come to heed the unconscious little person who lay stretched at their feet. It was really only a habit with them, by this time, to ignore the new girl; for most of them had quite forgotten the fancied grievance they had originally cherished against her for her defiance of their favourite, Jean Murray. Indeed, if it had not been for the fear of Jean's scorn and Jean's tongue, they would undoubtedly have made friends with her days ago. With the best intentions in the world, it was not easy to go on avoiding some one who never seemed to notice that she was being avoided; and most of them wished secretly that Jean Murray would 'come round.' But whatever Jean felt about it, she showed no intention outwardly of coming round. Whenever she found herself alone with a picked audience, she seized the opportunity to inflame them and herself afresh, by recalling the evil behaviour of Barbara over the head girl's boots, pointing out how, by a tissue of deceit, the offender had wormed herself into Margaret's favour, to the exclusion of other worthier members of the junior playroom–notably of Jean Murray herself. 'You've only got to see how little she cares, and *that* will show you what a wicked mind she's got,' was the kind of sentence that usually wound up one of these inflammatory addresses; and after that, the junior playroom would redouble its coolness towards Barbara Berkeley. But Barbara Berkeley persisted in going her own way cheerfully, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to live with fifty-five companions who never spoke to her; and the situation in the junior playroom threatened to become too absurd to be maintained.

Babs dropped her pen, and picked up one of Kit's letters for reference. She had so much to say to him and so little time to say it in, that she was afraid of leaving some of his questions unanswered. Kit's neat and precisely written epistle was a great contrast to her own blotted and smudged production; and Barbara sighed as she realised how much he managed to say in a few words, while she expended far more time and ink and energy, without expressing half as much as she wanted to tell him.

'Dear Babe,' Kit had written–'This is to tell you that we got home safely from the great Midnight Rescue Party, though of course I caught a chill and had to have that beast Hurst again. I'll tell you presently how Jill ragged him, though; and that was well worth being ill for. But first of all I have to inform you what we all think is for your good in the present crisis of your fortunes. (That means, now you are at school.) Of course we are much afflicted to hear that you are not happy, and of course we are not surprised to hear you do not like girls. (Nobody could, except Egbert, and he doesn't really, only he pretends he does because of that chap's sister last holidays. That's what has done for Egbert, and it's a great pity, but what we must expect at his age, so it's no use vociferating about it.) But to resume–we are all agreed that the best thing you can do is to stop where you are until the period of probation is over (that means till you've done being at school). You see, it is only for three months at a time, and *we* are here in the holidays. It would be indescribable and unprecedented (which means beastly, and awful, and things like that) if you had to live with girls in the vacation too. But you are spared this, and it is your duty to be thankful for every crumb of comfort that is to be substracted from the situation. (Besides, you are a girl yourself; you can't get over that though you mayn't like the idea, and you've got to go on being a girl till you're a woman. It's something to feel that it can't last for ever, and that in the end you will be able to be a woman, like Nurse and Auntie Anna; and there's nothing the matter with them, is there?) If your temporary indisposition only cures your spelling it will be money well spent, for your spelling, my dear Babe, as father once said, is both original and varied. So cheer up, and remember that Jill is but a girl too, and that she is quite passable for one of that slack and wayward sex. (Even when she is most like a girl I find I can bear with her. For instance, when I lammented the other day that the rescue party had been a frost, she said, "Why, you couldn't have bicycled unless it had been, could you? Listen to the rain, now!") The post is going, so I must infer the

description of how Jill ragged the doctor till next time. Meanwhile, cultivate the endurance for which English women have ever been renowned; that is the result of the codgitations of the council we held before the others went back to school.–Your affectionate brother, CHRISTOPHER BERKELEY.

'*P.S.*–I'm not quite sure about the m's in lammenting; it looks rum somehow, but there isn't a dictionary, so I must leave it. C.'

His other letter was much longer, and had evidently been written straight off without the elaborate care that he had given to the composition of the first one. As Babs read it, she pictured him sitting as he always did, perched on a high chair at the writing-table, with his legs curled under him and his nose very close to the paper; and suddenly, the deadly feeling of home-sickness she had been battling with for days came over her again.

'This is the true account,' she read, through a suspicious mist in her eyes, 'of how Jill ragged the doctor, when he came to dine with us, the day after the boys went back. Of course, Auntie Anna didn't know he was a beast, so she couldn't be blamed for asking him; but Jill and I much regretted the circumstance. Robin grumbled and said he wished he was old enough to sit up to dinner and have courses and courses and courses, but that's his beastly greediness, as I pointed out to him, and he doesn't know what it is to get a white tie under a filthy clean collar and then an Eton coat under that and to wash your teeth extra instead of only in the morning. But Jill came in and tied it, which was something, and she even did it better than Nurse, who used to make you feel sick by grinding her knuckles into your throat all the time. Having prepared ourselves for the awful holocaust we then proceeded downstairs. (Perhaps you won't be able to understand all the words in this letter, but it's too good a joke to be spoilt by making it easy for you, so you must do your best.) Jill had an awfully decent pink sort of thing on, and it had rows of fringe that you could tie into knots without her rotting you for doing it. Well, to come to the real matter of my discourse, we found the doctor in the drawing-room, also the old Rector, who is called Barnaby and is too old to count much, and besides Auntie Anna likes him so we mean to extend to him the charm of our companionship. And the Rector took in Auntie Anna, and the Beast took in Jill, and I followed behind feeling rotten. You don't know how rotten it is, when you are an odd one like that and nobody wants you in their conversation. You see there were two conversations all the time, Auntie's conversation with the old boy about

tithes and rent charges and things that are not suited to my intellect, and Jill's conversation with the doctor which wasn't a conversation at all because he wouldn't talk. He sat and glowered at his plate like a cat would, and if he lifted his eyes by accident and caught one of us staring at him, he looked down again as if he'd been shot. His conduct was most unaccountable and reprehensible as I pointed out to Jill afterwards, and she said, "Yes," and grinned. I was greatly incensed with him for giving her so much bother, because she worked hard at him and never got cross once, and she asked him about the village and about the poor people and about abroad, and all those grown-up things, and the Beast said "Yes" and "No" and "Certainly," till I wanted to kick him. I tried to help Jill once or twice by tossing off one of my polite rejoinders, but he only behaved as if I wasn't there and looked more like a poker than ever. That was what put Jill's monkey up. She couldn't stand his indifference and acidity to me, so she began to rag him and that shows that she is in reality a brick though forced to maskerade as a girl. (That's another word you don't know perhaps but it's in the dictionary.) She smiled at him as perky as you please and she said in that soft-cotton-wolly voice of hers, "Is there anything that *does* interest you, Dr. Hurst?" And when the Beast was so bowled over that he nearly dropped his knife and fork, she just went on and explained how funny it was to sit all the evening with some one who didn't want to talk, and didn't he think so too? I wanted to break out into paeons of triumph in order to express my satisfaction at the turn matters were taking, but I restrained my impetuosity in time and waited for the Beast to speak. He stuttered rather and began chopping up the pear on his plate as if it was for Christmas puddings, and then he said he didn't suppose any young people were interested in what he was interested in (which shows that all the while he lumped Jill and me together as *kids* and not fit to associate with him). Then Jill asked him what he *was* interested in, and he said "Bac–" (this is the longest word of all and I'm afraid you won't find it in the dictionary, at any rate not in the way I'm going to spell it) "Bacterioi–" oh hang! here goes again–"Bacteriollodgy." Then Auntie Anna winked at Jill, and we went upstairs and left the Beast with the Rector, which was a punishment he more than deserved, as I told Jill. She said she was afraid we boys were spoiling her manners, and Auntie said, "Of course they are!" as if it was a good thing, which of course *we* know it is. I had to go to bed then, and Jill said it was awful desolation and despair when I'd gone, because Auntie

Anna began her conversation all over again with old Barnaby, and the Beast instead of having the sense to join in it went and sat with Jill all the evening. Which shows his puerrility and blightedness. She sang to him too, and he got up to go the moment she had finished which was beastly rude, I think. If he did think she sang badly he might have played up better. But he's a beast, and you can't get over that. He's very ugly and sulky looking, and he's about fifty I should think, but Jill says not so old. That's her grown-up charitableness which she can't get over. Anyhow—'

The mist in Barbara's eyes threatened to become so serious at this point that she put down Kit's letter hastily and returned to her own. Whatever happened, she was not going to cry before all these girls, who never understood anything she did. She was hard at work again by the time Ruth Oliver pushed aside the curtain and looked in from the next room.

'Barbara Berkeley!' she called. 'Has any one seen Barbara Berkeley?'

One or two of the girls looked round casually at the slim figure on the floor, but nobody roused her. Ruth Oliver was too good-natured a person to inspire much authority in the junior playroom, and the children would sooner risk her displeasure any day than Jean Murray's. If it had been any other girl in the First, half a dozen of them would have hastened to do her bidding at once.

'Angela!' called Ruth, impatiently, coming into the room as she spoke; 'don't you know where the Babe is? She has got to go and see the doctor at once.'

On the other side of the curtain, both Barbara and her nickname met with the popularity that was denied to them in the junior playroom; and the note of familiarity in the elder girl's words sent Angela's impudent chin up in the air.

'We don't know anybody of that name in here,' she said, and went on talking flippantly to the girl beside her.

Ruth Oliver was not born to be a leader, and she was horribly afraid of some of the younger ones, who had been quick enough to detect this long ago, and naturally presumed upon it. But there were limits even to her endurance, and she laid a stern hand on Angela's shoulder.

‘If you don’t want to be reported to Margaret Hulme, you’d better fetch Barbara to me at once,’ she commanded, with a firmness she certainly did not feel.

Angela rose with a very bad grace, and strolled as slowly as she dared to the other end of the room. ‘If you’d only said that at first, it would have saved all this fuss!’ she muttered, as soon as she was at a safe distance.

Babs still lay face downwards on the floor, with her heels in the air and her whole attention fixed on the paper she was covering with her large round handwriting. If she did not finish her letter before the prayer-bell rang, it would have to wait until next Wednesday. So she did not take any notice when some one came and said something or another in her ear. She was always in somebody’s way, and if she moved, she would only be in somebody else’s way. So she stayed where she was.

‘Don’t you hear? You’ve got to go and see the doctor,’ repeated Angela, loudly and with impatience. Thoughtless and empty-headed as she was, even Angela Wilkins had the sense to see how absurd it was that the new girl should turn on her persecutors by ignoring them.

Barbara rolled over on her side and glanced up at her.

‘Oh, all right! I know how much of that to believe,’ she answered; and she rolled back again into her old position and continued her letter to Kit.

‘She says she doesn’t want to see the stupid doctor, and nothing will induce her to come, and she doesn’t care what you say or anybody else either,’ was Angela’s version, on her return to Ruth Oliver, of the way in which Barbara had received her message.

The elder girl looked down at her suspiciously. ‘Did she really say that?’ she inquired.

‘Go and ask her, that’s all,’ cried Angela, full of righteous indignation at having her word doubted. For she was really under the impression that she had correctly described the attitude of the new girl towards the doctor and Ruth Oliver.

‘Well, I will,’ answered Ruth, and she threaded her way among the girls until she too stood over the prostrate figure of the offender.

‘Babs,’ she called, bending down.

Barbara flourished her black legs in the air with an impatient movement. ‘How you do bother!’ she complained, stifling a sigh. ‘That’s the second in five minutes. Why can’t you leave me alone?’

There was a start of surprise in the group that surrounded her. It is probable that few of her listeners saw the ridiculous side of the new girl’s request to be left alone, when that was the punishment that had been meted out to her ever since her second day at school; but any one of them could have told her that that was not the way to speak to a girl in the First.

Ruth turned a little red from sheer nervousness; and the girls immediately decided that she was afraid of the youngest child in the school, and began to giggle with one accord. Barbara sighed again at this new interruption; and raising herself on her knees, she sat back on her heels.

‘Oh, it’s you!’ she observed, shaking the hair out of her eyes. ‘Why didn’t you say so? I thought it was just some one who wanted to bother.’

‘You’ve got to go and see the doctor in Finny’s study. Make haste, Babe,’ said Ruth, who was smarting under the giggle, and wanted to get back into the other room among her equals. But the Babe showed no signs of making haste.

‘Why have I got to see the doctor?’ she asked, opening her eyes. ‘I’m not ill or anything; and I want to finish my letter home. Don’t you think it’s a mistake?’

‘No, I don’t,’ said Ruth, forgetting her nervousness all at once, and lifting the child boldly off the floor. ‘You’ve got to be examined to see if you can do gymnastics, that’s all. He’s in Finny’s study, waiting for you.’ She carried her playfully under her arm and set her down on the further side of the curtain. Whatever the other tiresome children might think of her, she knew that the Babe never criticised her, and that gave her confidence.

Barbara was still a little dubious about the sense of seeing a doctor when she did not feel ill; but she trotted across the hall obediently and went into Finny’s study. She was only half conscious of what she was doing, for she had been taken from her letter too abruptly to have had time to wake up properly; and Babs always required plenty of time to wake up, when she had been absorbed in anything. So the solemn-looking young man, who sat

in the low arm-chair, was a little upset when she not only gave him her hand to shake but also put up her face to be kissed as a matter of course.

Dr. Wilson Hurst, in spite of Kit's idea of his age, was only twenty-eight and quite young enough to feel extremely bashful. He jerked back his head suddenly; and Barbara woke up.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she said, smiling. 'I wasn't thinking. Of course you don't want to be kissed; I shouldn't have dreamed of kissing you at home, you know, because the boys feel just like you about kissing. But Ruth kisses me such lots, and everybody seems to kiss everybody else here, so I suppose I've rather got into the way of—'

Here Miss Finlayson said 'Hush!' very softly; and the doctor pulled something so queer and interesting out of his pocket at the same time, that Barbara forgot everything else. 'What are you going to do with that funny thing? Is it a speaking-tube?' she asked curiously.

'I'm going to see whether your heart is in the right place,' answered the doctor, and he was immediately so overcome at his stupendous levity in making a joke over a medical examination, that he did not speak another word till it was completed. As for Babs, she was immensely interested the whole time, and never took her bright little eyes off his face once.

'Is it in the right place?' she asked him, when he put the queer-looking thing back in his pocket again.

'Yes,' said the doctor, briefly.

'Is anybody's in the wrong place?' pursued Babs, leaning against his knee in the most friendly way imaginable.

'Sometimes,' said the doctor. He marvelled at himself for not feeling more irritated by her, when as a rule he found children so worrying.

'Is yours in the right place?' persisted Barbara.

'I–I hope so,' said the doctor, struggling with a grim smile.

'Same place as mine?' continued Barbara, eagerly.

Miss Finlayson put out her hand to stop her; but Babs did not see. The doctor saw, and did not take any notice.

'I imagine it is in the same place,' he said feebly.

‘But how do you know, unless some one else finds it for you?’ inquired Babs. ‘You can’t listen to your own heart through that funny thing, can you?’

‘N–no, some one else has to find it,’ admitted the doctor, and she supposed he had remembered something that made him feel shy, for he coloured furiously and rose to his feet rather hurriedly.

Babs stood gazing up at him attentively, while he exchanged parting words with Miss Finlayson. ‘It’s an awful pity you didn’t go to see Kit when he was ill,’ she remarked, directly there was an opportunity. ‘Kit’s doctor was a beast.’

The long oval face turned slightly red again; and Miss Finlayson said something very quickly about the wet evening.

‘Yes,’ replied the doctor, stammering a little; ‘I am sorry the evening is so late,–so wet, I mean, and that I am so late in calling–positively the first minute I’ve had to-day,–extremely busy this time of year—’

A hand was stealing inside his, and he had to stop and look down again. ‘Do you think you could go and see Kit next time he is ill?’ asked Babs, appealingly. ‘It isn’t nice to have a beast for a doctor, when you’re ill, is it?’

The doctor went on looking down at her with an odd sort of smile on his face. ‘That reminds me,’ he said–though how it reminded him the child could not for the moment imagine–‘that your cousin Miss Urquhart charged me with a message for you. She sent you her love and promised to write soon. I hope I have given it correctly.’

‘Oh!’ cried Barbara, with great excitement. ‘Do you know Jill?’ The doctor kept hold of her hand and nodded. ‘And Auntie Anna? And the boys–*all* of them? Then you must know Kit!’

‘Yes,’ said Dr. Hurst, grimly. ‘I was the beast.’

Then he stooped and kissed her cheek very stiffly, as if he were not used to kissing people; and then he went away. Like Ruth Oliver, he had found it difficult to feel nervous of the youngest girl in the school.

Barbara climbed on the window-seat, and flattened her nose against the window-pane, and watched the lamps of the doctor’s trap receding down

the drive. ‘I like doctors; don’t you, Miss Finlayson?’ she inquired, when that lady came back into the study.

Miss Finlayson agreed that she liked doctors very much indeed, and she began to write something in a big book, while Babs knelt on the window-seat and stared out into the rain and the darkness. Suddenly she jumped down from her perch with a cry of dismay.

‘What’s the matter now?’ asked the head-mistress, absently.

‘I must have called him a beast!’ gasped Barbara.

‘I think I heard something like it,’ observed Miss Finlayson, still writing.

‘But–but I didn’t mean that *he* was a beast,’ proceeded Barbara, looking distressed. ‘I meant that somebody else was a beast. It wasn’t my fault that somebody else was *him*, was it, Miss Finlayson?’

‘It would be safer, I think, and perhaps a little more considerate, not to call anybody a beast,’ remarked the head-mistress, gravely. ‘Then these little mistakes would be avoided.’

‘I never will again,’ sighed Babs. ‘It’s such a particular pity, because he isn’t a bit like a real beast, is he?’

Miss Finlayson looked up while she dried the page she had just written. ‘Have you finished your letters home?’ she inquired pleasantly. ‘The prayer-bell will ring in about a quarter of an hour.’

The reminder sent Barbara straight out of the room, and she sped swiftly back across the hall, thinking busily. Clearly, the only reparation she could make to the doctor was to transform him from a beast into a fairy prince, and to offer him a place in her fairy kingdom; but he would be rather lonely there without a princess, she feared, and she herself already belonged to Kit. It was always easier to find princes than princesses, and she did wish that Finny would not wear a cap and scrape her hair back so tidily–two things which disqualified her, in spite of her niceness, from being a princess in anybody’s kingdom. However, perhaps he would not mind doing without a princess just at first; and in time she might be able to find some one who was neither silly nor unkind, and would be worthy of a crown and the companionship of a disenchanted beast.

At this point in her reflections Barbara reached the door of the senior playroom, and the sight of the elder girls, as they busied themselves with their weekly correspondence, reminded her again of her letter to Kit. For the moment, as far as she was concerned, her new prince would have to whistle for a princess.

CHAPTER IX

THE BABE'S 'FURY'

In the junior playroom Jean Murray had been taking the opportunity to revive the animosity against the new girl.

'Can't you see that she's laughing at us all?' she exclaimed to a circle of humble listeners. 'It's all very well to pretend to be such a baby; that kind of thing may go down with the elder ones, but it won't do here. Anybody can see that she's only putting it all on, to be aggravating.'

'She told a story the very day she arrived,' chimed in Angela from behind. 'A girl who could do that would do anything.'

'Can't you leave the child alone?' suggested Charlotte Bigley, who happened to be listening. 'She seems such a harmless infant to me. I don't believe she even knows she is supposed to be in disgrace.'

It required a good deal of courage to stand up alone against all the girls in the junior playroom, and Charlotte flushed a little when they all laughed at her.

'That's where her artfulness comes in,' declared Jean. She thought she heard her rival's voice on the other side of the curtain, and jealousy made her more bitter than before. 'If you ask me, I believe she only pretends not to notice any of us, so as to pick up everything she can; and then she goes and sneaks it all to the elder ones.'

'Oh, Jean!' remonstrated Charlotte.

Jean looked a tiny bit ashamed of herself. It was not nearly so easy to say unkind things about the new girl as it had been a week ago. All the same, her unhappiness at the continued coldness of Margaret Hulme was quite genuine, and it hurt her sorely to think that the head girl was now smiling on the interloper as she used to smile upon her.

‘Well, it’s true!’ she vowed. ‘I vote we don’t leave her alone, or give her the chance of mocking at us, any more. She wants to be taught that she’s the youngest girl in the school, and that it isn’t anything to be cocky about. Anybody who likes can make up to her, as the big girls do; but *I* am going to see that she keeps in her place.’

‘What a fuss to make about an innocent brat like that,’ remarked Charlotte, smiling scornfully. ‘It’s jealousy, because Margaret is kind to her: that’s all it is!’

That was decidedly what it was, but it did not soothe Jean’s temper to be told so in this blunt manner; and by the time her rival came in from the seniors’ room, the enemy had been worked up into a fine state of resentment against her. Unconscious as ever that there was anything unusual in the atmosphere of the junior playroom, Barbara slipped through the girls who were standing about, and reached her footstool and her letter almost before they noticed that she had returned. There seemed to be some wrangling going on between Jean Murray and Charlotte; but Jean Murray was always wrangling with some one about something, and Babs paid no more attention to it than to the sudden hush that followed as she dropped down in her old position on the floor. It was a good thing, she thought, that nobody talked just then, because there was so little time left in which to finish her letter. She took up the pages she had written and glanced over them.

‘Thank you awfuly much for your advice,’ she had scrawled in her large childish hand. ‘I am cheering up lots and now that I don’t take any notice of the girls and their awfull siliness it is quite nice being here but not nearly so nice as being at home with you and father all of which is now burried for ever alass in my past. I don’t hate girls like I did at first. At first they were always bothering and asking quesstions and being inquissitive but now they leave me alone and never talk except when they want the salt or the butter or haven’t heard the number of the psarm at prayers or can’t do their algibra I have lots of algibra to do because girls aren’t good at algibra I don’t think so I always do their algibra for them. Girls are no fun like boys but as long as they don’t say horible things to me like they did at first I think I shall be able to bear them all right but its rather dull excep when we play hockey I’m getting on at hockey Hurly-Burly says and she says I shall play in matches some day and she’s a brick and I like her. We haven’t had any gym yet because the gymnasiam is being painted but we’re going to begin to-

morrow and I'm longing to begin they can't laugh at my short skirts at gym because everybody's skirt is short at gym and its red and very becomming Ruth says Ruth is Ruth Oliver and she's a big girl and she hooks up my frocks and kisses me she kisses me rather a lot but it's Ruth Oliver so I can put up with it. School is very nice when it's games or algibra or latin but it's horrid when its dictation or geography or coppies Finny says I must try so I am trying but I wish I wasn't such an ignorrant girl I heard Jean Murray say yesterday I was the most ignorrant girl that ever came inside this house but praps that was because I had seventeen speling faults.'

She sighed as she dipped her pen in the ink again. That was all she had said, after writing nearly all the afternoon and evening. And she had so much more to say, and there was so little time left before prayers!

'I have just seen the doctor who is a Beast and he isn't a Beast,' she had written laboriously on a fresh page, when Jean Murray stooped over her and shook her vigorously by the arm.

'Oh, dear!' sighed Babs, feeling in her pocket for the handkerchief that so rarely seemed to be in it. 'There's another blot, and I'm in such a hurry!'

'It's no use losing your temper about it,' said Jean. 'You've got to get up from the floor and fetch a desk, if you want to write letters.'

Barbara looked up in mild surprise. 'But I'm not losing my temper! Are you sure you don't mean *you* when you say me?' she asked with a spice of mischief in her tone.

'There!' said Jean, turning triumphantly to the attendant Angela. 'Didn't I say she was only laughing at us? Now, look here,' she continued, turning again to Babs, 'you've got to remember that you're the youngest in the school—'

'Oh, don't!' interrupted Babs, putting up her hands to her ears. 'You'll begin about the head girl's boots next.'

It was the most luckless thing she could have said, for it convinced Jean more than ever that the new girl was bent on making game of her most serious feelings.

'I shall say anything I choose,' she retorted hotly. 'Get off the floor at once, will you? We don't want ink spilt all over the place; this isn't a nursery.'

‘Who’s spilling ink all over the place?’ asked Barbara, without moving. All the mischief that was in her rose uppermost when any one spoke to her like that.

‘You are, of course,’ returned Jean, shaking her again. ‘You’re so badly brought up that you don’t know how to behave in a civilised house. You’re nothing but a young savage; I heard Margaret Hulme say so, directly you arrived–there! It’s easy to see you’ve never had any one to look after you.’

The mischievous look died out of the child’s face, and she gathered up her papers and scrambled slowly to her feet. The boys would have known that such lamblike behaviour was only the prelude to one of the Babe’s ‘furies’; but Jean thought she had succeeded at last in subduing her, and she became exultant.

‘It’s time that some one civilised you,’ she remarked scornfully. ‘I’m glad I’ve been brought up properly, and not neglected like you.’

Barbara flashed round upon her suddenly. ‘What’s the matter with my bringing-up?’ she demanded in a breathless voice. ‘My father brought me up, and no one in the whole world could have brought me up better than he has.’

‘That accounts for it,’ scoffed Jean. ‘Fathers can’t bring anybody up, especially girls. I’ve heard mother say so, lots of times.’

Barbara’s eyes were glittering brightly. ‘My father can,’ she answered swiftly. ‘My father isn’t like other people’s fathers. You shouldn’t judge my father by your father. I don’t expect your father to be clever because mine is, do I?’

The implied insult was quite accidental on her part, in spite of the anger that was growing in her; but Jean could not be expected to know that.

‘How dare you say that my father isn’t clever?’ she cried indignantly. ‘My father is a professor at Edinburgh, so there!’

‘My father writes books,’ answered Babs, proudly. ‘It’s much more wonderful to write books than to be a professor, because everybody all over the world hears of you if you write books.’

‘That depends on whether they’re good books,’ argued Jean, warmly. ‘You *have* to be clever if you want to be a professor, but any stupid person can

write a stupid book, and nobody ever hears of that kind of book at all.'

'Everybody has heard of my father's book, though, so that shows how little you know about it,' replied Barbara. 'The people in America liked his book so much that they asked him to go all the way to America to lecture about it. The people in America never asked *your* father—'

'Is your father called Everard Berkeley?' asked Jean, suddenly. She had not listened to grown-up conversations in the Christmas holidays for nothing, and she thought she saw her way at last to crushing the irrepressible new girl, once and for all.

Babs nodded. She was too proud to say anything. What other girl in the room had a father who was so celebrated that people knew him by his Christian name, instead of calling him just *Mr.* Somebody? She had only a short time in which to enjoy her triumph, however, for Jean Murray turned quickly on her heel, and walked off with a swaggering step.

'Then my father says that your father is a failure over here,' she answered, tossing her head contemptuously. 'Nobody will read his old book in England; so he was *obliged* to go to America.'

The other girls were beginning to notice the dispute, and they came crowding round to hear what it was all about. Most of them were in time to see Jean Murray walk off with her head in the air, just as the little new girl clenched her fists and crouched down as if to make a spring. Then the storm broke, and the Babe's fury was let loose among the fifty-five occupants of the junior playroom.

It was an easy matter, in that spring forward, to send some half dozen or so spinning out of her way, but Barbara did not stop to see what happened to them. All she wanted to do was to reach the arch offender of them all, the one who had dared to slight her father, and to hold him up to the ridicule of fifty-five girls.

Nobody quite knew what did happen on this unexampled occasion in the annals of Wootton Beeches; and certainly nobody stirred a finger to put a stop to it. All that the girls in the senior playroom could tell about it afterwards was that a sudden scuffle and several screams broke the hush and hum of voices on the other side of the curtain; and then Angela Wilkins

dashed through the archway with a terrified look on her face, and seized Margaret by the arm.

‘Oh, come! do come!’ she sobbed out in her fright. ‘Barbara Berkeley has got Jean Murray down on the floor, and she’s *killing* her!’

CHAPTER X

THE END OF THE FEUD

When the prayer-bell rang that evening, it interrupted a wild tumult in the junior playroom. The elder girls had rushed through the curtain, on the terrified summons of Angela Wilkins; and the whole school crowded and thronged round a confused heap in the middle of the floor. Nothing much was to be seen except two lanky black legs, a crumpled white frock, and a good deal of untidy brown hair; and at first nobody did anything but stare and exclaim. The ringing of the prayer-bell, however, brought them all to their senses. Margaret Hulme made a sudden dash at the two combatants, picked up the one that came first, and dropped her in a corner of the room, where she could be hidden from view until she had time to recover herself. Then the head girl turned to the child who still lay sobbing and gasping on the floor.

'You get up and behave yourself!' she said in a stern undertone; and Jean Murray struggled to her feet and went off snivelling, to be comforted by the trembling and excited Angela. Then the elder girls melted away again into their own room, and a kind of uneasy hush settled down on the eighty-seven inhabitants of Wootton Beeches.

Barbara rubbed her eyes and stared wildly round her. A solid wall of girls stood between her and the scene of the recent scuffle; she could not see what had become of her victim, and at first she did not even realise what was producing this wonderful calm. Then the girls in front of her began slowly to move away towards the archway; and once she caught a glimpse through the curtain of the door in the room beyond. It was only a glimpse, for the girls closed up again immediately; but it was enough to show her the stately figure of Miss Finlayson, as she stood and wished her pupils good-night, one by one. Barbara had watched the same ceremony for a good many evenings now, but it had never seemed quite so orderly or so solemn before. To-night, it made a peculiar impression on the wild little tomboy who had been brought up without discipline or control, and the strangeness

and the misery of her position overwhelmed her as with a new feeling. At the same instant, in striking contrast to the dismal reality, came the remembrance of the dream she had dreamed all her life about this very place called school; and, unnoticed by her school-fellows, who were fully occupied in trying to behave as if nothing had happened, she broke down and sobbed bitterly in her corner.

The stream of girls that had been filing past Miss Finlayson came to an end at last; but Miss Finlayson did not follow them immediately to the chapel. Far away, in a distant corner of the junior playroom, crouched a dishevelled little girl in a crumpled frock, weeping dolefully for a dream that had never come true; and Miss Finlayson stood and waited in her place by the door.

A sense of the extreme stillness, now that the footsteps of the girls had ceased, slowly impressed itself upon Barbara; and she looked up with a new feeling of alarm. There, through the opening in the curtain, she could see the stately figure of the head-mistress in the room beyond; and Babs thrust a round, inky ball of a handkerchief into her pocket, and hastened towards her in a panic.

‘I didn’t know you were waiting for me,’ she said, fighting to keep the quiver out of her voice. ‘I didn’t know they had all gone. I–I’d forgotten it was prayers now.’

She knocked over a chair as she stumbled across the room, and once her dress caught on the edge of a desk and stopped her; but Miss Finlayson waited with her hand out, and the little new girl reached her at last. Once more, behind the grave glance of the blue-grey eyes, lurked a suggestion of something softer and more human, and it gave Barbara a little courage.

‘I wasn’t crying because I was sorry I’d thumped Jean Murray,’ she burst out. ‘I’m not a bit sorry, not a *bit*! I’d like to thump her again for saying–for saying—’

It sounded uncommonly like telling tales, and she had to stop. Miss Finlayson still had hold of her hand, and still looked down at her with the mixture of expressions on her face.

‘Are you coming up to prayers, Babs?’ was all she said.

Barbara had not even heard the question. She was full of her grievance against Jean Murray, which she had almost forgotten for the minute; and

she burst out again, more angrily than before.

‘Don’t you understand?’ she cried passionately. ‘I wasn’t crying for *that*; it–it was something else, but I can’t tell you what it was, because you’d only laugh. They all laugh–except when they’re just being horrible! Why didn’t you let me run away last week? I don’t want to stop with people like Jean Murray, and–and all the rest of them; I hate being here, I hate the girls, I hate you! Why won’t you let me go away?’

She hardly knew what she was saying. She had not been in such a passion since the dreary day, two years ago, when they took her nurse away from her, and she had made herself ill with fretting.

Miss Finlayson tightened her grasp on the hand that was struggling to free itself; then she bent over her rebellious little pupil, and laid her other hand against her burning cheek.

‘Are you coming up to prayers, Babs?’ she repeated. Her persistence began to take effect, and the cool touch of her fingers was very soothing.

‘Why–why won’t you let me go away?’ sobbed Babs, and the tears rained down her cheeks again.

‘Why?’ echoed Miss Finlayson, producing a handkerchief that had not been used, like Barbara’s, to mop up ink blots. ‘Because I want you myself, to be sure.’

She dried the child’s eyes as she spoke; and the small tear-stained face looked up at her wistfully. ‘Do you want me?’ asked Barbara. ‘Does anybody want me–*truthfully*?’

Miss Finlayson nodded, and a look slowly deepened in her face that gave the child confidence. ‘Yes, Babs, truthfully,’ she answered. Then she repeated for the last time, ‘Are you coming to prayers?’ And keeping the hot little hand within hers, she led her upstairs to the chapel.

At Wootton Beeches the girls always walked in and out of chapel in the order of their classes, beginning at the top of the school. But, this evening, the youngest child in the school walked out in front of everybody, for Miss Finlayson held her by the hand and would not let her go. They stood together, a curiously assorted couple, at the end of the passage that led to the other wing of the house; and one after another the girls passed them on their way to their rooms. There was not a sound for some moments, except

the tapping of footsteps on the polished boards; then, walking last of all, came Jean Murray. Babs broke from her companion and flung herself impetuously forward.

‘I say, I’m awfully sorry I thumped you on the head just now,’ she began, and held out her hand invitingly to the enemy. ‘I wasn’t a bit sorry at first, and I wanted to do it again, *frightfully*; but I am sorry now, and I don’t.’

The girls who were still in the passage lingered, and looked back. Evidently, there was no end to the sensations that Barbara Berkeley meant to produce in her first term at school.

‘Hush!’ whispered Jean, glancing round timorously at the head-mistress.

Babs looked amazed. ‘Won’t you shake hands?’ she asked. ‘I know I thumped you awfully hard, but still—’

‘Sh-sh!’ repeated Jean, trying to push past her. ‘Don’t you know we’re not allowed—’

‘I think–I *do* think you might make it up,’ continued Babs, in a disappointed tone. ‘Even if I did hurt you rather, you must own you were very mean.’

Jean Murray, feeling the eyes of authority fixed upon her, made another attempt to escape. ‘Can’t you wait till to-morrow?’ she asked in an agitated whisper.

‘I should have waited, if it hadn’t been for that hymn,’ answered the child, still barring the way obstinately. ‘I can’t help it if the hymn made me feel funny without making you feel funny too, can I? I can’t think what there was about that hymn,’ she added to herself reflectively; ‘I never remember noticing a hymn so much before.’

Miss Finlayson came up to them, and Jean fairly quaked. If there was a rule that the head-mistress was strict about, it was the rule of silence after prayers. Jean knew, for she had been unlucky enough to break it more than once.

‘I have changed your room, Jean,’ said Miss Finlayson, calmly. ‘Angela will have yours for the rest of the term, and you are to sleep in number fourteen, next door to Ruth Oliver. I have just told Angela, so you can go straight to her old room now, and I will send up one of the servants to move your things for the night. The rest can be done in the morning. By the way,’

she added, as she left them, ‘you three may talk till the lights are put out; for it seems that Barbara has something to say that will not keep until to-morrow. Good-night.’

She walked away downstairs with a deliberate step; and the two children were left standing together on the landing.

‘Well, I never!’ exclaimed Jean, staring after Miss Finlayson.

But Babs was less concerned with the peculiarities of the head-mistress than with her own immediate business. ‘How much longer are you going to be before you shake hands?’ she asked.

‘Oh, that’s all right,’ answered Jean, awkwardly, and she at last put a limp hand into the one Barbara was tired of pressing upon her. They trotted along the passage side by side, Jean feeling a little overwhelmed by the suddenness of the reconciliation, while Babs wondered what had happened to make her so silent all at once. To her it seemed the most natural thing in the world to be on good terms with the enemy whose head you had just thumped, provided that you had apologised suitably afterwards; and she chatted away cheerfully until Jean was obliged to stifle her inclination to be dignified.

‘I say,’ said Babs, when they reached the gallery in the other wing of the house and were hurrying round it to their rooms; ‘shall I be punished a lot for knocking you down this evening?’

Jean recovered some of her self-assurance. If she was to be denied the pleasure, in future, of persecuting the new girl, there was no reason why she should not still patronise her.

‘Punished!’ she echoed. ‘That’s all you know about it. Nobody is ever punished here.’

It took Barbara a moment or two to get used to this new idea, and by that time they had reached their rooms. She returned to the subject soon after, however, when Ruth had opened the doors that led from her room into both theirs, so that they could talk across her if they liked.

‘Can you be as naughty as you choose in this school?’ demanded Babs, in a puzzled tone.

‘I don’t advise you to try,’ remarked Ruth.

‘Why not? What would happen if I did?’ asked Babs, curiously.

‘Well, you’d feel jolly small, and have to come round in the end and behave like other people,’ said Jean, raising her voice to make herself heard.

Barbara wandered into Ruth’s room to have her frock unfastened, and continued the discussion from there.

‘Then, is being good at school the same thing as behaving like other people?’ she said doubtfully.

The others seemed to have some difficulty in answering this. ‘There!’ said Ruth, giving her a little push; ‘make haste and get undressed.’

Barbara wandered back into her own room again, and thought it over carefully. ‘Being good at home wouldn’t be the same thing as behaving like other people,’ she observed presently.

‘Home isn’t school,’ answered Ruth. ‘And Finny’s school isn’t like other people’s schools,’ she added.

‘Isn’t it?’ said Babs, with interest. ‘Where’s the difference?’

‘Ask Jean,’ replied Ruth; and Jean took up the tale from beyond.

‘I was at another school before I came here, and it was very different, I can tell you,’ she remarked. ‘There were nothing but rules there, and you always seemed to be breaking one or another of them, without knowing it; and then you got punished. I was punished the whole time I was there.’

‘What sort of punishments?’ asked Barbara.

‘Stupid punishments,’ answered Jean, vaguely. ‘Punishments that made you feel foolish, and made you hate people. I did hate a lot of people at that school. I thought I was awfully wicked because I hated so many people. And then I came here,’ she wound up triumphantly.

‘And did you find you were good when you came here?’ asked Babs.

‘You shut up and get yourself ready for bed, or else Fräulein will catch you,’ was all Jean said in reply to this.

Barbara gave one or two perfunctory taps to her head with a brush. ‘I suppose that’s why we’re left so much to ourselves,’ she remarked, after a pause. ‘We never see the teachers except at meals or in lesson time, do we?’

‘Of course we don’t,’ replied Ruth; ‘that’s where Finny’s school is so different, you see. In most schools you are being watched all day by some one or another, and it makes you whisper because you don’t want to be overheard. Nothing makes Finny so furious as to catch any one whispering.’

‘Is she ever furious?’ inquired Barbara.

‘Don’t be a young silly,’ said Ruth, good-naturedly, a reply which had no effect whatever upon Barbara.

‘It seems to me,’ she went on thoughtfully, ‘that it’s very difficult to know what is wrong and what isn’t, when there aren’t any punishments and no one is there to tell you.’

‘Well, you’re supposed to have some sense, you know,’ explained Ruth. ‘Finny’s great idea is that you should think for yourself and not go to other people to find out things. She says being good isn’t worth much, if you’re only good because some one else tells you to be good.’

‘That’s all very well,’ objected Babs, ‘but suppose you don’t know without being told?’

‘Well, if you don’t know that behaving like a wild Indian is wrong, it’s not much good being there to tell you so,’ said Jean, bluntly.

The point of her remark was quite lost on Barbara, who was still puzzling over a question that had never occurred to her before. ‘At home,’ she observed, ‘we never talk about whether a thing is right or wrong. If we did, the boys would call it awfully slack.’

‘What do they call it when you nearly kill people by knocking them down and hitting them?’ asked Jean, rather suddenly. The application of hot water was causing the bruise on her forehead to smart most unpleasantly.

‘Oh!’ said Barbara, in a surprised tone; ‘I thought you had made it up?’

‘Bother making it up,’ grumbled Jean, ‘when you’ve got a lump as big as—’

‘Why didn’t you say so before?’ cried Babs, in great concern. ‘Haven’t you any pomade to put on it?’

Something very like an amused chuckle came from the direction of Ruth Oliver, but Babs was in far too great a hurry to notice that. Flinging

everything right and left on the floor, she cleared out two drawers and a box before she succeeded in finding the bottle she wanted.

‘Here it is!’ she exclaimed, taking it in to her wounded foe. ‘It’s awfully good stuff, really; and it keeps you from turning blue and yellow. We always use it at home.’

Ruth’s chuckle grew into a hearty laugh. ‘I should think you wanted pounds of it in your home, if they’re all like you!’ she exclaimed.

Barbara wondered what the joke was. ‘They’re not like me,’ she said simply. ‘The others are all boys, you see, so they get their own way without fighting.’

And when the German governess came to turn out their lights, she found the three white-robed figures standing together in Jean’s room, one of them shaking with laughter, another trying rather unsuccessfully to keep grave, while the third, holding out a bottle in her hand, looked at them both with a puzzled air. There was no end, thought Fräulein, to the caprices of English children. Had not Miss Finlayson been relating to all the teachers downstairs, how the two little ones before her had flown at each other in a passion, just before prayers?

The junior playroom felt equally incapable of grappling with the situation, when the new girl marched gaily into it the next morning with her arm linked in Jean Murray’s. For once, Jean’s followers found themselves at a loss. Not having been informed what actually had taken place in the passage the night before, they could hardly be expected to know all at once how to treat this new state of affairs. Nor did Jean trouble herself to enlighten them. Indeed, she was so cross when any one approached her on the subject, that even Angela had to leave her alone; while the junior playroom in general, being less devoted, threw out dark hints about temper as soon as Jean was out of hearing. Angela, however, had the wit to see the one thing that was evident–the feud with the new girl was at an end, and anybody who wanted to keep friends with Jean Murray in future would have to accept Barbara Berkeley as well. So she decided to accept Barbara herself, to begin with; and she set to work at the same time to convert the whole of the junior playroom.

‘If you don’t behave decently to her, you’ll have Finny down on you,’ she advised, in the few moments allowed for conversation after breakfast.

‘Anybody could see that, from the way Finny glared at Jean last night.’

‘Did *you* see it?’ inquired Charlotte Bigley, with unpleasant directness.

‘N–no, not exactly,’ admitted Angela, uncomfortably. ‘But Mary Wells did, and she told me. And look here,’ she went on, shifting her ground hurriedly, ‘Jean’s made it up with Barbara Berkeley, and the sooner we do the same the better it’ll be for us. Besides, why shouldn’t we make it up? It’s such a bore to have to keep on remembering all the time that you’re *furious* with some one!’

This was more to the point; and the junior playroom, which had never thrown itself with any heartiness into the feud, decided that Barbara Berkeley was to be accepted without any more delay. Unfortunately, Barbara Berkeley, who had never realised that her school-fellows had been leaving her in peace on purpose to annoy her, was quite unprepared for the sudden change in their behaviour.

Charlotte Bigley was the first to put into force the resolution that had been arrived at by the junior playroom. ‘If you like,’ she observed carelessly, when she met Barbara by the bookshelf, just before the first class, ‘you can put away Ruth Oliver’s desk after preparation, instead of me.’

For her part, she had always felt kindly disposed towards the new girl, and the offer she was making now came straight from her heart, and was the most generous one she could think of at the moment. But Babs only looked dismayed.

‘Why must I put away Ruth Oliver’s desk?’ she demanded. ‘I have to put away Margaret Hulme’s as it is; and it’s so difficult to get dressed in time for supper when there’s such a lot of desks to put away first. Of course,’ she added with an effort, ‘I’ll do it to please you, if you really want me to.’

‘Why, I thought you’d *like* to do it!’ exclaimed Charlotte, staring at her. ‘You’re so thick with Ruth, and naturally I supposed—’

‘Thanks awfully,’ said Barbara, without enthusiasm. ‘It’s really awfully kind of you, but I think p’raps you’d better go on doing it, if you’re used to doing it. Of course, I know some people like doing those stupid things for the big girls, but—’

‘All right,’ said Charlotte, abruptly; and she went away, feeling distinctly small.

Babs hurried off to the Fifth classroom, and arrived just in time for the geography lesson. She was settling herself as usual at the bottom desk, when her neighbour, rather a dull girl, for whom she secretly felt a sort of contempt because she took no interest in her lessons, but only learned them from conscientious motives, began making advances to her.

'Barbara,' she whispered, nudging the new girl in a familiar way that was meant to be sociable. Babs, having sat next to her for fourteen days without extracting a single remark from her, was considerably startled.

'What do you want?' she asked impatiently. She was taking a last frantic look at the capes of Scotland, and the interruption was agonising.

'Would you like to be my partner, next time we practise running with Hurly-Burly?' proceeded Mary Wells, with an air of extreme benevolence. She was rather glad that Jean Murray had made it up with the new girl, for it had not been amusing to sit perpetually next to some one with whom she was not allowed to associate.

'Why, no, of course not!' answered Barbara, giving up the capes of Scotland in despair, and turning rather crossly to the tiresome neighbour who had never bothered her before. 'We're not a bit evenly matched, and it wouldn't be fair. Ask Angela Wilkins, if you want a partner; she doesn't run *much* faster than you do.'

If there had been time, her amazed neighbour would no doubt have told her what she thought of her. It was bad enough to have her friendly suggestion thrown back in her face, but to be offered a gratuitous criticism of her running powers into the bargain was intolerable. However, Miss Tomlinson said 'Silence!' before Mary could express her feelings, so Babs remained in comfortable ignorance of them.

She was not to be left alone for long, however, and it soon became impossible even for Barbara not to see that a change of some sort had come over her school-fellows. During the two weeks she had been at school, meal-times had been delicious periods of peace, when every one had babbled round her but never to her, and nobody had interrupted her if she wanted to dream. But to-day, when they all met in the dining-room for lunch, in the ten minutes' 'break' that occurred in the middle of the morning, it was evident that her time for dreaming was gone by. This was the opportunity that the children of the junior playroom had been eagerly

awaiting since the moment when Angela had succeeded in moving them to charitable designs. So Babs had scarcely made her appearance in the dining-room, than a crowd of eager penitents descended upon her, jostling one another in the attempt to be first. One rushed at her with the biscuits, another with a glass of milk, and a third with a plateful of bread and jam.

‘I say, don’t bother! Thanks awfully, don’t you know,’ stammered Barbara, who was a little flustered at finding herself the object of so much attention. She helped herself to bread and jam, accepted the milk, which the bearer insisted on holding for her till she felt inclined to drink it, and then tried to slip away as usual to a retired corner. But her way was barred by another group of girls, headed by the zealous Angela herself.

‘I wonder if you’ll help me with my algebra in French class,’ began the latter, beaming upon her former enemy with the air of one who was conferring a favour. ‘I always get in such a bog over it.’

‘You’re so splendid at algebra, Babs, aren’t you?’ added another, with great warmth.

‘She’s good at lots of things! She’ll get to the top of the Fifth in no time, won’t she?’ cried Angela, with her ordinary disregard for facts.

‘Oh, no,’ said Barbara, earnestly. ‘There’s my spelling; you’re forgetting that.’

‘Ye–es,’ allowed Angela, unwillingly; ‘but spelling isn’t everything.’

‘Should think not, indeed!’ echoed the chorus of enthusiasts.

‘And I don’t know any arithmetic,’ proceeded Barbara, desperately. It really hurt her regard for truth to have all these absurd remarks made about her.

‘What’s arithmetic?’ demanded Angela, loudly.

‘Only think of the piles of history you know!’ chimed in some one else.

‘Yes, indeed!’ said the chorus.

‘And Latin!’ proclaimed another admirer.

‘I–I wish you wouldn’t,’ murmured Babs, unhappily.

She could not think what had come over them all; and they made her feel foolish. Fortunately, somebody noticed just then that she had finished the bread and jam; and they all rushed off, jostling one another again as they

went, to find fresh provisions. Barbara seized the opportunity to escape, dodged the placid bearer of the milk, and went in search of Jean Murray. She had an uncommonly shrewd suspicion that Jean Murray was somehow at the bottom of this new and irritating persecution.

She found her hidden away in a corner of the big dining-room, occupying very much the position that Barbara herself had enjoyed until now. Her appearance was dejected, and she looked as though the encouragement of noble sentiments did not agree with her nearly so well as the strife and wrangling in which she usually indulged. The truth was that her new pose of friendliness was making her feel unpleasantly self-conscious; and she was afraid of being laughed at by the big girls for having so meekly accepted her late enemy for a friend. The big girls, of course, worried themselves so little about the petty quarrels of the junior playroom, that they had no more intention of laughing at her than Barbara had; but it was impossible for so important a person as Jean Murray to realise that. So she gave a guilty start when Barbara, heated, aggrieved, and bubbling over with resentment, suddenly pounced upon her in her corner.

‘I say, look here,’ began Babs, impetuously; ‘I thought you’d made it up, and it’s a shame!’

‘What are you talking about?’ demanded Jean Murray. ‘I have made it up, long ago.’

‘Then whose fault is it that all those girls keep bothering me?’ exclaimed Barbara, growing more indignant as she went on. ‘I haven’t had a moment’s peace all the morning, and it makes me feel silly. I don’t like being made to feel silly. Why don’t you tell them to leave me alone?’

‘But I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ said Jean. ‘How are they making you feel silly?’

‘They keep on telling me how clever I am,’ grumbled Barbara, in a tone of the deepest contempt. ‘Me clever! Just think of it! And they say I’m going to get to the top of the class, and all that rot. What do they mean by it? That’s what I want to know. I was just beginning to get used to girls, and I told Kit only yesterday that they were not so bad after all, because they left you pretty much to yourself; and now–look at them! It’s enough to make any one feel silly. Well, what’s the joke?’

Jean was laughing heartily. It was the first time that morning she had been able to forget her own feelings of ‘silliness’; and it cheered her considerably to find that some one else was in the same plight as herself. ‘You *are* queer!’ she declared. ‘Why, they are doing all that to show that they want to be nice to you, of course.’

Barbara stared at her aghast. ‘Oh!’ was all she said at first. After a pause for reflection, she added suddenly, ‘Then what were they trying to be all the time they left me alone?’

Jean stopped laughing, and began kicking at the window-seat by which they stood.

‘Was that their way of being nasty?’ proceeded Babs, in a puzzled tone.

‘I–I suppose so,’ muttered Jean, looking away from her.

‘Oh!’ said Barbara again.

There was another pause, and then Jean made an immense effort. ‘I made them leave you alone,’ she jerked out. ‘I hated you. It–it was because of Margaret Hulme.’

Barbara’s puzzled look vanished. When she did begin to understand a thing, she was generally pretty quick about it. ‘I’m beastly sorry,’ she said softly. ‘A little while ago, I thought Jill was going to make the boys like her better than me; and I felt just like that. What a pity you didn’t tell me sooner!’

That, after all, was their real reconciliation; and this time there was no doubt about it. If there had been, it would have been ended finally by Margaret Hulme herself, that same afternoon, in the cloakroom. The head girl had been taking off her own muddy boots for more than a fortnight now; and that in itself was enough to quicken her observation of events in the junior playroom.

‘Isn’t there anybody over there who would like to unlace my boots for me?’ she said in a loud voice, as the younger ones came trooping into the cloakroom after the hockey practice.

There was silence in the ranks of the juniors. The big girls were smiling, the little ones looked at one another doubtfully, and the head girl waited with her foot put forward. The etiquette of the junior playroom was tremendous,

and although forty-five sets of fingers were itching to be at the knot in the head girl's bootlace, nobody could move until Jean Murray did.

'You can do it, if you like,' she said to Barbara indifferently.

'Oh, no,' said Barbara, quickly. 'I shouldn't think of it.' This time, her sacrifice was genuine, for Margaret had kissed her just before dinner and told her she was a 'good little soul,' and the feeling of the youngest girl in the school had considerably changed in consequence with regard to the head girl's boots.

'Of course,' said Margaret Hulme, drawing back her foot, 'if nobody *wants*—'

A murmur ran along the ranks of the juniors, and Babs suddenly whispered something in Jean's ear. Then the two children joined hands and presented themselves solemnly before the head girl.

'Please,' said Barbara, quickly, 'we've settled it.'

'It's about time,' observed Margaret.

'We're going to halve it,' added Jean, in a great hurry.

'What? My foot?' asked the head girl.

The wit of the head girl produced a storm of laughter in the cloakroom. When it subsided, Barbara was ready with her explanation.

'Jean's going to do them four days, and I'm going to do them the other three,' she said. 'And Jean's going to begin,' she added, and walked away heroically.

'Oh, no, you begin,' said Jean, feebly.

But Margaret smiled and pinched her ear. 'You begin, child,' she said; and Jean fairly loved the new girl from that moment onwards.

CHAPTER XI

MISS FINLAYSON'S UNCLE, THE CANON

'It's all very well to tell you to do things for other people; but when nobody wants anything done, how are you going to carry it out?' demanded Charlotte Bigley of a circle of attentive listeners.

It was plain-work evening, some five weeks or so before the end of the term; and fifty-five busy little people, on one side of the curtain, sewed laboriously at fifty-five flannel garments, while thirty-two others, in the seniors' room, were cutting out fresh ones and struggling with what Miss Smythe called the 'fixing.' Usually, plain-work evening was the dullest out of the seven, for conversation did not flourish under the depressing dominion of flannel, and Miss Smythe, the needlework mistress who came from the town twice a week to teach them, had never managed to interest her pupils either in herself or in what they were doing. But to-night there was something to discuss that thrilled every one of the workers on both sides of the curtain, and the effect on the flannel garments of this unusual enthusiasm even awoke a faint wonderment in the mind of Miss Smythe. She did not know, never having tried to win the confidence of the children, that the cause of the emotion that was pulsing from end to end of the two playrooms was the temporary residence, under the honoured roof of Wootton Beeches, of Miss Finlayson's uncle, the Canon.

The Canon had always been an object of interest, theoretically, to the girls at Wootton Beeches. They did not know much about him, except that he lived in some cathedral town in the North of England, and came South about once a year and spent part of his holiday at Wootton Beeches; and they were familiar with his portrait, which always stood on the writing-table in his niece's study. That was all they could have told anybody; but the very lack of facts only added to the magic of his name, and as none of them happened to be in touch with a bishop, or even with a dean, Miss Finlayson's uncle the Canon continued to impress them from a distance with his importance. Hitherto, his visit had always happened to fall in the

holidays; but, this time, he had unaccountably appeared in the middle of the term, and the excitement of his actual presence among them had given them enough news to put in their letters home for quite two weeks. The day before, he had even replaced the curate in the little chapel, and had not only read prayers but had delivered an address on unselfishness as well; and it was this address that had provided the whole school, on plain-work evening, with a burning topic of conversation.

The problem that had just been put into words by Charlotte Bigley was one that had exercised the ingenuity of everybody since yesterday morning. To do good works was the present ardent desire of all their hearts; but where were the good works to be found?

'I suppose there's always something to be done for somebody, only we've got to discover what it is,' said Mary Wells, after profound reflection.

'He did say life was full of little things that were waiting to be done, but it's so easy to talk like that,' complained Jean Murray. 'Why didn't he say *what* things?'

'Well, you see, we've got to discover what they are,' persisted Mary. When she did manage to produce an idea, she was always very slow to part with it.

'You said that before,' retorted Jean, impolitely; 'and it doesn't help anybody at all. You can't go round *asking* people, can you? They'd call you a nuisance.'

Barbara sighed, and laid down the blackened piece of flannel she had been toiling at since the beginning of term. Between the address of the Canon and the shapelessness of her flannel petticoat, life was very difficult to understand just then.

'Besides,' she chimed in, when Jean finished speaking, 'if everybody is doing something for everybody else, there's nobody left to do anything for!'

'Finny always says we are to do things for ourselves as much as we can, and that the way to help other people most is to see that they don't have to bother about *us*. That's not a bit the same thing as going round and finding out what people want done for them,' continued Charlotte, eloquently.

'They can't both be right,' declared Angela, shrilly. 'If the Canon says one thing and Finny says another, what are we to believe, and what is the truth

of it all, I should like to know? The *truth*–that's what *I* want!'

'Yes, you do,' remarked Babs, beginning to chuckle. 'You want it awfully badly, most of the time.'

'You mind your own business, Barbara Berkeley, and I'll mind mine,' advised Angela, threateningly.

'But that's just what we haven't got to do,' retorted Babs, with another laugh. 'I've got to forget my own business and look after somebody else's, and so have you. The Canon said so.'

'The Canon never said anybody was to have enough cheek for two people, anyhow,' returned Angela, rather feebly. She generally ended in coming off the worse in a battle of words with Barbara. On this occasion, however, she had the junior playroom with her.

'You shouldn't joke about serious things, Barbara Berkeley,' said Mary Wells, disapprovingly.

'Barbara Berkeley thinks she can laugh at everything!' cried Angela, with renewed courage.

Miss Smythe came up at the same moment and put the crowning touch on Barbara's discomfiture by examining the luckless flannel petticoat and disclosing the fact that she had sewed it up all the way round.

'How do you expect a child is going to get into that?' asked the needlework mistress, holding up the misshapen garment to the derision of the whole room.

Barbara accepted the criticism and the laughter with equal unconcern. She had never supposed that any child was going to get into a petticoat that only existed for her express torture and the witticisms of Miss Smythe. It had been unpicked so often that it would scarcely hold the large, uneven stitches she repeatedly put into it; and she took up the scissors and began to undo it all over again as a necessary part of the evening's proceedings. Hardly, however, had she snipped at the first piece of cotton, than she was assailed on both sides by eager helpers, thirsting for the painful pleasures of self-sacrifice.

'Let me do it for you, Babe!' exclaimed Angela, quite forgetting their recent dispute on the very subject of the virtue she now was so anxious to exploit.

‘No, let me,’ begged Mary Wells on the other side.

Barbara looked from one to the other doubtfully. The Canon had said nothing about complications of this kind. Then Mary took the decision and the flannel petticoat simultaneously out of her hands.

‘Do, there’s a dear,’ she said coaxingly. ‘Think how I helped you with your German the day before yesterday.’

‘It’s a shame,’ vowed Angela Wilkins, retiring sulkily. ‘I did ask first!’

‘Never mind,’ said Babs, soothingly; ‘I’m sure to do it again before long; I always do.’

Angela, however, found a more abiding consolation in Barbara’s temporary idleness.

‘You’re not doing anything for anybody, that’s certain!’ she threw back at her jeeringly. ‘Why, you’re the only idle person in the room! Call that being unselfish, indeed!’

Barbara hastened to clear herself of the reproach by picking up Mary Wells’s neatly made and spotless piece of white flannel. She was not sure what it was meant for, as it was not sewed together anywhere; and she had never been shown how to do the elaborate scallops that ornamented the edge of it. But a trifle like want of skill made very little difference to a seeker after self-sacrifice; and Babs recklessly plunged her needle into the beginning of the next scallop, and entangled the silk hopelessly. A cry from Mary Wells disturbed her well-meant efforts. The Canon, thought Mary, might say what he liked about people doing things for others, but was it quite fair when they did them all wrong?

‘It’s for my sister’s baby,’ she lamented, seizing her handiwork from the zealous Barbara; ‘and if I don’t finish it soon, the baby will be too big for head-flannels at all.’

‘But–I wanted to do something for you,’ protested Babs, in a disappointed tone.

‘You’ve stickied the needle, and left a great black finger-mark on it,’ wailed Mary Wells, making fresh discoveries, as she went on, of what Babs *had* done for her.

Miss Smythe came up to know what the fuss was about; and she promptly added her word to the condemnation of Barbara Berkeley.

‘What do you mean by touching anybody else’s work, you naughty little girl?’ she said sharply. ‘You are more trouble than anybody else in the school, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself.’

Barbara did not look at all ashamed of herself. She never did when people were cross with her. Mary Wells had the grace to come to her assistance.

‘Please, Miss Smythe,’ she said, swallowing her mortification at the ravages in the head-flannel, ‘it was my fault as well. I took Barbara’s work, to begin with.’

The needlework mistress stared from one to the other. ‘What’s come over the children?’ she exclaimed. ‘Why are you interfering with each other’s work like this?’

Barbara assumed an exaggerated expression of meekness. ‘Please, it was because we were both trying to sacrifice ourselves,’ she announced.

It certainly sounded a ridiculous reason when it was put that way, but it completed the perplexity of Miss Smythe, and that was something.

‘It seems to me,’ she said severely, ‘that you are strangely forgetting yourself, Barbara Berkeley. Commence what I gave you to do at once, and stand up until I tell you to sit down again.’

‘Why, the Canon *said* we were to forget ourselves,’ began Babs, mischievously; and there is no doubt that a further penalty would have been added to her punishment had not Jean Murray made a sudden diversion by dropping her thimble. In spite of the want of success that had attended Barbara’s attempt at good works, the influence of the Canon was still very strong among the occupants of the junior playroom; and five girls hastily flung aside their work, and bumped their heads together on the floor in their hurry to restore Jean her property. Jean took it with the grudging manner of one who would like to have been in the fortunate position of conferring rather than of accepting a service; and Miss Smythe in despair condemned five more culprits to a standing position.

As luck would have it, the Canon expressed a wish that evening to see what the young people were doing with themselves; and it happened that Miss

Finlayson brought him through the curtain into the junior playroom just after the six ringleaders had been ordered to stand up.

‘Very nice, very charming, to be sure!’ murmured the old gentleman, whose benevolent face had gone a long way in carrying his address home to the hearts of his hearers. ‘Such a beautiful and womanly sight, too! I suppose you are all working for the poor, eh, my dears? Very excellent indeed, I’m sure!’

His niece was busy talking with Miss Smythe, and did not correct his mistake; and the children were too shy to do more than look at one another and giggle faintly. The Canon went on, and bent over Mary Wells, who appealed to him at once by the serious expression of her face and her diligent application to the head-flannel.

‘And for whom are you working so industriously, may I ask?’ he inquired benignly.

‘It’s for my sister–I mean the baby,’ stammered Mary, much flustered at being thus singled out. The Canon felt a little perplexed, not having supposed Mary Wells or her sister to belong to what he largely called ‘the poor’; and he passed on hurriedly to where the six culprits stood first on one leg and then on the other, trying to stitch at their work with wavering and unsteadied fingers.

'Dear me!' he said, slightly taken aback.

'Dear me!' he said, slightly taken aback. 'Is it–is it quite usual–I mean, do you find it *convenient* to perform your–your embroidery in that exceedingly arduous position?'

The six girls edged up to one another; and more giggles, very nervous ones this time, greeted the Canon's remark. He put on his eye-glasses, and began slowly to grasp the meaning of their uncomfortable position.

‘Ah!’ he said, with a knowing smile. ‘So you have done something you shouldn’t, eh, my dears? Shocking, shocking! Let us see what the cause of offence is, and perhaps we can get the punishment mitigated for you. How would that be, eh?’

He turned to look for Miss Smythe, and the six put their heads together for a hasty, whispered consultation.

‘Let’s tell him it’s through his sermon,’ urged Barbara, all agog with mischief. ‘It would be such fun!’

‘Certainly not!’ decided Angela, solemnly. ‘He must never know. Didn’t he say it was splendid to suffer for righteousness’s sake, and isn’t this *real* righteousness?’

She carried the remaining four with her; and by the time Finny and Miss Smythe joined the Canon in front of them, five out of the six faces glowed with the fervour of martyrdom. The sixth was glowing too, but hardly from such a lofty motive.

‘Well,’ said Miss Finlayson, gently, ‘and what is the reason of this?’

Miss Smythe coughed and hesitated. She did not understand her pupils in the least, but she had a certain feeling of loyalty towards them, and she did not want to get them into trouble. Added to this, she really did not know the reason of it.

‘They–they were a little tiresome, and I made them stand up,’ she explained hurriedly. ‘No doubt–only high spirits, and–and so on. I–I could not quite grasp what had been upsetting them this evening, and I always find standing up is–is an excellent remedy for–for high spirits, in short.’

It was the opinion of the junior playroom afterwards that ‘Smithy’ had got out of it very well; and she went up in its estimation henceforth. But her explanation failed to satisfy Miss Finlayson. There was something about the virtuousness on the offenders’ faces that struck her as being overdone; and she turned to the one at the end of the row, whose countenance was a study in suppressed emotions, and tried to get at the truth of the matter.

‘What was it, Barbara?’ she asked in that tone of hers that would make any girl tell her anything. Not that Barbara, on this occasion, needed forcing.

‘It was because of the sermon yesterday,’ she said, bubbling over with enjoyment of the situation. ‘And we were all trying to sacrifice ourselves, and it was so difficult, because nobody wanted anything done; and then Mary Wells sacrificed herself for me, so I tried to do the same for her, and I only spoiled the baby’s head-flannel, and made Smithy–I mean Miss Smythe–wild. That was why I stood up. The other five stood up because they all tried to sacrifice themselves for Jean’s thimble; and Miss Smythe hadn’t heard the sermon, you see, and she only thought they were being naughty, so—’

‘That will do,’ said Miss Finlayson, and she turned her back hurriedly on the row of martyrs. The needlework mistress was almost in tears at what she considered a wilfully frivolous manner of referring to a sermon by a real canon. But the Canon just passed his hand across his mouth, and then gave up the attempt to look shocked.

‘You are very good little girls to listen so attentively to people’s sermons,’ he said, smiling openly. ‘And I think, if anybody ought to stand up, it should be by rights a certain old gentleman who preaches them. What do you say, Miss Smythe? If I promise to stand up for the rest of the evening, will you let these six young ladies sit down?’

CHAPTER XII

THE FURTHER PURSUIT OF GOOD WORKS

‘All the same,’ said Jean Murray afterwards, ‘it doesn’t mean that the Canon’s sermon was wrong just because all of you were so stupid in the way you tried to make it work.’

She could not really resist such an enticing opportunity of showing her superiority; but her less fortunate school-fellows found it difficult to appreciate her point of view, and they resented it accordingly.

‘It’s only just by chance that it wasn’t you as well,’ Barbara hastened to point out.

‘And you know you began by being jealous because *we* were doing all the sacrificing,’ added Angela.

The others, not being in the inner circle of Jean’s friendship, did not venture on an open remonstrance; but one of them asked her bluntly what she considered the Canon did mean by his address.

Jean drew herself up complacently. ‘Well, of course he meant much bigger things than just picking up people’s thimbles and interfering with everybody all round,’ she began rather contemptuously.

‘He said *little* things, all the same,’ observed Mary Wells, doggedly.

‘That,’ said Jean, airily, ‘was only his way of putting it–and because he was a canon,’ she added, struck by a brilliant thought. ‘When you are a canon, the things you consider little are the same as the things that ordinary people call big.’

‘Bravo, Jean,’ said Charlotte Bigley, sarcastically. ‘Now, let us hear what the big things are.’

Jean was on her mettle, and she gave herself a moment’s desperate reflection.

‘Well, things like helping the poor, and taking food to people who are starving, and giving up your pocket-money to buy things for them, and not minding how dirty they are, nor how wicked and dishonest and–and tipsy,’ she proclaimed.

The junior playroom was much impressed by this new view of the Canon’s sermon.

‘Isn’t Jean clever?’ demanded Angela, proudly, of her immediate neighbours. One of these happened to be Barbara, who fully agreed with her, but still appeared a little puzzled.

‘It will be very difficult to do all that,’ she observed. ‘How can we do things for the poor, when we never see any poor?’

‘You never know when the chance may come,’ answered Jean, who was rarely at a loss. ‘Besides, there’s the holidays.’

‘What!’ said Mary, in a voice of dismay. ‘Have we got to wait till the *holidays* before we can be unselfish?’

‘Well,’ replied Jean, vaguely, ‘you can’t say that, for an opportunity may occur at any minute. What we’ve got to do is to be on the look-out for it.’

This unsatisfactory way of disposing of the Canon’s address fell very flat after the recent excitement in the juniors’ room concerning it; and most of Jean’s listeners grumbled loudly as soon as she was out of hearing. But Babs and Angela unhesitatingly threw in their lot with Jean. They were not quite sure what she meant, but they never doubted her right to be their leader in this as in everything.

‘We’ll all keep on the look-out,’ they said to one another; ‘and the first who sees an opportunity of helping the poor must promise to share it with the other two.’

Saturday afternoon came round in another day or two, and on Saturday afternoon the girls could do pretty much as they liked, as soon as the hockey practice was over. It was one of those late wintry days in March which bring with them a promise of spring to come: there was a sharpness in the air, now that the sun was nearing the west, that proclaimed it still to be winter, while a faint earthiness of smell, a tumult of birds’ voices in the hedge, and an intense blueness above, all told of the warmer season in store. The triumvirate, as Margaret Hulme had nicknamed Jean and her two

inseparable companions, were much too fond of the open air to go indoors before they were obliged; so, while most of their school-fellows voted for the fire and a story-book, they wandered off down the nine-acre field, their arms linked affectionately together. Their conversation was very engrossing, for it turned on the gymnastic competition that was going to be held at the end of the term, for which the Canon had just offered a prize of six morocco-bound books, to be chosen by the successful competitor herself.

‘That’s where this hole is such a nice hole for a school,’ said Jean. ‘At the other school I went to, they never asked you what books you’d like; and they always gave you *poetry*.’

‘Some poetry is all right. I think I like poetry when it’s got a story in it, and the rhymes are not too far away from one another, and the lines jog along without your having to bother about them,’ remarked Babs.

‘Oh, that kind isn’t bad,’ admitted Jean. ‘I didn’t mean Macaulay and Longfellow and all the *real* poets. But the stuff they gave you at my school was horribly dull, and it never had any sort of story in it, and the lines didn’t seem to belong to one another at all; and there was generally a thing called a glossary at the end, which only showed that it wasn’t fit for any one to read.’

‘I know that kind of poetry; we have lots of it at home,’ put in Angela. ‘There’s a chap called Browning who’s rather like that. Have you ever read any Browning, you two?’

‘No,’ said Jean, flatly. ‘Don’t believe you have either. My father says Browning didn’t understand himself, and I’m sure *you* don’t know more than Browning. So there!’

‘Never mind about the poetry,’ interposed Barbara. ‘I want to hear about the gym prize. Who do you think is going to get it, Jean?’

‘Well, Margaret is awfully good, of course, but we shall know better after the trial on Monday afternoon,’ said Jean, cautiously.

‘What trial?’ asked Barbara.

‘Why,’ exclaimed Jean, in surprise, ‘didn’t you hear Finny give out that we were all to do the show exercises before her on Monday afternoon, so that she could decide who was to go in for the prize?’

‘Of course she didn’t hear; the Babe’s always asleep!’ said Angela, with scorn. ‘I watched her all the time Finny was speaking, and she was smiling away to herself as if some one was having a conversation with her.’

‘Never mind, she’s getting better,’ said Jean, approvingly. ‘She doesn’t gape half so much as she did, and she doesn’t jump when you go up and speak to her suddenly. By the way, you’ve got as good a chance as any one, Babe, of getting the gym prize.’

Barbara, who had taken their frank criticisms of her without a murmur, could not allow this last assertion to pass. She pulled up suddenly in the middle of the field, and looked first at one and then at the other of her two companions. ‘What do you mean?’ she gasped.

'Hullo! said Jean. What's the matter?'

'Oh, you're putting it on; don't be affected,' scoffed Angela.

'No, she isn't putting it on; she never does,' objected Jean. 'Look at home, Angela, before you talk about affectation.'

'All the same,' continued Angela, undisturbed, 'you must know you're perfectly splendid at gym, Babs. Now, don't you?'

‘I’d quite forgotten,’ confessed Barbara, as they resumed their stroll. ‘I’m so bad at most things that I’d got out of the way of thinking I could do gymnastics. But, of course, the boys always said I wasn’t bad, for a girl; and once I got the prize at my class in London. There were only thirty of us, though,’ she added modestly.

They strolled on as far as the gate at the bottom of the field, and stood looking over it into the lane below. The lane was out of bounds, which lent it an added charm; and they liked nothing better than to come here on half-holidays and lean against the gate, and wonder where the grass-grown path led to and what it looked like when it got round the corner by the old elm tree. To-day, they had scarcely taken up their position there when they were startled by sounds of distress from below; and the next minute a small boy came slouching along the lane, crying bitterly.

‘Hullo!’ said Jean. ‘What’s the matter?’

The boy was so surprised that he stopped crying and looked up. He was a very pitiable little object, in corduroy garments that could not properly be called knickerbockers and yet were too short for trousers, with a small area of grey flannel shirt appearing above them, and a red worsted comforter twisted round his neck, making an unbecoming patch of colour against his pinched and tear-stained little face.

‘What is the matter?’ asked Angela, pityingly.

‘Have you hurt yourself?’ added Barbara, as the child only stared at them vacantly.

With a little more coaxing and the bribe of a piece of dusty chocolate that came from the depths of Barbara’s pocket, he was at last induced to mumble out a confused statement of his woes. Between the quaver in his voice and the broadness of his speech they had a hard matter to understand what he said; but Angela, who lived in another part of the same county, managed after a while to translate to the others that he was crying because his father was away looking for work, and his mother could not pay the rent, and they were all going into the ‘house’ to-morrow. To Bobby Hearne, who was smarting under the remarks of the neighbours’ children, it was the last part of his story that seemed the worst; but the triumvirate only grasped the fact that starvation and poverty really stood before them in the person of

the small boy with the red comforter round his neck. They looked at one another breathlessly, for the same thought was in all their minds.

‘It’s the opportunity!’ said Jean, solemnly.

‘They’re really starving!’ cried Barbara, clapping her hands joyfully. ‘We must go and feed them—’

‘And give them clothes,’ added Angela, enthusiastically; ‘and pocket-money!’

Babs pulled a purse out of her pocket. ‘Here’s three and sevenpence halfpenny, and I’ve got ten shillings more in my left-hand corner drawer,’ she said earnestly. ‘Will that be enough, do you think?’

Jean had been thinking deeply. ‘It’s no use giving anything to that scrap of a child,’ she decided. ‘We must go and see his mother first, and find out if his story is true. My father says that indis-indiscrim-in-*ate* charity does an awful lot of harm. We don’t want to do indiscrimin-*ate* charity, do we? Come along, you two, and look sharp!’

They clambered over the gate and dropped into the lane, one by one. Barbara was the last, and she almost forgot the solemn reason for their expedition in the thrilling thought that they were going to find out at last where the lane went to. She was quite unprepared for the disappointment she felt when they turned the corner by the old elm tree and the forbidden world beyond burst upon their view. After all, the lane was just the same round the corner, except that it was not quite so interesting, for it grew less grassy as it went on, and finally widened out into a kind of cart-track that was anything but romantic. An enchanted princess might flee with a prince down a grass-grown lane that wound away to nowhere in particular but she would never dream of stumbling over sharp flint stones and splashing through puddles in a common cart-track. The other two did not seem to notice that there was anything wrong with the lane, though; they just kept on straight ahead, with Bobby Hearne shuffling along between them, and Barbara had to run a little to catch them up.

‘Is it far?’ she asked.

‘Oop agin the top end o’ the village,’ explained Bobby, who was fast losing his shyness under the influence of these wonderful young ladies, who

carried such funny sticks in their hands, and talked in such a magnificent way about pocket-money.

‘That’s close to the church, on the way up from the station,’ said Jean. ‘Is yours the cottage with the red roof, Bobby, or the one with roses all over it?’

Bobby looked vacant again; he did not recognise his home from Jean’s picturesque description. ‘There be foive pig-styes along of it,’ he announced, after long and careful reflection.

The cart-track brought them to a ploughed field, across which they plodded laboriously, and in the end it landed them in the road that ran right through the village. They met a good many inquisitive glances as they hastened along, for the young ladies of Wootton Beeches very rarely left their own grounds, and certainly never appeared in the village except on their way to and from the station. They found their courage slowly evaporating in the face of the curiosity they provoked, and there was very little of it left by the time they arrived at the cottage with the five pig-styes. Talking about good works in the junior playroom was a very different matter, they found, from carrying them out in a strange cottage, where numbers of strange children came out from dark corners and gaped at them without saying a word of welcome. Babs and Angela pushed forward their leader, and peered over her shoulder as she stood hesitating on the threshold.

‘Hello, mother!’ shouted Bobby, hustling his brothers and sisters out of the way and penetrating into the gloomy recesses of the cottage. ‘Here be three yoong ladies come to see ye.’

A harassed-looking woman came in from the back-yard, and started when she saw the three faces in the doorway. ‘It be proper good of ye, for sure,’ she said, casting nervous glances from her unexpected visitors to a bed that was made up on the floor, near the empty grate; ‘but my girl Lilian Eliza, she be ill, she be, and ye’d best not come in, I reckon.’

She did not know the power of the Canon’s address. At the sound of her voice, the triumvirate, neither understanding nor heeding her warning, stepped firmly into the room.

‘I’m so sorry your daughter is ill,’ began Barbara, fumbling hastily in her pocket. ‘Would three and sevenpence halfpenny be any good, do you think?

And I've got ten shillings more in my—'

Jean nudged her violently, but the woman's eyes had glistened at the mention of money, and Babs emptied her purse impetuously on the table.

'Bless ye, missy, for sure!' said the woman, gratefully. 'Lilian Eliza, she be goin' to the infirmary to-morrow, she be, and I can git her Neighbour Bunce's spring-cart wi' that, I can.'

Her evident gratitude reproached Jean, and she forgot all about the dangers of indiscriminate charity. She took the other two by the hand and pulled them away to the door.

'We'll come back again directly, Mrs. Hearne,' she called out. Then the triumvirate broke into a run, and vanished along the road before the eyes of the bewildered woman.

'What are we going to do?' asked Angela, panting, when they once more climbed the gate at the bottom of the nine-acre field.

'We're going straight to the larder, straight as we can go; and then, we're just going to bag all the food we can carry,' answered Jean, in an odd, determined sort of tone. 'Did you see the look on that woman's face when you gave her the money, Babe? I believe–I believe they've all had nothing to eat for *weeks*! It's–it's horrible to think of!'

There was a sob in her voice, and the other two were silent from sympathy and a kind of awkwardness. They had never heard Jean talk like this before, and it finished the work begun by the Canon's address. There was not the thought of a scruple in either of their minds when they arrived at the back of the house, and Jean bade them climb up by the water-butt and get into the larder through the open window.

'There's sure to be a hook you can undo so as to move the wire netting aside,' she told them. 'If we went round to the door, some one might make a fuss; and there's no time for fusses.'

'Jean knows everything,' murmured Angela, as she found the hook and squeezed successfully through the window.

'What shall we take?' whispered Babs, slipping after her into the dimly lighted larder. 'I think they'd like jam tart and plum-pudding, don't you?'

She shifted the two delicacies dearest to her heart on to one dish, and handed it up to Jean, who stood poised uncertainly on the edge of the water-butt.

‘The jelly and the cranberry pie look rather nice,’ said Angela, her own mouth watering for them, as she passed them out to Jean.

‘Can’t you find something substantial?’ urged Jean, when she had deposited the second load on the ground beside the water-butt.

The two children in the larder looked round at the well-stocked shelves. There was cold beef, to be sure, and a large tureen of mutton broth; but these did not strike them as being at all the sort of present that any one would like to have.

‘Apple dumplings,’ settled Angela, swiftly, as her eye fell on a large dish full of them; and they handed the apple dumplings after the other things, and then followed them by way of the water-butt to the impatient Jean, who had already loaded herself with the jelly and the cranberry pie.

‘Come along!’ said Jean. ‘If we’re not quick, we shall be late for tea. Besides, we must get back to see Finny, and explain to her what we’ve done. She might be cross if she found it out for herself.’

‘Are you sure she won’t be cross anyhow?’ asked Barbara, as she staggered along in her wake, carrying the dish that contained the plum-pudding and the jam tart.

‘Not if we explain exactly why we did it,’ said Angela, gasping for breath just behind her companions. She found the apple dumplings decidedly weighty.

‘Nobody,’ said Jean, emphatically, ‘could mind anything we chose to do in a cause like this. Besides, there wasn’t time to ask leave first, was there? When people haven’t had anything to eat for weeks, you can’t keep them waiting for food while you ask *leave*, can you?’

The shortest cut to the nine-acre field was across the lawn at the side of the house, and then through the little gate in the shrubbery. It was much less secluded than the longer way by which they had come, but detection had to be risked, now that the time was so short. And even if they were caught, as Jean pointed out in a whisper, it would be worth while to suffer in such a noble cause; and as for the Hearnes, Finny would be sure to send them on

the things as soon as she heard how many weeks they had been without food.

‘But how can we suffer, if Finny isn’t going to be cross about it?’ argued Barbara, becoming heated in the effort to keep the plum-pudding from rolling into the jam tart and sticking to it. ‘You said—’

Her sentence was never finished, for just as they left the shadow of the house and were going to strike across the lawn, they heard the click of the little gate opposite, and two figures emerged suddenly from the shrubbery. There was still light enough to disclose that they were the Canon and Barbara’s disenchanted beast, the Doctor.

Even then, the triumvirate might have escaped detection by slipping round to the back of the house again before they were seen; and Jean had the presence of mind to sound a retreat in an agonised whisper, and turned sharply round herself. But Barbara’s effort to follow her example was too much for the uncertain balance of the plum-pudding. It chose that very moment to tumble into the jam tart, and the two slid together from the dish and rolled to the feet of the astonished Canon.

‘Upon my word,’ exclaimed the old gentleman, starting violently, ‘Elizabeth’s establishment is full of surprises!’

The triumvirate kept very close together at the edge of the grass lawn, and waited for the two gentlemen to approach. Very little of their enthusiasm remained to keep up their spirits, for the erratic behaviour of the plum-pudding made even the pursuit of good works seem foolish and unnecessary.

‘What are you children doing here?’ asked the Canon, and his voice distinctly took a note of disapproval. He did not know very much about girls, though his niece assured him they were not unlike little boys; but he was quite sure that it was not the right thing for plum-puddings to be rolling across the lawn at that time of day, and disapproval seemed to be demanded by the circumstance.

The effect on the three children of his mild attempt at severity was immediate. Babs was struck dumb by it; anything so dreadful as the anger of a Canon had never occurred to her as a possible result of feeding the poor, and she had to think it all over before she could say anything. Angela

put down the apple dumplings, the weight of which had become intolerable, and began to cry softly. Jean pulled herself together with a frantic effort, and clutched the dish she was holding so fiercely that the jelly on the summit of the cranberry pie shivered and shook.

‘It was my fault,’ she blurted out, looking steadfastly over the edge of the dish at the well-blacked boots of the Canon. ‘I made them go out of bounds, and visit the poor, and–and climb into the larder window to fetch things for the woman who looked so hungry. They wouldn’t have gone, if it hadn’t been for me. I made them–it was my fault.’

‘No, it wasn’t; it was all our faults,’ wept Angela, in a confused mumble.

Babs stepped forward and tried hard not to break down and cry too. ‘Please don’t rag Jean for it,’ she begged. ‘The boy was crying, and we all thought it was the opportunity come at last—’

‘What opportunity?’ asked the Canon, looking extremely puzzled.

‘To–to do what you said in your sermon,–good works, and feeding the poor, and all that,’ faltered Barbara. Somehow, when she expressed it that way, it seemed like putting the blame on the Canon, and she was sure it could not be right for a little girl to blame a Canon. Added to this, she was possessed with the dread that they had only made themselves look ridiculous after all; and she expected that they would all three be very heartily laughed at, as soon as the old gentleman began to understand their story. She was determined in her own mind that if the Doctor should join in the laugh against them, a certain fairy prince should be turned once more into a beast and banished for ever from her kingdom. She was bound to admit, however, that the Doctor, so far, had not shown the least interest in them or their story.

‘But–but I quite fail to understand,’ said the Canon, rather testily. ‘Who was the boy you speak of, and what had you to do with him?’

‘It was Bobby Hearne,’ answered Jean, still staring down at his boots; ‘and if you only knew how hungry they all looked when we got to the cottage—’

She was interrupted by the Doctor, who suddenly behaved in the most extraordinary manner. For the first time he appeared to be listening to what they were saying, and he sprang right in front of the Canon and grasped Jean by the shoulder.

‘Do you mean to say you have been into the Hearnes’ cottage?’ he cried, shaking her in his impatience until the jelly and the cranberry pie ran some danger of following the example of the plum-pudding. ‘Were you stupid enough to go right inside?’

‘Yes!’ answered the triumvirate, with one voice.

The Doctor took his hand away, and turned with a shrug of his shoulders to the Canon.

‘The Hearne girl is down with scarlet fever,’ he said in a suppressed tone.

CHAPTER XIII

IN ‘QUORRANTEEN’

‘My dear darling dearest Father,–We are in quorranteen that’s Jean Murray and Angela Wilkins and me becos we tried to feed the poor after the cannon’s sermon and the poor had scarlet fever and now praps we shall have scarlet fever too and in case we do we’ve got to stop in quorranteen for eight days and it’s an awful shame becourse it gives us such a little time to practis for the gym prize. The cannon is Finny’s uncle and he’s awfully nice though a little unreesonable Jean says and Jean knows bekause her father is a professor and he has ofered a prize for whoever is best at the gym display on the break up day. I mean the cannon and not Jean’s father. Quorranteen is a little house built by itself in the garden and connected with the school by a covvered passage that leads into the front hall because Jean says it’s no use being in quorranteen unless you’re quite sure no one can catch things off you so we are issolated. All the same we do free exercises every morning just to keep our mussels in good order for the gym competition and I tell them fairy stories when their’s nothing else to do and Angela says they’re not bad only she likes reel stories best which is a great pitty becos I don’t know any reel stories but still they put up with my kind of stories very well and Jean says I’m a funny kid. We have our dinner early so that we can go out in the garden while the other girls are having theirs so that no one can catch anything off us and we are alowed to go all over Finny’s garden as well as the nine aker field and we are really in a very supperior possition Jean says. Sumtimes for a great treat one of the big girls is alowed to come and talk to us from the garden and we stand at the window and shout down to her because you can’t catch things off people that way Jean says and the other two nearly always vote for Margaret that’s the head girl who is adorrable and divvine Jean says but I vote for Ruth who is a brick. The worst of being in quorranteen is that I have learnt the true charracter of the doctor and Kit always said he was a beast but I didn’t think he was a beast but now I think he must be rather a beast because he is so horrid and unsimpathetick he always behaves as if we were very naughty

and wicked for wanting to feed the poor and giving such a lot of trubble insted of understanding that it was all the cannon's fault for preaching that sermon which meant something quite diferent and how were we to know that the poor had scarlet fever? I think we were rather silly and it was our silly silliness that I minded most but the doctor doesn't seem to think that and he looks at our tungs and he says what's that? to every paper bag he sees about in the quorranteen which is only hardbake or chocalate from the big girls. Jean says he is much nicer to me than to Angela or her but I haven't noticed any diference myself and I don't want him to be nice to me if he isn't nice to them it isn't fair or above bord is it father? Anuther bother is that Finny hasn't said a word to us yet about feeding the poor and giving such a lot of trubble and I think she's very cross and is saving up for an enormous skolding but Jean says no it's Finny's way to give us time to think it over before she says anything and it's just dissipline Jean says. Besides, she can't be very cross or else she wouldn't have gone on feeding the poor I mean the Hearnes ever since we came into the quorranteen which is what she's been doing because she told us so and they haven't had to go into the workhouse after all.'

Barbara had scribbled so far uninterrupted, but when she picked up her third sheet of exercise paper and began to cover that too, the patience of her companions became exhausted.

'I say,' said Jean, yawning, 'I wish you'd stop writing and talk; I never knew any one so fond of writing as you are, Babe.'

Quarantine, after nearly a week of it, was beginning to lose its novelty, and all the paper bags that the sure aim of the head girl managed to deposit in their prison did not make up for the many hours of her society that they were unable to enjoy. Even the arithmetic lessons of Miss Tomlinson, and the plain-work evenings conducted by 'Smithy,' would not have seemed nearly so unattractive now as they did a week ago.

'All right,' said Babs, putting down her blue pencil; 'I don't mind stopping, but I thought Angela didn't want to talk.'

Jean glanced round at Angela, and Angela immediately put her hand to her head and sighed heavily. She had been doing this for some minutes without making any effect upon Barbara, although Barbara had been the first to notice that there was something unusual in her behaviour. That was so like

Babs! She was always the first to notice anything, but she had such an unsatisfactory way of passing it over, whatever it was, that it was no advantage to anybody unless some one else noticed it too.

‘Hullo!’ said Jean, staring; ‘what’s the matter, Angela?’

‘I’ve got a splitting headache,’ murmured Angela, half closing her eyes.

‘Anything else?’ asked Jean, becoming interested.

‘My throat is rather sore, I think, and–and I’m sure I’m feverish,’ answered Angela, faintly; and she shivered to show how feverish she was.

‘Oh,’ said Barbara, opening her eyes, ‘that’s how Dr. Hurst said it began; and then Finny dragged him away, and we didn’t hear any more.’

‘*Don’t* say anything so dreadful,’ murmured Angela, complacently. ‘What shall I do if I can’t go in for the competition?’

‘Besides, you might have it very badly and die,’ said Jean, consolingly.

‘Yes, you might. We knew a boy on the opposite side of the square, and *he* died,’ remarked Babs. ‘Only, I’m not sure if it was scarlet fever. His sister used to come and tell us about it, and she said he had a kettle with a long spout in his room, all day long, and it puffed out smoke at him, and made such a funny gurgling sound that she used to be afraid to pass his door after dark. Perhaps it wasn’t scarlet fever,’ she added, out of consideration for Angela, ‘but he did die.’

Angela looked from one to the other and shook her head mournfully. ‘I expect it was,’ she said. ‘It sounds exactly like it.’

‘Oh, yes,’ continued Jean, cheerfully. ‘I *know*, because a cousin of mine had something that was catching once, and she nearly lost her sight through it, and she’s had to wear spectacles ever since, and her eyes are all red and shiny, and she looks a hideous sight. I expect that was scarlet fever too.’

Angela shuddered, and quite closed her eyes that time. Her two comforters looked at each other expressively.

‘Poor Angela!’ said Jean, stroking her forehead. ‘It’s awful hard lines that you should be the one to catch it.’

‘Oh, never mind about that,’ answered the victim, meekly. ‘I’m glad it’s me and not you.’

‘Lots of people don’t die, you know,’ added Barbara, taking hold of her hand and waggling it up and down in a way that was intended to express sympathy.

‘N–no,’ said Angela, with some reluctance; ‘but lots of people do. Anyhow, I hope I shall be brave, whatever happens.’ And she stifled a sigh.

‘Of course you will,’ said Jean, warmly. ‘*We* know that!’

‘If–if this should be the last time we are together before they separate us,’ continued Angela, opening her eyes again and looking up at them appealingly, ‘you *will* remember, won’t you, that—’

The door opened and put an abrupt stop to her pathetic last request. The triumvirate, still clasping hands affectionately, looked round and met the astonished gaze of the head-mistress.

‘What’s the matter with Angela?’ she inquired briskly.

Angela closed her eyes again hastily. The other two prepared valiantly to defend her position.

‘She’s got a headache and a sore throat, and she’s feverish,’ answered Jean, glibly.

‘She thinks she’s got it,’ added Babs, coming straight to the point.

They fully expected Miss Finlayson to do something startling to show her concern at the approaching peril of Angela; but Miss Finlayson merely smiled.

‘Oh, so that’s what she thinks, is it?’ she observed. ‘And may I ask if that is why you have chosen this particular moment to hang over her more closely than usual?’

The triumvirate loosed hands, and Miss Finlayson came and looked very sharply at the unconscious features of the sufferer; then she suddenly whipped a thermometer out of her pocket and into the open mouth before her. Angela sat up in dismay, and tried to protest; but Miss Finlayson smiled again and pressed her gently back.

‘You mustn’t speak, or we shall not be able to find out your temperature,’ she said, and Angela put on a resigned air, and suffered in silence.

‘Now,’ continued the head-mistress, pleasantly, ‘we can have a few minutes’ conversation, while we are waiting to discover whether Angela has scarlet fever or not. To begin with, I want to ask you if you remembered, when you went out of bounds last Thursday, that you were abusing the trust I had placed in you? Recollect!–I do not keep policemen at every corner to spy over you when you are left to yourselves, but I do put you on your honour not to do anything you know I have forbidden. Did you think of this, Jean?’

Jean reddened and looked down.

‘No, I didn’t,’ she blurted out. ‘I forgot all about the bounds, at first, and I only thought you would like us to feed the poor, and it was such a grand opportunity. And then, afterwards—’

‘Yes–afterwards?’ said Miss Finlayson, encouragingly, as Jean hesitated.

‘Afterwards, when I saw that woman look like she did, I never thought of you or anything,’ she muttered with an effort; and she was very red indeed by the time she had finished.

Miss Finlayson took her hand and held it between her own, and then turned to Barbara.

‘Was that your reason too, Babs?’ she asked.

‘No, it wasn’t,’ answered Babs, without hesitation. ‘I did remember about going out of bounds directly we climbed over the gate; but I saw the other two had forgotten, so I didn’t say anything.’

The thermometer nearly fell out of Angela’s mouth from surprise at this amazing admission; and Jean felt compelled to say something in Barbara’s defence.

‘You see, the boy was crying so,’ she interrupted anxiously; ‘and I suppose Babs thought—’

‘Hush!’ said the head-mistress, softly; ‘I want Babs to tell me what she thought.’

Barbara was almost as red as Jean by this time. ‘I didn’t think about the boy, or the poor, or anything,’ she confessed; ‘but I wanted to see whether the lane did lead to the enchanted grotto, where the beautiful princess—’

She paused, because she remembered just in time that nobody ever understood about those things. Miss Finlayson was watching her carefully.

‘And did it?’ she asked quietly.

‘Oh no,’ said Barbara; ‘it was *horrible* when it got round the corner.’

Miss Finlayson nodded, and smiled her own mysterious smile. Then she took the thermometer out of Angela’s mouth.

‘And what was your reason, Angela?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Angela, rather foolishly. ‘Jean said “Come on!” and we’d promised to share the first opportunity that came; and Babs went, and so of course I went too.’

Miss Finlayson looked relieved. ‘You have made me feel much happier, children,’ she said, ‘because I see now that you did not realise what you were doing, and that your own reasons seemed good enough to you at the time. If I thought I could not trust to your honour any more, I should be most unhappy. Do you think you understand?’

The triumvirate looked very thoughtful. Angela, who seemed to have forgotten all about her alarming symptoms, was the first to speak.

‘I suppose I ought to have found out whether the others were right before I followed them,’ she said.

Miss Finlayson nodded.

‘And we ought to have made sure we were right ourselves before we let her follow us, because Angela always follows,’ added Jean.

Miss Finlayson nodded again.

Barbara roused herself and shook back her hair. ‘I was the worst,’ she said impetuously. ‘I did remember about the bounds, and the others didn’t until afterwards. But I forgot about the honour part, truthfully!’

‘Yes,’ answered the head-mistress; ‘you were the worst, Babs; and you soon found out that the lane did not lead to the enchanted grotto, didn’t you? Now, what we can all see very clearly from this conversation is that we must think a little more carefully in future before we do things. The rules in my school are made for people who *think*, and not for people who have to

be told whether a thing is right or wrong. People of that kind are not the people for me. Are you going to let me trust you again in future, children?'

There was no doubt whatever from their faces that they thought she might; but Babs still wanted something cleared up.

'Was the Canon's sermon all wrong, then?' she asked in her straightforward manner. Jean and Angela looked at the head-mistress nervously; but Miss Finlayson did not seem to mind.

'The Canon's sermon was rather like my rules,' she pointed out; 'and it was meant for people who think. It is no use being unselfish in a thoughtless kind of way, or else you do as much harm as most people do by being selfish. I want you to try very hard to put lots of thought and cleverness into your good deeds all your life, so that by the time you are grown up your good deeds will be really worth doing. Then you will be able to carry out properly what the Canon told you; for, to tell the truth, the Canon's sermon was rather meant for grown-up thinking, and perhaps that is why you misunderstood it. But children's thinking is worth just as much in its own way; don't forget that, little girls.'

She jumped up and kissed them all round, then glanced hastily at her watch. 'It strikes me,' she said gravely, 'that if somebody looks out of the window in five minutes' time, somebody will see something in the garden.'

She was just going out of the room, when an exclamation from Barbara called her back. 'Why,' she said, 'you haven't told us about Angela's scarlet fever yet!'

'No more I have,' said the head-mistress, and she took the thermometer to the window and examined it. Angela tried rather feebly to recover her resigned expression, which she had completely dropped in the last few minutes; and her school-fellows exchanged a look of apprehension.

'Poor Angela!' said Miss Finlayson, pensively, as she dipped the thermometer into a glass of water.

Angela put her hand to her head, and the other two closed round her sympathetically.

'I am truly sorry for you,' continued Miss Finlayson, returning the thermometer to her pocket and sighing deeply.

The triumvirate gazed at her in a scared fashion.

‘Is she–is she going to have scarlet fever, *really*?’ asked Barbara, anxiously.

Miss Finlayson walked slowly across the room, shaking her head. She turned when she reached the door, and her eyes twinkled. ‘I am afraid not,’ she said, and they heard her laughing to herself as she ran downstairs.

The triumvirate had very little time to congratulate Angela on her escape before their attention was caught by a loud ‘Coo-ey!’ from the garden below. Certainly ‘quorranteen’ was full of diversions this afternoon.

‘Kit! Kit! That’s Kit!’ shouted Babs, and a series of flying leaps took her across to the window. In another minute the sash was flung wide, and she was leaning out as far as the laws of balance allowed her. She was right about the ‘Coo-ey!’ for there on the lawn below stood her favourite brother, and by his side stood Jill and Auntie Anna.

‘Well, well,’ said the old lady, leaning on her blue-knobbed cane and looking more like a witch than ever, ‘and what is the meaning of this, I should like to know? A fine lot of trouble you’re giving people with your tricks, you young monkey!’

‘Oh, it’s all right,’ Babs assured her; ‘we’ve made it up with Finny, and she’s not a bit cross, and next time we’re going to think first, and we’re never going to pay a bit of attention to the old Canon till we’re grown up. Then we shan’t make any more mistakes, she says.’

‘It’s to be hoped not, for I think you’ve made a young silly of yourself all the same,’ remarked Christopher, frankly. ‘Whatever made you do it, Babe?’

Barbara looked a little crestfallen. It would be easier to explain their escapade to twenty Canons than to one brother, even when it was a favourite brother like Kit. Jill came hurriedly to the rescue.

‘Never mind about that, Kit,’ she said. ‘Think how lucky it is that she hasn’t caught scarlet fever, after all.’

Barbara cheered up. ‘Even Angela doesn’t think she’s going to have it now,’ she observed; ‘and she’s been thinking she’s got it, ever since we went into quarantine; so we shall be able to come out again the day after to-morrow. Of course it means sums and flannel petticoats and all those horrible things

as well; but still, we shall be able to practise up for the gym display, and that's much more important. You're all coming to the gym display, aren't you?'

'Rather!' said Kit. 'It's the day after the others break up; and even Egbert says he doesn't mind coming, though it's only a girls' school, and he says he doesn't expect much. Of course, Will is awfully keen on coming, and so is Peter; but that's only for the grub, so don't you make any mistake about it.'

'I don't know why Egbert is so mighty grand,' objected Barbara. 'Our gym is really *serious*, I can tell you. You should see Angela on the rings; and as for Jean Murray–why, I forgot! You don't know them yet!'

She disappeared abruptly from the window, while Auntie Anna said something about leaving the young people to themselves, and strolled off towards the house. Kit was attacked with a sudden fit of shyness at the prospect of being presented to two perfectly strange schoolgirls; and he shouted at Barbara to 'come back and chuck it!' But Barbara did not hear him, and he edged behind Jill for protection.

Upstairs, in the 'quorranteen,' Barbara was trying with some difficulty to persuade Jean and Angela to show themselves.

'Oh no!' they both said, getting as far away as possible from the window, and contriving to look neglected. 'Never mind us, Babe; *please* go on talking to your people.'

'But it's *Kit*!' represented Babs, as if that settled the matter at once. 'He's my favourite brother, and he's a genius, and he's only thirteen, and he has asthma so badly you'd think he was going to die. You *must* want to know Kit! Besides, Jill is there too.'

'Jill Urquhart?' cried Angela. 'Why didn't you say so before? Of course, we want to see Jill Urquhart!'

So the triumvirate squeezed themselves on to the narrow window-seat, and hung in a row over the window-ledge, while Jill smiled and nodded from below, and said pleasant things to them in her pretty soft voice. For all that, her old school-fellows did not feel at their ease with her; for they had suddenly made the discovery that Jill Urquhart, who used to be the privileged possessor of boots to be unlaced and desks to be put away, and

other things now connected with Margaret Hulme, had somehow changed into a daintily dressed, grown-up sort of visitor, who had to hold up her skirt because the grass was wet. No one, not even the head girl, held up her skirt at Wootton Beeches.

‘This is Jean Murray, Kit, and that’s Angela Wilkins,’ said Babs, by way of introduction; and Christopher, who was still seeking protection behind his cousin, pulled off his cap and grinned. Then there was a pause, and the situation became rather strained. Barbara looked round at her two companions, and could not imagine what had come over them. Why, she wondered, did they not chatter away as they usually did? They only giggled faintly, however; and Angela was covered with blushes. So far, the introduction did not seem a success.

‘Angela can swing and turn and leave go with one hand and catch on again– I mean on the rings,’ said Barbara, by way of opening the conversation.

‘I can’t! What stories! Besides, it’s quite easy; anybody could!’ declared Angela, vehemently.

‘And Jean can turn coach-wheels as well as Peter,’ continued Babs, eagerly. ‘She can do hand-balance too, when Hurly-Burly isn’t looking; because we’re not allowed to do hand-balance, you see, so we’ve got to wait till no one is looking. Isn’t it wonderful of Jean?’

‘How *can* you, Babe?’ murmured Jean, reproachfully; and she concealed her confusion by staring up at the top of the elm tree opposite and pretending that she was not the person referred to.

‘They are very clever, aren’t they, Kit?’ said Jill, in a gentle, encouraging manner.

‘Oh, rather!’ said Kit, picking a blade of grass and gnawing it in his desperation.

‘And it will be most exciting to see Angela on the rings at the display, won’t it, Kit?’ continued Jill, smiling away more pleasantly than ever.

‘Oh, rather!’ said Kit, again; and he wound the blade of grass elaborately round his little finger.

‘What we can do is nothing to Babs, though!’ said Angela, making a mighty effort to overcome her shyness. ‘She’s the best in the whole school!’

‘Oh, the Babe!’ remarked Christopher, leaving the shelter of Jill’s big hat, and suddenly regaining confidence. ‘*She* doesn’t count.’

Conversation flourished more easily after that, for the triumvirate combined immediately in an attempt to prove to Kit that the Babe did count. Indeed, the argument grew so hot and furious that the Doctor, who happened at that moment to make his call upon his small patients, knocked three times at the door of the room, and finally had to walk in unannounced. There was a look of annoyance on his face, for he already resented being compelled to waste his precious time in attending three healthy young schoolgirls who had nothing whatever the matter with them, and would not have been in their present plight but for a piece of childish folly. When he found that his patients had not even the grace to be ready for his visit, his irritation increased.

‘Excuse me,’ he began, ‘are you aware—?’ He paused and frowned, for it was quite evident that none of them was aware of anything except of what was going on in the garden. Nothing was to be seen of his patients except an array of black legs along the window-seat; the rest of them appeared to be hanging over the ledge outside in a perilous and inelegant position; and all three of them were gabbling away as fast as their tongues would let them.

‘Well, you wait for the competition, that’s all!’ Angela was proclaiming shrilly.

‘It all depends on how soon that stupid Doctor lets us out of this hole,’ added Jean, with suppressed scorn in her voice.

‘He’s so funny; he never says anything important, and he only looks glum, as if he was *so* sorry for himself,’ chimed in Babs, with a laugh.

Dr. Wilson Hurst tapped his stick smartly on the table; and there was a sudden pause. Then came three thuds on the floor by the window-seat, and the triumvirate stood facing him in varying stages of confusion.

‘We–we didn’t know you were there,’ ventured Barbara.

‘So I gathered,’ said the Doctor, without a smile. ‘Will you kindly show me your tongues?’

He did not want to see their tongues particularly; but it seemed the most obvious means at his disposal for producing silence. The rapidity with

which three tongues simultaneously darted out for his inspection reminded him irresistibly of mechanical toys, and he very nearly allowed himself to smile.

‘That will do,’ he said, controlling himself sternly; and he took out his watch and felt Barbara’s pulse. The moment the child’s tongue was her own again, she began to make use of it.

‘You’re sorry that we are not any iller, aren’t you, Dr. Hurst?’ she remarked.

‘Eh? What?’ said the Doctor, taken aback. ‘I–I don’t know what you are talking about.’

‘Well, you always look as though you would like us so much better if we *really* had scarlet fever instead of only waiting for it,’ explained Babs, pleasantly. ‘*Would* you like us better, Dr. Hurst, if we really had scarlet fever?’

She had so nearly guessed the truth with her quick, impish perception, that the Doctor dropped her hand abruptly and passed on to Angela. ‘There doesn’t seem to be much the matter with any of you,’ he said, by way of conducting the conversation on strict medical lines. He looked so cross about it, however, that the attempt did not prosper. Barbara, in the innocence of her heart, thought he needed cheering up.

‘Are you coming to the display, Dr. Hurst?’ she asked politely.

‘The–I beg your pardon?’ he murmured, staring hard at his watch.

‘The gymnastic display at the end of the term, when we’re going to compete for the Canon’s prize, you know,’ proceeded Barbara. ‘Everybody’s coming–Jill too! So *you* will, won’t you, Dr. Hurst?’

‘Really, I don’t know,’ answered the Doctor; and he dropped Angela’s hand just as hastily, and passed on to Jean Murray. Babs looked a little puzzled for a moment, and then her face cleared.

‘Oh, of course, you don’t like Jill! I’d forgotten that,’ she remarked with a smile. ‘But that doesn’t matter, because you needn’t sit next to her, need you? I don’t think Jill would mind your not sitting next to her,’ she added reflectively.

The Doctor began to wish very heartily that he had accepted Miss Finlayson’s offer to let one of the teachers accompany him from the house,

and he prepared to beat a speedy retreat. But Angela, in her bland and tactless manner, put the finishing touch to his embarrassment and cut off his retirement.

‘Jill Urquhart is outside on the lawn now,’ she observed quite pointlessly.

‘So she is!’ cried Barbara, clapping her hands. ‘Then you’ll come to the window and speak to her, won’t you, Dr. Hurst? Kit is there too!’

‘You must really excuse me,’ said the Doctor, stiffly, as he took up his hat and stick; ‘but, really—’

‘Oh, Dr. Hurst, *do* come,’ begged the child, her little black eyes bright with entreaty. In spite of her temporary disloyalty during the period of ‘quorranteen’ to the prince who had once been a beast, she still considered him worthy to stay in her kingdom with the magician and other privileged folk; and it really hurt her to feel that he did not appreciate Jill and Kit, and that Jill and Kit on their side did not know he had been disenchanted quite six weeks ago. Surely, she thought, if they were all properly brought together, they could not fail to like one another.

The Doctor hesitated, and Barbara waited anxiously. He thought he only had to decide whether he should leave at once, or whether he should stay and be laughed at by the other schoolgirl outside–the one who had made him feel so stupid at Mrs. Crofton’s dinner-party. But to Barbara his decision meant much more than that, for it was going to determine whether a certain beast was a prince, or whether a certain prince was a beast.

So she waited with a look of thrilling expectancy on her face; and the other two, who had never seen her look like that before, began to feel a little doubtful about the way she was behaving.

‘I say, Babe, don’t!’ whispered Jean, tugging at her.

The little movement roused the Doctor, and recalled him to the absurdity of his position. He bowed, and walked with sudden determination to the door.

‘Good afternoon,’ he said curtly; and the disappointment on Barbara’s face haunted him in the most tiresome manner for the rest of the day.

Babs stood motionless for nearly a minute after he had gone. Then she smiled a little wistfully to herself.

‘After all, he must have found it rather lonely without a princess, and I can’t find a princess,’ she reflected out loud.

‘What *are* you talking about?’ asked Jean.

‘Hadn’t we better go back to Jill?’ added Angela, impatiently.

Barbara gave a start. ‘What a silly duffer I am!’ she cried joyfully. ‘Of course, there’s Jill; and she’s been there all the time!’

‘Yes, she has,’ said Jean, bluntly, ‘and it’s time you remembered it, for she must be tired of waiting for us by this—’

Barbara interrupted her with another remark–rather a mournful one this time.

‘It never comes right,’ she sighed. ‘Now, I’ve got a princess without a prince!’

CHAPTER XIV

PREPARING FOR THE DISPLAY

Dr. Hurst did not call again at the little house in the garden, and the triumvirate came out of quarantine in due course, very little subdued by their eight days' imprisonment, and more on the alert than ever for any piece of excitement that might come their way. The junior playroom, having passed an exceedingly dull and uneventful week during their absence, welcomed their return with joy; and it was perhaps fortunate for the internal affairs of Wootton Beeches that there was going to be a gymnastic display to absorb the energies of its wilder spirits. As the days rolled on and the end of the term drew nearer and nearer, the conversation on both sides of the curtain became almost entirely limited to the one topic of the Canon's prize; and those who were not among the chosen competitors for it spent the best part of their time in watching the others practise in the big gymnasium, and in disputing hotly the various chances of the claimants. Miss Finlayson had settled that the six morocco-bound volumes offered by her uncle should be divided into two prizes, one for the senior and one for the junior division of the school; and while it was generally agreed that Margaret Hulme would carry off the first, the discussion in the junior playroom as to the winner of the second was endless. Most of the girls were agreed that Charlotte Bigley and the three members of the triumvirate shared equal chances, on the whole, of being successful; and a great deal would depend, it was said, on the exercises chosen for competition. For, until a week before the great day, nobody knew what the exact programme was to be. 'It's one of Finny's dodges,' Charlotte Bigley declared, 'because she wants us to be good all round, and not to grind at one or two things just for the sake of the prize. It's like the prize-giving in the Christmas term; we never know what the prizes are going to be for, till after the exams. are over.'

So the excitement was great when Miss Burleigh walked into the gymnasium on the Saturday before the display, and called for silence so that she might read out the order of the competition. Even the younger children

forced themselves into a kind of uneasy order, as Hurly-Burly unfolded her sheet of foolscap paper; for the next few minutes would practically decide, they thought, who was to be the lucky one among the juniors.

‘First of all,’ announced the games-mistress, ‘the whole gymnastic class will open the display by an exhibition of step-marching.’ This was received with average interest, for it sounded like one of the ordinary gymnastic lessons, and had nothing to do with the competition. Miss Burleigh waited for the murmur of comments to subside, and went on. ‘Then the thirty-two girls chosen to compete for the prize will separate into two divisions; and the senior division, led by Margaret Hulme, will perform the following exercises:–’

Miss Burleigh paused again, but there were no comments this time.

‘First, wand exercises by the whole senior division; then a display on the horizontal bar, to be followed by one on the vaulting-horse,–competitors to choose between the bar and the horse,–and the whole to conclude with high jump. After tea, I will show you the exercises chosen for competition, and will help you to divide yourselves into sections.’

The buzz of remarks from the senior division lasted almost long enough to shake the loyalty of the younger children to the head girl; and they cast many reproachful glances towards the further end of the gymnasium, where Margaret formed the centre of an eager, chattering group. Then Hurly-Burly took pity on them and called for silence again, and the juniors had their chance at last.

‘The junior division, led by Charlotte Bigley, will go through the following exercises:–’ began Miss Burleigh. She did not mean to pause here, but a storm of remonstrance from the junior division drowned her next words.

‘Did you *ever*!’ cried the shrill voice of Angela Wilkins, who, with Jean and Barbara, sat perched on the top of the vaulting-horse.

‘Why doesn’t Jean lead?’ added Babs, indignantly.

‘I say, please don’t! I’m not nearly so good as you are,’ contradicted Jean, in a faint tone that lacked conviction.

‘Can’t you be quiet, you three?’ grumbled Mary Wells, who had a prejudice against the triumvirate, founded on many injuries. ‘As if anybody could lead better than Charlotte! The impudence of *some* kids—’

‘Hush-sh!’ interposed the audience generally, and Miss Burleigh struggled on.

‘First, Indian clubs for the whole section. After that—’

‘Jean–for certain!’ interrupted Barbara, nodding. ‘She bangs every one at clubs!’

‘There you go again!’ said the injured voice of Mary Wells. ‘Everybody knows that Charlotte—’

‘Oh, stop it!’ said Charlotte herself; and temporary peace was restored.

‘After that,’ continued Hurly-Burly, rapidly, ‘a display on the horizontal ladder, to be followed by one on the rings. Competitors to choose between—’

‘I bag rings!’ screamed Angela, at the top of her voice.

‘No, you don’t!’ said Mary Wells, in her stolid, aggravating way. ‘You’ve just got to wait till it’s settled for you, so there! We all know why you’re so anxious not to do the ladder; why, you can’t even manage a simple travel—’

‘How can you, Mary Wells?’ asked Angela, solemnly. ‘You know I can bear anything but an untruth; and to say that *I*—’

‘Sh-sh!’ said Miss Burleigh, vigorously, and she was again allowed a few seconds of silence. ‘The junior division will then conclude with rope-climbing.’

Hardly were the words out of her mouth than her listeners fell to disputing again.

‘Rope-climbing–Barbara!’ asserted Jean.

‘What are you talking about?’ cried Mary, with contempt. ‘Barbara is simply not *in* it with Charlotte; and what’s more, you know she isn’t, Jean Murray.’

‘Oh, the wicked stories some people can tell,’ sighed Angela. ‘Have you seen Barbara Berkeley swarm up the—’

‘Please, please don’t,’ implored Babs. ‘Can’t you see that Hurly-Burly wants to say something else?’

Being the champion in question, she could not very well side with Jean, as she usually did. Her appeal had some effect on the disputants, and Miss Burleigh, remembering it was a half-holiday, shrugged her shoulders good-naturedly and took advantage of the pause to proceed.

‘The display will take place at five o’clock on Thursday,’ she proclaimed; ‘supper will be at seven, and after supper, the Canon, who is coming from the North on purpose, will give away the prizes to the two successful competitors—’

‘That’s Margaret and Charlotte Bigley,’ interrupted Mary, noisily; and Hurly-Burly gave it up and fled, with her hands over her ears, just as Angela, with a yell of defiance, lost her balance and plunged down head-first from her perch on the vaulting-horse.

‘No, no! Margaret and Jean!’ she gasped out breathlessly, as she scrambled up again from the floor and brushed the dust from her hands and knees.

Jean sprang to her feet on the top of the vaulting-horse, and danced up and down in her excitement.

‘Margaret and the Babe!’ she shrieked, waving her arms wildly round her head.

But Barbara had slipped down after Angela, though not quite so precipitately, and had retired from the contest to a particular corner of the gymnasium, where the hot-water pipes projected sufficiently to form what might with imagination be considered a seat. It required some ingenuity, perhaps, to preserve any sort of balance on the edge of a row of hot-water pipes; but that was nothing to a small person who could never sit down tamely on a chair like other people, but always preferred the slanting surface of a desk, or something equally unaccommodating. So Babs felt the hot-water pipes with her grubby little hands, to make sure they were just the right heat to be sat upon, and then squeezed herself on to them contentedly, curled her legs away underneath, and in a few seconds was supremely unconscious of what was going on at the other end of the gymnasium. Jean Murray might yell herself hoarse in her defence, for all she knew or cared; for at that moment her mind was occupied with a far more important question.

It was Angela who first grew tired of waging war with Mary Wells without the valuable support of Barbara Berkeley. Angela could shriek with the shrillest, when once some one had told her what to shriek; but there was a solid calmness about Mary that carried more conviction with it, and Barbara's wit was the only thing to make any impression upon that. Besides, if Angela shrieked 'Margaret and Jean,' and Jean shrieked 'Margaret and the Babe,' who was there left but the Babe to shriek for Angela herself? So in a very short time Angela Wilkins also left the contest, and found her way to the place where the hot-water pipes projected into a perch for the youngest girl in the school.

'Hullo, Babe! What's up?' she inquired.

Barbara looked at her vaguely. Some one in a scarlet gymnasium frock certainly stood in front of her, but it had nothing whatever to do with what she was worrying over in her mind; so, at first, she did not take any notice.

'Aren't you coming to practise rings?' pursued Angela, who had seen Barbara look like this before, and knew from experience that in time the child would rouse herself sufficiently to answer her.

'Rings?' repeated Babs, vacantly.

'Oh, come on!' said Angela, impatiently. 'How you do moon about the place, to be sure! Don't you want to win the Canon's prize?'

Barbara's expression changed swiftly, and she frowned. 'Get away,' she growled, with unusual fierceness; and Angela stared and withdrew.

'Barbara Berkeley is in an awful fury,' she announced, when she got back to Jean.

'What about?' asked Jean.

'Oh, not *about* anything,' answered Angela, shrugging her shoulders. 'When the Babe is in a fury, it's never *about* anything, is it? It's inside her, or something,' she added, seeking in her mind for some explanation of the strange moods that made Barbara Berkeley a puzzle to every one.

'Inside her!' echoed Mary Wells, scornfully. 'What you two can see in that child I never can make out. Fancy making friends with any one who loses her temper *inside*!'

‘Well, it’s better than losing it *outside* and upsetting everybody by howling like a baby, because you can’t find your pencil-box, isn’t it, stupid?’ cried Jean.

Mary blushed painfully at the personal reference, and hastily changed the conversation. ‘Barbara Berkeley is a spoilt little kid,’ she retorted. ‘She’s the most sullen, ill-tempered, obstinate little—’ The words stayed at the tip of her tongue, for the unconscious subject of them had suddenly joined the group round Mary, and was staring at her in her most solemn and disconcerting manner.

Mary Wells felt foolish. There was something about the youngest girl in the school, when she looked like that, that would make any one feel foolish. But Babs had evidently not heard a word she had been saying.

‘Come on,’ she said, hooking her arm into Jean’s; ‘I want to ask you something.’

The two wandered away together down the long gymnasium.

‘Look here,’ began Barbara, impetuously, as soon as they were out of hearing of the others. ‘Are you keen on winning that prize?’

Jean drew a long breath. She wanted to take that prize back with her to the little home in Edinburgh, where she had been adored and spoiled for twelve whole years, more than she had ever wanted anything in the world; and she did not know how to answer Barbara’s unexpected question.

‘Why?’ she asked, at length.

Barbara took hold of a rope and waved it backwards and forwards to give herself courage. ‘Because,’ she blurted out, ‘I want to get it too,–*awfully*, and so does Angela, and–and we can’t all get it, can we?’

‘No,’ said Jean, looking at her curiously. She had thought she really was beginning to understand the Babe; and here she was, showing herself in a more puzzling light than ever.

‘You see,’ Barbara went on, swarming up the rope a couple of feet and making her next remark to the black hook in the beam above, ‘I’d like awfully to win it, because I don’t want the boys to think I’ve got too much like a girl to do things now; and because it’s so–so splendid to feel you *can* do things.’

She slid down the rope again, and Jean saw how her eyes were glowing and shining, and she felt a little more puzzled than before.

‘Then, Angela wants to get it because she’s always bottom in everything else,’ continued Barbara. ‘That’s not much of a reason, I think, especially when she hasn’t got any brothers–only millions of sisters, who don’t count; but still, she’ll be awfully disappointed if she doesn’t get it, won’t she?’

‘Yes,’ said Jean.

Babs curled the rope round her waist, and swung herself gently to and fro. The movement seemed to aid her reflections. ‘Why do *you* want to get it, Jean?’ she asked softly.

It was never easy to induce Jean to talk about herself; but if any one could do it, Barbara was the person. And, this time, she succeeded.

Jean drew another long breath, and clenched her fists.

‘Because I want to be first,’ she said slowly. ‘I want to be first in *everything*. I’d sooner be bottom than second! Of course you’ll think I’m a conceited pig,’ she added, almost fiercely, ‘but I can’t help that; I don’t expect you to understand.’ Then she muttered in a lower tone,–‘Nobody ever does, excepting only mother and father.’

Barbara’s eyes were fixed on her face, and there was a warmth in their blackness that Jean had only seen there once, and that was when she was writing to her father in America.

‘Good old Jean!’ she murmured. ‘It’s awfully hard to understand; but I’ll try–*truthfully*. And I’d like you to get the prize–I would, really. I didn’t want you to have it before; but I do now, Jean, old girl!’

‘I ought to want *you* to have it, but I don’t,’ sighed Jean, trying vainly not to be behindhand in unselfishness; ‘I just want it myself, so it’s no good pretending I don’t.’

There was silence between them for an instant; and from the other end of the gymnasium drifted the monotonous war-cries of Mary Wells and Angela Wilkins.

‘Margaret and Charlotte Bigley!’ shouted one.

‘Margaret and Jean Murray!’ added the other.

The enthusiasm was too infectious to be resisted. With a wild scream of glee, Jean and Babs raced the whole length of the room and flung themselves into the fray, without a thought of the opposite sentiments they had just been expressing to each other.

‘Margaret and the Babe!’ yelled Jean, brandishing an Indian club.

‘Margaret and Angela!’ came from the panting Barbara, just behind her.

Nothing but the entrance of Finny would have calmed the noisy tumult; but when they saw her standing on the platform, looking down at them with her best Saturday smile on her face, the clamour ended in a burst of laughter; and five or six of the more eager of them invaded the platform, and danced round her appealingly.

‘Do, do say who’s going to win,’ begged Barbara, catching hold of her sleeve.

‘It’s Margaret and the Babe, isn’t it?’ cried Jean.

‘No!’ shrilled Angela. ‘You mean Margaret and—’

‘Charlotte Bigley!’ gasped Mary Wells, squeezing herself into the front rank.

Miss Finlayson put out her arms and encircled as many of them as she could, and spun them round the platform with her.

‘Dear, dear little girls!’ she exclaimed, when she was out of breath and could dance no more. ‘Do you know what the Canon ought to have done, if he wanted to please *me*?’

‘What? What?’ cried a dozen voices.

‘He ought to have offered thirty-two prizes, and then I should not have been afraid of any of my children feeling disappointed,’ answered Miss Finlayson, nodding at them wisely; and, somehow, it seemed to Jean as if the head-mistress’s eyes rested longest of all upon her.

CHAPTER XV

THE GYMNASTIC DISPLAY

The junior division, drawn up in double file, stood assembled in the anteroom of the gymnasium, on the day of the great competition for the Canon's prize. The figure-marching by the whole class was over, and the senior division had just begun the wand exercises to the piano accompaniment of the German music-master, who, being the unlucky possessor of an unpronounceable name in three syllables, was generally known as 'Scales.' The applause which had followed after the marching had taken away the first shyness of the younger children; and even the prospect of doing separate exercises presently, before an audience of strangers, did not seem to be having much effect on the sixteen little girls in scarlet frocks who were waiting in the anteroom for their turn to come. Hurly-Burly, though supposed to be superintending affairs in the gymnasium, had to look in at the door more than once, to remind them that the crashing chords of 'Scales' did not drown everything; but just as she had succeeded in reducing them at last to order, a piece of information passed down the file from Charlotte Bigley, who stood nearest the doorway and had the best view of the gymnasium, upset them all once more.

'Margaret has forgotten the figure,' 'Margaret has put the others out,' 'Margaret has gone wrong,' 'Margaret Hulme has clean forgotten everything, and she's got to step out,' were the various forms in which the news travelled down to the end of the file, the last of all being the version of Angela Wilkins and therefore generally discredited.

'I don't believe a word of it!' said Jean, stoutly.

'Why, Margaret couldn't go wrong if she tried,' exclaimed Barbara, whose belief in the head girl, though slow in coming, was quite equal by this time to Jean's.

'She has, though,' declared Angela, who stood with Mary Wells just in front of Jean and Barbara.

Mary Wells, who had stepped out of rank on hearing the surprising news, now returned, and in her slow and conscientious manner proceeded to reprove Angela.

‘How you do exaggerate, Angela!’ she said, frowning. ‘Margaret only went a little wrong; and she’s caught up again all right. Isn’t it funny, though?’ she was obliged to add immediately, with a thrill of amazement in her voice.

The two children behind her for once were dumb. The head girl, according to their simple creed, could do no wrong; so when she did, what words had they left to use? Babs was the first to see a way out of the difficulty.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I expect she’s nervous. It makes you forget like anything, if you’re nervous. Once, when Egbert was being prepared for confirmation, he was so nervous–it was a strange clergyman, you know, and Egbert said he blinked–that he clean forgot his catechism, even the easy first part about your godfathers and godmothers. So that’s why Margaret forgot her steps, you see if it wasn’t!’

‘Nervous!’ echoed Jean, incredulously. ‘Who ever saw Margaret nervous? Do you think she’d be able to make every new kid who comes to the school quake in her shoes if she was *nervous*?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Babs, doubtfully. Margaret Hulme had certainly never made her quake in her shoes, even when she was a new girl; but she did not admit this to Jean. ‘Egbert can make people afraid of him too,’ she went on, ‘and he can thrash any chap you please, and he always washes his head in cold water *every* morning, even if there’s ice, and he has more ties and clothes and things than all the others put together, and he’s awfully grand and splendid, Egbert is,–but all the same, he was frightened of that strange clergyman. Can you see Egbert?’ she concluded proudly. ‘He’s at the end of them all, next to Jill. Wasn’t it jolly of Finny to put them right in the front row of the gallery?’

Her companions forgot Margaret for a minute or two in their efforts to stand on tiptoe and catch a glimpse through the open door of Barbara Berkeley’s five brothers. The various relatives who came to the break-up parties, and never seemed to exist at any other time except on letter-writing days, always caused a good deal of excitement among the girls, and added a

temporary importance to the most insignificant of them, provided she was lucky enough to possess a parent or even a cousin among the visitors.

‘They’re all mine,’ said Babs, glowing with the joy of possession. ‘I’ll introduce them to you at supper, if you like.’

‘I’m rather glad I haven’t any one belonging to me here,’ said Jean, cheating herself into a brief forgetfulness of the little home in Edinburgh. ‘I’m so frightened of the introducing part; I never know what to say, and it makes me feel such a goat.’

‘Oh,’ said Mary Wells, placidly; ‘how funny of you, Jean. I always say, “Here’s my sister, and this is Charlotte Bigley.” That’s quite easy, surely.’

‘Yes, but it isn’t right,’ responded Jean, frankly. ‘You should hear Margaret Hulme do it–that’s something like! It reminds you of mothers, and callers, and At Home days when you wear your best frock and hand the scones.’

Their talk was interrupted by the retirement from the gymnasium of the senior division. Margaret marched into the anteroom, with her eyes staring straight in front of her, and an exaggerated air of confidence in her bearing. There was an obvious lack of enthusiasm among her followers, who were all whispering and looking significantly at their leader; but the noise produced by Scales, who seemed to think that a Beethoven sonata was an appropriate solo to play in the interval, made conversation impossible; and the section that was to do the horizontal bar, led by Ruth Oliver, returned to the gymnasium before the juniors were able to satisfy their curiosity. During the second event of the competition, Margaret and the vaulting-horse section exchanged very few remarks, and the feeling that there was something unusual in the air had considerably increased by the time Ruth, looking flushed and totally unlike herself, marched her section back again. The rumour ran down the junior file that Ruth Oliver had been distinguishing herself, and that as much of the clapping as Scales allowed to be heard was on her account. Certainly, the irresolute manner that marked everything Ruth did, as a rule, had quite deserted her as she filed past the triumvirate with her little band.

‘Why,’ exclaimed Angela, audibly, ‘I never knew Ruth Oliver was pretty before!’

‘She isn’t, is she?’ said Jean, just as loudly.

‘Of course she is!’ declared Babs, warmly. ‘She’s *beautiful*, and–and classic!’

The others laughed, and she wondered why. Somebody had said, only the other day, that Jill Urquhart had classic features; and how was she to know that, although she was every bit as fond of Ruth as of Jill, the same adjective would not do for both?

‘Look at Margaret Hulme,’ whispered Mary Wells, as the vaulting-horse section marched past them. ‘She’s quite white!’

The little remark was enough to set them all wondering afresh; and Barbara, moved by a sudden impulse, darted up to Ruth Oliver.

‘*Did* Margaret go wrong in the wands?’ asked the child, in an anxious whisper.

The smile that had made Ruth look so surprisingly pretty died out of her face, and she glanced gravely down at her little questioner.

‘Never mind, baby,’ she said gently. ‘Go back to your place.’ And she came as near snubbing any one then as she ever did in the whole of her school career.

A burst of applause put every one in the anteroom once more on the alert.

‘What is it?’ passed eagerly from one to another. The answer, given by Charlotte from her point of vantage near the doorway, was soon circulated. Margaret Hulme had easily surpassed her seven companions by a brilliant performance on the vaulting-horse; and the spirits of the anteroom went up with a bound. Hurly-Burly had mounted the platform at the farther end of the gymnasium, and was comparing notes with Miss Finlayson and the expert from the London training-college, who was acting as one of the judges; so there was no one to restrain both senior and junior divisions from falling out of rank and pressing round the head girl, as she once more marched back to them. They had never once made so much fuss over their idol as they did now that she had shown, for the first time, that even idols are capable of failure.

Hurly-Burly returned and restored order in a stern voice; and they saw Finny standing in the middle of the platform, waiting for Scales to bring the *Erlkönig* to a thundering close. The next moment she was speaking in that low voice of hers that went straight to the ears of every one in the room.

‘It may make the end of the senior competition more interesting to you,’ she began, ‘if you know how the competitors stand now. So far, Ruth Oliver is a little ahead of the others—’ Even the solemnity of the occasion could not stay the murmur of astonishment that rose in the anteroom at this announcement; but Miss Finlayson waited for it to subside, and finished her speech. ‘She and Margaret Hulme are very close, for they are exactly even as regards gymnastics; but Margaret lost a little over the wand figure. So the prize will greatly depend upon the result of the high jump. At the same time, I feel sure you will agree with me that the way in which the other competitors have worked has greatly added to our enjoyment, and deserves much of our applause.’

A good many downcast faces in the anteroom cheered up as Miss Finlayson made her ingenious reference to the unsuccessful ones, and so contrived to make them feel that the applause at the end of her speech was really for them. Then the whole senior division filed into the gymnasium for the last time, to the slow music of Herr Scales, who had just had a polite rebuke from Hurly-Burly, and was forcing himself desperately to keep the soft pedal down.

The children never forgot the tense feeling of the next few minutes, the thrill that ran through every girl in Wootton Beeches when Ruth Oliver knocked down the rope at four feet four, the answering thrill that followed it when she cleared it at four feet six, the surprise they went through when Margaret also cleared it at four feet six, but knocked it down at four feet eight; and last of all, the enthusiasm of the spectators when Ruth just managed to clear it at four feet eight and Margaret still knocked it down after two tries at it. The people, who clapped and smiled so good-naturedly, little knew that the exciting contest they had just witnessed had upset the traditions of two and a half years and proclaimed the triumph of the most retiring girl in the school. They only thought how modern and delightful it was for girls to play the same games as boys; and Mrs. Oliver beamed on every one from the platform, and decided that Ruth should stay another year at school instead of leaving at midsummer. But the anteroom was overwhelmed.

‘It’s–impossible!’ gasped Jean, when the news travelled down to the triumvirate. ‘Why, Margaret can clear four feet ten *easily*! I’ve seen her.’

‘And Ruth has never done more than four feet six before,’ added Angela, forced by the seriousness of the moment into a strict statement of facts.

‘Margaret was nervous; I’m certain she was,’ said Barbara, positively. ‘It was the same with Egbert, when he forgot his godfathers and godmothers; he said there was a silly idiot at the bottom of his form, who didn’t mind the strange clergyman blinking at him a bit, and he even got through the duty to his neighbour. And Ruth wasn’t nervous, you see.’

‘What nonsense you are talking,’ remarked Mary Wells, who loved to be literal. ‘Why, Ruth is more shy than any one in the whole school!’

That was certainly true, and Babs went on puzzling over it, long after Margaret and Ruth had retired hand in hand to the other end of the anteroom. For whatever the head girl felt about her failure, she did not mean to let any one guess that she cared. Her easy self-possession was all her own again, as she kept tight hold of Ruth’s hand and chatted lightly to the girls about her; and one or two of the others, who tried to patronise her with their consolation, received such sarcastic replies that they were very soon put back in their place again. Margaret Hulme was not going to forget she was head girl, even if that roomful of strangers had robbed her of the power she had wielded for two and a half years.

Scales struck up a march of his own composition; and at a vigorous sign from Miss Burleigh, Charlotte Bigley hastily marshalled her scattered troop and led them into the gymnasium for the Indian club performance. They were all very much subdued by the time they had separated to their various places, for the peep they had stolen through the anteroom door had given them no idea of what it really felt like to stand in the middle of this staring crowd of people, who filled the gallery above and the platform at the end, and even spread thinly round the room close up to the wall. Jean clenched her teeth and frowned fiercely, and would have endured twice the shyness that tortured her sooner than forget one of the exercises she had to go through; and as for Barbara, she took no notice of the people at all, but began to work mechanically, as soon as the first bars of the familiar valse fell on her ears. Angela, however, lost her head and one of her clubs at the same instant; and a harmless aunt, who sat near, only escaped a severe blow from the latter by the dexterity of another visitor, who put out his hand just in time and caught it as it flew past him. It was neatly done, and the audience applauded vigorously, while Hurly-Burly gave the command to

stop practice, and the stranger restored her property to the confused and unhappy Angela. Then Babs recognised him. It was the Doctor who had come out in this surprisingly new light; and even Kit, with whom she immediately exchanged glances, was looking down at him approvingly.

‘Did you see Dr. Hurst?’ whispered Babs to Jean afterwards, as they filed out of the gymnasium again.

‘Of course I did, directly I got in,’ answered Jean. ‘Couldn’t think who it was looking so glum and thundery! Wonder why he came to a show like this? He doesn’t look as though he went in for gymnastics, does he?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Babs, trying to be fair even to the beast who had not shown himself worthy to be a prince. ‘It was very smart the way he caught that club. Perhaps he is good at gym, though he can’t take a joke.’

Angela required so much consolation from them both on account of her blunder, that they forgot all about the doctor, and spent most of their time, while Charlotte’s section was displaying on the horizontal ladder, in assuring her, with more or less confidence in their tones, that when it came to the rings no one could hope to compete with her. Then Charlotte Bigley returned at the head of her section, trying unsuccessfully to look as if nothing had happened; and Mary Wells proudly informed all those who cared to hear, that if anybody thought she was going to do the rings as well as Charlotte had just done the ladder, she was much mistaken!

‘Oh, you shut up!’ rejoined Babs. ‘You haven’t seen Angela yet.’

‘Or Jean!’ echoed Angela, faithfully.

The third voice for once was wanting. Jean Murray stood waiting for the signal to advance; and her determined, almost dogged look was blotting out every other expression on her thin, clever face.

Babs understood, and sprang forward to her place at Jean’s side.

‘It’s all right, Jean,’ she said earnestly. ‘I must try my very hardest, because Finny made us all promise; but–but I do want you to win, all the same.’

‘Oh, stop it, Babe,’ Jean threw back at her, in a tone that startled and hurt her; and the child shrank into herself again, and had a hard fight to keep back the tears that rushed into her eyes for the first time in many weeks.

Their persistent encouragement of Angela made her go through the first exercise on the rings successfully. It was a swing and a pull up in front, and she managed it more neatly than either of her supporters. Then came the swing and turn, and here Angela's temporary courage deserted her. Perhaps she was flurried by the little attempt made by the gallery to applaud her the second time she came forward; in any case, the glimpse she had of Kit, who caught her eye and nodded cheerfully just as she was beginning, did not help to compose her. She turned too soon and too vigorously, and spun round helplessly in the air, until Hurly-Burly came to her aid and helped her to drop ignominiously to the ground. After that, it was evident that the issue of the competition rested with Jean and Barbara, for they soon showed that they were much more finished and thorough in their work than any one else in their section; and everybody was prepared for the statement made by Miss Finlayson in the next interval. She announced that Charlotte Bigley, Jean Murray, and Barbara Berkeley were exactly even up to that point, and that the result would have to be determined by the rope-climbing.

The rope-climbing, however, left the result still undetermined. Both Jean and Babs reached the top in six seconds, blew the trumpet they found there with a vigour that sent the spectators into a peal of merriment, and slid down again, much pleased with themselves and the interest they were exciting. Charlotte Bigley on the third rope excelled them in speed and reached the top in five seconds, but forgot to blow the trumpet, and so made things even once more. The junior division filed out again, while Miss Finlayson and the expert and Hurly-Burly put their heads together on the platform, and Herr Scales thought the moment an appropriate one for a performance in his best manner of his favourite composition, which was called *Sonnenschein* and had been thumped out in the holidays to half the parents in the room.

Miss Finlayson rose to her feet again. As the three competitors she had already mentioned were still equal, she must call upon each of them to do one of the advanced exercises, Charlotte on the ladder and the other two on the rings; they were to choose their own exercises, and if they again proved themselves equally good, the prize would be divided. The spectators were in a pleasant state of interest by this time, and the three little rivals were greeted with enthusiasm when they stepped out of the anteroom for the last time and took up their positions in front of the platform. They looked very

small and slight as they stood there in their short red frocks against a solid background of people; but they had quite lost every suspicion of bashfulness, and Babs even began to look upon the whole thing as an immense joke. She nodded gaily to the boys in the gallery, and smiled happily at Auntie Anna, who had the place of honour on the platform next to the Canon; and in the silence that followed, while Charlotte Bigley was jumping from rung to rung of the horizontal ladder, she occupied herself in trying to decide on her own exercise. If Jean chose leaving go with one hand, she should swing and let go and catch on to the trapeze beyond–at least, if Hurly-Burly would only be decent and give her leave. She half hoped that Jean *would* choose the other; for she had practised the trapeze one, only last week, and—

A sudden murmur, followed by a faint attempt at applause, roused her; and she saw Charlotte Bigley walking slowly back to the anteroom with her eyes fixed on the ground.

‘What happened? I didn’t see,’ she whispered, nudging Jean.

‘Hand slipped, fell off,’ answered Jean, briefly, as she went forward and grasped the rings.

She did choose swinging and letting go with one hand, and she went through it very successfully, and earned every bit of the applause that greeted her when she finished. Barbara was so delighted that she went on clapping her loudly after everybody else had stopped, and did not notice what she was doing till the audience began to laugh and Hurly-Burly came up and spoke to her.

‘May I have the trapeze let down?’ whispered Babs, eagerly. ‘I want to let go of the rings and catch on to it at the end of my swing–like I did the other day.’

Hurly-Burly looked doubtful. ‘Are you sure you can manage it?’ she asked.

Barbara pleaded, and the games-mistress gave in. It was always difficult for any one so practical as Miss Burleigh to understand the odd little pupil, who at one moment could throw herself into a game as heartily as a boy, and at another was liable to exasperate her companions by going off into a dream and completely forgetting what she was doing. But it was impossible to help liking the child, and Hurly-Burly, who had a sneaking conviction that

the trapeze exercise would decide the prize in her favour, could not resist the temptation to let her have her own way and secure to herself at the same time a little reflected glory. For it was she who had taught Barbara the exercise, and she had every reason to be proud of her pupil. So she let down the trapeze from the roof and held it back with her hands, ready to drop it forward when the child had worked up her swing.

The eyes of the German music-master were filled with sentimental interest, as the youngest girl in the school stepped up to the rings. He knew very little about gymnastics, though a German; for his life had been passed almost entirely in other lands, and during the brief period he had spent in his own country he had been so absorbed in his art that he had completely neglected the physical culture that is of so much importance to most Germans. As for girls' gymnastics, his experience in them had been entirely confined to a few occasions like the present, when he was asked to play instead of the junior music-mistress. But he never assisted at the usual lessons, when the junior music-mistress was considered good enough to perform; so Miss Finlayson's remarks on the merits of the three competitors conveyed very little to him. Still, he managed to gather that Barbara stood a good chance of winning the prize, and his fat, benevolent face beamed with satisfaction in consequence. It was true that the little Fräulein with the black, black eyes and the wonder-clumsy fingers had no more talent for music than his tabby cat, while the performances of Fräulein Vilkins were the joy of his heart; but it was the little one who asked him so many questions about his beloved Germany, which she seemed to regard as being about the size of Kensington Gardens, and he forgave her all her excruciating false notes for the sake of her warm heart, which was *colossal*. When he saw her standing there all alone, he quite gave up trying to be brilliant and dropped into a little simple melody of his own, which he had never thought important enough to name, but which Barbara had always told him in her funny English was 'awfully fine.' Unfortunately, just as she recognised the notes and nodded at him with a little smile, Jean brought him a message from the games-mistress, asking him not to play at all until the exercise was over.

'It's rather a difficult exercise, and you might put her out,' explained Jean, seeing that he looked puzzled at such a peculiar request. Her explanation did not help him much, for Jean did not trouble to translate it into his own

language; and, never having witnessed the exercise that was coming, he failed to see the point of Hurly-Burly's message. However, he was glad of the opportunity to descend from the platform and get a better view of the little Fräulein's performance; and he placed himself, rather inconveniently, just in front of the games-mistress, and prepared to miss nothing of what followed.

Everybody in the room was smiling genially at the youngest girl in the school. She had already prepossessed them in her favour by her frank admiration for Jean Murray; and now, as she stood there waiting for the sign from Hurly-Burly to begin, there was something about her happy unconsciousness that appealed irresistibly to her audience. Suddenly, the five boys in the gallery began to stamp their feet encouragingly, and Peter shouted 'Go it, Babe!' at the top of his voice. In a moment, the cry was taken up in the anteroom. 'Go it, Babe!' said twenty voices or more in a breath. The enthusiasm was infectious, and the words were repeated with many a laugh all over the room. 'Go it, Babe!' cried the people on the platform, and the people in the gallery, and the people who sat near her by the wall, until every one in the gymnasium was stamping and clapping and saying 'Go it, Babe!' to the little person in the short scarlet frock.

Barbara held the rings tightly, and her breath came rather quickly and unevenly. She was bewildered by the noise, and waited for it to subside before she began the exercise. It was so difficult to know what it all meant. Of course, the boys wanted her to win; and perhaps the other people did too, because they were grown up, and grown-up people always were jolly and kind to her. She could understand why the Doctor, stern as he was, smiled away at her and clapped her as heartily as any one, from his place on the platform; and she thought she knew dimly what was making Jean stamp on the floor till the dust flew. But the enthusiasm of her other school-fellows, who were pressing forward from the anteroom door, amazed her greatly. Could it be that they had suddenly forgotten how young and unimportant she was, and how much she needed correction, and how often she required to be told that she was the youngest in the school? Were these the girls she had hated so heartily only three months ago, the disgraced princesses she had turned out of her kingdom so passionately?

The applause died down at last, and Miss Burleigh made her the signal to begin. Babs walked back as far as she could, stood stretched for a second on

the tips of her toes, then shook the hair out of her eyes with the old familiar movement, and took a sharp run forward. The next minute, the slim scarlet form was flying backwards and forwards, with graceful, regular movements. The onlookers gazed and admired, wondering with some curiosity what her exercise was going to be; and their interest increased when she uttered a sharp 'Now!' just as she was sweeping backwards from her highest swing. Only one person in the room failed to notice that it was Miss Burleigh who let the trapeze drop forward instantly, so that it hung ready for the small performer to grasp on her return swing.

The music-master had been wholly absorbed in watching the little Fräulein, from the first moment she had begun to swing. He thought he had never seen anything so graceful as the way she swept to and fro, nor anything so *hübsch* as the expression and the rose-red complexion of the youngest girl in the school. It was truly *grossartig*! His eyes followed her closely all the time, from end to end of her swing; and that was how he contrived to be looking away at the precise moment when Hurly-Burly let down the trapeze. The murmur that rose from the people who surrounded him, as they realised what Barbara was going to do, made him look round; and he saw the thing hanging there, as though it had dropped from the roof by accident, and in another second would get in the way of the child who was swinging so deliciously. Viewed afterwards in the light of ordinary common-sense, it seemed to him *wunderbar* that he could so have deceived himself. At the time, not a doubt was in his mind as to what he thought had happened. The trapeze had fallen down by accident and was going to embarrass the little Fräulein, if not to hurt her; and the people around him were all exclaiming aloud, because they too had realised her danger. Nevertheless, nobody seemed to know what to do, and the little Fräulein was already sweeping straight towards it on her downward swing. All these reflections rushed through his brain in the flash of a moment. There was no time to hesitate. He must be the one to rush out and come to her aid. With a loud German exclamation, the music-master hurled himself forward and snatched back the trapeze just as the child let go of the rings.

He had a dim recollection afterwards of being gripped by Hurly-Burly just an instant too late, and of seeing the little scarlet figure twist in the air above him and drop with a nasty thud at the edge of the last mattress, of finding himself in the midst of a huge concourse of people, who suddenly

rose up with a great roar and bore down upon him, uttering shriek after shriek,–and then, of coming miserably to himself again, with his heart thumping and his head throbbing painfully, just as a deathlike silence succeeded the uproar, and a voice like Miss Finlayson's said something that sounded like 'Doctor!'

Some one had sprung from the platform with a flying jump the moment the accident happened, and was forcing a passage through the throng of people. There was not a sound to be heard in the great gymnasium as the Doctor knelt down on the floor and put out his hand to the little still spot of scarlet that lay on the edge of the last mattress.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST DAY OF THE TERM

In the annals of Wootton Beeches there had never been so dismal a packing-day as the one that dawned on the morrow of the gymnastic competition. Generally, packing-day was the most delightful day in the term: it came just after the break-up party, and just before going home, and everything that happened on it seemed filled with a peculiar interest of its own. First of all, there was the joy of rushing up to the bedrooms directly after breakfast, to put out all the clothes in tidy little heaps, ready for packing later on; then, the less delightful business of clearing the bookshelves and tearing up the old exercise-books–an occupation which contrived, in spite of itself, to present a certain amount of charm, simply because it belonged to the last day of the term. And the nicest part of all was the indescribable feeling that it was the last day of the term, that there were no more lessons to prepare and no more penalties to avoid, no more scales to practise and no more stockings to mend, and, best of all, no more rules to bother about, so that Fräulein and Mademoiselle could both be addressed, much to their own distraction, in the British tongue, and anybody who pleased could run up and down stairs to her heart's content without asking leave first. All these privileges made packing-day, as a rule, something to look forward to. But to-day nothing was happening as it usually did.

Breakfast had been gone through almost in silence, and the accustomed rush to the bedrooms afterwards had taken place quite quietly and tamely. The tidying of the bookshelves, which could generally be made to linger so pleasantly over the whole morning, was accomplished for once in an hour or so; and the girls found themselves, at eleven o'clock, with nothing further to do until Miss Tomlinson should send for them to pack their things. On any other packing-day the playroom would have been cleared of chairs and tables in a few minutes, and somebody would have been dragged to the piano to play a valse, and there would have been plenty of

amusement for every one until dinner-time. But to-day nobody wanted to dance, and hardly any one talked.

Jean Murray sat motionless on one of the window-seats in the senior playroom. On packing-day all ordinary restrictions were suspended, and the younger children wandered in and out of the two rooms as they pleased. Jean had taken advantage of this privilege to escape from her usual play-fellows, who were remaining behind from force of habit in their own domain. The way Angela persisted in crying was enough to drive any one away; she had cried all through prayers, and had begun again directly after breakfast. Mary Wells, forgetting how much she had endured on former occasions from the triumvirate, sat with her arm round Angela's neck, calling her 'Poor darling!' at intervals, with an occasional sob of her own to keep her company. Some of the others cried a little too,–at least, they did when they came near Angela,–and Charlotte Bigley was in such a temper that no one dared speak to her. All together, the juniors' room was more than Jean could bear just then. Jean was not crying herself: she had not cried a drop since she saw the streak of scarlet twist round in the air and drop with a thud that still sounded in her ears.

It was not a bit like the last day of the term. 'Tommy' did not once come to the door and call out the name of the next girl who was to go upstairs and pack. Nobody in the room was exchanging addresses with any one else, or promising to write weekly letters during the holidays. Margaret was as cross as Charlotte Bigley, it seemed, for she allowed no one but Ruth Oliver to come near her; and the other big girls were scattered about the room in idle, listless groups, conversing a little, now and then, in hushed tones. None of them noticed Jean; and Jean never saw them. She just sat rigidly on the window-seat, and looked straight in front of her, with the odd, hard expression on her face that had been there since the night before.

Margaret was sitting at the table tracing interminable circles on the back of an old envelope with a pair of compasses. The presence of Ruth at her elbow, as she absorbed herself in this pursuit, was very comforting. Ruth was a slow old thing, as every one knew, but in time of need she was invaluable.

After a while, the head girl dug the point of the compass into the table, and cleared her throat nervously.

‘She’s such an awfully nice little kid,’ she said. She spoke hurriedly, and her face had turned rather red.

‘Yes,’ answered Ruth, staring down at the maze of circles on the back of the envelope.

Margaret went on, with an effort: ‘She has such a queer way of getting at you,’ she said. ‘I never knew how much I cared about the child, till–till now.’

‘No,’ answered Ruth, softly.

‘Supposing—’ began Margaret, and stopped abruptly. ‘Do you think—?’ she began again, and again hesitated.

‘Hurly-Burly said they couldn’t tell till the Doctor’s next visit,’ replied Ruth. ‘She hadn’t recovered consciousness when he left, you see.’

‘Don’t!’ muttered Margaret, hastily. She dug the compass a little deeper, and cleared her throat once more. ‘When did you see Hurly-Burly?’ she asked.

‘Just after prayers,’ said Ruth. ‘She said I wasn’t to tell the younger ones, so don’t split. The Doctor stayed till five this morning, and he’s coming again presently. He’s rather cut up, she says.’

‘*That* Doctor? Don’t believe it!’ said Margaret, shading some of the circles with a pencil.

‘Hurly-Burly said so,’ maintained Ruth, in her resolute way. ‘Perhaps he isn’t so stiff and stupid as he seems. I saw him last night, talking to Jill Urquhart, and he looked quite young and jolly. You never know, do you?’

‘Perhaps not. It doesn’t matter, does it?’ said the head girl, indifferently.

‘Hurly-Burly is pretty bad, too,’ continued Ruth. ‘She thinks it’s her fault, because there was a gap in the mattresses, so that the Babe fell half on the boards. That’s how she cut her head. You see, the mattresses were arranged for the rings, and when Hurly-Burly altered them for the trapeze she didn’t stop to test them to see if they were in the right place. Anybody else might have done the same, with the whole room waiting for her; but still, she is reproaching herself like anything.’

‘She needn’t,’ said Margaret, with quiet vehemence. ‘It’s only the fault of that idiot Scales.’

‘Poor Scales!’ murmured Ruth. ‘I saw him too wandering about the hall; and he was crying just like a baby, and he didn’t seem to mind my seeing him a bit. I suppose foreigners are always like that.’

Margaret curled her lip contemptuously. ‘I shouldn’t waste my pity on him, if I were you,’ she remarked. ‘No one but a foreigner would have anything to cry about.’

Ruth glanced at her timidly. ‘I think, perhaps, it is worse for Scales than any one,’ she ventured to say. ‘Of course, he’s a hopeless idiot, but he didn’t mean—’

‘Oh, never mind about Scales!’ interrupted Margaret; and Ruth took up the compasses and began drawing invisible circles on the tablecloth.

A bit of conversation drifted across to them from the juniors’ room.

‘Her brothers stopped all night; so did the old lady,’ Mary Wells was saying. ‘I saw their breakfast going into Finny’s study this morning, when Tommy called me back into the dining-room to fold my table-napkin.’

‘How could you notice a thing like that?’ came in plaintive, reproving tones from Angela. ‘I wish I was able to bear up like you, Mary.’

‘Poor darling!’ said Mary Wells, tenderly.

‘Was Jill there too?’ asked another voice.

‘She’s up in Finny’s bedroom, with *her*,’ answered Angela, quickly. She was almost restored to a normal condition by the desire to tell something that nobody else knew. Then she remembered herself, and subsided into a proper state of tearfulness. ‘I was hanging about upstairs, to see if I could find out how *she* was, when Jill passed me in a white apron, looking just like a real nurse,’ she went on, with a long-drawn sigh. ‘I tried to speak to her, but I was too upset.’

‘*Poor* darling!’ cried Mary Wells, more fervently than before.

Margaret stirred impatiently, and flung down her pencil. ‘I say,’ she said to Ruth, ‘what can we give those children to do? I’m sure Finny wouldn’t like them to go on drivelling like that. Angela is such a little idiot!’

‘I think she’s really fond of the Babe,’ observed Ruth, as she followed the head girl across the room.

‘Oh, yes,’ admitted Margaret, with a shrug of her shoulders; ‘Jean told her she’d got to be.’

At the window-seat she stopped and forgot Angela for the moment. The sight of the child who sat there, looking so white and wretched, touched her.

‘Cheer up, kiddie!’ she said, sitting down beside her. Ruth Oliver discreetly moved on.

‘Get away!’ gasped Jean.

Margaret stroked her hand, but Jean drew it away sharply, and shifted her position so that she looked out of the window. Her eyes wandered across the drive and fell on the little building in the field, where she and Angela had passed their eight days of quarantine with the youngest girl in the school. Somehow, Jean could not bear the sight of it to-day, and she moved round restively, till she faced Margaret again.

‘Oh, do leave me alone!’ she said fiercely; and the head girl felt rather helpless, and left her.

In the junior playroom, Angela had relapsed at the sight of Ruth Oliver into a fresh fit of crying.

‘What *is* the matter, Angela?’ demanded Ruth, for once almost losing her patience.

‘Matter?’ sobbed Angela, leaning back for support on the substantial arm of Mary Wells. ‘I’m full of re–remorse, and–and penitence! So would you be, if–if you were as bad and–and as sinful as me!’

‘Why, what have you been doing now?’ inquired Ruth, keeping her temper with difficulty.

Angela stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth, and recovered sufficient control over herself to take it out again and make her confession.

‘Last week,’ she faltered, ‘*she* asked me to help her with her French; and–and–I was cross, and–and–I wouldn’t.’

She burst into tears again, as Charlotte Bigley looked up from the book she was pretending to read and put in a curt remark.

‘Who’s *she*?’ she demanded bluntly.

Angela stopped crying to stare at her. ‘You know fast enough, Charlotte!’ she mumbled indistinctly.

Charlotte tossed her head scornfully. ‘If you mean Barbara Berkeley, why on earth can’t you say so?’ she exclaimed. ‘She hasn’t lost her name because she fell off the rings, *has* she?’

Mary Wells spoke her mind solemnly. ‘We all know *you* have no feeling, Charlotte Bigley,’ she was beginning, when some one near the window announced that the Doctor had just driven round the corner of the house.

This in itself was enough to reduce Angela to further depths of contrition. ‘What shall I do,’ she wailed, ‘if she dies before I can ask her forgiveness?’

Margaret Hulme suddenly stood over her, and shook her by the shoulder.

‘Stop it, child!’ she said, not unkindly, for even Angela’s tears made her own feel uncomfortably near the surface. She turned to the others quickly.

‘Every one will get ready and go into the field for a hockey practice,’ she commanded.

Charlotte shut her book with a bang. ‘What’s the good of hockey?’ she grumbled crossly.

‘What’s the good of anything,’ sighed Margaret, ‘with that poor little kid lying ill up there?’

Charlotte looked at her swiftly, and then turned away, blinking her eyes furiously; and the head girl took her arm with astonishing condescension, and walked silently into the cloakroom with her.

A little later, Dr. Hurst came out of Miss Finlayson’s bedroom upstairs, and closed the door softly behind him. The head-mistress stood waiting for him on the landing. Their eyes met, and hers were full of anxious inquiry. In his there shone a gleam of something that had not been there before.

‘Better,’ he said, and drew a long breath. He put his hand on the baluster-rail to steady himself. ‘She’ll do, now that consciousness has returned,’ he went on in a businesslike tone; ‘the concussion was only slight, after all, and the fracture to the leg could hardly be in a better place. Wonderful what children will do to kill themselves without succeeding! She’ll pull through

in no time, with rest and quiet–perfect quiet, mind! Don't let those boys go near her, whatever you do; and keep your girls from weeping on her neck as much as possible. Good morning.'

Miss Finlayson smiled, and retained his hand a moment. No one would have thought that this practical man of medicine, who pretended to regard his little patient merely as an interesting case, was the boyish-hearted fellow who had sat by her bedside all night to watch for her returning consciousness.

'Must you go?' she said. 'Why not rest on the sofa in my study for an hour, and stay to lunch with us? You must be worn out.'

The Doctor drew himself up and frowned. 'Not at all, not at all!' he said, looking vexed. 'Room full of patients waiting for me at home–I must wish you good morning.'

‘Tell me, Herr Doktor, haf I kilt her?’

He left her and hurried off, still frowning. Just as he turned the corner of the gallery, Egbert and Peter, who had been lying in wait for him some fifteen minutes, sprang out upon him from an open door.

‘How is she?’ they asked eagerly.

‘Really!’ fumed the Doctor, who hated being taken by surprise. ‘The bulletin is with Miss Finlayson; I have no time—’

Peter grasped his arm as he was escaping. ‘Is she going to get better?’ he implored. There was no mistaking the earnestness in the boy’s face, and the Doctor melted in spite of himself.

‘Yes, yes, to be sure,’ he growled. ‘That is, if you leave her alone.’

When he reached the staircase he was again brought to a standstill. The way was entirely blocked by the massive form of the German music-master, who sat on the top stair with his face buried in his large, fat hands. The Doctor tapped his foot on the ground impatiently. If one thing more than another annoyed him, it was the sight of uncontrolled emotion.

‘Pardon me,’ he said briskly, ‘but will you kindly—’

‘*Gott in Himmel!*’ shouted Herr Scales, springing to his feet as he recognised the Doctor’s voice. ‘Tell me, Herr Doktor, haf I kilt her? Am I a murterer of the *lieblichste* little Fräulein that ever walked upon—’

‘Nonsense, sir!’ interrupted Dr. Hurst, doing his best to keep his temper. The sight of the tears that streamed down the good-natured face of the music-master was enough, he told himself, to annoy any man who was not a foreigner. ‘Nobody has killed her yet; but what you are going to do, among you, before you have done with her, I shouldn’t like to say.’

‘You do not understand,’ wept Herr Scales, clasping his hands. ‘It was I who nearly kilt her, *dummer* wretch that I am.’

‘Well, you haven’t killed her, my good sir, and she’s going to get better,’ answered the Doctor, trying to deal gently with him in spite of his irritating foreign behaviour. Then he left him and went quickly down the stairs.

Two more voices assailed him in the hall, as he took down his coat from the peg. Restraining his impatience as best he might, the young man looked round to find Kit and Wilfred at his elbow. Curled up on the rug in front of the stove lay Robin, fast asleep, with his head pillowed on a footstool. Weariness and the shedding of many tears had left their mark on his round, babyish face, and the elder boys looked little more than half-awake themselves. Kit’s face was tear-stained too, and he suddenly found he could not put the question he was longing to ask. It was Wilfred who blurted it out instead.

‘Is she better?’ he asked.

The Doctor had been up all night; he had gone through more anxiety than he could have believed himself capable of feeling; he had found that his heart had gone out unconsciously, eleven weeks ago, to the child who had called him a beast; and he felt that all the glory his profession could bring

him was not worth so much as the saving of that one little life upstairs. And then people came and bothered him with their senseless questions. If she were worse, was it likely he would be leaving her now?

He was worn out with want of sleep, and it did not occur to him that the same thing might possibly be true of the white-faced lads before him.

‘Bless my soul!’ he exclaimed testily. ‘How many *are* there of you? There’s a couple at every corner. How can you expect your sister to get better if you hang about the place and ask questions at the top of your voice? There’s–there’s an atmosphere of nervous sentiment all over the house that’s enough to ruin any case.’

Wilfred was dumbfounded, and stared stupidly. But Christopher suddenly found his tongue, and, being Christopher, he found it sarcastically.

‘Counting Jill, there are only six all together,’ he said, peering up at the irritated young man through his spectacles, ‘so you won’t meet any more.’

‘I don’t care how many there are of you,’ grumbled Dr. Hurst, flinging on his coat. ‘Keep out of her way, that’s all–and mine too.’

‘You may be sure we’ll do that, if we can,’ retorted Wilfred, recovering his courage. ‘Only, you haven’t told us yet how she is.’

‘You seem to forget she’s our sister, and we’re beastly cut up about her,’ added Kit, glumly.

‘She’s not a rotten bacteria, either,’ said Wilfred, in a vicious undertone which the Doctor fortunately missed.

Dr. Hurst felt a little bit ashamed of himself, and was more cross than ever. ‘There, there! She’s better, of course,’ he muttered, pushing past his questioners. Then he saw the sleeping Robin curled up in front of the stove, and he glanced back at the tired faces of the other two. ‘Best thing you can do is to go straight to bed,’ he advised, jamming his hat down on his head. ‘Best thing for the case, too.’

Kit smiled at him indulgently. ‘Let them go to bed who have beds,’ he remarked. ‘I’ve only got an arm-chair.’

The Doctor fled discomfited, and shut the front door in their faces. He did not understand boys, and he did not like them, and he would not have minded if he had never had to meet another boy as long as he lived. In a

very few moments, however, he came to the conclusion that although boys were pretty bad, girls could beat them easily, with several points to spare.

His man was walking the cob up and down outside, and the trap was not in sight when Dr. Hurst shut the front door behind him. The occurrence was particularly unfortunate, for as he stood waiting on the steps the whole of the junior hockey team came strolling round the corner of the house. This in itself was sufficiently embarrassing to the young man who stood there; and he hailed the appearance of his trap with deep and earnest satisfaction. But he was not to be allowed to escape so easily. The sound of wheels made the children look round; and some one suddenly called out–'It's the Doctor!' The next moment he found himself, greatly to his consternation, in the middle of a throng of excited young ladies, all in extremely short skirts and all armed with hockey clubs, who were clamouring loudly and persistently to know if Barbara Berkeley was out of danger.

Probably it would never have happened if it had not been the last day of the term, when a sense of unusual liberty prevailed. Certainly, if it had been any other day the hockey team would not have been wandering round by the front door at all, but would have gone straight to the nine-acre field through the orchard at the back. But the Doctor knew nothing of all this. He only realised that the girls were finishing what the boys had begun, and that in another minute he should lose his temper very badly indeed.

Most eager of all was a child with a freckled face and reddish-coloured hair, who somehow seemed familiar to him, though he could not remember where he had met her before. She came right up to where he stood helplessly, with his right foot placed on the carriage-step; and she raised her voice shrilly above all the others.

'May I see her before she gets worse?' she implored sentimentally. 'I should never forgive myself, Mary Wells says I shouldn't, if anything happened to her, and—'

The Doctor made a great effort and waved them off distractedly, just as Margaret Hulme and some of the elder ones hurried on the scene and called angrily to his tormentors. He seized the opportunity to spring to his seat, and then turned and glared at them.

'See her before she gets worse?' he answered back furiously. 'If you want to see her before you've done your best to finish her altogether, you'll have to

look sharp.'

Miss Finlayson suddenly appeared on the doorstep. Nobody knew how much she had seen or heard, but she was looking exceedingly stern. She opened her mouth to speak, just as Dr. Hurst perceived her and broke into a fresh torrent of words. By this time he had lost the last scrap of his patience.

'What with rascally boys and hysterical *schoolgirls*,' he shouted, seizing the whip and cracking it round his head, 'how can you expect me to pull the case through?'

He tugged violently at the reins; the startled animal sprang forward, and the trap clattered noisily out of sight.

The few short, vigorous sentences with which Miss Finlayson improved the next five minutes sent the girls into the hockey field with a much reduced opinion of themselves. Margaret Hulme stayed behind to vindicate the offenders as well as she could; and the result was that the head-mistress remembered it was the last day of the term, and blamed herself for having almost allowed her feelings for the youngest girl in school to run away with her.

'Send Jean and Angela up to my bedroom at once,' she said thoughtfully, when Margaret had finished telling her what had been going on in the playroom that morning.

She waited for them on the landing, and kissed them both very affectionately when they appeared hand in hand. She glanced quickly from Angela's red and swollen countenance to Jean's pale and miserable one, and she decided not to say what had been in her mind the minute before. A much better idea struck her, and she acted upon it promptly.

'If you will promise me to be as quiet as mice,' she whispered, 'you shall both have one peep at her.'

The room into which she led them on tiptoe was almost dark. The only light that was admitted came from one small window in the farther corner, and it was just enough to reveal Jill, as she bent over the bed with a cup in her hand. Then she moved away, and the two children, peeping from their hiding-place behind the screen by the door, saw Barbara.

She lay flat on her back among the white pillows; a hillock under the bedclothes showed where the cage protected her broken leg, and a bandage

round her head kept the thick, dark hair from tumbling over her face as it usually did. Otherwise, she was not nearly so much altered as her play-fellows had vaguely expected to find her. The bright little eyes gleamed out as impishly as ever from beneath the white bandage, and as she smiled up at Jill they realised to their intense relief that the Babe, with a hole in her head and a cage over her leg, was much the same Babe who had arrived in their midst, with her elf-like look and her happy unconscious smile, three months ago.

‘Why, Jean, I do believe you’re crying,’ said Angela, in surprise, when Miss Finlayson had pushed them outside again, and they were retreating slowly along the gallery. Angela herself felt no further inclination to cry, now that she had seen the Babe and found she was not a bit altered. There was no middle course in Angela’s emotions, and her only wonder now was why any one had made a fuss about Barbara’s accident at all.

But the tears were raining down Jean’s cheeks for the first time, and the hard, queer look was gone from her face. She flung herself away to her own room, and left Angela to puzzle over her behaviour as best she might.

CHAPTER XVII

SEVEN TIMES ROUND THE WORLD

‘Have the girls gone home?’ asked the invalid, about a week later. She had made such strides towards recovery that she was to be allowed her first visitor that day, and she could not help wondering whether Jean Murray was going to be the privileged person. Everything had been so strange and quiet since the morning she had woke up in Finny’s bed; and she had slept away so many hours of the days that followed, that she had lost count of the time altogether. She seemed to have been lying in a kind of delicious enchantment, with people doing things for her just as though she were a princess; while Jill was always at hand to tell her stories in her beautiful soft voice, whenever she grew tired of lying still. For Jill was the nicest person in the world to be with, when one was enchanted; she never bothered, and she always seemed to come to the rescue just in time, when the pain of being strapped in one position began to grow intolerable. Then, there was the Doctor too. No one would have expected the Doctor to turn out such a trump. Only to-day, after being so strict in the morning about what she was to eat, he had run in again after lunch to bring her a packet of sweets. They were very wholesome sweets, as he had assured Jill; but still they were sweets, and a doctor who was a beast would never have thought of bringing them, even if they were wholesome. So, clearly, he was not a beast. Even Jill had been surprised at his coming twice in one day, now that she was so much better; so that showed that he must be a particularly nice sort of doctor. For Jill had once nursed Auntie Anna when she was ill, and she knew a lot about doctors, so she would not have been surprised at his coming twice in one day, if it had been a usual thing for a doctor to do. Babs smiled happily to herself as she settled the Doctor’s claims to niceness; then she remembered that she was going to have a visitor after tea, and she asked again if the girls had gone home.

‘Yes, they went five or six days ago,’ said Jill, without impatience, though she had answered the same question once already. Babs certainly did not

need an illness to make her absent-minded.

‘Then who is coming to see me after tea?’ was Barbara’s next inquiry.

‘I said Kit might come; I thought you would like to have him best,’ answered Jill.

‘Kit? Is he going to bicycle over from Crofts?’ asked the child.

‘Why, no,’ explained Jill, smiling. ‘They have all been in the house ever since you were taken ill. Finny invited them to stay, you know, and Auntie Anna too.’

Barbara laughed a little. ‘They’ll never be able to tease me again, now that they’ve stopped in a girl’s school themselves,’ she remarked with a chuckle.

There was a pause, which the invalid occupied in thinking over the things she had been too lazy to consider before. She had a great many questions to ask, but somehow it was too much exertion to ask them. Fortunately, Jill was so clever that she always guessed what she wanted to know without waiting to be asked first; and that saved a lot of trouble. In this way the child had learned that the gymnastic prize was to be divided between Jean and herself; and thinking about the gymnastic prize produced another question from her, rather unexpectedly.

‘Wasn’t it Scales who moved the trapeze away?’ she asked.

Jill looked up surprised. None of them knew how much Babs remembered of what had happened on the night of her accident. ‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘He has been very unhappy about it, poor man! He writes every day from Hanover to say how miserable he is. But, of course, it was an accident.’

‘Of course,’ said Barbara, looking distressed; and Jill was afraid she had said too much.

‘Shall I write and send him a message from you?’ she suggested quickly. Babs brightened up, and nodded.

‘Tell him it’s awfully jolly to be ill and to have every one doing things for you, and bringing you sweets, and all that,’ she said eagerly. ‘And say that if he wants me to pay him out, just to make us quits, don’t you know, he can think of the awful way I am sure to play my pieces next term.’

‘Very well,’ answered Jill, laughing; and there was silence once more.

Jill looked very pretty as she sat there by the window, working away at her embroidery in the frame; and Babs congratulated herself, with a glow of satisfaction, on having made her a princess in her fairy kingdom. It was so nice of Jill, she reflected, to behave exactly like a princess, and to sit at the window of her lonely turret making tapestry, to while away the time until her prince should come thundering over the drawbridge below. Jill's prince had not come yet, so of course she would have to go on working by the window till he did; she deserved an extra nice prince too, and Babs sighed as she remembered that she had not been able to find her any sort of a prince so far.

'It's a pity, isn't it, that Dr. Hurst had to be enchanted again so soon?' she murmured aloud.

'I'm afraid I don't *quite* understand,' said the princess, from the window.

'You see,' continued Babs, solemnly, 'he began by being a beast; then I disenchanted him and made him into a handsome and gallant young prince; and after that he was so horrid to Jean and Angela in the quarantine that I had to turn him out of my kingdom, and make him wander over the earth once more in the shape of a beast.'

'Oh,' said Jill, bending rather closely over the embroidery frame. 'Let me see, what kingdom was that?'

'*My* kingdom,' answered Barbara, in an important tone. Then she realised that Jill did not know about her kingdom. 'I've never told any one before,' she went on doubtfully. 'If I tell you, Jill, will you promise not to laugh?'

Jill promised, and worked on steadily at her embroidery while the small voice from the bed painted her the fairy kingdom she had never described to any one before.

'And so,' concluded Barbara, with a sigh, 'I can't make it come right, because now there's a princess without a prince. Do you mind waiting until I find you a prince, Jill?'

'Not at all,' answered Jill, turning to the light rather abruptly, and taking quite a long time to choose between two shades of silk.

'It was so stupid of Dr. Hurst to get himself turned out like that, wasn't it?' continued Babs.

‘He–perhaps he didn’t know,’ said Jill, with some hesitation.

‘You can’t be a beast without knowing it,’ answered Barbara, positively.

‘Are you sure he *is* a beast?’ asked Jill, who was still looking out of the window, though she had chosen her silk some moments ago.

‘Oh, he’s not a beast now. I *love* him. Don’t you?’ cried the child, enthusiastically.

Jill began putting her work away in a great hurry. ‘It’s time for tea,’ she remarked.

Barbara did not seem to have heard. The dreamy look had returned to her face, and she was almost thinking aloud.

‘You see,’ she murmured, ‘however nice he is now, he *must* walk round the world seven times, and kill a giant, and rescue a beautiful princess, before he can be disenchanted a second time. You can’t alter that. It’s a pity you haven’t got to be rescued or anything, Jill, because then—’

‘If you talk any more, child,’ interrupted Jill, with decision, ‘you will be too tired to have a visitor after tea.’

Jill *was* a nice person, Barbara settled again in her mind, as they had tea together out of Finny’s private tea-set that the Canon had given her last Christmas. She was so nice that she even slipped away afterwards, when Christopher came into the room, so that he and Babs could have their talk together without feeling that somebody else was listening. For all that, neither of them seemed to find it easy to begin, and they remained looking at each other in silence for some moments after Jill had closed the door upon them.

Then Christopher made a great effort and addressed her from the end of the bed, where he had taken up his position.

‘Hullo!’ he said, tugging at his collar as if to remove some obstruction to his voice.

‘Hullo!’ answered Babs, faintly, from among her pillows.

Then followed another pause. They both felt there were plenty of things to be said, but somehow they could not think of them just then. Presently, Kit remembered that she was an invalid, and that invalids always had to be

kissed. He also decided that the sooner he got it over the better; so he marched round to the side of the bed and kissed her.

‘How are you, Babe?’ he asked, feeling more at his ease now that this formality was over and he was free to climb on the edge of her bed and sit there swinging his legs.

‘Oh, I’m all right,’ answered Barbara, heartily.

They both knew she was nothing of the sort, but in the Berkeley family it was a point of honour with every one, even during a visitation of toothache, to declare himself ‘all right.’

‘How are you, Kit?’ asked Babs, after a little further reflection.

‘I’m all right, thanks,’ answered Christopher, faithfully, and he whistled a tune to fill the next pause. ‘Awfully poor lying here, isn’t it?’ he resumed presently.

Barbara nodded. ‘It’s stale,’ she said expressively.

Kit looked sympathetic. ‘It would make *me* sick,’ he observed.

‘Oh, it’s all right,’ Barbara hastened to assure him; and he whistled a little more.

‘Jill’s all right too, isn’t she?’ he continued after a while.

‘Oh, Jill’s all right–*rather*,’ said the child, warmly. ‘How are the other boys, Kit?’

‘They’re all right,’ answered Kit.

‘And Auntie Anna?’

‘She’s *all* right,’ answered Kit.

Conversation again languished slightly. Barbara’s eyes, wandering round the room in search of inspiration, fell on the little bag of sweets that the Doctor had brought her.

‘Have a sweet,’ she suggested, pointing to the table by the window.

Christopher slipped off the bed with alacrity. ‘It’s awfully decent of you,’ he observed. ‘Sure you don’t want them all?’

‘Oh, no; take the whole jolly lot,’ begged his sister.

Kit's countenance fell slightly when he peered into the bag. 'Acid drops,' he commented briefly, and put a couple critically into his mouth. 'Who brought them?'

'Dr. Hurst. He said they were wholesome,' replied Babs, by way of explanation. She did not want Kit to think she had been such a muff as to choose acid drops in preference to chocolate.

'That's just about what he would say,' remarked the boy, putting several more of them into his mouth.

'I–I think he's all right, Kit,' said Barbara, timidly.

Christopher shook his head vigorously. It was the only form of reply possible to him at the moment.

'He's a rotter,' he said, as soon as he could speak; 'and so slack, too!' He peered again into the paper bag. 'Is it worth while?' he murmured to himself, and decided that it was not. 'Pity it wasn't some one else who got them for you,' he added with a sigh, as he returned to the bed.

'He isn't bad, *really*, Kit,' persisted the child, looking troubled.

'Not bad? Why, he's an awful old soft, Babe,' answered Kit, contemptuously. 'If you were a boy, you'd know.'

'He isn't old, anyhow. He's only twenty-eight; I asked him,' said Babs, eagerly.

'Oh, rats!' laughed Kit, who had quite got over his awkwardness by this time, and was rapidly forgetting that she was an invalid and that he had been told not to tease her. 'He may be twenty-eight perhaps, if you just count his birthdays, but he's as old as the hills for all that. He was born grown-up; that sort of chap always is.'

'He's been awfully kind to me, Kit,' persisted the child, her troubled look returning.

'You always think people are nicer than they are, don't you?' observed her brother, with gentle scorn. 'When we had that beast of a housekeeper who used to smack you and Robin, you always said her Sunday bonnet was beautiful, or something like that.'

‘Oh, Kit!’ was all Barbara felt capable of replying, and the boy rattled on heedlessly.

‘That Doctor is the rottenest of rotters,’ he declared in a cheerful tone. ‘He only pretends to like you because you’re what he calls a “case.” If you’d got asthma, now, he’d treat you as if you were putting it all on, and make you feel a jolly humbug. *I* know him!’

‘Of course, you’re always right, Kit,’ said Babs, growing more unhappy every minute, ‘but–but—’

‘He treated us all like kids the first day you were ill,’ said Christopher, scowling at the recollection; ‘and once, when Jill was blubbing because you weren’t so well, we got in a funk and went off on our own, Peter and I, to fetch him; and he wouldn’t come. He said no one could do anything for you by just coming and looking at you, and we weren’t to disturb him for nothing at all–or some such rot. Then we found that he’d cooked up an arrangement with Finny not to come unless *she* sent for him. Just like him!’

Barbara was struggling feebly to keep back her tears. She could not think what was making her want to cry so much.

The boy had stopped scowling, and was chuckling softly to himself. Barbara held her breath, and thought that if he would only talk about something else, she might be able to keep from crying. Perhaps the table by the window might stop swimming about, too.

‘We’ve scored one against him at last, though,’ her brother was saying, in a voice that seemed suddenly to have gone a long way off. ‘He must be quite at the other end of the gallery,’ Babs thought. Yet some one was certainly sitting on the edge of her bed, because she could feel the mattress jumping up and down.

‘We struck that little kid in the yard just now–the one who nearly gave you scarlet fever,’ Christopher went on gaily. ‘He came to know how you were, or something. Bobby Hearne, I think he called himself. Well, we got him to go to the doctor’s house with a message from his aunt, who lives five miles t’other side of Crofts, to say that she had just fallen downstairs and nearly killed herself, and would he go to her at once! Thirty miles there and back, all for nothing! Rather a score, eh? It was my idea, too, not Peter’s!’

He turned to Barbara for approval, and found her sobbing bitterly. She had heard every word he said, with horrible distinctness, though his voice had come from such a long way off. She had tried to stop him, but she could not make a sound till she began to cry.

‘Babe! I say, don’t! What’s up, old girl?’ exclaimed Kit, staring at her in consternation. At any time it was an event, to make the Babe cry, but now that she was so ill, he felt nothing short of a brute.

Jill had slipped into the room and was bending over the excited child.

‘Kit doesn’t understand–he doesn’t know he’s not really a beast–he isn’t a beast, is he?’ gasped Barbara, between her sobs. ‘He’s played a horrible trick on him–he’s sent him seven times round the world; and I never meant him really to walk seven times round the world–you know I didn’t, Jill. It’s all my fault for turning him out of my kingdom–if I hadn’t turned him out of my kingdom, he wouldn’t be wandering seven times round—’

‘Hush!’ whispered Jill, and she gave Christopher a look that sent him stumbling out of the room in a mixture of bewilderment and remorse. Up and down the landing he paced, feeling desperately wicked and desperately foolish by turns, until Jill opened the door of the bedroom and beckoned to him. She held a thermometer in her hand, and she paid no attention whatever to the shamefaced inquiry he stammered out.

‘Send Miss Finlayson here at once, and say I want the Doctor,’ she commanded, and went hurriedly back into the room.

Clearly, she was very angry with him, and it had never seemed possible before that Jill could be angry with any one. But it was not this that suddenly made Kit turn cold and funny all over as he started along the gallery with Jill’s message. He pulled up short with a jerk, and gave a little cry of dismay.

‘What shall I do?’ he exclaimed in a despairing tone. ‘I’ve sent the Doctor fifteen miles in the opposite direction.’

It was nearing seven o’clock and growing dusk when Kit at last struck the high road between four and five miles below Crofts. It was a full ten-mile drive by the road from Wootton Beeches, but Kit had saved over two miles by taking the short cut across the fields. He stopped for the first time since

he had started on his mad chase after the Doctor, and looked panting up and down the deserted road.

‘I can’t have been much more than three-quarters of an hour, and I bet it’s four miles,’ he muttered. The mud with which he was splashed up to the collar showed the kind of ground over which he had been travelling, and the way his breath was coming and going told how much of the four miles had been covered at a run. Now that he had exhausted his first impulse to rush after the Doctor and bring him back at any cost, he began to realise what an absurd thing he had set himself to do. Dr. Hurst had had an hour’s start of him at least, and even the short cut across the fields would not make up for that. With a quick-trotting cob like his, he would have reached his destination easily by this time and discovered the trick that had been played upon him, and no effort on Kit’s part would bring him back a moment sooner than he would be coming of his own accord. Besides, if it was any good going after him, Finny would have sent her man on horseback long before this, and he would have outdistanced Kit in any case.

‘If only our bicycles had been there instead of at Crofts, I might have caught him up then,’ cried the boy, as the hopelessness of the position dawned upon him.

Nothing answered him, and the road looked more dreary than ever. A good deal of rain had fallen that week, and the drip drip of the trees overhead added a kind of melancholy to everything. Christopher’s quick imagination called up all the details of the scene he had left behind him: the unwonted anger of his cousin, the anxiety of Finny and Auntie Anna when he had rushed into the drawing-room with her message, and then their eagerness to ring the bell and send some one for the Doctor, whom he knew to be far away on a wild-goose chase of his own making. He pictured with vividness too the consternation that would be caused in the house when Finny’s messenger returned from his fruitless errand, and the look that would come on Auntie Anna’s face when Peter came in from his tramp with the other boys and explained the trick that had been played on the Doctor. No wonder he had hurried straight out of the house and struck blindly across the fields, without stopping to reflect whether it would be any good or not! Even now, though he knew how little he could do, he felt unable to remain inactive; and turning his face in the direction of Crofts, he once more broke into a run and hurried wildly along the muddy, desolate road.

He had been running about thirty-five minutes, only falling into a walk now and then to recover his breath, when the sound of wheels, coming from behind made him draw to the side of the road. He still trudged on, however, with his head down and his hands clenched, and he did not even trouble to look round when the vehicle caught him up and passed him. The light from the lamp flashed across his face as it rolled swiftly by; and immediately afterwards, the trap pulled up just ahead of him.

'Hullo! Is that Christopher Berkeley?' said a voice from above.

Kit staggered, and stood speechless. It was the Doctor's voice; there was no doubt about that. But how came he to be driving towards Crofts instead of away from it? His sudden appearance was so remarkable that the boy's head felt in a whirl.

'I–I thought—' he faltered.

The Doctor gave a quiet laugh, and climbed down from his seat.

'You thought I was green enough for anything, didn't you?' he observed. 'Just stand by the animal, will you, while I get out of my coat?'

Kit obeyed mechanically. Everything had turned so topsy-turvy all at once, that it seemed no more extraordinary for him to be doing meekly what the Doctor told him than it was for the Doctor to be struggling out of his greatcoat just as the rain was beginning to come on again.

'Then–then you didn't go to Bobby Hearne's aunt, after all?' he inquired stupidly.

'Not much!' answered the Doctor, with another short laugh. He had got his coat off by this time, and he held it out to Christopher peremptorily. 'Put this on, and look sharp!' he commanded.

'But—' stammered the boy, hanging back.

'Do you want to keep me here all night?' cried Dr. Hurst, impatiently; and as Kit still hesitated, he wrapped the coat quickly round him and lifted him bodily into the gig. Then he mounted beside him, and turned the animal's head. The next instant, they were bowling along towards home, at the rate of ten miles an hour.

For the first five minutes they did not speak. Then the Doctor jerked out a sharp inquiry.

‘Aren’t you going to ask after your sister?’ he demanded.

Kit started. ‘I was afraid you’d rag me for it,’ he muttered awkwardly.

The Doctor flicked the horse with his whip. ‘Sorry you think me such a brute,’ he said shortly. He flicked the horse again, and played it a moment or two, as it tossed its head and jumped about. ‘I don’t think it’s anything serious,’ he went on. ‘I gave her a soothing draught, and everything depends on the state in which she wakes up. But I think she’ll be all right.’

The relief at Kit’s heart nearly choked him. ‘Did Jill tell you it was my fault?’ he asked after a while.

‘I gathered as much,’ said Dr. Hurst. ‘You mustn’t excite her any more, you know, or I won’t answer for the consequences. What was it all about, eh?’

He was evidently making a gigantic effort to be amiable, and Christopher felt he owed him something in return. Besides, it was a kind of relief to put the blame on himself.

‘I said you were a rotter, and she said you weren’t,’ he jerked out; ‘and I said you were only decent to her because she was an interesting case, and she said—’

‘All right,’ said the Doctor, hastily. He supposed truthfulness was an excellent thing in theory, but it added another terror to boys.

As they neared the village Christopher summoned up courage to ask one more question.

‘Did you come out on purpose to bring me back?’ he inquired with an effort.

‘Yes,’ said Dr. Hurst, briefly.

Christopher puzzled over this. ‘But–but how did you know I’d gone after you?’ he asked curiously.

‘Jill told me you’d disappeared, and I guessed,’ said Dr. Hurst. If it had not been so dark, Kit might have seen a smile flicker across the serious face of his companion.

‘Did Jill think about me, then?’ cried the boy, eagerly. ‘Perhaps she isn’t so wild with me after all!’

‘Not so wild with you as you deserve, I dare say,’ remarked Dr. Hurst. ‘Indeed, it was because Miss Urquhart was making such an unnecessary fuss about you, that I promised to come and look for you.’

He thought that the boy, although a boy, would not notice the slip he had made just before in calling his pretty cousin by her first name; but Kit noticed fast enough. He had not much time, however, to think about it before they pulled up with a jerk at the back entrance to Wootton Beeches. He began to mumble out his thanks, while the Doctor helped him out of the overcoat and then put it on himself; but the young man cut him short.

‘Do you suppose I drove all those miles in the rain, at the end of a hard day’s work, for the sake of a scamp like you?’ he growled; and Christopher was left staring after him in the darkness.

In the holidays supper was not before nine o’clock at Wootton Beeches, so the boy had plenty of time to make himself presentable before the bell rang. He looked eagerly round the drawing-room when he went into it, but only the three elder boys were there.

‘Where’s Jill?’ he asked.

‘Oh, it’s you, is it?’ observed Egbert, without answering him. As the eldest of the family, he felt that he ought to administer some sort of rebuke to Kit for the commotion he had caused in the household. Indeed, he had said as much to the others before the boy came in; but there was something about Kit that would make any one fight shy of rebuking him, when it came to the point. So Egbert was rather relieved than otherwise when Wilfred interrupted him.

‘Jill’s upstairs,’ he said, looking over his book at Kit. ‘She wants to be with the Babe when she wakes up, in case she’s excited or anything.’

Kit flung himself into an arm-chair and whistled carelessly. Whatever his feelings were in the matter, he was not going to let the family see them. There was rather an awkward silence, which Peter broke by remarking that it was ten minutes to nine, upon which Egbert said something about a clean collar and went out of the room. There was a feeling of relief when he had gone, Egbert having reached the age when it was never quite possible to say whether he was going to side with the enemy or not.

‘Egbert’s awfully wild with you,’ observed Peter, with smiling frankness. ‘He says you ought to be kicked.’

‘Let him do it,’ grunted Kit, indifferently. Having given the Doctor a glimpse of his real feelings not so many minutes ago, he did not intend to betray himself again yet awhile.

Wilfred, who had been watching him closely, began slowly to understand. ‘It’s all right, Kit,’ he said good-naturedly. ‘Egbert never counts! He only does it because he’s the eldest and thinks we’ve got to be reminded of it. Peter and I are with you!’

‘Awfully kind of you, I’m sure,’ answered Christopher, sarcastically. All the same, he stopped whistling and seemed inclined to come round; and Peter hastened to put in a conciliating word.

‘Of course, we know you didn’t mean to make the Babe excited,’ he said. ‘Jill says so herself.’

‘Oh, shut up!’ said Kit, ungraciously.

‘As for the Doctor,’ continued Wilfred, ‘anybody is justified in ragging *him*.’

‘Rather,’ chimed in Peter. ‘What do you think Egbert says about him?’

‘Don’t know and don’t care,’ rejoined Kit. Somehow, he felt it was rather mean to join in abusing the man who had gone out after him, all in the rain and the darkness. Still, he was sure he hated the fellow more than ever now, for had he not outwitted him and put him under an obligation to him at the same time? The boys did not notice his diffidence.

‘Egbert says—’ began Peter, and paused to give his words more effect; ‘Egbert says–that–the Doctor is in love with Jill.’

Christopher sat up and gazed at him. For once his quick wit had not been quite so quick as Egbert’s. So that was why Dr. Hurst had called her ‘Jill’; and that was what he had meant just now by his parting words at the gate!

‘Egbert’s hit it,’ he said morosely. ‘The chap *is* in love with Jill. Poor Jill!’

‘That’s what Wilfred says,’ cried Peter, all ready as usual for mischief. ‘He says Jill has got to be saved from him, or else—’

‘Jill saved?’ echoed Kit, scornfully. ‘As if she needed any saving from *that* idiot!’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ objected Wilfred, shaking his head. ‘Girls are so rum. Look at Merton major’s aunt—’

‘She isn’t a girl, she’s an *aunt*!’ interrupted Christopher.

‘Well, it’s all the same, really,’ declared Wilfred. ‘Merton major says she only married that Indian chap because he bothered so, and because she wanted to be obliging.’

‘And Jill is *awfully* obliging, you know she is,’ added Peter. ‘You can’t tell what may happen, if that Doctor goes on bothering her.’

‘Well, what are we to do, then?’ Kit condescended to ask. ‘We can’t lock him up, can we?’

‘No,’ admitted Wilfred, ‘we can’t lock him up. But there’s lots of other things we can do. We can see that she’s never left alone with him, for instance. Babs is always with them in the sickroom, that’s one thing. But what happens when he comes out of the sickroom, and Jill walks along the gallery with him and sometimes even down to the front door? That’s dangerous, anyhow.’

‘In future,’ said Peter, solemnly, ‘one of us will always be on the look-out to join them the moment they come out of the sickroom. What else, Will?’

Wilfred reflected a moment. ‘Sometimes,’ he said at last, ‘I’ve known her to be taking a walk in the garden, just as he happens to drive up; and then they stay talking ever so long before they go into the house. Once, he even made her take him round the conservatory. That must never happen again.’

‘Never,’ agreed Peter. ‘*I’ll* see to that.’

‘Look here,’ said Christopher, doubtfully; ‘perhaps Jill won’t like our hanging round her like that.’

‘She may not like it *at the time*,’ began Wilfred, impressively.

‘But she’ll thank us for it all her life afterwards,’ concluded Peter, with great solemnity.

Jill’s voice at the door made them start like guilty conspirators. She was much too preoccupied to notice their confusion, however.

‘Has Kit come back?’ she asked anxiously. Christopher sprang out of the arm-chair, and her face cleared. ‘I’m so glad; I was afraid you were lost,’ she said, taking his hand gently. ‘Babs has just woke up,’ she explained, as they went upstairs together, ‘and she is still rather upset about something. I think you can calm her, if you will.’

Kit muttered something indistinctly, and she went on talking in her soft voice. ‘The child has got into her head that you have done something to the Doctor, so I want you to assure her that it is all right. Will you, Kit dear?’

‘I’m the biggest brute,’ burst out the boy, ‘that ever—’

‘Nonsense!’ said Jill, putting her hand over his mouth. Then she opened the door of Barbara’s room and they went in.

Auntie Anna was sitting by the child, trying to soothe her.

‘Bless your little heart!’ she was saying as they entered. ‘There’s nothing the matter with the Doctor, my dear. What makes you think such a thing, eh?’

‘You don’t understand,’ said the little fretful voice from the bed. ‘Kit said–Kit said—’

Christopher pushed Jill on one side, and suddenly knew what he had got to do.

‘That’s all right, Babe; I was only rotting,’ he said bluntly, and patted the hot little hand that lay on the counterpane.

The bright, wistful eyes were fixed searchingly on his face. ‘But you’ve sent him wandering seven times round the world,’ she murmured wearily. ‘You said you had, Kit.’

‘It’s all right, Babe,’ said Kit, again. ‘He’s come back now. I’ve just seen him.’

He only partly understood what she was talking about, but he seemed to know how to satisfy her, and the others drew back and left him to do it alone.

‘You’ve seen him?’ asked Babs, wonderingly. ‘But—’

‘You see,’ said Kit, desperately, ‘it doesn’t take long to get round the world seven times, when–when you’ve got a smart little cob like his!’

The worried look faded out of the child's face, and she smiled for the first time. 'That isn't the reason, Kit,' she told him. 'It is because he was once a fairy prince.'

'Oh, is it?' remarked Kit.

The bright little eyes were closing sleepily, and the aching bandaged head fell sideways on the pillow.

'He has only got to kill the giant and rescue the princess now,' she whispered contentedly. And Kit went on stroking her hand till she was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RESCUE OF A PRINCESS

Barbara was none the worse for her relapse, and she made such a good recovery in the weeks that followed, that the Doctor decided she could be moved to Crofts on the last day of the holidays. Miss Finlayson vowed she had never enjoyed her Easter holidays so much before for she had persuaded Auntie Anna and the boys to remain her guests the whole time, to save her, as she said, from the horrible feeling of loneliness that always seized her as soon as the last fly went down the drive with the last box on the top of it, and the last girl sitting inside. ‘At my age,’ she told them laughingly, ‘it is not safe to be left alone. Who knows that I might not begin talking about rheumatism and nerves, if I had a whole month to think about myself?’ And Auntie Anna, who never talked about rheumatism by any chance, though it had bent her back for her ten years ago, nodded her head wisely like the old witch that she was, and consented to remain at Wootton Beeches with her adopted daughter and her noisy young nephews until Barbara was well enough to be taken home. The boys, for their part, enjoyed themselves every bit as well as if they had been at Crofts; for Finny was first-rate company as long as she was with them, and she contrived at the same time to leave them to themselves just as much as they wished to be left. And staying at a girls’ school was by no means such poor fun as might have been expected; for it was big enough for them to make as much noise in it as they pleased without disturbing anybody, while they had the run of a capital gymnasium, and, as soon as their bicycles had been brought from Crofts, could explore the country for miles round as well. Altogether, the Easter holidays were a great success, and there were many groans when the month came to an end, and school once more threatened to darken the joy of their existence.

‘You are a lucky beast, Kit,’ observed Peter, as they sat swinging on the yard gate a couple of mornings before their departure. ‘Wish I was you and needn’t go to school.’

‘You wouldn’t like it, if you were me,’ answered Kit, shortly. Nobody ever guessed how much he wished he were like other boys and could lead the healthy life they professed to despise so much.

Wilfred, who had just strolled up, had occasional glimmerings of understanding where Kit was concerned; and he had one now. ‘Never mind, old chap,’ he said consolingly. ‘You’ve got all the genius, you know.’

Christopher kicked a stone across the yard without speaking; and Peter hastened to change the conversation, which he perceived was in danger of becoming serious. Peter never attempted to understand anybody, but he had a determined objection to anything that was serious.

‘If we’ve done nothing else these holidays, we have at least saved Jill from the Doctor,’ he remarked with a chuckle.

‘What’s the good of that?’ growled Kit. He did not take the keen interest in the salvation of Jill that the others expected from him, though he certainly did not raise any grown-up objections to it, as Egbert would have done. Egbert was going to Oxford in October, and he was getting far too grown-up for ordinary intercourse with the rest of the family. Kit was not in the least grown-up; besides, he hated the Doctor–that was certain, because he so constantly said he did. But it was a pity, the others agreed, that he did not show more enthusiasm over persecuting him.

‘It’s a lot of good,’ retorted Peter. ‘You don’t want her to marry the chap, do you?’

Kit smiled in a superior manner. ‘I’m not interested in *marrying*,’ he observed. ‘You can’t have marrying, or any of that rot, without girls. And I hate girls.’

‘Do you hate Jill?’ cried Wilfred, staring.

Christopher kicked another stone across the yard.

‘That’s different,’ he said vaguely. ‘Jill’s not a girl, exactly.’

‘What is she, anyway?’ demanded Peter.

Kit’s genius was hard pressed. It was so stupid of people to take him literally. Robin saved his embarrassment by suddenly rushing helter-skelter into the yard, from the direction of the carriage-drive.

‘He’s just driven in at the lodge gates,’ he panted. ‘An’ Jill’s waiting on the front doorstep. If you don’t look sharp you won’t cob them in time.’

The conspirators glanced hastily at one another. ‘It’s your turn, Kit,’ said Wilfred.

Kit started uncomfortably. ‘I don’t think so,’ he objected. ‘I’m not in the mood, and I should make a mess of it. You go, Peter.’

‘All right, I’m on,’ said Peter, and he strode briskly towards the front of the house, swinging his long arms as he went.

Robin danced round the other two gleefully. ‘Silly old Doctor won’t marry Jill, won’t marry Jill, all on a summer’s morning!’ he chanted in a kind of refrain he made up on the spur of the moment.

Kit turned upon him sternly. ‘Chuck it, Bobbin, unless you want your head cuffed!’ he commanded, and walked off before he could be provoked into carrying out his threat.

Upstairs Barbara lay on the sofa by the window and waited for the Doctor’s visit. Her leg was in plaster of Paris now, and she could be lifted on to the sofa by Egbert, every morning. It was less wearisome than lying in bed all day, but even the fun of pretending she was enchanted by an evil fairy did not make up for the dulness of staying in one room all through her first holidays. To be sure, she was going to Crofts the day after to-morrow, and Auntie Anna had promised that Jean and Angela should come and see her the very next Saturday; but that did not make up for everything, and she hoped that if her bad fairy ever bewitched her again, she would manage to do it in term-time instead of when the boys came home.

The Doctor drove up just below as she came to this conclusion, and she forgot her own enchantment in the more thrilling amusement of thinking about his.

It was rather stupid of the Doctor, she reflected, to be such a long time working out the rest of his spell. Any one who had gone round the world seven times, as easily and as cheerfully as he had, might at least take the trouble to find a princess to rescue. He must really want to go on being a beast, she decided, as she craned her neck over the window-sill and watched him dismount from his gig. The princes in the fairy tales never wanted to go on being beasts; and it was very confusing. Just then, Jill came

out on the doorstep, and she patted the horse and began to talk to the Doctor. Barbara laughed softly to herself. If only the cruel giant would come along now and clap Jill into a dungeon, the Doctor could rescue her on the spot and then stand before her in his real shape. A prince and princess, who had no giant to bring them together, did not make the right sort of fairy tale at all.

'Hullo! There *is* the giant!' exclaimed Babs, immediately afterwards, as Peter came striding across the lawn to interrupt the conversation on the doorstep. 'He must be the giant,' she continued, watching the trio below her with great interest, 'because the Doctor is looking so angry and Jill has such a funny, frightened look on her face. Besides, Peter looks like a giant; he's so big and dangerous looking. I wonder if the Doctor will kill the giant *now*, or–oh, dear! they've both come indoors and left the giant outside. I don't think I ever heard of the prince and princess running *away* from the giant before. I'm sure that's wrong. How Peter is grinning–just like a horrid old giant. *Coo-ey*, Peter!'

The prince and princess came into the room, talking busily.

'If you don't come to-morrow,' Dr. Hurst was saying, 'I am afraid it will have to be put off indefinitely, as I am going away for ten days. When I come back, you will have gone to Crofts, you see.'

'I will ask Auntie Anna,' answered Jill.

Barbara seized the first opportunity to interrupt them. 'What's going to happen to-morrow, Dr. Hurst?' she demanded. 'Are you going to carry off the princess at last?'

'I–I don't think so,' said Dr. Hurst, sitting down beside her.

'Why don't you?' demanded the child.

'Well,' said Dr. Hurst, smiling, 'I don't know whether the princess is ready to be carried off. Are you so anxious to get rid of her?'

Both he and Jill were used by this time to her fancy for weaving the people she liked best into a fairy tale. But Jill was not smiling so much as usual this morning.

'I don't want to be carried off by anybody, thank you, Babs,' she said demurely.

‘Oh, that doesn’t make any difference,’ Babs assured her. ‘If you’re a princess, you just have to be carried off whether you like it or not.’

‘Then I’ll be a new kind of princess, and refuse to have anything to do with the prince when he comes. Shall I, Babs?’ suggested Jill, lightly.

Barbara looked at her doubtfully. Jill’s idea was not like anything she had ever read in a fairy tale, and she did not think much of it.

‘You see, you’re *not* a new kind of princess,’ she answered simply. And the Doctor looked amused; but Jill hurried away to the other end of the room and began talking about temperatures.

The giant must have been very busy all that day, for he did not come near the invalid’s room till just before supper. Kit came, and so did the other boys, but they only said vaguely that Peter was in the barn; and when he ran in at last to say good-night to her, she knew it was no use trying to find out what his plans were for locking up the princess. For Peter did not know that he was a giant, and he did not know that Jill was a princess; and it was better to go on with the story in her own way than to provoke Peter’s great laugh by telling him about it. So she went to sleep and dreamed of the dear old magician, who had been away from her kingdom for four whole months, and was going to be away for two months more; and in her dream he came back and rescued the princess himself, and turned the beast into a prince for her. But that was only a dream, and in the morning the end of the story seemed further off than ever.

‘Do let me see what you have been writing, Peter,’ she shouted through her open window, just before lunch-time. Peter and Wilfred had been more than an hour composing a letter on the lawn below, with Robin jumping round them all the time, jogging their elbows and otherwise provoking them into outbreaks of fury that did not improve his behaviour in the least.

‘*Do*, there’s a dear, nice, darling boy,’ begged Barbara, as the conspirators looked at one another and hesitated.

‘It’s a secret,’ said Wilfred.

‘I can keep a secret; you *know* I can,’ cried Babs, indignantly.

‘It’s about Jill,’ explained Peter, ‘and you might do her a great and lasting injury if you were to go and blab. Mightn’t she, Will?’

‘I think it’s a shame,’ protested Babs. ‘Here am I shut up all alone, with a bad leg that hurts and hurts and—’

‘Oh, let her see it. Anything for a quiet life,’ interrupted Wilfred, and Peter strode upstairs with the letter.

‘Promise faithfully you’ll endure any amount of awful tortures, sooner than betray us?’ he demanded threateningly, when he arrived in her room.

‘I’ll be killed first, honour bright,’ said Barbara, solemnly; and the letter passed into her hands. Her countenance grew very perplexed as she read it; for, to tell the truth, she could make neither head nor tail of its mysterious contents.

‘Dearest Jill,’ it ran,–‘We the undersigned are anxious to save you from an awful and terrible fate that is hanging over your head. The barn, we know, is not a place you would choose to spend a happy afternoon in, but Peter has cleaned out as much of the filth as he can (he found several decayed martins’ nests full of insects, two dead rats in an unspeakable condition, and a rotting owlet that made you squirm; so you see it might have been much worse, mightn’t it?) And I (that’s Wilfred) have successfully deposited in a box you will find secreted in the manger, two apples, some seed-cake (sorry it isn’t plum, but there wasn’t any), and a bottle of ginger beer. This, we think, will keep starvation from gnawing at you till the hour of release, which is seven o’clock, when we hope the Doctor will have given up waiting for you. We would put some more things to eat, but they are a little difficult to get without arousing suspicion; and we are afraid of attracting the mice and rats, which are plentiful already, and of which we believe you are afraid. We the undersigned all hope, dear Jill, that you will not attribute base motives to our action in this matter. We do assure you, honest Injun, that though you may dislike us for the moment, you will thank us deeply all the rest of your life.–We have the honour to remain,

WILFRED EVERARD BERKELEY,
PETER EVERARD BERKELEY,
ROBIN EVERARD BERKELEY.

'*P.S.*–Kit isn't in it, because he raised objections and we shunted him. So your lifelong gratitude need not be extended to him.'

'But when are you going to give Jill the letter?' asked Barbara, looking extremely puzzled, as she came to the end of this elaborate composition.

'We're not going to give it to her,' explained Peter. 'It's going to be dropped into the barn through a hole in the roof, as soon as Robin has coaxed her to go inside. The letter is to explain why we've locked her—'

He did not finish his sentence, for Wilfred called him from below, and he seized the sheet of paper and scampered off with it.

Barbara was left in a great state of bewilderment. Something was evidently going to happen to Jill, and it was apparently intended to save her from something that was much worse; but what it all meant was a mystery to her, and there was no one about to give her any more details. The three conspirators were careful to keep out of her way, and she did not see any more of them until after lunch, when they raced out of the front door and disappeared in the direction of the nine-acre field.

'I'm going to leave you for half an hour,' said Jill, when Barbara had finished her midday meal. 'Bobbin has been worrying me all dinner-time to go and look at a baby rabbit he has found, so I promised to run down to the barn and meet him there. Do you mind?'

Barbara said she did not mind at all; and she was left behind, consumed with curiosity as to whether Jill was really going to be locked into the barn, and whether it really could be for her good, as the boys had said, and whether Jill would be angry with them for doing it or would give them her lifelong gratitude. Somehow, Babs did not believe in the lifelong gratitude much; it did not seem likely that Jill would be grateful to any one for shutting her up in a dark and dirty barn for a whole afternoon, even if it was to save her from an awful fate that still remained to be explained. As she thought about it, Babs even began to wonder if she had been right in

promising not to warn Jill. But then, if it *was* to save her from an awful fate, as Peter declared it was, it would have been very unkind to keep her from going down to the barn.

She gave up trying to reason it out, and hoped it was all a joke, and that Jill would come back again at the end of half an hour. But more than half an hour passed by, and still she did not come back. Everything suddenly grew very dull. The garden looked more deserted than usual, and after the pony carriage had come round and taken Finny and Auntie Anna and Egbert for a drive, there was not another sound to break the stillness. Babs began to feel neglected; she had not once been left alone like this, ever since she was first taken ill, and she found it extremely depressing. If it was really necessary for the future happiness of Jill that she should be kept in the barn all the afternoon, some one else might have been told off to take her place in the sickroom. Besides, as the afternoon wore on, the little invalid realised with some sadness that unless Jill did come in, there would be no one to get her tea ready; and she wanted her tea rather badly.

At last, to her intense relief, a thump came at the door, and Kit rushed unceremoniously into the room.

'Where's Jill?' he demanded hurriedly.

'I wish I knew for certain, but I don't,' said Barbara, plaintively.

'Then they've done it!' exclaimed Kit, in a tragic tone, and he dropped into a chair and looked at her.

'Done what?' inquired Babs, eagerly. Kit's behaviour was as remarkable as every one else's to-day, so perhaps she was going to get at the truth at last.

'Locked her up in the barn!' gasped Kit. 'They said they were going to, yesterday, but I thought they were only rotting. I told 'em it wasn't good enough, and I'd have nothing to do with it, so I s'pose that's why they didn't tell me any more. And then, I forgot all about it; and after dinner to-day I went into Finny's study to read a stunning book I'd found there; and I didn't think of anything, till it suddenly struck me how awfully quiet everything was. If she's disappeared, they must have done it, stupid owls!'

'But isn't it all right?' cried Barbara, looking distressed. 'Peter said it was to save her from an awful fate—'

‘That’s all very well,’ returned Kit; ‘but the game isn’t worth it, and that’s what I told them. You see, the Doctor’s coming after tea to-day, to fetch Jill and take her over the new infirmary he’s so keen about, because Jill is nuts on nursing and all that, don’t you know. Well, Peter overheard them talking about it yesterday and Auntie Anna said at breakfast that she’d come home from her drive in time to go too, if she could. But we all knew that she wouldn’t get back in time, most likely; and besides, the Doctor meant business from the look of him, Peter said, so he’d be dead certain to come early enough to go off with Jill alone. Trust him! That was jolly dangerous, you see, because the chap is going away to-morrow, and it’s their last chance of being together.’

‘Why is that dangerous?’ asked Barbara, trying hard to follow his bewildering tale.

‘Oh, well, if he’s ever going to ask her to marry him, or any of that rot, he must be going to do it to-day,’ explained Kit, with a certain contempt in his voice. ‘Anyhow, what we’ve been trying to do all the holidays is to save Jill from the Doctor; so naturally we were rather upset when Peter brought us the news. But I said I’d have nothing to do with locking any one up, ’specially Jill; so they said I could make myself scarce, and I did.’

‘Oh, Kit!’ exclaimed Barbara, opening her eyes, ‘do you think Jill is in that horrible dark barn all this time?’

Kit sprang to his feet and made for the door. ‘I’ll go and see if I can find those idiots,’ he said, but an exclamation from the sofa made him look back. Babs was clapping her hands wildly, and her face had suddenly reddened with excitement.

‘It’s all right, Kit. It’s beautiful,’ she was crying joyfully. ‘Don’t stop them, Kit; don’t help her to escape, whatever you do. Leave her alone till the prince comes. Don’t you see he’ll be able to break the spell at last!’

Kit did not see at all. Indeed, he looked rather alarmed, and came back into the room. ‘Look here, Babe, you’re not going to get excited again, or anything like that, are you?’ he asked her, nervously.

Barbara set his mind at rest by laughing merrily. ‘You silly old Kit, of course I’m not!’ she said. ‘I never felt so jolly in my life!’

Christopher sped away, reassured, and Barbara lay back on her cushions and waited impatiently for the sound of the Doctor's gig. She did not have to wait long, and she waved her hand gaily in answer to the flourish of his whip with which he greeted her as he drove up to the door.

'Come up here, Dr. Hurst, and be as quick as you possibly can!' she called down to him; and a minute later he was in the room.

The first thing he did was to ask where Jill was, just as Kit had done. Barbara laughed more merrily than ever. Her small black eyes were glittering with excitement.

'She *has* been locked up by the cruel old giant, and you can go and rescue her at last,' she told him.

Dr. Hurst frowned slightly. 'What do you mean, child?' he asked a little impatiently. He was evidently not in a mood for joking, and Barbara instantly became grave.

'I didn't mean to play, but it *is* so like a fairy story,' she said penitently. 'And it's quite true about the locking up. They've put her in the barn, Peter and the others have,–not Kit,–and they mean to keep her there till you've gone away, so that–so that you won't get a chance of marrying and living happily ever after! It's to save Jill from you, they say, but Kit's furious about it, and—'

The Doctor flung his driving-gloves on the table. They were quite new ones, she noticed, and he had even forgotten to take the tissue paper off the buttons of one of them. 'Where is the barn?' he asked grimly.

'It's at the far end of the nine-acre field,' explained Barbara, and before she could say any more she found she was alone.

Excitement had made her forget all about her tea, though the hour for it was long past. She wished with all her heart that she could be transported to the scene of the rescue and actually see the princess fall into the prince's arms, while the giant lay stretched at their feet. Then she remembered that the giant was Peter, and perhaps Will and Bobbin too, and she hoped he would not lie stretched there for long.

The minutes crept slowly by, and still no one came in. It was no use looking out of the window, for the nine-acre field was on the other side of the house, beyond the orchard. Then she began to be afraid that something dreadful

must have happened. She reminded herself again that Peter was the giant, and that the Doctor was small and slight in comparison, even for a prince. Supposing, contrary though it was to all the laws of fairy tale, that the giant should be too strong for the prince, and the princess should not be rescued after all? At last she heard the welcome sound of footsteps coming along the gallery, and then Jill opened the door softly and hurried up to her. The Doctor was just behind her.

'My dear little Babs!' cried Jill, dropping on her knees beside the sofa, 'have you been wondering what had become of me?'

'Oh, no,' answered the child; 'I knew about the dark and gruesome dungeon. But I think I'd like my tea, please.'

'Of course you would,' said Jill, in much distress, and she began bustling about the room and making preparations for tea in quite a flustered sort of way. Babs turned to the Doctor. A question was burning on the tip of her tongue, and he smiled encouragingly.

'*Did* you rescue the princess?' she asked.

'I did,' answered the Doctor, briefly.

She looked anxiously at his tie, which had wandered under his right ear, and at his collar, which was crumpled. 'Did you hurt the giant *much*?' she asked.

'I found him in three pieces,' answered the Doctor, gravely, 'and I give you my word I did not leave him in more.'

Barbara was not yet satisfied. 'How did you get into the dungeon?' she asked.

'Through the door,' replied the Doctor.

She opened her eyes wide. 'Then you must have stepped over the body of the giant,' she said.

'So I did,' laughed Dr. Hurst. 'But do not let that alarm you, for here he comes.'

The door was pushed open once more, and the three conspirators tumbled into the room. Their ties and collars were in much the same condition as the Doctor's, but they seemed none the worse for that. Indeed, they looked

rather cheerful over it than otherwise, until they saw the Doctor sitting there, holding Barbara's hand; and then they stopped short and hesitated.

'Do, do tell me,' implored Babs. 'How did Dr. Hurst rescue Jill?'

'I'll tell you, Babs dear,' cried Robin, suddenly dancing up to the Doctor, and climbing on his knee in quite a friendly manner. 'He came walking with big long steps up to the door of the barn, where we was keeping guard over Jill; and he said, "Who can wrestle, out of you young scamps?" 'Course I said *I* could, but he just swinged me up in the apple tree an' left me there, which was horrid, but I didn't mind much, 'cause I saw all the fun. An' the others said they could, if he liked; an' the Doctor said whoever won was to have Jill, an' Peter said "Yes," 'cos he's lots bigger'n the Doctor and he thought he'd win. But he didn't win, nobody did, 'cept only Dr. Hurst; so he got Jill and brought her back here; an' I climbed down from the apple tree all by myself, an' the others shook hands with the Doctor and stopped behind, lookin' scared!'

'I beg to state,' said Jill, severely, from the other side of the room, where she was preparing tea, 'that nobody has *got* me, as you call it. And the sooner you all go out of this room and leave me alone with my patient, the better.'

'So he got Jill'

'I say,' began Wilfred, who was standing first on one leg and then on the other, and trying not to laugh, 'you're not really wild with us, are you, Jill?'

'I'm simply *furious* with you,' said Jill, and she began cutting bread and butter with vigour.

'We really did it for your good,' added Peter, putting on an air of mock penitence. 'How were we to know you didn't *want* to be saved from the Doctor?'

Jill tossed her head and went on cutting bread and butter still, with her back turned to them all. 'Next time you try to save any one from any one else,' she remarked, 'you'd better make sure first that she does want saving.'

Anything they might have said in reply to this was drowned by the noisy entrance of Christopher. He bounced into the room and shook his fist wrathfully at his brothers.

‘Look here, you fellows!’ he shouted. ‘Next time you shut a chap into a *pig-sty*, perhaps you’ll choose a pig-sty that doesn’t belong to a pig that comes home at tea-time and bangs against the door. I’d like to—’

He was brought to an abrupt pause. It suddenly struck him that there was something a little odd about the way every one was assembled in the Babe’s room.

‘Dry up, Kit!’ said Wilfred, with a huge sigh. ‘You were quite right; the game wasn’t worth it. She didn’t want to be saved, after all.’

‘She’s just a girl,’ added Peter, in a tone of deep dejection.

‘She’s a *princess*!’ insisted Barbara, from the sofa.

Christopher looked swiftly round the room. The attitude of every one seemed a little strained. Jill was cutting enough bread and butter for a school, and the crumbs flew in all directions as she stood there with her back to them all. The Doctor was smiling in a way that was clearly put on, and Bobbin was examining his watch-chain with a familiarity that would not have seemed possible an hour ago.

‘Well, I’m bothered!’ said Kit, at last. The truth was gradually dawning upon him. ‘Do you mean to say that you two have been and gone and got *engaged*, while we’ve been trying to save you?’ he demanded. ‘*Have* you, Jill?’

‘Oh, don’t bother,’ grumbled Jill. ‘Why can’t you ask Dr. Hurst?’

‘*Have* you?’ repeated Kit, turning to the Doctor.

‘Ask Jill,’ replied the Doctor, smiling more than ever.

‘Boys,’ said Christopher, fixing his spectacles firmly on his nose and staring solemnly at his brothers, ‘we’ve made shocking idiots of ourselves.’

Into the middle of them all now walked Mrs. Crofton of Crofts.

‘Such a trouble as I’ve had to get back in time, my dear,’ she was beginning, when she too stopped short and seemed to find things a little unusual.

‘Hey-day!’ she cried, leaning on her blue-knobbed cane and looking sharply round. ‘What’s every one looking so glum about, I should like to know?’

Nobody answered her at first. Dr. Hurst put Robin down and rose to his feet, and he stopped smiling at last, while Jill dropped the bread-knife and turned round with a very red face; but neither of them spoke. It was the Babe who came to the rescue, and it was she who explained everything in her small, dreamy voice.

‘Dr. Hurst has saved Jill from the giant,’ she said, ‘and they are going away to their own kingdom, to live happily ever after! I do wish,’ she added wistfully, ‘that the magician would come back too. Then things would be *quite* beautiful.’

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAGICIAN

The triumvirate sat under the old cedar tree at Crofts, and once more they discussed the important affairs of the little world at Wootton Beeches. It was the first Saturday in the term; and Auntie Anna, true to her promise, had invited Jean and Angela to drive over and spend it with Barbara. The spring had come in with a rush, and May had dawned in such a flood of warm sunshine that the child was able to pass most of her time on a couch in the garden. The Doctor, in spite of the ten miles that lay between his house and Crofts, came nearly every day to see how she was; and he hinted at a promise of crutches in ten days' time, after which she was to go away to the seaside and get strong enough to return to school at the half-term. It was very nice, Barbara thought, to see the Doctor so often, now that she was so much better and did not really need him; but Christopher was very sarcastic on the subject.

'S'pose you think he comes to see *you*, don't you?' he remarked scornfully; and when pressed by Barbara for a more definite explanation of the Doctor's actions, he condescended to add: 'Once a chap gets engaged to a *girl*, it's the *girl* who's at the bottom of everything he does!'

The day was so hot that Kit and Bobbin came out to join the others under the cedar tree, and they flung themselves on the grass in different stages of exhaustion. Now and then, they threw in a lazy contribution to the conversation that was going on over their heads, though at first this related entirely to the number of new girls, the alterations in the classes, and other bits of school gossip. Then, however, it took a personal turn, and Christopher's comments grew satirical.

'Has anybody asked after me?' inquired Barbara.

'What a question!' scoffed Christopher. 'A kid like you!'

'They have, though,' declared Jean, making a great effort to overcome her shyness of Barbara Berkeley's clever brother. 'Everybody did, first thing.

You'd never think the Babe had only been there one term.'

'Oh, well, that's because she smashed herself up,' said Kit, cheerfully. 'Girls always fuss over you, if you kill yourself ever so little.'

'They *don't*, Kit,' objected Babs.

'Guess what Margaret Hulme said about you yesterday,' put in Angela, eagerly. Angela was not nearly so shy as Jean, and, much to Barbara's astonishment, Kit found her 'better fun' in consequence. It seemed a little strange that the genius of the family should not be able to appreciate the amazing qualities of Jean Murray.

'What did she say about me?' asked Barbara, only to be interrupted by another jeer from Christopher.

'Never knew such cockiness as the Babe's,' he laughed, tilting his straw hat a little more over his eyes.

'Babs always thinks that everybody's always talkin' about her,' added Bobbin, in his shrillest voice.

Barbara stretched as far as she could, and managed with difficulty to knock off Kit's hat with the end of a stick. Robin was out of reach, so she contented herself with frowning at him severely, and then leaned back again and began to fan herself with her handkerchief. Everything made one feel hot this afternoon. 'What did Margaret say about me?' she repeated curiously.

'It was when I was waiting to put away her books, just before dinner yesterday,' Angela related with eagerness; 'or was it before tea? No! I think it was before dinner, because—'

'Oh, get on, Angela, do!' interrupted Jean, impatiently. Even the presence of Barbara Berkeley's clever brother, which was paralysing her, could not keep the leader of the junior playroom from snubbing Angela.

'Well, she said Babs was the most popular girl in the school,' continued Angela. 'She did, honour bright, and I'm *not* exaggerating, Jean. She said it to Ruth Oliver, and Ruth Oliver said: "Isn't it queer? Such a little kid, too." And Margaret said: "That's just it, stupid!" Then she saw me listening, and she told me not to listen but to make myself scarce; and of course I wasn't listening at all, I was only—'

‘There’s nothing new in *that*’ interrupted Jean, looking superior. ‘Everybody knows that the Babe—’ Here she caught Kit’s eye, and stopped hastily. She was not sure that she liked Barbara Berkeley’s clever brother; he had such a queer way of looking at one. Nobody in the junior playroom ever made her feel like that.

Barbara was in deep perplexity. ‘Is that why every one clapped, then, on the night of the display?’ she said wonderingly.

Christopher looked in mock reproach at Angela. ‘You shouldn’t have told her,’ he said. ‘She won’t be fit to speak to for a month now.’

‘Oh, don’t, Kit!’ retorted Barbara, more from habit than because she really resented his words. As a matter of fact she had hardly heard them, for she was busy puzzling things over in her mind. ‘I can’t think what it all means,’ she went on; ‘every one used to complain of me so. There was Mary Wells, for instance—’

‘Oh, Mary Wells *adores* you!’ cried Angela, in her effusive manner. ‘She said so directly you broke your leg.’

Barbara puzzled still more. ‘I don’t understand about Margaret Hulme a bit, though,’ she observed. ‘Only the day before the display, she told me I was a little nuisance, because I didn’t hear her the first time she spoke to me; so of course I thought she hated me!’

‘That was before you broke your leg, though,’ explained Jean.

‘She *adores* you now,’ added Angela.

Kit and Bobbin burst out laughing, but Barbara went on puzzling, and did not notice them. Adoration at Wootton Beeches seemed to spring from the strangest causes. After being more or less neglected for a whole term by the greater part of her school-fellows, it was at least surprising to be suddenly placed on a pinnacle of fame, just because she had broken her leg. If she had only guessed at Angela’s envy of that same broken leg–an envy that was probably shared by half the junior playroom–she might have been still further amazed.

The boys strolled indoors to find Auntie Anna and to beg for tea in the garden; and the conversation under the cedar tree grew more intimate. Jean came out of her shell, and talked about her home in Edinburgh in a way she had never done before, even on half-holidays at school; and Angela, in her

turn, gave an elaborate description of her eldest sister's drawing-room dress, and of the longing it had aroused in her own frivolous little mind to be presented at Court herself.

'And so I shall be, some day; mother says so!' she announced, spreading out the folds of her rough serge skirt, and seeing it in imagination many times its length and composed of shimmering satin.

'I shan't,' said Jean, regarding her with scorn. 'I don't want to be presented. Any stupid idiot can put on a white satin dress, miles long, and grin at Queen Victoria. *I* want to be clever like father, and get a degree at college, and lecture to thousands and thousands of people, and—'

'Oh, don't be like that, Jean,' interrupted Barbara, earnestly. 'If you're going to give lectures you'll have to go away from all your children, for months and months and months, and leave them to break all their legs, all by themselves, and–oh, it *is* so horrible to break your leg all by yourself!'

'Poor dear,' said Angela, ready as usual with a tearful and demonstrative sympathy.

Jean was much too wrapped up in her future to sympathise with anybody. 'I dare say I shan't have any children,' she said, seized with a happy inspiration. 'You can't have everything, and I'd much sooner have a degree.'

Barbara looked at her in some doubt. 'That's all very well,' she remarked, 'but you'll be jolly dull if you don't look out. *I* don't mean to go without children; I'm going to have millions of 'em–all boys–see if I don't! Then we can always be sure of having enough for sides, without inviting strangers to come and play. You can never be sure how strangers are going to play, and sometimes they spoil the game, and that's a bore.'

'If you have boys of your own, you'll be a mother; and if you're a mother, you won't join in the games at all. Mothers only sit and look on, and send the ones to bed that can't agree,' said Angela, with an air of experience.

'I don't advise you to be a mother, Babe,' added Jean, earnestly. 'You'll have to mend such a lot of socks, and p'r'aps make babies' clothes too; and you've been a whole term getting round the hem of one flannel petticoat, as it is.'

‘You *can* get things ready-made,’ answered Barbara, but her tone did not sound hopeful. She had to own sadly to herself that she was not cut out for a mother, and she fell back on the more practical futures of other people. ‘Wilfred’s going to be a doctor, after all,’ she told them, with great pride. ‘Auntie Anna says she’ll stand all the money that father can’t, and he’s going to St. Thomas’s–Will is, I mean. Isn’t it awfully splendid?’

Her friends murmured something appropriate, but they were not deeply interested in the career of Wilfred. At school, the girls’ conversation was largely made up of details of this kind; but Crofts was not school, and neither Jean nor Angela felt inspired to carry on the discussion. Babs, however, failed to notice their want of enthusiasm. Everything was happening exactly like the fairy story she had planned, the fairy story that had begun in the old London house, on the day that a certain dragon had entered it as a fairy godmother; and for the moment she was back again in her own kingdom, where the old witch still wandered about in her steeple-hat, in the company of Kit the prince, and where the twice-disenchanted beast was placing a crown on the charming head of the princess who had waited so long for him, and where a crowd of other princesses, after breaking their heads and their legs and suffering numerous unpleasant penalties of the kind, had at last returned from their banishment and were hailing the child herself as their queen. But one familiar figure was still missing from her fairy kingdom; and the little queen came sadly back to the world under the cedar tree, with a sigh and a murmured remark about ‘America’ and ‘lectures’ that her listeners only half understood. They recognised the Babe’s very natural wish for her father’s return, but they did not know how the wish had grown into a longing since her accident, during the weary days in which there had been no school to distract her, and nothing to do but to think.

‘He’ll be back in two months, won’t he?’ asked Jean, meaning to be sympathetic, though her manner was awkward.

‘Two months!’ echoed Babs, dolefully, ‘What’s two months?’

‘It’s years, isn’t it?’ responded Angela, with her accustomed inaccuracy.

Having secured their sympathy, such as it was, Barbara allowed herself to become more doleful still. ‘He must have missed all our letters, too,’ she sighed. ‘The last one he sent us was from some awful American place, that

Kit says is in the map if you've got a month to look for it, only you haven't!–and he never told us where to write next, and he didn't say a word about me. So he's not even heard yet that I fell off the rings!'

'Never mind, Babs dear,' said Angela, consolingly; 'think how *proud* you will be when you can tell him all about it yourself.'

Not appreciating the distinction of having broken her leg quite so warmly as Angela, Babs did not respond; and the arrival of tea, and with it every one from the house, made her give up the immediate attempt to pity herself. After all, people who went away to America to lecture could not leave their children to break their legs by themselves for ever; and meanwhile, there was home-made cake and strawberry jam under the cedar tree.

It was in the middle of tea, just as Robin, with a wavering hand, was conveying a second cup to Babs, that the wonderful event happened. Jill had the best view of the house from where she sat at the tea-table, and her sudden exclamation interrupted the jeers of the others over Robin's strenuous performance.

'Such a funny-looking man is coming up the drive!' she remarked. 'He's wearing the very oddest kind of clothes, too–a sort of Inverness cape, and a squashy brown hat. And do look at the way he is walking, with his arms swinging about–just like Peter, when he's in a hurry.'

'He must be a tramp,' said Angela, giggling.

Everybody looked round, except Barbara, who made a plaintive request, that nobody heard, for her couch to be wheeled into a different position.

Then Auntie Anna gave a little shriek, and dropped her pince-nez into her lap.

'Bless my soul!' she cried, fumbling for them in an agitated manner. 'Why, it looks exactly like–I do believe–look, Jill! Your eyes are younger than—'

The boys were sharper than Jill, though, and they settled the question at once in their own riotous fashion. Barbara's second cup of tea fell with a crash and a splash, before she could reach out her hand for it, and her two brothers rushed shouting and screaming across the lawn. In another instant they had disappeared in the folds of the Inverness cape; and Angela Wilkins realised with a shock that she had called Barbara Berkeley's father a tramp!

‘Well, Everard, and what have you to say for yourself?’ demanded Auntie Anna, in a severe tone, as soon as she could make herself heard. For quite ten minutes, every one had been talking at once.

‘What have I to say?’ repeated Mr. Berkeley, with his eyes twinkling. ‘Why, plum-cake, to be sure! You haven’t offered me any tea yet.’

His sons nearly wrecked the tea-table in their efforts to be first in supplying his wants; and Auntie Anna gave up the attempt to be firm.

‘Well, well,’ she said, shaking her head, ‘you always were incorrigible, Everard! But what about the end of your lecturing tour?’

‘There won’t be any end, as far as I’m concerned,’ smiled her brother, devouring plum-cake with avidity.

‘But–but what did they *say* to your extraordinary departure?’ cried Auntie Anna.

‘I didn’t give them time to say much,’ answered Mr. Berkeley. ‘The boat was starting in a couple of hours, you see.’

Auntie Anna threw up her hands. ‘Of all the improvident, hot-headed—’ she was beginning, when the change of expression in her brother’s face silenced her. He held out his cup to her with a pathetic look.

‘You always forget,’ he said. ‘Two lumps, please.’

The boys flung themselves upon the sugar-basin, and more than two lumps found their way into his cup. Jill took the opportunity to present Barbara’s friends to him, and Mr. Berkeley smiled and said something genial to both of them, which made Jean forget at once how shy she was and drove away the last bit of Angela’s confusion over her stupid mistake. But his attention soon wandered back to his children, and he stirred his tea and beamed upon all three of them alternately, until the others began to feel that they were in the way. His eyes rested longest of all upon Babs, who lay on her couch with an expression of complete contentment on her face; and Auntie Anna saw, and understood.

‘I said all the while it was madness to write and tell you about it,’ she grumbled.

Mr. Berkeley chuckled. ‘I never got your letter till last Wednesday week,’ he said. ‘It had been following me about from place to place. Poor little

Babe!' he added, pinching her cheek softly; 'what a shame to let you knock yourself about, when your poor old father wasn't there to take care of you!'

Auntie Anna smiled grimly. 'No one could very well be less capable of taking care of her,' she remarked.

Robin clambered on his father's knee and hugged him afresh.

'Why *did* you come home, father?' he cried, raising his voice higher than ever.

Mr. Berkeley looked mildly surprised. 'Can't you guess, sonny?' he asked. 'Do you suppose I could stay another minute in somebody else's country, when I heard that my little girl was ill over here?'

Jill got up rather suddenly, and offered to take Jean and Angela round the garden; and Auntie Anna grasped her blue-knobbed cane, and rose slowly to her feet. Before she went off, however, she shot one more question at her brother in her most abrupt manner. 'What about your luggage, Everard?' she demanded. 'Where have you left it?'

Mr. Berkeley reflected a moment. 'I *think* it was Boston,' he began doubtfully, 'but it may have been—'

He did not finish his sentence, for the old lady shook her head in despair at him and hobbled off towards the house. Barbara watched her retreating figure, and smiled gently to herself. Auntie Anna might pretend as much as she liked that she was a dragon, but nothing could prevent her looking like a fairy godmother!

Her father stroked her rough, tumbled hair caressingly, and smiled back at her.

'What is it, Babe?' he asked.

The child gazed at him as he sat there, with the two boys clinging to him as though they would never let him go again; and the whimsical look stole into her bright little eyes, and lighted up the whole of her small impish face.

'The magician has come back,' she said, with a happy laugh; 'and there isn't room to *move* in my fairy kingdom!'

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