

FICTION

Angela Brazil

The Manor House School

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION



GLORIOUS NEWS!

The Manor House School

[Pg 3]

BY

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[Pg 5]

Contents

CHAP.	Page
I. NORA'S NEWS	9
II. AN INTERESTING STRANGER	22
III. A STRONG SUSPICION	36
IV. HAVERSLEIGH	50
V. AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT	67
VI. MONICA	80
VII. LINDSAY'S LUCK	94
VIII. PENDLE TOR	111
IX. THE PLOT THICKENS	127
X. UNDER THE HAWTHORN TREE	143
XI. SIR MERVYN'S TOWER	161
XII. AN ENIGMA	178
XIII. LINDSAY MAKES A RESOLVE	189
XIV. THE LANTERN ROOM	202
XV. HIDE-AND-SEEK	215
XVI. A SURPRISE	229
XVII. GOOD-BYE TO THE MANOR	243

Illustrations

	Page
GLORIOUS NEWS!	<i>Frontispiece</i> 239
"SHE OPENED THE DOOR CAUTIOUSLY"	35
"I KNOW WHAT MONICA WAS GOING TO SAY"	93
AN UNFORTUNATE ACCIDENT	139
THE SECRET DOOR	202

CHAPTER I

Nora's News

It was the first week of the summer term at Winterburn Lodge. Afternoon preparation was over, and most of the girls had left the classroom for a chat and a stroll round the playground until the tea-bell should ring. From the tennis court came the sounds of the soft thud of balls and a few excited voices recording the score; while through the open windows of the house floated the strains of three pianos, on which three separate pieces were being practised in three different keys, the mingled result forming a particularly inharmonious jangle.

On a bench in the corner by the swing two yellow heads and a brown one might be seen bent in close proximity over a rather dilapidated atlas. Their respective owners were apparently making a half-hearted endeavour to hunt out a list of towns upon the map of England, and were amusing themselves between whiles with the pleasant, though somewhat unprofitable pastime of grumbling.

"I hate geography!" declared Lindsay Hepburn. "If we could be taken a picnic to each of the places, there'd be some sense in it; but to have to reel off a string of tiresome names that don't mean anything at all to you--I call it stupid!"

"It's such a fearfully long lesson, too!" agreed Cicely Chalmers dolefully. "Miss Frazer might have set us a shorter one for the first! It's really too bad of her to make us begin with two pages and a half in a new book! I'm sure I shall never get it into my head, if I try till midnight."

"I wonder why things always seem so much harder to learn when one's just come back after the holidays?" propounded Marjorie Butler with a melancholy yawn.

"I don't know. I suppose because it all feels so horrid. It's perfectly dreadful to think what a huge time it is until we can go home again."

"Thirteen whole weeks! And every one of them will be exactly the same: lessons with Miss Frazer or Mademoiselle, an hour's practising, a walk in the park or along the Surrey Road, and a game of tennis when you can manage to get hold of the court. There's never anything different, unless Miss Russell takes us to a museum or a concert, and that doesn't happen often, worse luck!"

Lindsay's picture of the forthcoming term certainly did not seem a remarkably enlivening one, and the other two groaned at the prospect.

"I wish one wasn't obliged to go to a boarding school," said Cicely in an injured tone.

"Girls! Girls!" cried a fourth voice, breaking abruptly into the conversation, "I've been hunting for you everywhere. I thought you were in the house or the gymnasium. Oh! I've such a piece of news to tell you!"

"What's the matter, Nora?" enquired Marjorie, for the newcomer was out of breath, and looked as excited as if it were breaking-up day.

"Come here and sit between us," added Lindsay, pushing the others farther along the seat to make room.

"Is it anything really nice?" asked Cicely.

"It depends on what you call 'nice'. I'll give you each six guesses, and even then I don't believe one of you'll be right."

"Miss Frazer doesn't mean to take geography to-morrow?"

"Absolutely wrong, though I wish she wouldn't."

"Somebody has broken another window with a tennis ball?"

"Don't be silly! It's much more interesting than that."

"Miss Russell's going to give us a holiday?"

"You're getting warm! Try again."

"Oh, we can't!"

"We give it up!"

"Go on and tell!"

"Do you remember that just before Easter a gentleman came with Dr. Redford, and they both went over the school, peeping and poking about in such a mysterious manner?"

"Yes, we wondered what they were doing."

"Well, it turns out that he's a sanitary inspector, and he's sent a report to Miss Russell to say that the drains are wrong, and must be taken up immediately."

"Is that your grand news?"

"No, it's only the first part of it. Let me finish, and then you'll see. Dr. Redford says the drains can't possibly be touched while we're all in the house, and yet they must be opened at once. Can't you guess now?"

"Miss Russell never means to send us home when we've only just come back?" gasped Lindsay hopefully.

"No, not that, though it's nearly as jolly. She's taken a beautiful old manor house in the country, and it's to be our school for the whole of the summer term. We're to go there in a body--girls, and teachers, and servants, and everyone."

If Nora had hoped to astonish her companions she had certainly succeeded. They were wild with curiosity, and fired off questions all three together.

"Where is it?"

"When are we going?"

"How did you get to know?"

"One at a time, please," said Nora, enjoying her importance. "I met Mildred Roper in the hall just now. Miss Russell has been explaining it to the monitresses, and said they might tell us as soon as they liked. It's a lovely Elizabethan house, at a place called Haversleigh, a long way from here. We're to start next Tuesday."

Such a tremendous event as the removal of the school from town to country was without precedent in the annals of Winterburn Lodge.

"It's almost too good to be true," cried Cicely rapturously.

"It will be like the last day and setting off for the seaside both together," declared Lindsay, waltzing round the seat in the exuberance of her spirits.

"Not quite, because we shall have lessons when we get there," corrected Nora.

"Well, at any rate it'll be ever so much nicer than being in London."

"Hurrah for the old Manor!" shouted Marjorie Butler, clapping her hands.

Miss Russell had indeed been much alarmed by the sanitary inspector's report. She was determined to make the change without delay, and hurried on the preparation as speedily as possible.

Boxes were brought down from the attic, and teachers and monitresses were kept busy superintending the packing of clothes, linen, schoolbooks, and numberless other articles. For the few days that remained work was relaxed, the headmistress's chief anxiety seeming to be the health of the girls, and her one object to take them away before any sign of illness should break out amongst them.

"Miss Russell looked so worried when I told her my head ached," said Nora Proctor. "She asked every one of us afterwards if we had sore throats."

"I was silly enough to say I thought mine felt a little scrapy," said Lindsay ruefully. "I soon wished I hadn't, because she gave me a horribly nasty disinfectant lozenge, and told me to suck it slowly until I'd finished it. Ugh! I can taste it yet!"

"I'm absolutely sick of the smell of carbolic. There's a jar full in every room," said Cicely.

"Never mind! You'll only have to endure it for one day more. We're actually off to-morrow."

Those in authority might certainly be excused if they looked worried, for it was no light task to accomplish so much in such a short space of time. By Tuesday morning, however, the final arrangements were completed; the rows of boxes were locked, strapped, and piled on railway carts; while the girls, an excited, chattering crew, were ready and waiting for

the omnibuses which were to take them to the station.

"Good-bye to poor old Winterburn Lodge!" said Cicely, giving a last peep into the familiar classroom. "We shan't see these maps and desks again until next September."

"I wonder how many things will have happened before we come back here?" said Lindsay thoughtfully.

It was a long journey into Somerset, but Miss Russell had engaged saloon carriages, and taken large baskets of lunch; so, in the opinion of her thirty pupils at least, the expedition felt like a picnic.

"How I wish we could go every year, or that Miss Russell would remove into the country altogether," said Beryl Austen, who had secured a corner seat, and was in raptures over the view.

"Then it wouldn't be town, and we shouldn't be able to have visiting masters," said Mildred Roper, one of the monitors.

"Who wants them? I'm sure I should be only too delighted never to see any of them again!"

Mildred smiled.

"I suppose, after all, we're sent to school to learn something," she remarked dryly. "I'm afraid you'll find Miss Frazer will give you plenty of work to make up for the loss of Herr Hoffmann and Monsieur Guizet."

"I don't care a scrap, so long as there's fun when lessons are over. We're going to have a glorious time, and I mean to thoroughly enjoy myself."

Beryl only expressed the sentiments of the rest of the girls, most of whom regarded the coming term in the light of a holiday. As the train steamed through green meadows and woods just breaking into leaf, it indeed seemed as if London and professors had been effectually left behind, and their spirits rose higher with every mile.

By afternoon they were all impatient to arrive. For fully an hour before they reached their destination they kept enquiring whether they must get out at the next station, and were sure that each ancient house visible from the carriage windows could not fail to be the Manor.

"Here we are at last!" announced Miss Russell, when, after many false alarms, the welcome word "Haversleigh" made its appearance in plain letters, and a porter's voice was heard pronouncing something which bore a faint resemblance to the name. "Steady, girls! Steady! Remember each is to take her own bag, and file out in proper order. Nobody is to move until I say 'March!'"

Miss Russell first held a review on the platform, to make sure that none of her pupils or their belongings had gone astray.

"I am quite relieved we have all arrived safely," she said. "I think we may congratulate ourselves that not even an umbrella is missing. It is only half a mile from here to the house, quite an easy walk, so we will start at once, and leave our luggage to follow."

In a few minutes more they had passed the ticket collector, and found themselves on the leafy high road. It seemed as different from London as a fairy tale from a Latin grammar. There had been a slight shower of rain, which had brought out the scent of growing grass and budding leaves; the ground was white with the fallen blossom of blackthorn hedges; and a thrush, seated on the summit of an apple tree, was pouring forth a volume of song that sounded almost like a welcome to the country.

With so many new sights to gaze at, it was difficult to walk primly two and two, and the line proved a straggling one, in spite of Miss Frazer's efforts in the rear. At a pair of great iron gates Miss Russell stopped and turned to her girls.

"This is our first glimpse of the Manor," she said, with a touch of pride in her voice. "I want you to take a good look at your new school."

It was nicer even than they had expected—a glorious old place, built partly in Tudor fashion of grey stone, and partly of black and white timbers. There were latticed windows, and a porch ornamented with stone balls, and curious twisted chimneys, and picturesque gables at odd angles.

"It's like a house out of one of Sir Walter Scott's novels," said Marjorie Butler.

"It looks as if one might have all kinds of adventures there," added Lindsay Hepburn gleefully.

The inside proved just as satisfactory as the outside. It was delightful to sit down to tea in a great dining-hall, with a

carved roof, and walls hung with spears, shields, and stags' antlers.

"I feel we oughtn't to be drinking tea," said Cicely Chalmers. "I'm sure they didn't have it in Queen Elizabeth's times. It was tankards of ale or mead in those days."

"Don't finish your cup, then, if you wish to imagine yourself entirely in the past," said Mildred Roper. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave the marmalade too. That's quite a modern invention, and so are the Bath buns."

"Don't be horrid!" said Cicely. "It really is an old-fashioned place. Lindsay and I have got the quaintest panelled bedroom you could possibly imagine. There's a great four-post bed, with yellow brocaded curtains; it's big enough to hold six, instead of only two."

"And there's a lovely library, and a picture gallery, and ever so many queer rooms and long passages upstairs," put in Nora Proctor. "I got quite lost, and couldn't find my way down at first."

"So did I," said Beryl Austen. "I tried to explore a little, but it looked so dim and dark I didn't dare to go alone, so I turned back. I thought I might meet a Cavalier or a Roundhead on the landing!"

Beryl was not the only one to whom their new quarters seemed rather weird and strange on this first evening of their arrival. After being accustomed to electric light and modern bedrooms, it was a great change to walk upstairs with candles to antique chambers that might have belonged to the Middle Ages.

"Don't be silly, girls!" exclaimed Miss Russell indignantly, as they scurried past the suits of armour in the picture gallery. "I shall not allow any absurd nonsense of this kind. You have no more to be afraid of here than you had at Winterburn Lodge. I will take you over the house to-morrow and show you everything, and when you study the real history of the place you won't want to concern yourselves with silly superstitions."

Though the old Manor might look ghostly by night, it wore a bright and cheerful aspect in the sunshine of next morning, and not even the most ardent of Cockneys would have wished herself back among streets and squares. It certainly seemed more interesting to learn lessons sitting on tall-backed oak chairs at a carved table, than at desks in an ordinary schoolroom, furnished with maps and blackboard. The teachers enjoyed it as much as the girls, and everybody had a delightfully romantic feeling of being transferred to the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

"We oughtn't to have science, or physiology, or anything up-to-date here," said Cicely, as, in company with the rest of the third form, she took possession of the panelled parlour that was to be their temporary classroom.

"No, indeed," said Lindsay. "Girls in those days didn't have half our work."

"You forget Lady Jane Grey," said Miss Frazer. "In the matter of knowledge she would easily have put you to shame. If you want her sixteenth-century studies you will have to begin Greek as well as Latin, French, Italian, and some Hebrew and Arabic!"

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Lindsay, aghast at such a list of accomplishments. "I'd rather stick to our own century."

"I thought ladies did nothing but go hunting and hawking then," said Marjorie Butler. "Did they all know Greek and Latin?"

"Probably not, but they could make preserves, and perfumes, and other secrets of the still-room; and they embroidered the most beautiful tapestries, if we are to judge from the specimens in the big drawing-room. Young people were very severely brought up. They might never sit without permission in the presence of their parents or teachers, and they were beaten for the slightest offences. Don't you remember that even poor Lady Jane Grey was punished with 'nips, bobs, and pinches'; and little Edward VI had his whipping-boy, to receive the blows which it was not considered seemly to bestow upon his own princely person!"

"Had the other boy to be whipped for what the king had done? How horribly unfair!" said Beryl Austen.

"Yes, their ideas of justice were rather different from ours. They would have thought present-day children absolutely spoiled. The girls who perhaps may have done lessons in this room three hundred years ago would not learn them so easily and pleasantly as you are going to do this morning. Fetch the geology books, Beryl. We must go on with modern work, in spite of our ancient surroundings."

CHAPTER II

An Interesting Stranger

Among all Miss Russell's thirty pupils you could not have found two stancher friends than Lindsay Hepburn and Cicely Chalmers, both of whom were members of the third, or lowest, class.

Lindsay was a short, plump, fair, jolly-looking girl of twelve, with a very energetic disposition; apt, according to Miss Frazer, to be inconveniently lively and irrepressible in school, but a general favourite in the playground.

Cicely, six months younger, was much more quiet and steady on the surface, though her twinkling brown eyes belied her demurer manners, and proclaimed her ready for anything in the shape of fun. She admired Lindsay immensely, and copied her absolutely, being generally ready to follow her through thick and thin, whatever scrapes might be the consequence.

The pair shared a bedroom, and were so inseparable that Cicely was often called Lindsay's shadow. That was an injustice, however; she had a character of her own, though she might choose to merge it in her friend's stronger personality. It is with these two, and their strange experiences at the Manor, that my tale is chiefly concerned, for if it had not been for Lindsay's enquiring mind, backed by Cicely's persistent efforts, there might have been no story to tell.

This is how it all began.

On the second morning after their instalment at Haversleigh the whole school was assembled ready for a history class in the big dining-hall. Miss Russell, for a wonder, was late, and when she entered at last she brought with her a new pupil. The stranger was about sixteen, a pretty, graceful girl, with hazel eyes, long chestnut hair, and a rather distinguished air. She was given a seat in the first form, and replied to the few questions asked her in a quiet voice; then, at the close of the lecture, she took her books and went away alone, without waiting to join in the next lesson.

Naturally her sudden appearance and departure excited much curiosity. The moment work was over, Lindsay and Cicely seized upon Kathleen Crawford, who was rather a friend of theirs among the monitresses.

"Who's the new girl?" they asked. "We hadn't heard anybody was coming."

"She's only a day pupil for a few classes," answered Kathleen. "Her name's Monica Courtenay. She lives here, but of course not just now."

"What do you mean?" enquired Cicely.

"Why, surely you knew Miss Russell has taken the Manor for the summer from Mrs. Courtenay?"

"I never thought about whom it belonged to," confessed Lindsay.

"Well, at any rate, Mrs. Courtenay and Monica are staying in rooms in the village while their house is let, and Monica is to come three times a week for French and history."

"So this is really her home?"

"Yes, and I heard someone say it is all her own. She's an only child, and her father is dead."

"It must seem funny for her to see a whole school here!"

"I expect it does. I shouldn't like it if the place were mine."

"Is she nice?"

"How can I tell? I saw no more of her than you did yourselves."

Everybody was greatly interested in the newcomer, and ready, at the end of a week's acquaintance, to decide heartily in her favour. Monica was rather dignified and reserved in her manners, and evidently not much accustomed to mix with companions of her own age; but when her shyness began to wear off she proved most attractive.

"She's not at all conceited, although she's mistress of the Manor," said Lindsay.

"No, I can't say she gives herself airs in the least," agreed Cicely.

"I think she behaves beautifully," said Mildred Roper. "She never so much as hints that it's her own house, or tries to

take the lead, as some girls would certainly have done. She doesn't go anywhere without leave, nor even stop to play tennis unless she's asked. I heard her apologizing to Miss Russell yesterday for giving an order to the gardener. Mademoiselle says she is 'bien elevee' and 'tres gentille', and that's a great compliment, for she doesn't admire English girls as a rule."

"No one could help liking Monica," said Kathleen Crawford. "She's charming. I call her one of the nicest girls I've ever met. And she's had such hard luck! I've just been hearing all about her from Irene Spencer."

"How does Irene know?" asked Lindsay.

"She stays sometimes with an uncle who is vicar of the next parish, and her cousins are friends of Monica's. It's a most extraordinary story--it might have come out of a book."

"Oh, do tell us!" said the others eagerly.

Kathleen's tale was in scraps, and missed out several points of which she was not aware at the time, so it will be better to set it down here as the girls learnt it more fully afterwards, for it was of great importance, and formed the basis of much that was to follow.

The Courtenays, it appeared, were a very ancient family, and had inherited the Manor from an ancestor who had fought bravely on the Yorkist side in the days of the Wars of the Roses. In the present generation there was no male heir, and Monica was the last of her race.

Until a few years ago the old house had been in the possession of her great-uncle, Sir Giles Courtenay, a most eccentric man, so odd and peculiar, indeed, that many people had considered him to be out of his mind. He was reputed to be extremely wealthy, yet lived in a miserly fashion, entertaining no visitors, and never spending a penny which it was possible for him to save. He never married, but passed his days as a recluse, shut up among the books in his library, seeing only a few old servants whose services he had retained. Sometimes in the early morning he would wander about the woods and fields in the neighbourhood, seeking for wild flowers, but on such occasions he seemed much annoyed if spoken to, and evidently preferred to take his rambles unnoticed.

At his death he left everything to his great-niece, Monica.

"Both the Manor", so ran the will, "and all that it may contain, especially commending to her the volumes in my library, and advising her to pursue the study of botany, which has ever been a solace and a distraction to me amidst the various ills and disappointments of life."

At first it was supposed that Monica must be a great heiress, but when Sir Giles's legacy came to be investigated nothing could be found beyond the ordinary furniture in the house and a few pounds in the local bank. No one knew anything about his affairs, and neither papers nor documents were forthcoming to give the slightest indication as to what had become of the fortune he was known to have inherited.

Not only was all trace of the money lost, but the valuable silver plate and jewellery that had been handed down from generation to generation of the Courtenays were also missing, and there was no clue to their whereabouts. It was generally believed that Sir Giles must have concealed the whole of his wealth somewhere in the old house, but, though a minute search had been made from cellar to garret, the hiding-place had not yet come to light.

Instead, therefore, of owning a fortune, Monica had received nothing but the Manor, in itself a very barren heritage. She and her mother had taken up their residence there, but they possessed only a small income, quite insufficient to maintain the former traditions of the family. It was on this account that they had been glad to let the house to Miss Russell for the summer, and to retire themselves into quiet lodgings close by.

"Hasn't Monica ever tried to hunt for the treasure?" asked Lindsay, when Kathleen had finished her narrative.

"Oh, yes--often! I believe she has gone systematically through each room, but it's so well hidden that it seems quite impossible to find it."

"Yet it must be there!"

"No doubt. It may never turn up, though, until the place is pulled down. The whole thing is a complete mystery, and so far nobody has been able to solve it."

"Have you asked Monica where she has looked?"

"Certainly not. Irene says she's very sensitive about it, and can't bear to hear it spoken of. Naturally it must have been a most terrible disappointment. I don't wonder she avoids the subject. Please be careful never to mention it to her, or

you'll offend her dreadfully, and I shall be sorry I told you."

"I'm sure both Lindsay and Cicely would have too nice feeling to question Monica on such a personal matter," said Mildred Roper.

"Of course we shan't say anything--we wouldn't for worlds," promised the two younger girls.

That Monica should be the heroine of so romantic a story made her doubly interesting in the eyes of Lindsay and Cicely. They were much impressed by Kathleen's account, and retired to the privacy of the summer-house to talk it over together.

"It must be dreadful to be so poor when you know you ought to be so rich!" said Lindsay.

"And so tantalizing, when perhaps the fortune is actually in the house," said Cicely.

"I could never be happy for thinking about it."

"No more could I."

"Look here! Why shouldn't you and I set to work? So long as this treasure is hidden away somewhere, I suppose it's possible to find it."

"Oh, don't I wish we could!" cried Cicely, her eyes round at the idea.

"Well, I can't see why we shouldn't have as good a chance as anybody else. I expect it's chiefly a matter of careful hunting."

"How splendid it would be if Monica really turned out an heiress after all!"

"Glorious! It's worth trying for. Those panelled walls might be full of hiding-places. We don't know what we may discover when once we begin."

"We shan't have to let Miss Frazer catch us looking about."

"Rather not! Nobody must know what we intend to do."

"Not even Marjorie Butler?" pleaded Cicely.

"No," said Lindsay firmly. "Marjorie couldn't help whispering it to Nora, and then it would be all over the school. The big girls would make dreadful fun of us, I'm sure. They'd call us 'The Gold Seekers', or some other stupid name, simply for the sake of teasing. Besides, if it were talked about among the rest, it would be sure to get to Monica's ears, and we particularly don't want that."

"No, she mustn't hear a word of it."

"Very well, then, we had better keep it to ourselves. Will you promise faithfully that it shall be a dead secret just between you and me?"

"Absolutely dead!" agreed Cicely.

The two girls were determined to institute a thorough search for the lost legacy, but they foresaw many difficulties in the way. In the first place, it was hard even to make a start without letting anybody suspect what they were doing. Although the term at the Manor seemed like a holiday, it was nevertheless school: there was a certain amount of supervision by the mistresses, and there were rules and regulations to be obeyed, the same as at Winterburn Lodge. The girls were not allowed to wander about alone exactly when and where they wished, and even during recreation time they were expected to play games in the garden.

One of the greatest hindrances to their plan was Mrs. Wilson, an elderly servant who had been left in charge by Mrs. Courtenay, and who seemed to consider herself responsible for her mistress's property. She evidently much resented the presence of thirty schoolgirls in the Manor, and kept a keen eye upon them to see that they did no damage. She was continually watching to satisfy herself that they were not scratching the furniture, nor spilling candle-grease upon the stairs; and was loud in her complaints to Miss Russell over the most absurd trifles.

If she had had sufficient authority, I believe she would have limited the girls entirely to their bedrooms and schoolrooms, but as that was impossible, she did her best to frighten them away from the rest of the house by being as disagreeable as she could. As a natural consequence they detested her. They nicknamed her "The Griffin", and took a naughty pleasure in defying her as far as they dared.

"She's as sour as a green gooseberry!" grumbled Effie Hargreaves. "If we only take a stroll along the portrait gallery, she thinks we're going to knock down the armour, or poke our fingers through the pictures."

"Yes, she seems to imagine we can't look at a thing without breaking it. It's perfectly ridiculous!" declared Beryl Austen.

"She's an absolute nuisance. It's a pity she was left behind," said Nora Proctor; and that was the general verdict in the old housekeeper's disfavour.

With such a dragon continually on the alert, it was almost impossible for Lindsay and Cicely to find the slightest opportunity of beginning their treasure hunt, and they were reduced to very low spirits on the subject. One half-holiday afternoon, however, Lindsay reported that Mrs. Wilson, dressed in black bonnet and mantle, had been seen to leave the back door and walk away in the direction of the village.

"Now is our chance!" she assured Cicely. "Miss Russell is lying down in her bedroom with a bad headache, Miss Frazer is playing tennis, and Mademoiselle is sitting reading in the arbour. Everyone else is in the garden, and if we run indoors at once nobody will notice, and we shall have the place practically to ourselves."

Could anything have been more fortunate? They lost no time in hurrying into the Manor, feeling almost as desperate conspirators as Guy Fawkes and his confederates; and commenced immediately to make a careful tour of investigation. They stole round the hall, the dining-room, and the library, scrutinizing every nook and corner, tapping the panels to hear if they sounded hollow, and peeping up the old wide chimneys, but all with no success.

"I'm afraid we shan't find anything down here," said Lindsay at last. "I expect people made hiding-places where they wouldn't be so easy to get at. Let us go and explore the attics. We've never been up there yet."

They reached the top storey without encountering even a servant. Somehow it felt a little eerie to hear nothing but the echo of their own footsteps, and to find themselves quite alone in such an out-of-the-way part of the house. The Manor was very large, and nearly the whole of the left wing was unoccupied. They passed door after door, all leading to more and more empty rooms, till Lindsay began to grow almost dismayed at the bigness of their undertaking.

"I didn't know the place was so huge!" she sighed. "I'm afraid one might spend years looking round and examining it thoroughly. I don't wonder Monica lost heart. There isn't the faintest clue to go upon, either, to give one a hint where to hunt."

"Hadn't we better be turning back?"

Cicely was growing rather tired of the fruitless attempt.

"In a minute. Let us go to the end of this landing."

The passage in itself was like the others, but it differed in one particular, for it terminated in a narrow, winding staircase. This looked tempting--just the sort of thing, in fact, that they felt ought to lead to somewhere interesting and important.

"It's like the way to the turret chamber where Sir Walter was imprisoned, in *Tales of the Middle Ages*," said Lindsay.

"Or where Katherine was dragged when Sir Gilbert found she had overheard the secret plot," said Cicely.

They scrambled almost on hands and knees up sixteen steep steps. At the top was a small landing, and exactly facing them, up three steps more, stood a closed door. The girls paused for a moment to consider what to do next.

"Listen!" said Cicely suddenly. "I thought I heard a queer noise."

There certainly was a most extraordinary sound issuing from the room opposite. It resembled somebody groaning, or giving long-drawn, sighing breaths. It went on for a few moments and then stopped, then commenced louder than before, and finally died away altogether.

"What is it?" whispered Cicely, rather nervously.

"I don't know, but I'm going to look and see."

"Oh! Dare you? I hope it's nothing that will bounce out!"



"SHE OPENED THE DOOR CAUTIOUSLY"

"Nonsense! Why should it?"

"It might. Do be careful!"

"Don't be silly!" said Lindsay. "We came up here on purpose to discover things, and help Monica. If there's a noise in that room, we certainly ought to find out what's making it."

And with this plausible excuse for satisfying her curiosity, she opened the door cautiously, and peeped inside.

CHAPTER III

A Strong Suspicion

If Lindsay and Cicely had counted upon finding something interesting behind the closed door, they were much disappointed. The room was absolutely bare and unfurnished. It was not panelled, as mysterious rooms ought to be, but had an old-fashioned and rather ugly wallpaper, adorned with big bunches of grapes and flowers; and there was a plain, whitewashed ceiling. At one side a window overlooked the garden, and at the other was a shallow store cupboard, the open door of which revealed rows of empty shelves, probably intended for jam or linen.

There was nothing to give the least suggestion of romance, or the possibility of any concealed hiding-place. There was no carved overmantel nor four-post bed; in fact, the only article of any description to be seen was a large horn lantern that hung from a hook in the ceiling. The curious noise had ceased, and although the girls looked round most carefully, they were not able to find anything which would account for it.

"There isn't a corner that even a cat might hide in," said Lindsay. "It was so loud, too! I can't understand it in the least."

"I call it rather uncanny. Let us go!" said Cicely.

She was stepping down on to the little landing again, when, to her dismay, she almost ran into the arms of Mrs. Wilson, who, still in black bonnet and mantle, had returned from the village sooner than they anticipated, and must have come unheard up the winding staircase.

"The Griffin's" surprise at seeing them seemed as great as their own. She gave a gasp of consternation, peeped hastily inside the empty room, then turned to Lindsay and Cicely with a look of mingled relief and wrath.

"What were you doing in the lantern room?" she asked sharply. "You know perfectly well you've no right to be up here. You must mind your own business, and keep to your own places, instead of poking and ferreting about into matters that don't concern you. I can't have you rambling about wherever you please, and the sooner you understand that the better. It was sorely against my advice that the Manor was let for a school!"

She spoke rudely, and seemed more upset and annoyed than the occasion warranted. She swept the two girls downstairs before her, muttering angrily as she went, and did not let them out of her sight until she had watched them safely into the garden.

"How horrid she was!" exclaimed Cicely, when they were alone, and able to talk things over. "Miss Russell never said we weren't to go on to that top landing."

"What was Mrs. Wilson doing there herself--in an empty room, in such a deserted part of the house?" asked Lindsay meditatively.

"I don't know. She looked quite aghast at seeing us."

"I believe there's something about it we don't understand. Perhaps she has some reason beyond mere fussiness and nastiness for wanting to keep us away from that particular room."

"What kind of a reason?"

"Well, suppose she had discovered the hiding-place?"

"Wouldn't she tell Monica?"

"She might intend to take some of the money."

"Oh, how dreadful! It's quite possible, though, that she knows where it is. She was housekeeper to old Sir Giles for ever so many years."

"It seems to me most suspicious," said Lindsay. "We must watch her, and find out everything we can, for Monica's sake."

The idea that Mrs. Wilson was concealing the treasure for her own ends was a thrilling one. The more they thought about it, the more probable it appeared. Who had a better opportunity than she of searching the old house? She might even have been present when her eccentric master stowed his fortune so carefully away. If this were really the case, the greatest caution was necessary, for to allow "The Griffin" to see that they had noticed anything might entirely spoil their plans.

"We must treat her just as usual," said Lindsay, "only we must keep our eyes and ears open, in case something should turn up to give us a hint."

For the next few days they behaved with what they considered the greatest diplomacy. They took care not to aggravate Mrs. Wilson, nor in any way to attract her special attention; but they looked out for the slightest chance of following her movements, dodging round corners, and stalking her along passages with the zeal of detectives. Unfortunately their efforts were not so unobserved as they supposed, and drew down a reproof from headquarters.

"Lindsay and Cicely! how is it that you are continually loitering about the landing when you ought to be in the garden?" said Miss Russell. "I shall have to make a new rule, that nobody is to come upstairs until ten minutes before meals. In this lovely weather I expect you to be out-of-doors. It is a shame to waste a minute in the house. Don't let me find you here again during recreation time."

This was a blow, as it brought the great scheme temporarily to a standstill. The girls could not venture to disobey openly, and judged it wiser to let things rest for the present, until the mistress should have forgotten the matter, and they might once more quietly begin to renew their investigations.

"We'll play cricket hard, and put our names down for the tennis handicap," said Lindsay. "We mustn't on any account let Miss Russell think we'd a special motive in what we were doing."

"Rather not! We'll 'lie low and say nuffin', like Brer Rabbit," agreed Cicely.

There was no lack of liveliness or occupation at the Manor to justify anybody in idling about the passages, and there were certainly many small excitements, apart from mysterious chambers or hidden treasures. All kinds of funny events kept occurring which had never disturbed the prim atmosphere of Winterburn Lodge.

Nora Proctor and Marjorie Butler awoke half the school one night by loud and repeated screams, and when Miss Frazer rushed into their room, imagining fire or burglars, she found them cowering behind the bed curtains, in mortal terror of a large bat that had made its way through the open casement. Earwigs were a constant nuisance, and everyone grew almost accustomed to catching green caterpillars, which crept in from the roses that surrounded the windows, and would turn up in the most undesirable spots.

Naturally so old a house was infested with rats and mice. They scuttled inside the walls, and squeaked behind the wainscots, and seemed to hold carnival at the back of the oak panelling, often disturbing the girls at night with the noise. This was particularly noticeable in the room where Lindsay and Cicely slept. They were sometimes awakened by sounds like the rolling of barrels overhead, as if heavy objects were being clanked about up in the ceiling.

"You've no need to be afraid of them," said Mrs. Wilson, who made light of all complaints, "they never venture out of the walls, to my knowledge."

The fear, however, that a rat might possibly gnaw its way into her bedroom afflicted Cicely continually.

"If it ran across my pillow I should die of fright, I know I should!" she wailed. "I wish Mrs. Wilson would let us have the cat to sleep with us. I should feel far safer."

"I wish we could send for the Pied Piper, and get rid of them all. They woke me twice last night," said Lindsay.

Poor Cicely never dared to retire without first having a thorough examination to assure herself that no lurking rodent was lying hidden behind the wardrobe, or in any other obscure corner. One evening she was making her usual round, armed with a tennis racket for protection, and was peeping under the bed, when she suddenly let the valance fall hurriedly, and drew back with a shriek.

"There's a rat there! I saw it quite plainly; its great big eyes were glaring at me!" she announced in a trembling voice.

"What are we to do?" exclaimed Lindsay, in equal consternation.

"Call for Miss Frazer this instant. She hasn't gone downstairs yet."

"Don't disturb it on any account!" decreed Miss Russell, who was fetched from the drawing-room to cope with the emergency. "I shall send at once for Scott, the gardener, and ask him to bring his terrier dog. We must really take some measures to destroy these pests."

It was not very long before Scott arrived. He clumped solemnly up the stairs with a thick stick in his hand, and Bill, his sharp little fox terrier, at his heels. Mrs. Wilson accompanied him, bearing the kitchen poker; and the parlour-maid followed, holding the yard dog by the collar, in case Bill should miss his prey. Miss Frazer and Miss Humphreys were there to support Miss Russell; while Mademoiselle and a great many of the girls hovered outside in the passage, half-

frightened and half-excited over the coming fray.

"If you'll please to tell me where the young lady saw it, mum," said Scott, "I'll let Bill on it sudden. He's death on rats."

"It was just at the foot of the bed," quavered Cicely. Scott stooped, and raised the valance with the greatest precaution. Bill sniffed eagerly, but he did not pounce upon any concealed victim.

"There's nothing there, mum--leastways no rat," said Scott, straightening his back.

"Are you sure?" gasped Miss Russell. "It couldn't possibly have escaped."

"I think it's been a little mistake of the young lady's, mum," said Scott, suppressing a grin. "If you'll kindly take a look under the bed, you'll see for yourself."

Miss Russell hastened to comply, and, bending down, gave an exclamation as she drew out one of Lindsay's best Sunday gloves.

"What an extraordinary illusion!" she cried. "I don't wonder Cicely took it for a rat. The soft doeskin is exactly the same colour, and the buttons were gleaming just like two bright eyes. I never saw a more perfect resemblance. I should certainly have been deceived. Well, I'm glad our chase has been a case of much ado about nothing. I think you may go to bed with easy minds to-night, girls. If we have any more alarms, we must send for Bill to protect us. Good dog! Can you find some scraps for him in the kitchen, Mrs. Wilson?"

Cicely's rat was of course a great joke in the school, and a subject of teasing for several days afterwards.

"You'll imagine your dressing-gown is a tiger next," said Effie Hargreaves.

"Some people scream at nothing. I'd have been sure about it first, before making such a fuss," said Beryl Austen.

"She thought it was a wily rat, and watched to see it move,
She looked again, and saw that it was nothing but a glove!"

improvised Nora Proctor, who was fond of *Alice*, and had rather a taste for parody.

"It was such a disappointment to us, when we were waiting to hear the scuffle," said Marjorie Butler.

"We shan't believe in your scares next time," said Effie.

"It's all very well, but I'm sure you'd have been just as frightened yourselves," retorted Cicely. "You've no need to make so much fun of me."

"It's too bad. I vote we pay them out, and have the laugh on our side," sympathized Lindsay, leading her friend away. "I've thought of such a capital idea. Come to the summer-house and we'll talk it over."

As the result of Lindsay's cogitations, the two girls went boldly to Mrs. Wilson, and begged an old cardboard box.

"It's half to pieces," said "The Griffin", quite amiably, for a wonder. "It's not much good you'll do with it, I'm afraid."

"Never mind, it's enough for what we want, thank you. We're not going to put anything very heavy in it, are we, Cicely?"

Cicely's reply was such a wildly hysterical giggle that Mrs. Wilson stared at her in offended surprise.

"She's only silly!" explained Lindsay hurriedly. "Please, could you let us have some scraps of dark cloth? Perhaps there'd be something in the rag bag. Be quiet, you stupid!"

The last remark was aside to the irrepressible Cicely, who straightened her face with an effort. "We're going to do some sewing," she volunteered, choking back her mirth.

"You're not generally so industrious," said Mrs. Wilson grimly. "I should be glad to see you using your needle for once. It seems all tennis and croquet with you young ladies."

She produced the rag bag, however, and allowed the girls to take their choice of the various odds and ends which it contained. They selected a piece of rough, hair-brown serge; then, fetching their work-baskets, they retired to a remote part of the garden, where they were not likely to be disturbed. If Mrs. Wilson had imagined they were about to engage in some fine and delicate needlework, she was much mistaken. They confined themselves to cutting and snipping, and to a few big, cobbling stitches that would have caused her to exclaim in righteous horror.

At the end of half an hour all was finished, and Lindsay proudly held up the result of their labours. It really was not a

bad imitation of a rat. It had a nice round, plump body, four squat legs, a pointed nose, and a long, thin tail.

"We can't make whiskers," said Lindsay, "but that doesn't matter in the least. They wouldn't notice them. What a good thing it's light until so late now! They'll be able to see it perfectly well."

"We couldn't manage if the bed weren't a four-poster," said Cicely, chuckling in anticipation of the fun to come.

Beryl Austen and Effie Hargreaves slept in a room almost opposite to Lindsay's and Cicely's. Before eight o'clock arrived the two latter contrived to make an excuse to go upstairs, and hastily completed their preparations. The arrangements were ingenious. They fastened their rat very lightly by two pieces of thin sewing cotton to the middle of the piece of tapestry that formed the roof of the great four-post bed. To the cotton was attached a long strand of string, which passed through the curtains and out at the door (conveniently near the bed), the end being hidden under the mat on the landing.

"You'll see, when we jerk the string, the cotton will break, then down will plump the rat right on to their chests," said Lindsay, justly proud of her inventive powers. "Poke the box under the valance, Cicely, quick! I thought I heard someone coming."

The cardboard box contained a bobbin, to which a second string was tied, and concealed in the same manner as the first.

"I don't believe they'll suspect anything," said Cicely. "Won't it be lovely to give them a scare!"

At bedtime the conspirators retired innocently as usual, having wished Beryl and Effie good night in the passage.

"I nearly said I hoped nothing would disturb them," laughed Lindsay, "but I thought it would be wiser not. How long must we leave them to go to sleep?"

"About half an hour, I should think. Let us get up as soon as we hear the clock in the picture gallery striking nine."

The twilight lasted long, so it was still quite possible to distinguish objects as two nightgowned, barefooted figures stole gently across the landing. Fortunately everything was perfectly quiet in the upper portion of the house. The younger girls were in bed, and the elder ones were with the teachers downstairs.

"We must be sure to work the right strings," breathed Lindsay. "Have you got yours? This was mine, with a knot at the end."

She gave a smart pull, and the bobbin rattled loudly inside the box. They could hear it plainly, even through the closed door.

"What is that?"

The question came in an anxious and wideawake tone from within the room.

"I don't know. Oh, there it is again!"

The voice this time was Effie's.

"It sounds as if it were under the bed!"

"Oh, surely it's not a rat!"

"Now for it!" whispered Cicely, pulling the second string.

The result was all they could have desired. A series of yells proceeded from the four-post bed, sufficient not only to rouse the occupants of the other rooms on the landing, but to bring Miss Frazer hurrying up from the library. Lindsay and Cicely dropped their strings and fled, not a second too soon. They could hear Miss Frazer striking a match to light the candle, and her exclamation when she discovered the cause of the uproar.

"All the girls have turned out to see what's the matter," said Cicely. "If you and I don't go too, they'll know who's done it."

"I think we shall have to own up, in any case," replied Lindsay.

"It was worth the scolding," she declared afterwards, when Miss Frazer had administered a due homily on the danger of practical jokes. "I only wish I could have seen their faces when the rat plumped on to them. They needn't talk of screaming at nothing, and if they ever begin to tease us about anything again--well, we'll just say 'Rats!'"

CHAPTER IV

Haversleigh

There never was such a glorious place as the Manor. Upon that point the whole school perfectly agreed. The garden was as fascinating as the house, and proved an absolute dream of delight, with its smooth bowling-green, its winding paths, its charming little arbours overgrown with creepers, its clipped yew hedges, and its unexpected flights of steps. It might have been designed as a kind of terrestrial paradise for girls. The big lawns afforded space for so many tennis courts that there was no need for the younger ones to hover about, waiting enviously until their elders had finished before they could get a chance of a game; and there was plenty of room left for croquet and clock golf. The shrubbery and the plantation were ideal spots for hide-and-seek (almost too good, Lindsay said, because it was so very difficult to find anybody); while the various rustic seats scattered under the trees made sewing and reading a luxury on hot days, when no one felt inclined for violent exercise. A stone-flagged terrace ran the entire length of the front of the Manor, proving an invaluable playground when the grass was too wet for games in the garden; and a roomy summer-house stood near the bowling-green, so big that it was capable of sheltering all the school during a thunder shower.

Beyond the avenue, and at the farther side of the shrubbery, was a maze. Marvellous little narrow, twisting paths, with high hedges of clipped box, wound round and round in an utterly bewildering manner, most of them either ending blindly or turning back to the original entrance, and only one of the number leading to the arbour in the centre. For a long time the girls amused themselves with trying to discover the proper clue. Cicely, like Hansel, dropped pebbles to show which paths she had already traced; Lindsay essayed to cut the Gordian knot by creeping through the hedge; and it was only after many and repeated trials that they were at last able to solve the puzzle.

In the midst of one of the lawns grew a grand old yew tree, the lower branches of which were easy to climb. It was a favourite haunt of the younger girls, each having her special seat, and here they might often be seen perched like birds, and certainly chattering enough to suggest a flock of magpies. A stalwart oak close by supported a swing that was far more romantic than the swing in the playground at Winterburn Lodge, because a strong push would send the happy occupant high up among the green leaves, and give her a flying peep into a missel-thrush's nest on the topmost bough, where four gaping yellow mouths were clamouring for food. In a corner, down a flight of steps, there was a pond where grew marsh marigolds, and irises, and forget-me-nots, and other water-loving plants. A pair of ducks lived here in a wooden hutch, and would come waddling up to be fed with bread, which the girls saved from breakfast for them. Great was the delight of the whole school when one morning a brood of seven small ducklings appeared on the water, each as yellow as a canary, and seemingly quite at home already in its native element.

Then there was the rose garden, where every variety of the queen of flowers seemed to flourish, from the delicate Marechal Niel to the sweet, old-fashioned, striped York and Lancaster. Archways and pillars were covered with climbers and ramblers, a little untrained, but hanging down in such glorious profusion that one almost approved of the neglect. Round this garden was a high hedge of clipped holly, so that it was sheltered from every wind, and the roses bloomed as if in a greenhouse. Nor must we forget the peacocks, which were as much a feature of the old house as the twisted chimneys, or the stone balls on the porch. There were six of them, and the gorgeous sheen of their feathers as they spread their tails in the sunshine was a sight worth remembering. In fact, as Miss Russell often remarked, they gave a finishing touch to the whole scene, and made the Manor look more than ever like a medieval picture.

The village of Haversleigh was only ten minutes' walk from the lodge gates. It consisted of one long row of quaint black-and-white cottages, with thatched roofs, and gardens so gay with flowers that they seemed to be overflowing into the road, and pinks and pansies were coming up between the cobblestones of the street. At the end stood the beautiful ancient church, built in days when each artisan was a master of his craft, and made his work a labour of love. Strangers often came from a distance to admire the delicate tracery of the windows, the exquisite carving of the pillars, and the splendid old oak choir stalls that had formed part of a tenth-century abbey. At the west end hung a collection of banners, won by Monica's ancestors in many a hard-fought battle, and, all tattered and faded as they were, still bearing tribute to the glories of the past. There were monuments, too, in memory of the Courtenays: stone effigies of knights in armour, lying under carved canopies emblazoned with their coats-of-arms; stiff ladies and gentlemen of Tudor times, with starched ruffs and buckled shoes; and one lovely marble figure, by a forgotten sculptor, of a young daughter of the house who had perished during the Great Plague. The ruthless hands that had chipped and spoiled many of the other monuments had spared this one, and the beautiful, calm face seemed to be resting in tranquil sleep, patiently waiting for the summons to arise to immortality.

The Manor pew, though large, could not accommodate the school. The girls sat in the left aisle, and made quite an important addition to the little congregation of villagers. They certainly helped to swell the singing, and I think even the most thoughtless among them learned to love that dear old church, and carried its remembrance into after years.

The Rectory marked the last boundary of the village, then the road passed over a bridge straight into the open country. The scenery was pretty without being grand. Picturesque farmhouses stood in the midst of rich pastures, behind which rose wooded slopes leading to a higher peak, called Pendle Tor; that stood out as a landmark for the district. Naturally the girls were very anxious to explore the neighbourhood, and delighted when Miss Russell allowed walks on half-holidays. The whole school was not often sent out together, but each form would go in turn, separately, with its own teacher--an arrangement that all much preferred, as they could then ramble about in an informal manner, instead of keeping to the prim file which was the general rule.

One Wednesday afternoon, at the end of May, it was the turn of the third class, and its six members were standing by the gate, impatiently awaiting the arrival of Miss Frazer, who, to do her justice, was not often at fault in the matter of punctuality.

"I hope she isn't telling Miss Russell what bad marks I got this morning," said Effie Hargreaves dismally. "She threatened last week to report me if I had another cross for history, and I missed five times, and four times in literature, and all my problems were wrong in arithmetic too."

"I believe they're planning to hire another piano," said Beryl Austen, "so that we can all get in the same amount of practising as we did at Winterburn Lodge."

"Oh, what a shame! I'm sure half an hour a day is enough for anybody," came in a chorus from the others.

"Especially now, when we haven't a music master," added Cicely.

"That's the very reason," explained Beryl. "Miss Russell says she wants us to keep up what we've learnt, so that we won't seem to have fallen back when we begin with Mr. Nelson again."

"Don't talk of Mr. Nelson! We shan't see him for ages."

"You will, in September."

"Well, it's not September yet, it's only May, and in the meantime we're learning from Miss Frazer. Here she is, by the by, hurrying down the drive as fast as she can."

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, girls," said the teacher, "but Miss Russell has been giving me a commission to transact while we are out. She wants us to go to Monkend, a farm about a mile and a half from here."

"A new walk?" asked Beryl.

"Yes, we have never been there before, but I don't think we can miss the way."

A perfectly fresh walk was a pleasant prospect. Everyone set off, therefore, in the best of spirits. It was a beautiful afternoon, one of those glorious days when summer seems to clasp hands with spring and join the delights of both seasons. The newly unfolded leaves were still a tender green, and the sycamores were covered with pendent blossoms, in the golden pollen of which the bees revelled like drunkards. The larches had opened all their tassels, and the young cones on the firs glowed with such a pink hue that they resembled candles on a Christmas tree. The hawthorns were almost over, but here and there a crab apple showed a mass of pink bloom, or a guelder rose made a white patch in the hedge; and all the stretches of grass by the roadsides were carpeted with bluebells and starry stitchwort.

Miss Frazer was indulgent, and would wait for a few minutes while the girls gathered handfuls of flowers, or climbed up to the top of a bank to admire the view. She was as interested as they were in the finding of a robin's nest; and quite as excited when a hawk swooped suddenly into a bush, and flew away with a young thrush in its claws. The cuckoos were calling persistently from the woods, the larks were singing up in the air above, and all the hedgerows seemed to teem with busy bird life.

Their way soon left the high road, and, striking across a field, led them through a copse where there was an interesting pond, swarming with tadpoles. The girls would have lingered here, trying to catch the funny, wriggling, little black objects, but Miss Frazer's patience gave way at last, and she hurried them on, declaring that if they were not quick they would never get to the farm and back before tea-time.

Monkend was a quaint old house, built in the midst of cherry orchards. Its timbered walls were grey and weather-stained, and its tiled roof yellowed with lichens. By the side of the open barn door the cows were standing lowing to be milked, and the dairymaid, a rosy-faced young woman in a blue apron, was coming from the kitchen, singing as she swung her bright pails. She stopped in astonishment at the unwonted sight of visitors to the farm, and ran to call her mistress to the scene.

"You may wait for me here, girls, while I do my business with Mrs. Brand," said Miss Frazer; "or if you like you may walk back to the stile, and I will overtake you in the wood."

Mrs. Brand insisted that Miss Frazer should come into the best parlour to transact her errand, so, left alone, the girls began slowly to retrace their steps towards the copse.

"I wonder how long she'll be," said Lindsay, who with Cicely had lingered a little behind.

"I believe she has to pay a bill and order more butter and eggs and things, so I don't expect we shall see her for five or ten minutes at least," replied Cicely.

"Then there'll be just time to run round the farm. I want to peep inside those barns, and see what is at the other side of those haystacks. It looks interesting. Come along! The dairymaid is busy milking, and won't see us, and I don't suppose it matters if she does. We'll soon run after the others."

Feeling rather adventurous, the pair fled away down the yard, and dived through an open doorway into the depths of a big barn. How fragrant it smelled--such a delicious, sweet scent was in the air! Surely it must come from that great heap of hay in the corner. The girls ran across, and jumping on to the pile, were soon burying each other with armfuls of the hay, and scooping out nests to sit in. It was dark inside the barn--the beautiful brown gloom that one sees only in old castles or churches, or ancient buildings, and is quite different from the black of ordinary darkness. Through the open door came just one shaft of sunshine, in which the specks of dust seemed to float and flutter like living things. Overhead the great beams of the roof were lost in dim obscurity; very old and rough they were, and covered with a mass of cobwebs, among which Cicely declared she could see bats hanging head downwards, with folded wings, though Lindsay said it was all her imagination.

It was so nice sitting perched on the hay that neither was in a hurry to move. I believe they quite forgot about the time, until at last they heard Miss Frazer's voice in the distance bidding good-bye to Mrs. Brand.

"We shall have to go," groaned Cicely. "What a nuisance! I could stay here for hours."

"So could I," said Lindsay, getting up with a yawn, and brushing loose stalks from her dress. "Let us jump down on the other side of the hay."

I do not know why it should have occurred to Lindsay to get off the stack by the back instead of the front. If they had gone out of the barn by the way they came, they could have overtaken Miss Frazer in a moment, and the adventure which followed would never have happened at all. As it was, fate decreed that Lindsay, in her flying leap through the dusk, should knock her shins against something decidedly hard. She stood rubbing them ruefully, and put out her hand to feel what had been the cause of her bruises. It was a ladder, standing against the wall, and through the gloom of the barn she could just distinguish its upper end, which seemed to communicate with a doorway in the angle of the roof. This looked attractive. She pointed it out at once to Cicely.

"Where does it lead, do you think?" asked the latter.

"To some granary above, I expect. I wonder what's up there! Shall we go and explore?"

Without even waiting for an answer, Lindsay had begun to ascend, and as she was six rungs up before Cicely ventured a half-hearted remonstrance, she did not see fit to come down again.

"Oh! we shan't be a minute," she declared. "Miss Frazer will wait for us in the wood, and we can run all the way from the farm."

Where Lindsay went Cicely always felt bound to follow; accordingly, she clambered up the ladder behind her friend, and in due course both arrived at the top. As Lindsay had supposed, they found a granary half-filled with sacks of corn and a pile of loose barley. A door at the farther end appeared to open on to a flight of steps leading outside, while opposite was a small lattice window overlooking the fields.

"There's really nothing to see," said Cicely. "It was hardly worth while coming, after all."

"We might go out through that door, instead of climbing down the ladder again," suggested Lindsay, beginning to walk round the sacks. "Why, look! Somebody has left his lunch here."

On the top of the barley was a tin can, and also a red cotton pocket-handkerchief, evidently containing slices of bread. From sheer idle curiosity Lindsay seized them, and showed them laughingly to Cicely.

"Will you have some afternoon tea?" she exclaimed in joke.

At that moment she was startled by a low growl behind her. From a corner of the room sprang a collie dog that, unobserved by them, had been lying among the sacks, and keeping a watch over its master's property.

Lindsay promptly replaced the tin and the handkerchief on the barley.

"Good dog! Poor fellow!" she said encouragingly, holding out her hand.

The dog, however, did not make the least response to her friendly advances. It came a little nearer, growling again, and showing its teeth in an ugly fashion.

"Come here, silly fellow! Does it think I want to steal something?" said Lindsay.

"I expect it does," replied Cicely, in rather a shaky voice. "Don't try to touch it! It'll certainly bite you."

Even Lindsay, fond of animals as she was, could not deny that the gleaming eyes and snarling mouth looked the reverse of friendly.

"Perhaps we'd better be going," she said, turning towards the door.

Directly she moved, the dog growled louder, and would have flown at her if she had not instantly stopped.

"What are we to do?" she exclaimed, looking at Cicely with a terrified face.

They were indeed in a most awkward and dangerous position. The dog, deeming itself guardian of the granary, and doubtless considering the two girls intruders for dishonest purposes, would let neither of them beat a retreat. It stood looking vigilantly from one to the other, snarling so fiercely if they stirred even an inch that they did not dare to put its intentions to the test. Oh! why had they come? If they had only gone back down the ladder before they had roused the dog, or if Lindsay had not been inquisitive enough to peep inside the handkerchief, they might have been across the yard and following Miss Frazer to the wood. How were they ever to escape? Would they be obliged to remain there until the dog's master returned?

"Perhaps Miss Frazer'll come to hunt for us," quavered Cicely, in a very small voice, and with a timid eye on the collie lest it should spring. Evidently it did not object to conversation, so long as they kept still, for though it looked at her it did not growl. That was one comfort, at any rate. The situation was terrible enough, but to endure it in silence would have been ten times worse.

"I don't believe anybody knows where we are," said Lindsay. "I wonder if the dairymaid noticed us go into the barn. They wouldn't dream of our climbing the ladder. They'd look all round the stackyard, and perhaps think we'd taken a short cut and gone home."

Would nobody ever arrive to release them? The minutes seemed long as hours, and they felt as if their trembling knees could scarcely support them. Cicely, from the place where she was standing, could fortunately look through the window and command a view of the field below. Though she gazed with as keen anxiety as Sister Anne in the story of Bluebeard, she did not see anybody hurrying to their rescue. The dog apparently grew a little tired, for it threw itself down on the floor, but without relaxing any of its former vigilance.

"I believe it's going to stop here all night," groaned Cicely, almost in tears.

The case was waxing desperate. So weary were the poor girls that they were ready to drop with fatigue. Unless something happened, and that speedily, there was bound to be a catastrophe. At the moment, however, when Cicely felt that she simply could not endure any longer, deliverance came. Through the little squares of the wooden lattice she saw a figure strolling leisurely across the field. It was Monica Courtenay, and she was walking in the direction of the farm. Cicely shouted at the very pitch of her voice:

"Monica! Monica! Help! Oh, do come!"

Monica stopped in much astonishment, and looked round as if to ask who was calling her by name; then, deciding that the screams came from the direction of the granary, she hurried as fast as she could up the steps, and opened the door. Her amazement was only equalled by her distress at the girls' plight.

She did her best to call off the dog, but as that proved impossible she ran to fetch the first person she could find. In less than a minute she had returned with Mr. Brand, whose stout boot and stick soon sent the collie yelping disconsolately into a corner, to realize that it had exceeded its duties.

"He's a good watchdog, is Pincher," said the farmer, "but he's been a bit too clever to-day. You silly hound! You ought to know better than to set on two young wenches. You may well slink off! You'd better keep out of reach of my stick, I

can tell you!"

Lindsay and Cicely were much upset and shaken by their terrifying experience. They never forgot how kindly and considerately Monica behaved. She did not tell them it was their own fault, and that it served them right for prying into places where they had no business (as Mildred Roper or any of the other mistresses would certainly have done); she only sympathized in her gentle way, and offered to escort them to the Manor by a short cut, so that they should not be so very late after all.

"It was a lucky thing I happened to be taking a walk this way," she said. "It might have been hours before any of the farm people went into the granary. I wouldn't keep such a savage dog if it were mine."

As Lindsay supposed, Miss Frazer was not aware that she had left two of her pupils behind at Monkend, and imagined that the missing pair must have walked home in front of the others. Their absence had only just been discovered when they arrived to explain the cause. The teacher was hardly so tender with them as Monica, and they received more scolding than sympathy.

"Though it wasn't such a very dreadful crime to go into the barn," said Lindsay afterwards to her companion in misfortune. "Miss Frazer needn't say we are the two who are always in mischief, because it might have happened just as easily to any of the others. I saw Beryl and Effie peep into the cowhouse as they passed, though they didn't climb up a ladder. Wasn't Monica nice? I believe the old farmer would have been cross with us if she hadn't been there. He evidently knows her very well. So do all the people in the village. She seems to know each man, woman, and child there, and to be a favourite with everybody."



CHAPTER V

An Unexpected Development

Lindsay and Cicely had by no means forgotten either their quest for the treasure or their curiosity about the lantern chamber. In spite of several small efforts, nothing fresh had occurred to elucidate matters, and they were almost beginning to despair of ever making any further progress, when quite unexpectedly something important happened.

One afternoon, as they were sending tennis balls to each other along the terrace, they heard a voice calling to them from overhead. They looked up, and saw Merle Hammond, a second-form girl, leaning out of one of the upper windows of the house and beckoning to them violently.

"Lindsay and Cicely, is that you?" she cried. "Come up here; I've made such a discovery!"

"Where are you?" asked Cicely, for the old Manor had so many windows, it was impossible to identify any particular one from the outside.

"In a room up a funny winding staircase, on the top landing. It's empty, but there's a big kind of lamp hanging from the ceiling. Oh, you'll never guess what I've seen!"

"The lantern chamber!" gasped both the girls, and, dropping their rackets, they raced into the house in a state of the wildest excitement.

Were they actually on the brink of solving the mystery? How had Merle found it out? It was good of her to call to them. Had she accidentally come across the hiding-place? or was it some other secret still?

The answer to all these questions lay in that attic room, and they fled upstairs as if their feet were wings.

They were halfway along the passage, and a few seconds more would have seen them safely on the top landing, when (oh, the bad luck of it!) they almost knocked down Miss Frazer, who emerged at exactly the wrong moment from her own bedroom door.

"Gently, girls, gently!" she remonstrated. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

It was impossible to explain. How could they tell the teacher the nature of their errand? They both stood still, looking very "caught" and dismayed, and said nothing.

"As you have come indoors so early, you had better tidy your drawers," continued Miss Frazer dryly. "I looked at them just now, and found them in terrible disorder. You will have nice time to do it before tea."

Could anything have been more aggravating? The poor girls were nearly crying with vexation. There was no appeal, however. Miss Frazer escorted them into their bedroom, and stood over them, giving directions, until each pair of stockings or pocket-handkerchief was disposed according to her ideas of neatness. They might chafe and fret inwardly at the delay, but outwardly they were obliged to behave with due decorum.

The governess was certainly justified in her disapproval, for Cicely's best coat and hat were lying jumbled together at the bottom of the wardrobe, and Lindsay's belongings looked as if they had been stirred up with a stick.

"If I notice any of your places in such a condition again, I shall be obliged to give you each a punishment," she said gravely. "Wash your hands now, and comb your hair. There's the first bell."

Would Miss Frazer never leave them alone? If only she would take her departure at once, they could perhaps manage to rush up to the lantern room before the second bell rang. Merle must be waiting for them, and wondering why they did not come. And the secret was waiting too! Lindsay looked at Cicely, almost meditating a bolt. Possibly the mistress read her intention in her face; at any rate, she waited until both were ready, then marched them downstairs to the dining-room like a female policeman, without giving them the slightest chance to escape.

"Of all jolly sells this is the biggest!" whispered Cicely.

"I wish Miss Frazer had been at the bottom of the sea!" groaned Lindsay.

Merle came in rather late and took her place at table, looking a little red and self-conscious. Lindsay tried to meet her eyes, but she avoided the gaze, and went on stolidly with her bread and butter as if nothing had happened. When Cicely made a like effort she fared the same. What had Merle seen? How they longed for tea to be over, that they might hear of her discovery! They hoped she would not reveal it to any of the other girls first, and they looked on in quite a

fever of anxiety whenever she spoke to Elsie Ryder or Marjorie Butler, who sat one on either side of her.

"She doesn't know what we suspect about Mrs. Wilson," whispered Lindsay. "She may be letting out something it would be far better, for Monica's sake, not to tell."

The moment the meal was finished the two girls followed Merle into the garden, but, greatly to their surprise, she took no notice of them, and began to play tennis.

"I expect she's waiting for a safer time. Of course it wouldn't do for her to be seen talking to us so particularly. We'll stay here while she finishes her set," said Cicely.

The game lasted until preparation, and then Merle walked away with such an evident intention of escaping from them that the two were most indignant.

"What does she mean?" burst out Lindsay.

"Do you think she's offended because we didn't go up at once?" returned Cicely. "She doesn't know yet that Miss Frazer stopped us. We must explain it as soon as we can."

They tried to get hold of Merle after supper, but she kept persistently to Elsie Ryder's company, and would not give them any opportunity of speaking to her in private, so they were obliged to go to bed in a horrible state of suspense. Next morning things were just as bad. There was no mistaking the fact that Merle wished to avoid them, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that they succeeded at last in catching her alone.

"What do you want?" she enquired abruptly. "Please don't go chasing me about like this all over the school."

"We want to know what you saw in the lantern room, of course," replied Lindsay.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I can't tell you."

"Not tell us!"

Lindsay and Cicely could scarcely believe the evidence of their own ears.

"No, it's quite impossible."

"But why?"

"Simply that I can't."

"Were you offended, Merle, because we didn't come when you called us?" asked Cicely.

"We were hurrying up as fast as we could, only Miss Frazer stopped us and made us tidy our drawers. It wasn't our fault," added Lindsay apologetically.

"No, I'm not offended in the least. I'm very glad you didn't come."

"But you shouted to us to be quick."

"I know I did."

"Was it something or somebody you saw in that room?"

"Please don't ask me."

"But look here, Merle, this is too bad," protested Lindsay. "You're playing a very nasty trick upon us."

"It can't be helped. I've said I am sorry," returned Merle doggedly.

"Well, you are a fraud," cried Cicely. "I like people who keep their promises."

"So do I," said Merle, in rather a significant tone. "It's exactly what I intend doing, too."

"You don't mean to say you've promised not to tell!" exclaimed Lindsay.

"I didn't say anything at all."

"Have you told Elsie Ryder or Marjorie Butler?"

"Certainly not. I haven't mentioned the matter to anybody, and I hope you won't either."

"But why shouldn't you whisper it just to Lindsay and me? We wouldn't let a soul know," pleaded Cicely reproachfully.

"I can't explain why. Do let us drop the subject."

Here was indeed a deadlock. They had been afraid lest Merle should betray her secret indiscreetly, but they had certainly never contemplated being kept out of it themselves. The more they pressed her, the more obstinately she refused, and neither scolding nor coaxing would induce her to disclose even the least hint. They gave it up at last, feeling very baffled and rather out of temper.

"We do know something about your old room, all the same," said Lindsay crossly, as a parting shot.

"Oh, Lindsay, you don't really!"

There was an anxious note in Merle's voice.

"More than you think."

"Then, whatever it is, you had better keep it to yourselves, and not let it go any farther."

Merle's extraordinary behaviour seemed to make the mystery even deeper than before. She had evidently been exploring the Manor on her own account and had made some discovery, which she undoubtedly had intended to share with them when she called from the window. Then something must have occurred afterwards which caused her to change her mind.

To whom had she given a promise of secrecy? Surely not to Mrs. Wilson? That would be aiding and abetting one whom they strongly believed to be Monica's enemy. If only Miss Frazer had not such a tiresome love of tidiness, they might have reached the lantern room in time, and be now in possession of the information they wanted. It was too tantalizing to feel that they had been so near a solution of the problem, and had missed it by a few moments.

Events never happen singly. For a whole fortnight they had been able to find out nothing, yet on the very day following this disappointment something occurred which seemed to add another link to their chain of strange circumstances. They had managed to escape Miss Frazer's vigilance, and were indulging in a surreptitious game of "tig" along the forbidden ground of the picture gallery, when one of the bedroom doors opened, and Mrs. Wilson appeared in the distance, carrying a pile of clean towels in her arms.

"There's 'The Griffin!'" exclaimed Lindsay. "She mustn't catch us here, on any account. She'll tell Miss Russell, and we shall each lose a conduct mark. Quick! Let us hide somewhere till she's gone by."

The ancient arras seemed to offer a safe retreat. As fast as possible they whisked behind it, and stood flattening themselves against the wall, hoping Mrs. Wilson would notice nothing lumpy or unusual as she passed.

At the same time came a sound of heavy tramping footsteps from the other end of the gallery, and Cicely, peeping through a hole in the tapestry which happened to be on a convenient level with her eyes, saw Scott, the gardener, coming down the flight of stairs which led from the upper landing. He met Mrs. Wilson exactly opposite the hiding-place where the girls were concealed, and the two stopped to speak, quite unaware that listening ears were eagerly following their conversation.

"Have you been in the lantern room?" began the old housekeeper uneasily. "I'd no idea you were going up this afternoon."

"Thought I'd best take a look," returned Scott.

"There wasn't any need. I was there myself this morning, and things were all right."

"I don't know what you may call all right," grunted Scott. "There was far too much noise going on to satisfy me."

"You don't think there's any danger----?" burst out Mrs. Wilson, in an anxious voice.

"No, no!" interrupted Scott quickly. "Not for the present, at any rate. Don't upset yourself. Still, it needs care, especially with all this crew in the house."

"Yes, it's that that's worrying me. I shan't breathe freely till they're gone. And such an inquisitive, meddling set they are, too! You'd scarcely believe the trouble they give me. Two of them took it into their heads one day to go wandering on the upper landing. I actually found them inside the lantern room!"

Scott gave an exclamation of something like alarm.

"That'll never do!" he said. "You mustn't let them go poking about there; it would be most unsafe. Can't you lock the door?"

"No, the key's lost."

"I must try if I can find a padlock for it."

"I wish you would. It would take a load off my mind. By the by, I wanted to warn you----"

But here one of the housemaids came along the landing, Mrs. Wilson's voice sank to a whisper, and the only words audible were "Miss Monica", "evening", and "wouldn't trust".

"I'll be extra careful," said Scott, as he clumped away.

Lindsay and Cicely waited several moments after the gallery was empty before they ventured to emerge from behind the tapestry. They had the great satisfaction of having learnt something. They now knew definitely that there was a secret in connection with the lantern room which both Mrs. Wilson and Scott were anxious to keep from them.

"What can it be?" speculated Cicely. "Did you notice what he said about the noise? It must have been that dreadful groaning we heard."

"I've been thinking about that," replied Lindsay. "There may be a hidden room, and someone shut up in it."

"As a prisoner, do you mean?"

Lindsay nodded.

"But who could it be?"

"I can't imagine, unless--could it possibly be old Sir Giles Courtenay? Perhaps he didn't really die, after all. Don't you remember, in *Ivanhoe*, how Athelstane of Coningsburgh was supposed to be killed, and he was really only stunned; and the monks of St. Edmunds put an empty coffin in the chapel, and kept him in a dungeon and pretended he was dead, because they wanted his property? Mrs. Wilson may be doing the same."

"How dreadful!" Cicely looked quite appalled at the idea. "I suppose she goes up, then, to feed him. Scott must know too. I shouldn't have thought it of Scott. I rather liked him. I expect they'll share the money between them. I wonder what 'The Griffin' was warning him about. I hope they're not hatching a plot against Monica!"

"It looks bad," said Lindsay, "decidedly bad. It's evidently something shady, or they wouldn't want to keep it so quiet. It may be a very good thing for Monica that we've taken the matter up."

"What shall we do?"

"We must stalk 'The Griffin' again, and try to follow her to that room, and see what she does there."

"She's as wary as a weasel."

"Then we must be clever and outwit her. I'm positive she has some scheme on hand that ought to be watched. One doesn't know how much may depend upon it."

It was certainly very exciting to feel that dark deeds might be taking place in the attic, and that they were the fortunate instruments selected by fate for the purpose of bringing the wrongdoers to justice. It gave them a delightful sense of superiority over the other girls, whose heads were full of nothing but tennis and croquet, and who never troubled themselves with a thought about the missing treasure.

"Merle is the only one who knows anything," said Lindsay, "and I verily believe 'The Griffin' must have bribed her."

Mrs. Wilson evidently used the utmost precaution in her visits to the top landing. In spite of the pains they took to watch her movements, it was some days before they found the propitious moment. "All things come to those who wait," says the old proverb, however, and it proved true in this case.

One afternoon, through the chink of the bathroom door, they saw her walk into the gallery as if she were going to the upper story. As stealthily as Indians they crept after her. They tiptoed along the passages, and just caught a glimpse of the tail of her skirts as she passed up the winding staircase and entered the lantern room. Very quietly they followed on to the little landing, and listened for a moment outside the closed door.

"What is she doing?" whispered Cicely.

"That's what I want to find out."

They both tried to peep through the keyhole, and bumped their heads together in the attempt.

"I can hear her moving!"

There was a slight noise inside, almost like the clicking of a latch, then all was perfectly silent.

Lindsay could bear it no longer.

"Here goes!" she cried boldly, and flung open the door. To her utter amazement, the room was absolutely empty. Mrs. Wilson had vanished as completely as if she had been a ghost.



CHAPTER VI

Monica

The two girls rushed into the empty room and examined every corner minutely. There was not a trace of any secret exit to be found. The opening through which Mrs. Wilson must have disappeared was evidently marvellously well concealed.

"Where can she be? It's like magic!" whispered Cicely.

"Wherever she's gone, I suppose she'll have to come back," replied Lindsay.

"Listen!" said Cicely, with a start.

It was the same strange sound again which they had heard on their former expedition--a low, long-drawn-out moaning, as of someone in pain, feeble at first, then growing louder, and suddenly ceasing.

"Oh! I wonder if she's hurting anybody?" cried Cicely, shuddering with horror.

"I'd give a great deal to find out what's going on. I'm afraid it's something that won't bear the light of day," said Lindsay uneasily.

"Dare we wait till she comes out of her hiding-place?"

"Yes, but we mustn't stay here. It would spoil everything if she caught us. Let us go outside and close the door again, and watch through the keyhole; then, if we see her coming, we can rush."

Mrs. Wilson's errand was evidently a long one. Though they relieved each other more than once in mounting guard over the keyhole, she did not return.

"Perhaps she knows we're here, and won't come out till we've gone," suggested Lindsay at last.

"How could she know?"

"She may have been looking at us all the time through some little spy place."

"Oh, how horrid! It makes me feel quite creepy to think of it."

The fact that they were doing exactly the same did not strike either of the girls. Circumstances alter cases, and they considered they were justified in their plan of action. They grew extremely tired of waiting, but they were determined not to give in.

"There's that noise again!" said Cicely. "She must have a prisoner shut up there; I'm perfectly certain about it."

Both put their ears to the door, and were so absorbed in listening to the queer sounds inside the room that they did not hear footsteps sounding up the winding staircase. An exclamation behind them caused them to turn hastily round.

There was Monica!--the last person in the world whom they had expected to see, and who was looking as astonished as themselves at the meeting. Lindsay and Cicely felt decidedly embarrassed. Monica must have seen them peeping through the keyhole, and they knew they had been discovered in a somewhat doubtful and discreditable occupation. They could not possibly begin to explain that it was entirely on her account and for her benefit, so they simply turned very red and said nothing. It was a most uncomfortable situation.

There was a painful pause, and then Monica recovered her presence of mind.

"Why, Lindsay and Cicely, I thought you were with the others in the garden!" she said.

"We were only exploring the house a little," replied Lindsay, trying to pass the matter off carelessly. "Miss Russell said there were interesting things all over it."

"I'm afraid you won't find much to interest you among empty bedrooms," said Monica, in her calm, quiet voice. "If you like to come downstairs with me I'll show you some of the curiosities in my cabinet. I've a great many old coins and a few daggers that were dug up when the moat was drained."

Looking rather shamefaced, the pair went with Monica to the library, where she unlocked an oak cupboard, and spent quite twenty minutes in explaining her various treasures. She was most kind, and spared no trouble, but the others

could not get over their confusion. They had the guilty sensation that they had been caught like naughty children, and were being amused to keep them out of the way.

"Why was Monica going into the lantern room?" demanded Lindsay, the moment they were alone.

"Does she know the secret?" ventured Cicely.

"Either she knows, or she's trying to find out. Perhaps she's stalking Mrs. Wilson too!"

This was a new idea, and required consideration.

"Then that would perhaps be what 'The Griffin' was warning Scott about," said Cicely reflectively. "Ought we to tell Monica?"

"Not yet--not till we've something more definite to go upon. We've only suspicions at present, and one can hardly speak about those. She might be offended, and think us meddling, especially as she doesn't like to talk of her affairs."

"I'm afraid she'll think us sneaky and underhand, in any case. I'm so sorry she saw us spying like that."

"Well, we couldn't help it, and we can't explain."

"Mightn't we just say why----?"

"It's no use," interrupted Lindsay decidedly. "We'd better not breathe a word."

And Cicely, as usual, gave way.

It was gratifying to feel that they were Monica's champions, though she might not yet be aware of what she owed them. They must be content to be misunderstood for a little while; afterwards she would appreciate what they had been doing for her, and would thank them accordingly. They often looked at her in school with the satisfactory sensation that they knew something of which everyone else, even Miss Russell, was ignorant.

I fear the lessons suffered sometimes while they indulged in day-dreams, for it was hard to recall such mundane matters as the capital of Mexico, or the date of Magna Charta, when their thoughts were far away in the lantern room, busy with concealed prisoners or supposed plots.

"You're the two most inattentive girls in the class!" cried Miss Frazer indignantly one day, after a specially bad lapse of memory. "You both did far better at Winterburn Lodge. I cannot understand why your work should have fallen off so much lately. This is the third time this week you have had bad marks. If it occurs again, I shall be obliged to report you to Miss Russell."

Apart from their interest in her as the owner of the hidden treasure, Lindsay and Cicely regarded Monica with the worship which schoolgirls are sometimes fond of bestowing upon a companion who happens specially to attract them. They admired the shape of her nose and her long chestnut hair, and considered her dignified manner absolute perfection. They used to follow her about at a respectful distance, longing to improve the acquaintance; but they received so many snubs from the elder girls, who also wished to monopolize her, that matters did not advance much further than an occasional "Good morning" or "Good afternoon".

"The big ones are so jealous, they like to keep her all to themselves," grumbled Cicely. "Eleanor Wright was quite rude when I offered to lend Monica a pencil yesterday. She said I was 'officious'."

"They're horribly mean," agreed Lindsay.

Monica had certainly become a great favourite at the Manor with both teachers and pupils, and, had she been of a less steady disposition, might have run considerable danger of being spoiled. She took her sudden popularity, however, very serenely, and scarcely seemed to notice that her schoolfellows were quarrelling over who should sit next her in class, or take part with her in a game of tennis.

"She always seems so calm and superior, like a nightingale among sparrows," remarked Irene Spencer sentimentally.

"Or a swan among a flock of geese," laughed Mildred Roper. "You've all grown really quite silly over Monica. I admire her very much myself, but I don't go and kiss her jacket when it's hanging in the vestibule, or beg her old torn exercises for keepsakes."

"Oh, well, you're a monitress!"

"I've got a little common sense left, I'm thankful to say."

The pretty rose-covered cottage where Monica and her mother had established themselves for the summer was only a few minutes' walk away from the Manor. One afternoon Miss Russell, happening to meet Lindsay and Cicely in the hall, gave them a note, and told them to take it at once to Mrs. Courtenay, and bring back an answer.

The two girls ran off in high glee, delighted to have this opportunity of seeing their idol in private. They found Monica preparing her French lesson in the small strip of front garden, but she put her books aside as they opened the gate.

"Come to Mother," she said, when they had explained their errand, leading the way through a French window into a low, old-fashioned sitting-room.

Mrs. Courtenay was a sweet, delicate-looking lady, with a gentle, refined face, and hair slightly streaked with grey. She did not rise from her sofa when they entered, but held out her hand instead, and asked them to come and speak to her.

"I am somewhat of an invalid, you see," she said. "The doctor is very strict, and has told me to lie still. It's rather hard, but I am trying to obey. So you are two of Monica's little friends? Well, now you are here, you had better stay for tea. The letter? Oh, I'll send Jenny, our maid, with the answer, and she shall tell Miss Russell that I'm keeping you. We'll take care that you go back in plenty of time for preparation."

This was indeed a most unexpected treat. Both Lindsay and Cicely beamed with smiles. They were the only girls in the school who had been thus favoured, and they felt that their present enjoyment would be equalled by the envy which they would excite among the others on their return.

"I am glad to hear you are all so happy at the Manor," continued Mrs. Courtenay. "Isn't it a dear, interesting old place? I expect Monica will have told you most of the legends. No! Why, Monica, what have you been thinking of? Do you mean to say they haven't heard yet about your ancestress and Sir Humphrey Warden in the rose avenue?"

"There really hasn't been any time for telling stories, Mother," declared Monica, "we've been so busy playing tennis when we were not at lessons. I'm never very good at remembering them, either--not like you are."

"I suppose I must consider myself the family chronicler," said Mrs. Courtenay. "We certainly ought to let Lindsay and Cicely hear the tale of the picture. Ah, here comes tea! Monica, you must look after our guests."

Monica evidently loved to be her mother's nurse. She placed a small table by the side of the sofa, and busied herself in arranging cushions and seeing that everything was placed for the invalid's greatest comfort. She did not neglect the visitors either, and brought out a jar of honey for their special benefit.

"I know you'll like it, because you were so interested in the bees," she said. "Do you remember the day when you went too close to the hives, and nearly got stung?"

"Yes; we had to run the whole length of the walk where the roses grow. I shan't forget it in a hurry," answered Cicely.

"That is the rose avenue where my namesake outwitted Sir Humphrey Warden. I wish you would tell them the story, Mother."

"Oh, do, please," pleaded Lindsay and Cicely; "we'd like so immensely to hear it!"

"I believe I shall just have time while we finish tea," said Mrs. Courtenay. "I suppose you need not be back in school until half-past five? Have you been in the long gallery at the Manor, and looked at the pictures?"

"Yes, often," said Cicely.

"Then you will remember one, at the far end, of a girl in a white dress, holding a bunch of roses in her hand?"

"Yes; it's the prettiest of them all. We always say it's the exact image of Monica."

"It is the portrait of a Monica Courtenay who lived here in the time of the Civil War. Her father was killed fighting for the king at Marston Moor, and her only brother, Sir Piers, was also one of the hottest supporters of the crown. When Cromwell came into power, Sir Piers had to flee for his life. He was chased from one hiding-place to another. Sometimes, like Prince Charles, he had to clamber up a tree until the soldiers had passed by, and once he spent a night in a fox's hole.

"At length, one summer evening, hunted almost to desperation, he returned to his old home. He met his sister in the garden, and though she exclaimed with joy at seeing him, she immediately made a sign for silence, and motioned him to conceal himself under a large box tree which stood near.

"It was not safe, so she whispered, to go to the Manor. There were spies about, and Sir Humphrey Warden, the most zealous Roundhead in the district, had set a watch upon the house. At any moment they expected he might arrive with a troop of soldiers. Piers must stay where he was, and she would run and bring him the key of the boathouse; then, under cover of the darkness, he might creep away to the river, get out the boat, and drop with the current until he reached the sea, where possibly he might find a ship to take him over to France.

"She hurried indoors at once to fetch the small key that unlocked the boathouse, but as she was returning down the avenue she found she was just too late. There was a tramp of horses' hoofs, and Sir Humphrey Warden came riding up at the head of a band of men.

"'Good even, fair neighbour,' he said. 'I must needs make an inspection of your house, and with your permission I will give myself the honour of supping with you to-night. What brings you hither?'

"'I do but take the air, and pluck a few of these fragrant blossoms,' replied Monica hastily. 'I will presently conduct you to the Manor myself, and entertain you.'

"She was in a desperate strait. How could she manage to save her brother? Now that Sir Humphrey had come, she knew her every movement would be watched. No one could be trusted, for the servants (so she feared) had all been bribed. Gathering a bunch of roses, she contrived unnoticed to slip her little key inside the heart of one of them.

"'I would fain crave the favour of a flower, madam,' said Sir Humphrey, who was an admirer of fair dames, in spite of his Puritan dress.

"'Take your choice, sir,' replied Monica, boldly holding out her bunch. 'Nay, not this red one; it is overblown, and will fall directly. 'Tis but fit to be flung away. This pink hath the sweeter scent, an you will wear it for me.'

"As she spoke she tossed the rose containing the key with apparent carelessness over the hedge to the foot of the box tree where her brother was lying concealed; then, leading her unwelcome guest to the house, she gave orders for his due entertainment.

"Sir Humphrey and his men searched the Manor in vain, but they never thought of looking in the garden, where the fugitive was waiting till the darkness should be black enough to hide him. Sir Piers got safely away to France, and returned in triumph to his estates when Charles II came to his own again. As a remembrance of his wonderful escape, he caused his sister's portrait to be painted, with the bunch of roses in her hand. Ever since the Courtenays have had an almost superstitious reverence for the picture. There is an old saying that it guards the safety and fortunes of the family."

"And what became of Monica?" asked Lindsay, who had been deeply interested in the story.

"She married a cavalier friend of her brother's, and went to live in Devonshire. I believe she kept one of the roses treasured away in a box, and it was buried with her when she died."

"I suppose Monica was christened after her?" said Cicely.

"Yes; that has always been a favourite name with the Courtenays, though I do not think any of them can have more closely resembled the portrait."

"How can the picture guard your fortunes?" enquired Lindsay.

"I don't know. It is one of those quaint ideas that sometimes linger in families. Of course it is only a tale, and I am afraid I have been a long while in telling it. Monica, dear, it is twenty minutes past five. Lindsay and Cicely must hurry back to school at once, if they are to be in time for preparation. We shall get into sad disgrace with Miss Russell if we allow them to be late."

"I think your mother is perfectly sweet," said Lindsay, as Monica walked with them along the road to the Manor gates.

"She's just everything in the whole world to me," replied Monica. "I wish she were stronger, though. She has been ill for such a long time. The doctor says it would do her good to spend next winter in the south of Italy, but that, I'm afraid, will be quite impossible. She ought to go, it might make all the difference," she continued, almost as if talking to herself; "yet we can't manage it, however much we try, unless, indeed----"



"I KNOW WHAT MONICA WAS GOING TO SAY"

But here she seemed to recollect the presence of her companions, and wishing them a hasty good-bye, she turned back to the cottage.

"I know what Monica was going to say," remarked Cicely, as they walked up the drive.

"She meant her mother would be able to go away if the treasure were found," replied Lindsay. "Oh! it does seem hard, when they need it so badly, that it should be shut up somewhere, and doing no good to anybody at all."

"I think Monica is frightened lest Mrs. Courtenay should grow worse and die, if they have to stay in England for the winter. I don't believe she would enjoy a penny of her fortune if it were to come too late for her to share it with her mother."



CHAPTER VII

Lindsay's Luck

One day, shortly before Whitsuntide, Irene Spencer walked into the third-class schoolroom with a letter in her hand, and a look on her face which proclaimed news of some importance.

"I don't believe any of you will ever guess what I've come to tell you," she announced. "I've heard this morning from my aunt at Linforth Vicarage. She writes asking me to spend a few days there at Whitsuntide (we are to have a short holiday, you know), and she says: 'We have asked Monica Courtenay, and we should be very pleased if Miss Russell would also allow you to bring one of your younger schoolfellows who would prove a nice companion for Rhoda.' My cousin Rhoda is twelve, so I have to pick out one from among you six. Whichever it is will have an uncommonly jolly visit, because we always have glorious times at Linforth."

"How delightful! Oh, do take me!" exclaimed the six in chorus, each enchanted with such a tempting prospect, and anxious to be the chosen favourite.

"I wish I could take you all," replied Irene, "but unfortunately the invitation is only for one. Miss Russell says this will be the best way to arrange it. The girl who is nearest to Rhoda's age must go. Will you each tell me the date of your birthday, and then I shall be able to decide. Rhoda's is on the twentieth of March."

It certainly seemed the fairest way of settling the question, and one against which there could be no appeal.

"Miss Russell is a modern Solomon," declared Cicely. "I'm afraid I haven't the slightest chance, because I'm only eleven and a half, and so is Nora."

"I'm almost thirteen," wailed Beryl. "I wish I were a few months younger. Effie, I shall be horribly jealous if the chance falls to you."

"No such luck! I am a Christmas child," returned Effie. "I believe Marjorie is nearer."

"The twenty-seventh of February. Can anybody do better than that?" asked Marjorie hopefully.

"Mine is the sixth of April," said Lindsay.

"About as much after Rhoda's as Marjorie's is before," said Irene. "We must count it up exactly. Somebody give me a pencil and a piece of paper. Let me see, the twenty-seventh of February to the twentieth of March is twenty-one days, and the twentieth of March to the sixth of April is only seventeen. Then Lindsay is nearer by four days."

"Hurrah!" cried Lindsay, clapping her hands, "I'm glad I wasn't born a week later. How dreadfully sorry I am for you all, especially Marjorie!"

"My aunt says she will send the trap for us on Friday afternoon," continued Irene. "And we are to stay until Tuesday morning, so that will give us three whole days at Linforth. I'm sure you'll like Rhoda, and my other cousins too. There are eight of them altogether. Meta, the eldest, is seventeen; she's going to study music in Germany next September. Ralph and Leonard are fifteen and fourteen; they go to the Appleford Grammar School, and ride there every day on their bicycles. Then comes Rhoda, and there are four little ones. They do lessons with a governess, but perhaps some time Rhoda is to be sent to Winterburn Lodge. Aunt Esther says she shan't treat us as visitors; we must make ourselves at home amongst the others."

The visit seemed an event worth looking forward to, not only on its own account, but because Monica was to be one of the party. Lindsay could hardly believe her good fortune, and rejoiced again and again over the happy date of her birthday. She was in a state of great excitement on the Friday afternoon, when the phaeton arrived with Monica already installed on the front seat. To drive away in such company was indeed a matter for congratulation, and she felt much sympathy for the disconsolate five who were perforce left behind, especially for poor Cicely, who would miss her more than anybody, and whose eyes were full of tears at the parting.

"Never mind," she whispered to the latter, "perhaps it will be your turn next time for something nice. At any rate, I shall have heaps to tell you when I come back."

Linforth Vicarage was a long, rambling stone house, the flagged roof and mullioned windows of which proclaimed it as belonging, equally with the Manor, to a period of the past. It was a delightful, roomy, almost medieval kind of a place, so picturesque, in its old-world fashion, that one could forgive the lowness of the rooms, the narrowness of the passages, the steepness of the stairs, and the inconvenience of the fact that the front door opened directly into the

dining-room, and the bedrooms nearly all led into one another. None of these drawbacks seemed to distress the young Greenwoods, who thought their home the nicest spot in the world. They were a particularly jolly, merry, happy-go-lucky family, full of jokes and noise. Rhoda, for whose benefit Lindsay had been invited, received her visitor with enthusiasm.

"I'm so glad Miss Russell let you come!" she said. "You see, Meta will monopolize Irene and Monica, and I should have been left out altogether. I'm delighted to have someone of my own age."

Monica was a great favourite in the household, and held in request by all, from Mr. and Mrs. Greenwood to Cyril, the baby. As Rhoda had prophesied, however, she disappeared after tea with Meta and Irene, the three elder girls evidently wishing to have a chat in private. Rhoda made an effort to secure Lindsay to herself, but the four little ones--Wilfred, Alwyn, Joan, and Cyril--begged so piteously not to be banished from the society of the interesting visitor that in the end she yielded, and allowed them to help to exhibit the various treasures in the garden which she wished to show to her new friend.

The Greenwoods had quite a menagerie in the way of pets. They kept them in a disused stable, in neat cages with wire fronts, most of which had been made by Ralph and Leonard. There were silky-haired, lop-eared rabbits, that could be hugged in small arms without offering any remonstrances; bright-eyed little guinea-pigs, which often caused exciting chases by escaping from their owners' embraces and hiding away behind the cages; a family of piebald mice, consisting of a mother and five young ones, which generally went to bed in the daytime, and had to be poked out of their sleeping quarters with a lead pencil to make them show themselves; a morose-looking tortoise that would allow Wilfred to scratch its head, but spat indignantly at the others; and a whole box full of silkworms in various stages, from tiny, wriggling black threads to chrysalids in cocoons. The children were accompanied to the stable by a sharp little black Pomeranian; but they were obliged to leave him outside in case he might hurt the rabbits, and he sat howling dolefully on the doorstep until they came out again. He escorted them into the garden afterwards, however, and so did a large nondescript kind of yard dog, which was called Bootles, and which allowed itself to be harnessed to a mail-cart, and drew Cyril up and down the path.

"I want to show you our fruit trees," said Rhoda, leading the way to the orchard. "We each have one of our very own, planted as soon as we were born. Meta, Ralph, and Leonard have apples, Wilfred and Alwyn pears, mine is a Victoria plum, Joan has a greengage, and Cyril a black cherry. You see, they stand in a row, away from the other trees, so we call this our part of the orchard."

"Whose is the ninth?" enquired Lindsay, looking at a fine pear tree which headed the line.

"That belonged to our eldest brother," said Rhoda. "He died before I can remember, but we still call it 'Herbert's tree'. The pears are always ripe every year on his birthday, so we pick them all and pack them carefully in a box, and send them to a children's hospital in London. Mother sends the money she would have spent on his birthday present too. They're the most beautiful pears, the best we have, and we thought that was the nicest thing we could do with them."

The Greenwoods' little gardens were as interesting as their fruit trees. Each child appeared to have been trying a different experiment. Wilfred had made a pond in his by sinking an old wooden tub in the ground, and was trying to persuade a water-lily to grow in it. He had planted a clump of iris and some forget-me-nots at the edge, which hung over rather gracefully, and really looked quite pretty. He kept several frogs to swim about in the water, though the constant catching of these rather interfered with the wellbeing of the struggling lily. Alwyn had built a miniature house in her plot out of old bricks and stones, and had thatched it neatly with straw. She had made a gravel path up to the front door, and had sown grass to represent lawns, and cut a round flower bed in the middle of each. Joan's garden was subject to violent changes. Last year it had been a potato patch, but as she dug up those useful vegetables every day to see how they were sprouting, it was not surprising that they refused to make much growth. Lately she had converted the whole into a dolls' cemetery, and, with Cyril's aid, keenly enjoyed conducting the funerals of various headless favourites, waxing so enthusiastic over the obsequies that she even buried several quite respectable wax babies, though, regretting their loss afterwards, she was eventually forced to dig them up again. She put tombstones at the heads of the graves, made of slates from the roof of a tumble-down shed, and carefully wrote names, dates, and epitaphs upon them in slate pencil, being greatly distressed when the inscriptions were invariably obliterated by every fresh shower of rain.

Cyril had sown the letters of his name in mustard and cress, which were just coming up fresh and green, and would soon be ready to cut. He also had some bulbs under pieces of glass in a corner which he called his hothouse. Ralph and Leonard were so busy at school that their gardens appeared to be mostly cared for by Rhoda, who had a very ambitious scheme for her own.

"I want to make a floral clock," she explained. "You see, I've dug a round face and marked it out into twelve parts, and I'm going to put each figure in different-coloured flowers. Then I thought if I could fix a pole in the middle it ought to

cast a shadow, and tell the time like a sundial. I've made it north, south, east, and west by my compass, and it will be most delightful if I can only get it to work."

Rhoda had almost as much to show Lindsay in the house as out-of-doors. There was her bedroom, a tiny sanctum where she kept all her special treasures out of the way of the children's meddlesome fingers. It was a very old-fashioned little room, with a low, black-beamed ceiling, and a window that opened on to a small balcony, where she could grow nasturtiums and other trailing plants in pots. The walls were covered with pictures in home-made frames, wonderful arrangements of corks, acorns, shells, or plaited straw; and there were quite a nice writing-table and some wonderful bookcases.

"The boys made these out of old boxes," said Rhoda. "They learn how in their carpentry class at school, and they did them to surprise me on my birthday. I keep all my books here. Father is giving me the poets now as Christmas presents. I have Longfellow and Shakespeare and Wordsworth, and I expect it will be either Cowper or Goldsmith next time. This is my paint-box. I daren't leave it in the schoolroom for fear of the little ones getting hold of it. Isn't it a beauty? Miss Johnson, our governess, gave it to me as a prize for passing the Trinity College exam. in piano and theory."

"Do you like music?" asked Lindsay.

"Yes, I think I'm rather fond of it. Miss Johnson wanted me to go in for this exam; she said it would be something to practise for. We had to go to Bridgend to take it. It was rather fun, for we were the whole day in getting there and back, and luckily I wasn't a scrap nervous. Do you play?"

"A little," replied Lindsay. "I'm learning the violin, but I can't have any lessons at the Manor."

"I wish you could come over and help us at one of our temperance concerts."

"Oh, I should be much too frightened!" exclaimed Lindsay, in horror.

"You needn't mind in a little village like this," declared Rhoda. "The people would think whatever you did was splendid. They clap at everything, even when Ralph gives nigger songs; and he's got no voice, and the banjo's generally out of tune, so that he's singing away in one key and playing in another."

"I don't know whether I could promise to keep in tune," laughed Lindsay. "Do you play at these concerts?"

"Yes, nearly always. It was a little awkward last time, because something had gone wrong with the keys of the piano. They stuck down, and I had to get Wilfred to sit underneath and keep poking them up as fast as I played on them, or else half the notes wouldn't sound; and it seemed so queer to only get part of a chord, and to miss the middle of a run. It quite put me out. I suppose it was the damp that caused it. We must get a tuner to come and see to it."

"Did the people applaud?"

"Yes, tremendously. I think it amused them to see Wilfred sitting underneath. They simply roared every time he pushed up the keys. It was as good as a comic song. It really is tiresome, though, to have a piano like that at the school. John Crosby, the stonemason's little boy, sings very nicely, and I went so wrong in playing his accompaniment, through losing so many of the notes, that he finished half a verse ahead of me. I apologized to him afterwards, but he said he didn't think anyone had noticed it!"

Lindsay found it quite a novel and entertaining experience to stay in the midst of such a large, enterprising, lively family as the Greenwoods. From Meta, the eldest, to Cyril, the baby, hardly out of petticoats, all had very decided opinions of their own, which they urged and argued with considerable force of character, but an amount of good temper which spoke well for their training. Mrs. Greenwood, who thought quarrelling greatly a matter of habit, insisted upon a certain standard of home politeness being maintained, and would tolerate neither domineering in the elder ones nor whining amongst the younger.

"You can discuss a subject perfectly well without being rude to each other when you differ," she declared. "You must take it in turns to have your own way. It is not fair that the eldest should always arrange everything, but on the other hand Joan and Alwyn will get nothing at all if they begin to wail and complain in that most grumbling and unpleasant tone of voice. I think it is a disgrace if you're all so selfish that you can't agree. You must each be prepared to give up a certain amount, for among eight children it is quite impossible for every one to be first and foremost."

Irene, being the Greenwoods' cousin, was accustomed to their tempestuous ways, and ready to hold her own amongst them; while Monica looked on with an amused smile, without taking part in any arguments or disputes. There was certainly plenty to do at the Vicarage, and none of the three guests could complain that the holiday was dull.

On Saturday afternoon Meta, Rhoda, and the two eldest boys arranged that they should make an expedition to a large

lake about a couple of miles away. They had been promised the loan of a boat there, and they proposed to take their visitors for a trip on the water. They started off with baskets of provisions, intending to land and have a picnic tea, if they could find sufficient dry sticks upon the banks to light a fire and boil their kettle. Both Meta and her brothers could row well, so the boat was soon skimming over the lake in a delightfully smooth and satisfactory fashion.

"We daren't anchor anywhere near the woods," declared Meta, "Sir Percy Harwood, the owner, is so very strict about trespassing."

"Yes, the keepers are down on you if you even go a few yards into the preserves," agreed Ralph. "Look here! What do you say to camping out on that little island? There can't be any pheasants there to scare, and we ought to get plenty of sticks."

The island in question was a small, green-looking collection of hazel bushes and birch trees, well out in the middle of the lake. It had an attractive appearance, so they rowed through the quiet stretch of water that separated them from it, and ran the boat in among the reeds that grew at the edge.

"It seems rather jolly," said Rhoda. "Suppose we leave the baskets here, and go and explore first to find a good place?"

"It's quite romantic," declared Irene, "like Ellen's Isle in the *Lady of the Lake*. We ought to find a hunting-lodge among the trees, and an interesting outlaw living there."

"More likely to find a poacher!" laughed Ralph; "though there'd be nothing for him to trap here, unless he kept a boat stowed away in the reeds, and took midnight excursions into the woods."

"I think it's the kind of place for a hermit," said Monica. "He could have had a little cell and told his beads without being disturbed by anybody, except an occasional knight-errant who would blow a horn from the opposite bank. I wonder if one ever lived here?"

"The landlords couldn't have been so particular about trespassing in those days, then, if he did," replied Leonard. "I don't believe Sir Percy Harwood would let anybody settle so near his pheasants; he'd suspect steel traps or wire snares under the cassock, and expect to hear a shot in the woods instead of a vesper bell."

"We'll tie the boat to this old stump," said Ralph. "Be careful where you step in getting off--the ground seems fearfully sippy. Perhaps it may be better higher up. Let us come on a little. I say, there's something rather queer about it, isn't there?"

There certainly was something decidedly queer. The green mossy earth under their feet gave way as if they were treading upon a feather bed. At each step it sank with a curious squelching sound, and rose behind with the elasticity of a cork, so that as they sprang here and there the whole of the little island appeared to be bounding up and down beneath them, as Leonard expressed it, "just like a spring mattress when you jump on it".

"The ground is so funny, too," said Meta, poking about with a stick; "it doesn't seem proper soil, only roots and moss and grass growing through it. Why, this stick goes down ever such a long way, and there's actually water coming up!"

The others all came to investigate, and standing close together began to dig their sticks into the curious heaving surface. It bore their combined weight for a moment or two, then sinking suddenly, like a punctured indiarubber ball, it collapsed, and they found themselves struggling nearly up to their waists in water. Luckily they were able to clutch at the hazel bushes above, and, by swinging themselves along the branches, to arrive at a firmer foothold, though even there the ground felt very insecure and spongy, and little dark pools came oozing up with every step.

"We must keep as far apart from each other as we can," shouted Ralph; "the wretched place has no solid foundation, it's only a collection of sticks and leaves. Cling to the trees, and try to get back to the boat before you go in any deeper. Don't put your weight on it! It's like walking on thin ice."

Very wet and muddy, and somewhat frightened, the explorers picked their way carefully back, treading as much as possible on the roots of the trees, and never letting go their hold of the boughs. They scrambled into the boat again with considerable relief, and held a review of their damaged garments.

"I'm soaked to the skin!" declared Rhoda. "It's a horrible nuisance. Look at Lindsay!"

"I don't mind my clothes so much, if it weren't so uncomfortable. My dress will wash," said Lindsay.

"Mine won't though, I'm sorry to say!" groaned Irene.

"I was carrying the cakes, and they're wet through, and not fit to eat," announced Leonard.

"The island is a perfect trap," said Meta, trying to squeeze the muddy water from her own dress and Monica's. "I believe it's nothing but a kind of raft, made out of all the dead wood and rubbish that have accumulated in the lake. I expect seeds have blown on to it, and then trees and bushes have sprung up. Now I think of it, I don't believe it was in the same place last year, so it must be able to float. We shall have to go home; we can't stop and picnic when we're drenched like this."

"I wonder how the hermit managed, if he ever lived there?" said Monica.

"It must have been an excellent penance, with a chance of martyrdom at the end of it," returned Ralph. "Well, I must say we have given our visitors a pleasant afternoon! They won't want to take this as a specimen of our picnics. No good offering tea and cake in this condition!"

"I'd rather have a cake of soap and a can of hot water!" said Irene.

"Never mind!" said Leonard consolingly. "I vote we go up Pendle Tor on Monday. We can boil a kettle there, and have no end of fun. If you've never been before, I expect you'll say it makes up for this."



CHAPTER VIII

Pendle Tor

It was with much pleasurable anticipation that the picnic party set out on Whit Monday for Pendle Tor. The four younger Greenwoods were left at home, as the walk would be too far for them, but they announced their intention of climbing a small hill behind the Vicarage in the afternoon, and having an alfresco tea on their own account, which was to be equal, if not superior, to that enjoyed by their elders--"because Mary will just have finished baking, and she has promised to bring us some buns straight out of the oven, and you certainly won't get those on Pendle Tor," said Joan.

Although they might be debarred from the pleasure of hot tea-cakes, the mountaineers nevertheless did not mean to starve on their journey, to judge from the baskets full of provisions which they bore with them. Leonard had taken a milk-can that would serve to boil the water in instead of a kettle, it being lighter to carry, and having the added advantage that they could pack the teacups inside.

"You see, an iron kettle is such a weight", he explained, "and the last time we took one of those rubbishy sixpence-halfpenny tin ones the solder all melted directly we put it on to the fire, and the spout dropped off. We can sling the milk-can on a stick and prop it over the fire, and it does splendidly."

"Mind you don't break the cups!" said Irene, expecting to hear a smash after the reckless way in which the can was being swung about.

"Couldn't do it if I tried; they're all enamel ones. The Mater wouldn't trust us with her best china, I assure you."

"There are ever so many trout up in the stream by Inglemere," remarked Ralph. "If we could manage to tickle a few, we might fry them in the lid of the milk-can."

"It's rank poaching!" declared Meta.

"I don't care in the least," returned Ralph. "If Sir Percy complains that any are missing, you can give him the bones, with my compliments."

"I don't think he would mind your catching one or two," said Monica. "I know Sir Percy rather well, and it is only real poachers that he's so hard on, and excursionists who come sometimes and try to fish. You see, as he says, if everyone were allowed to take fish, there would soon be none left, and people would begin to do it for the sake of selling them, and not for the sport. He allowed Mr. Cross's nephews to fish last summer when they were staying at the Rectory, and he said I might too, if I ever felt inclined."

"I've never seen trout tickled," said Lindsay.

"It will be a case of 'First catch your fish, then cook it,'" laughed Rhoda. "It isn't at all easy to whisk them out--they're the most slippery things you can imagine. I'm glad we don't have to depend on Ralph's skill for our dinner. I was hoping we might find some mushrooms, and stew them in part of the milk we've brought. We could put the can down among the ashes of the fire, and they'd be cooking while we ate the first course."

"Well, it is certainly a case of 'First pick your mushrooms', for you don't even know whether there'll be any," retorted Ralph. "The trout are always there, at any rate."

It was a long walk to Pendle Tor, and appetites, sharpened by the fresh air of the hills, began to grow rather keen; but as they had all resolved not to have their picnic before they had reached the summit, they staved off the edge of their hunger with a few biscuits, and, trudging on, covered the last mile in such quick time that Leonard declared it reminded him of a paper-chase. It was rather a steep pull to gain the highest point, yet they were well rewarded when they reached it by the bird's-eye view of the landscape around them, farms, churches, and distant village looking like so many toys, and the fields like the divisions in a map.

"I hope it doesn't mean to rain," said Monica, pointing to some rather threatening clouds that were rolling up from the west.

"We shall get a nice wetting if it does, for we haven't an umbrella amongst us!" returned Irene.

"Rain? Not it! Don't distress yourself; the glass was up to 'Fair' this morning. It's only a little scrap of mist blowing over. I don't mind giving you a butter-scotch in exchange for every drop of rain you get on your hat to-day," declared Ralph, whose prophecies were generally in exact accordance with his hopes, and who was apt to shut his eyes to unwelcome truths.

"Better not promise too much, old chap, or you may have to pay up," said Leonard. "I don't like the look of the sky myself. But what's the odds? It won't be the first time we've been wet through, by a long way, and I suppose we shan't melt."

"What about the lunch?" asked Rhoda. "I'm getting so famished, I can't wait much longer."

It was decided that the extreme top of the Tor was hardly a suitable place--the wind was strong, and no water was available; so they climbed some little distance down the cliff on the farther side, and at last hit upon a sheltered spot among the rocks, where a small surface spring, bubbling up from the ground, enabled them to fill the milk-can which was to serve as a kettle. The boys cut large bundles of dry heather, and, stacking it well together, soon had a good fire burning. They found it after all impossible to suspend the can, for the flames burnt directly through any stick that they tried to hang over the blaze; so they were obliged to set it securely on an arrangement of stones, and rake the fire round it. They had brought the tea in a muslin bag, which they dropped into the can, to save a teapot; and though pouring out was rather difficult, owing to the tin being so extremely hot, Meta managed to dispense the cups without burning her fingers.

"You haven't provided the fish course yet," said Rhoda to Ralph. "I thought we were to have fried trout as part of the feast."

"And I thought you were to give us mushrooms," retorted Ralph.

"Shouldn't care to wait while she cooked them," declared Leonard. "Ham sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs are quite good enough for me. Did you bring any salt? Another cup of tea, please, and don't be stingy with the sugar, Meta. I like three lumps."

"I wonder why things always taste so different out-of-doors," said Lindsay, looking reflectively at the three-cornered strawberry jam pastry she was eating.

"Why, I saw you swallow an ant on your tart just now," said Ralph, "so perhaps that has given it a flavour. Oh, you needn't distress yourself! Ants are quite wholesome, I assure you. There are a frightful lot of them crawling about here, though. I think we shall have to move on a stave."

"Ugh! Yes. They're stinging me already!" agreed Lindsay.

They were all a little tired after their long walk, so they were glad to sit and rest after lunch, asking riddles, cracking jokes, and listening to the boys' school tales of exciting cricket matches, private feuds, combats between class champions, and the punishments that had been meted out to certain sneaks and bullies--accounts which were as thrilling in their way as the doughty deeds of mail-clad knights of old, the warlike sentiments being just the same, though the setting of the century might differ. It was so interesting that nobody gave a thought to the time, or remembered the ominous clouds that had been stretching themselves out like long ribbons over the moor.

"Why, where's the view gone to?" cried Monica at last. "I thought we could see Linforth and the lake from here, and the tower of Haversleigh Church."

She might well exclaim in astonishment. Instead of the landscape which had met their eyes before, there was nothing to be seen but a great white wall of mist that seemed to close them in on every side, as if some giant hand had suddenly drawn down a blind between them and the distance.

"Whew!" exclaimed Ralph, starting to his feet, and indulging in a long-drawn-out whistle. "This is a nice fix! We're in the middle of a cloud. I never saw it coming up. It will be uncommonly awkward to get out of it. What a shame of old Pendle Tor to play us such a trick!"

"Will it soon blow over, do you think?" asked Irene.

"I don't know," replied Meta rather gravely. "Sometimes the clouds stay on these moors for days and days together. I wish we had noticed it sooner, and gone down to the road again before we were surrounded. I'm afraid it may be very difficult to find our way now."

"I don't think it's any use waiting," said Leonard, "it mayn't clear for hours. We'd better pack up our traps, and make the best push we can to try to strike the path."

"We must all stick close together," remarked Ralph. "It won't do to get divided, or we might never find each other again. We'd better keep well to the right; there's an old quarry on the left, and it wouldn't be exactly pleasant to walk into it. Luckily I've a pocket compass on my watch chain."

Very much sobered in spirits, the picnic party hastily packed up the baskets, and, choosing Ralph as guide, set off down the hillside, hoping to find some track that would lead eventually into the road below. It was a strange walk, groping their way through what Monica described as "white darkness". The heavy mist hung in the air like a blanket, so completely shutting them in that they could scarcely see each other at a distance of even a few feet, and it was only by keeping near enough to touch one another that they managed to avoid being separated. Though they had some general idea of their direction, they did not really know where they were walking, and stumbled blindly on through heather and bilberry bushes, over stones and rocks, only feeling that they were going downhill. It was very slow progress. Ralph stopped continually to consult his compass, and occasionally gave a loud "cooee", in case they might find some wandering shepherd or countryman who would be able to help them. There was no answer to his calls, however--only the occasional bleat of a sheep that sounded far off and muffled through the mist. They knew there was neither cottage nor farm within hail, and unless they could strike the road they might wander on hour after hour over the moors, only getting farther and farther out of their way. Tired out with the rough trudge, the girls at last declared they must sit still for a few minutes and rest.

"I'm awfully sorry to have landed you in such a hole," said Ralph, "but who would have thought those innocent-looking clouds would have come down on us like feather beds? You really never know what to expect on these hills."

"I wonder what we'd better do?" said Monica.

"Stay where we are," suggested Irene.

"It would be too cold to spend the night here," replied Meta.

"We haven't even our jackets with us," added Lindsay.

"Unless we're quite dead beat, we'd better push on," said Leonard. "I'm hoping we may come to the stream, because we could find our way along the banks to Whitcombe, at any rate. I've been listening for it all the time, but I haven't heard a sound."

"I wish we had a divining rod!" groaned Rhoda. "That would tell us in what direction the water lay. We've been going south-east all the time, haven't we?"

"Yes, I believe the stream lay due south from where we started," answered Ralph, "but I didn't dare to turn that way, because of the quarry. Perhaps we may strike it higher up. If you're rested, girls, we'll be going."

The damp, clinging clouds appeared to have settled down to stay. The wind that had been blowing earlier in the day, when they ascended Pendle Tor, had ceased, and there was not even the breath of a breeze to blow away the clammy mist that was already drenching their clothes with a chilly dew. It was now half-past five o'clock, and they had been wandering for more than an hour.

"I haven't an idea where we are, nor how far we've come," said Ralph. "I only know I've been steering east by the compass. Of course we've been going very slowly, but I think we shouldn't be far from the brook. If we could find that, it would be an enormous help."

"I believe I hear water now," said Rhoda, pausing a moment. "I'm sure I do: to our left. Listen!"

All stood still, with every sense on the alert, straining their ears intently for the faintest murmur. In the far distance it seemed to them that they could certainly catch the unmistakable rush of a stream flowing swiftly over a rough, stony bed. Guided by the sound, they stumbled on, till at length, after climbing over a number of rocks, they reached the welcome brook that was to be their path to home and safety.

"I'm uncommonly glad to see it!" said Ralph, stooping to take a drink. "I began to think we should never get back again. If we follow it down, it will lead us straight into Whitcombe. Of course, that's far enough out of our way, but we might get a trap there, and drive home."

It was a most terrible scramble down the bed of the stream, over jagged rocks, among briers and bushes, and through rushes and reeds. The mist still wrapped them round, and they did not dare to venture away from the water to find smoother walking. The three visitors, who were not accustomed to such exploits, were nearly exhausted, while even sturdy Meta and Rhoda showed signs of giving in.

"We're at the old bridge now," said Ralph, trying to encourage them. "We can climb up and get on to the road. It's only about three miles farther to Whitcombe village. We're bound to find a trap of some sort there, and then you'll be all right."

"I think the mist is lifting a little," said Leonard; "it isn't half as thick as it was. Look at the sun trying to get through!"

"I believe we're walking straight out of the edge of the clouds. That's what it is!" declared Ralph. "I begin to see the trees. Hurrah! It's clearing ever so. We'll scramble up the bank, and we shall get along much faster on the road than down here on these wretched stones. Cheer up, girls! You'll soon be in Whitcombe now."

An hour afterwards, very footsore and weary, the party limped into Whitcombe, a small hamlet consisting of a wayside inn and a handful of cottages. It was eight o'clock, and the sun, behind long bars of crimson and grey, had already begun to sink below the horizon. They were nine miles away from home, as the stream had led them in quite a different direction from Linforth, and, as Leonard expressed it, they had "altogether landed themselves in a jolly pickle". Just at present tea seemed the most pressing necessity, so a council of war was held to see what funds could be mustered for the purpose. These did not amount to very much. Lindsay and Rhoda were penniless, Monica also had left her purse at the Vicarage. Irene and Meta mustered a shilling between them. Ralph had a sixpence, while the contents of Leonard's pockets proved to be exactly those of the traditional schoolboy's, twopence-halfpenny and an old knife.

"I'm afraid it won't go very far," said Ralph. "We shall have to ask them to give us tick. Come along! We'll try the inn, and see what they will do for us."

"We must tell them who we are," added Meta, "and say Father will pay afterwards."

The sight of seven such *bona fide* travellers appeared to occasion much surprise, to both the good woman at the bar and the few villagers who, with pipes and glasses, were sitting discussing local politics and the chances of the harvest. Tea at the unwonted hour of eight seemed an unprecedented request, and the landlady was not content until she had satisfied her curiosity as to who her guests were, where they came from, and what they wanted at Whitcombe at that time in the evening.

"What we want is some tea," said Ralph, after a brief explanation of their adventure, "and anything in the shape of a conveyance that can take us back to Linforth to-night. We've only one and eightpence-halfpenny amongst us, but my father will pay the rest when we get home. If you like, I'll leave you my watch and chain."

"You've no need to do that!" laughed the landlady. "I'm sure I can trust you. Come into the little parlour, and have your teas there. The young ladies look ready to drop, and this is no fit place for them to sit down in. Those mists be nasty things up Pendle Tor. It's a mercy as you've got down at all. There was a gentleman from London caught there last autumn, and he wandered round and round in a circle for two days before it cleared and they found him. He was nigh dead, too, with the cold and the damp. My son Albert shall put the horse in the trap and drive you home. I dare say you'll manage to cram in somehow."

No tea was ever so acceptable as the large, steaming cups which they drank in the stuffy little parlour, and no carriage and pair could have been more welcome than the old market cart that came round to the door afterwards. It was rather a problem how to pack themselves and the driver into it, but Lindsay sat on Meta's knee, and Rhoda squeezed herself between her two brothers on the front seat. The horse walked up and down hill, and only rose to a measured trot on level ground, so it took a considerable time to accomplish the nine-mile journey, and it was nearly eleven o'clock before they reached the Vicarage. Very tired and cold and cramped, they rushed into the house, where Mrs. Greenwood, in an agony of suspense, had been imagining all the accidents which could possibly have happened to them, and was preparing herself for the worst. The Vicar and some of the neighbours, it appeared, were out searching for them with lanterns, so a messenger was quickly sent through the village to spread the good news of their safe arrival.

"You can't complain you've had no excitement here," said Ralph to the three guests. "We almost drowned you on Saturday, and to-day we nearly lost you on the moors. You're going to-morrow, or we might have had some more hairbreadth escapes. At any rate, I don't think you'll forget Pendle Tor in a hurry!"

Lindsay had certainly plenty of news to relate when she returned to the Manor. Her classmates were quite envious, and poor Cicely was a little wistful lest Rhoda should have usurped her place in her friend's affections. Of that, however, she need not have been afraid. Lindsay was faithful to her chosen chum, and had so many things to ask about, as well as adventures to tell, that the two were soon chattering as fast as usual. Cicely had made no further important discoveries during the few days, though she had kept a careful watch on Mrs. Wilson, and had once noticed her go up to the lantern room carrying a jug in her hand. Scott had not been in the house again, but he had been seen talking earnestly with "The Griffin" in the garden. He had gone hastily away when Cicely approached, so he evidently did not wish the conversation to be overheard. Whether it had anything to do with the mystery or not, it was of course impossible to say.

"I'm rather glad, on the whole, that nothing particular happened while you were away," said Cicely. "I should have wanted so dreadfully to tell somebody, I'm afraid Marjorie Butler might have wormed it out of me. As it is, they none of them know, and we still have the secret to ourselves."

CHAPTER IX

The Plot Thickens

After hearing the story of Monica Courtenay, their friend's ancestress, Lindsay and Cicely felt a special interest in her portrait. They strolled one afternoon along the picture gallery to take another look at it. There were the pretty smiling face--so like Monica's--and the bunch of red roses that had saved the life of Sir Piers Courtenay. Was all the good fortune of the race to be hers, and would none of it descend to the namesake who so closely resembled her?

"If she could only come back and be of some use again!" sighed Lindsay. "She ought to know every secret of this house."

"I wish we could make her speak and tell us," said Cicely.

At that moment a distant door banged, and a great gust of wind blew along the gallery. Cicely started violently.

"Lindsay, did you see?" she exclaimed. "The picture moved in its frame!"

"Nonsense! How could it?" said Lindsay, who had been looking the other way.

"I tell you it did!"

"You must have imagined it."

It certainly seemed rather improbable. The portraits were all firmly fixed in the panelled walls, and no breath of air could be expected to penetrate behind them.

"It's almost as if she were alive," continued Cicely, "and just when we were wishing she could talk! No wonder people make up tales about her. I don't think I quite like it."

"How silly you are!" said Lindsay scornfully. "You might have seen a ghost!"

"Well, it is queer! You needn't laugh at me so. I'm not going to stay here any longer; I vote we go out into the garden."

Pictures that moved were rather more than Cicely had bargained for. Mysteries were all very well in their way, but she began to feel it was possible to have too much of a good thing. It was a distinct relief to her to leave the gloomy old gallery, with its armour and tapestry, and walk out into the fresh air and sunshine. There was still half an hour to be disposed of before tea, and the two girls sauntered leisurely in the direction of the kitchen-garden.

"I wish I knew where the boathouse used to be that Sir Piers wanted the key for," said Lindsay.

"It was not very far away, I dare say. The river runs somewhere at the bottom of those fields."

"I wonder if there's a path."

"I believe there's one at the end of the orchard. I saw Scott walking down there once."

"Shall we go and see?"

"All right!"

The orchard was forbidden ground. Perhaps, though, the fact that they risked a scolding, or even a mark for bad conduct, only made the adventure more interesting. They ascertained first that Scott was safely attending to his tomatoes in the greenhouse, then they dived hastily between the rows of young apple trees. Cicely was right. At the far end there was a small gate that led into a meadow.

"The river must be over there, hidden by those willows," said Lindsay.

"I hope we shan't meet a bull," said Cicely, looking nervously at a group of cattle in the distance.

"Oh, come along! You're surely not afraid of cows!"

They had soon crossed the field and reached the shade of the willows by the water's edge. The low bank was covered with reeds and rushes. Tall purple flowers were growing on a green, boggy island close by. It was a very pleasant place, just the kind of spot to choose on a hot summer's afternoon.

"Far nicer than the garden, because we have it all to ourselves," declared Cicely.

"Oh, look what I've found!" exclaimed Lindsay ecstatically.

She had been poking about among the reeds, and now pointed in triumph under the branches of a big willow to a smooth little pool, where there actually floated a punt, anchored by a long chain to the trunk of the tree.

It was a most attractive-looking boat, nicely polished, and with the name *Heatherbell* painted in neat white letters on the prow. It came quite easily to the edge of the bank when Lindsay pulled the chain, and seemed deliberately to invite them to step into it. Such a temptation was not to be resisted. In a moment they were both inside.

"If I can manage to untie it, I'm sure I could punt us out on to the river," said Lindsay.

"Oh, do! And then perhaps we could find some water-lilies," agreed her ever-willing friend.

Lindsay leaned over to reach the chain. It was wound tightly round the tree, and was very difficult to unfasten.

"I'll come and help you!" cried Cicely, and without a thought of the consequences she bounced up, and stepped to the other end of the boat.

Her sudden change of position utterly upset the balance of their small craft. There was a splash, a succession of squeals, and both girls were floundering in the water. Luckily the pool was shallow, and they were in no danger of drowning; but by the time they reached the bank they were wet through, and in an extremely draggled condition.

"What are we to do?" said Cicely blankly, trying to wring the water out of her skirts.

"Go back, I suppose, and put on dry things," replied Lindsay. "We shall get into a fearful scrape, I expect."

"Yes! What will Miss Frazer say?"

Miss Frazer was on the point of collecting her flock in preparation for tea, when two dejected, dripping figures came creeping along the terrace. If they had hoped to reach the side door unobserved, they were soon undeceived; the governess's sharp eyes spied them at once.

"Lindsay and Cicely!" she burst out wrathfully. "You naughty girls! Where have you been? Come at once into the house and change your clothes. You give more trouble than all the rest of the class put together. Miss Russell will have to be told about this."

Miss Russell was angry--really angry. She lectured them both severely, and stopped their recreation for the whole of the next day. This seemed only a very small circumstance in itself, but strangely enough it led indirectly to something of much more consequence.

The two delinquents looked decidedly rueful when, instead of going into the garden as usual, they were obliged to sit in the classroom, and copy out a passage from "Lycidas" in their best handwriting. It was trying, certainly, particularly as the other girls were playing a tennis handicap, and they could hear the soft thud of balls, and the cries of "Vantage!" or "Game!" It was possible to see a few heads bobbing over the wall, but they could not gather how the tournament was progressing, nor which was the winning side.

Long before tea-time they had finished their allotted portions, and going to the window they leaned out, to try to catch a glimpse of what was happening on the lawn. The classroom was at the back of the house, and overlooked a small paved courtyard. Below, on a wooden bench in the sunshine, sat Scott, leisurely blacking boots, and humming to himself in a voice that had little tune in it. The cat, purring loudly, was rubbing herself vigorously against his trousers.

The girls were just going to call to him, and beg him to peep through the door in the wall and give them some news of the tennis players, when they suddenly changed their intention. Mrs. Wilson had appeared in the porch. She brought out a flower vase, flung the stale water away, and refilled it from one of the butts that stood near.

Scott had evidently seen her too, for he gave a short whistle to attract her attention, then, throwing down his blacking brush, he crossed the courtyard to speak to her. In spite of his lowered tone, his voice rose up clearly to the classroom window above.

"About what we were talking of this morning," he began. "It had best be done as soon as possible. I'll do it to-night."

"I've marked the place," replied Mrs. Wilson, "but I'll come with you to make sure. You'll want a helping hand. It's too much for one."

"You can hold the lantern, at any rate. It's a job that will need some caution. We mustn't attempt it till it's quite dark."

"No, not till everything's quiet," said Mrs. Wilson, as she re-entered the house.

Lindsay drew Cicely back quickly into the room, as Scott returned to his rows of boots on the bench. She did not wish him, at any cost, to see them at the window, or to know that they had overheard the conversation.

"What are they going to do?" asked Cicely breathlessly.

"I don't know. It must be something dreadful if they want to keep it so quiet."

"And do it in the dark, too!"

"I'm afraid both Mrs. Wilson and Scott are bad characters," said Lindsay in an impressive voice. "I expect they've stolen the treasure, and they're going to hide it in the garden. Perhaps even it may have something to do with the prisoner in the lantern room."

"You don't think they've killed him?" gasped Cicely.

"I can't tell. I believe they're capable of anything. I'm quite uneasy for fear they intend to harm Monica. We'll watch to-night, and find out what they're about. I shouldn't wonder if we're on the verge of a great discovery. It was most fortunate we were kept in this afternoon; if we hadn't happened to be at the window just then, we shouldn't have heard their plans."

Cicely's face had lengthened considerably at the idea of the black doings which it was evidently their duty to investigate.

"I don't know how we're to follow them in the dark," she said, after a moment's hesitation.

"We must," declared Lindsay emphatically. "I feel it all depends on us. Monica may be in the greatest danger, and we are the only ones who know anything about the matter, and can save her."

The tea-bell ringing at that moment sent them down to the dining-hall. The meal had been delayed half an hour on account of the tournament, so preparation followed immediately afterwards, and Lindsay and Cicely were obliged, with their thoughts still running on possible tragedies, to endeavour to apply their minds to the unromantic details of parsing.

It seemed of such minor importance whether a verb were transitive or intransitive, weak or strong, compared with whether Mrs. Wilson and Scott were really going to meet in the garden to carry out some fell intention. The time seemed endless until the books were at last put away, and they could snatch a few moments for private talk.

"There's one comfort," said Lindsay, "they won't begin until it's dark, so they can't have been doing anything while we've been in prep."

"It's generally light for quite half an hour after we're in bed," said Cicely. "I don't see yet how we're to know when they're starting."

"We shall find out," returned Lindsay confidently. "I have a kind of feeling that something is going to happen to-night."

"What are you two whispering about?" asked Nora Proctor curiously.

"Oh, only a joke of our own!"

"You've got some secret, I'm sure," said Beryl Austen; "you're always looking at each other and making signs. I noticed you yesterday during arithmetic."

"Do tell us, Cicely," begged Marjorie Butler. "You and I used to be friends, but we never have a secret together now."

"There's really nothing worth telling," declared Cicely, much embarrassed.

"We shall have to be careful though," said Lindsay afterwards. "We don't want the others to hear, and then go poking about and making discoveries."

"Certainly not; if there's anything to be found out, I'd rather we found it out ourselves."

Cicely was tired when bedtime arrived, and ready to curl herself up and forget what might be happening outside. Lindsay, on the contrary, lay with wide-open eyes, watching the room grow darker and darker. When the wardrobe and the chest of drawers and the washstand had at last all merged together into one deep mass of shadow, she got up and peeped through the open window. What she saw there caused her to run hurriedly and shake her sleepy companion.

"Cicely! Do wake up! There's a light moving in the garden."

It took a second or two for Cicely to recover her senses, but when she realized the nature of the news, she hopped out of bed in frantic excitement.

"Is it Mrs. Wilson and Scott?" she asked eagerly.

"I expect so, but of course I can't tell. Be quick! We must go at once and see what they're doing."

The two girls hastily scrambled into their clothes, and tiptoed downstairs to the side door. The servants had not yet locked up, so it was still standing ajar.

"Suppose we were to meet Miss Russell or Miss Frazer!" shivered Cicely, with a nervous glance down the corridor.

"Don't think about it. They're both safe in the drawing-room."

In another minute they had closed the door gently behind them, and were running softly across the lawn. It was a cloudy night, with neither moon nor stars in the sky. The outlines of the trees and shrubs were just visible, but it was very dark indeed under their shade.

"The light seemed to be going through the shrubbery towards the arbour," said Lindsay, feeling her way along the rose avenue.

"There it is!" replied Cicely, as a faint gleam shone in the distance.

"We must be very, very careful," said Lindsay, "not to disturb them on any account. We must stop somewhere near, and just look and listen."

As quietly as ghosts they stole down the path, trying not to rustle so much as a leaf. They were close now to the lantern. They could see it quite clearly, set on the ground, and two figures bending over it.

Skirting round under the bushes, they reached the shelter of an oak tree that grew on the side of a bank, and peeped cautiously round the trunk. Yes, it was certainly Scott and Mrs. Wilson who were in the shrubbery below. Every now and then a glint of light revealed their faces unmistakably. They were talking together in low tones, unfortunately too low for their conversation to be overheard. Scott held a spade in his hand, and was stooping to watch Mrs. Wilson, who, kneeling on the grass, was fumbling inside a large sack.

"Can you see if she's counting money?" breathed Cicely into Lindsay's ear. "I believe they're going to bury it."

"It looks like something bigger and heavier," whispered Lindsay, trying to crane her neck farther forward.

"Is it silver plate?"

"It might be anything in that huge sack."

"Oh! Not a body!"

I believe Cicely would have fled precipitately if Lindsay had not held her tightly by the hand. The fear that old Sir Giles Courtenay was being finally disposed of oppressed her like a nightmare.

"No! I expect it's the treasure. We must notice exactly where they're putting it."

Lindsay took a step nearer, to gain a better view of the proceedings, but as she did so her foot trod noisily on a dead twig.



AN UNFORTUNATE ACCIDENT

"What's that?"

The question was in "The Griffin's" well-known voice.

There was a growl in reply from Scott.

"Best take a look, anyhow," came from Mrs. Wilson.

Scott seized the lantern, and began to flash it round in every direction. Then, oh horrors! he walked straight towards the oak where the two girls were hiding. Nearly paralysed with fear, they did not dare to run away, and could only hope that, after all, under cover of the darkness, he might chance to overlook them.

In her desperation, Lindsay tried to draw farther behind the trunk of the tree. To do so she perforce pushed Cicely back. The latter was not quite prepared for the sudden movement, the ground was uneven, she swayed, clutched violently at her companion to save herself, and over they both rolled down the bank, almost to the very feet of Scott himself.

As Lindsay and Cicely came crashing down the bank, Scott uttered a cry of consternation. In the suddenness of his dismay, the lantern dropped from his hand, extinguishing the light in its fall.

Instantly the two girls were on their feet, and rushed helter-skelter across the garden through the darkness. They plunged anyhow through bushes and over flower-beds, scratching their faces on overhanging boughs, and tearing their dresses on thorns, their one fear lest Scott should be pursuing them, and their one anxiety to gain the safe shelter

of the house.

They reached the side entrance without hearing any footsteps behind them. If Scott had tried to follow them, they had evidently managed to elude him, and he must have given up the chase. The door was still unbolted, and they hurried breathlessly upstairs, luckily meeting nobody on the way. What a harbour of refuge it seemed to be, back in their own room! Without daring to light the candle, they went back to bed again with all possible speed.

"Well, we have had an adventure!" began Lindsay, when they were once more comfortably ensconced between the sheets.

"Do you think Scott noticed who we were?" whispered Cicely.

"I can't tell. He had just time to catch a glimpse of our faces before the lantern went out."

"I'm sure they were doing something dreadful that they wanted to keep secret, he looked so utterly horror-stricken at seeing us."

"There's no doubt about it. The unfortunate part is that now they find they've been discovered, they'll bury the treasure somewhere else instead."

"What a pity we fell just at that moment!"

Cicely's voice was very doleful.

"It will have aroused their suspicions, too, and will make them extra careful," lamented Lindsay. "If Scott recognized us, he and Mrs. Wilson will know we're watching them. They'll owe us a grudge. 'The Griffin' was bad enough before, but she'll be worse than ever now."

They scanned the old housekeeper's face narrowly next morning, as she carried the coffee into the dining-room, but her countenance wore its accustomed aspect of grim inscrutability. If she connected them with last night's happenings, she certainly did not betray the knowledge; it was impossible to tell whether she mistrusted them or not, or what feelings lay concealed under her forbidding exterior.

The moment breakfast was over, they rushed into the garden to renew their acquaintance with the scene of their adventure. Somebody had plainly been digging in the bank, though the traces had evidently been tidied carefully up, and the sods replaced.

"Do you think there could be anything here?" said Cicely wistfully, poking a stick into the loosened soil.

"Oh, dear me, no!" replied Lindsay. "Why, the first thing they'd do would be to rush off with that sack to some safer spot. Even the very stupidest persons wouldn't have gone on burying valuables in a place where they knew they'd been watched. 'The Griffin' and Scott are certainly not idiots!"

"If we could only guess where they'd put it!" sighed Cicely.

For the present they had had such a fright that, though neither would confess it, both were a little inclined to let the matter rest in abeyance. It needed courage to risk the anger of Mrs. Wilson and Scott if they were once more caught meddling. It had seemed pleasant enough to search for the treasure themselves in the house, but the affair was now beginning to assume a graver aspect.

"I sometimes wonder if we ought to tell Monica or Miss Russell," said Cicely, who occasionally had uneasy scruples as to the wisdom of their plan of secrecy.

"It wouldn't be of the slightest use," declared Lindsay. "'The Griffin' and Scott would simply deny everything. They'd make out it was all nonsense on our part, like grown-up people generally do. And how could we prove we were right? Miss Russell would tell us to mind our own business, and we should only get into a scrape for our pains. No, we shall just have to let things take their course, and trust to luck."



CHAPTER X

Under the Hawthorn Tree

It was high summer at Haversleigh. The trees, now in full leaf, cast rich shadows over the landscape, the wild roses were in bloom on the hedgerows, and tall foxgloves stood like crimson sentinels at the margins of the woods. The fields were white with moon-daisies, growing among the long, lush grass; and all the roadsides were a tangle of vetches, campion, bugle, trefoil and speedwells. The wind was fragrant with the scent of newly turned hay; everywhere the mowers were busy, and the daisies were falling fast beneath the swinging scythe or the blades of the reaping-machine. In the Manor garden the roses had reached perfection, and the flower-beds were a mass of colour. The girls spent every available moment out-of-doors, making the most of the bright days, and enjoying their country visit to the full.

One blazing half-holiday afternoon Lindsay and Cicely, allowed for once in the select company of a few of the elder girls, were lounging blissfully under the shade of a big hawthorn tree. The air seemed dancing for very heat; the grasshoppers were chirping away at the edge of the lawn, a lizard lay basking on the stones of the terrace wall, and the sparrows for once were silent.

"It's far too hot to play tennis," said Irene Spencer. "One just wants to sit somewhere where it's green and cool."

"I'm glad we're here, then, instead of at Winterburn Lodge," said Mary Parkinson.

"So am I; and yet Winterburn Lodge is nicer than many other schools," remarked Mildred Roper.

"It's not half bad," assented Mary. "I like it better, at any rate, than the French school I was at in Brussels."

"I didn't know you'd ever been in France," said Lindsay, idly picking a dandelion clock and blowing it to find out the time.

"No more I have, goosey."

"Then why did you say you'd been at a French school? You're telling fibs."

"No, I'm not, because Brussels doesn't happen to be in France--it's in Belgium."

"I thought you were supposed to learn geography in the third class," laughed Irene Spencer.

"She said a French school, not a Belgian one," objected Lindsay.

"Well, everybody speaks French in Brussels."

"Don't they speak Flemish?"

"Only the poor people, and even they can generally talk French as well."

"How long were you there, Mary?" put in Mildred Roper.

"Only one term. I got ill, and had to come home."

"Was it nice?"

"Oh, just tolerable!"

"Had you to talk French all the time?"

"I had to try, because none of the girls knew anything else. They used to laugh at me if I spoke English."

"How nasty! I shouldn't have cared to be you," said Cicely.

"Yes, it was horrid, when I was sure they were saying things about me and I couldn't understand them. I used to get quite cross, and that made my head ache."

"Was the school in the country?" asked Lindsay.

"No, I've told you already it was in Brussels, and that's a big city. It was a large building, with a great high wall all round it, with spikes on the top, as if it were a prison. Inside there was a courtyard where we used to play games. It had orange trees and oleanders in big green tubs, but no grass nor flowers. You couldn't possibly have called it a garden. We hardly ever went out for proper walks. Sometimes we were taken to the park, but even there we had to go very

primly, two and two, with the teachers looking after us most sharply."

"Were the teachers nice?"

"Yes, pretty well. I liked them better than the girls, at any rate. There were two sisters in my class, called Marie and Sophie Beauvais, who were always making fun of me because I was English. I had a horrid time until a German girl came to the school, and then they teased her instead of me. The best thing of all was the coffee. It was perfectly delicious--nicer than any I've ever tasted in England."

"Why didn't you stay in Brussels?"

"I was ill, and my mother had to come and fetch me. She declared she would never let me go so far away from home again; so she sent me to Winterburn Lodge instead. Miss Russell is very kind if one's not well, and Mother said she would rather have me properly looked after, even if I didn't learn French."

"Yes, Miss Russell does take care of us," said Irene. "I used to be at another school, and the teachers never noticed if we had headaches, or couldn't eat our meals. We had to work most fearfully hard for exams, too. The headmistress made a point of getting a certain number of passes each year, and one was obliged to prepare and go in whether one was clever or not. Give me good old Winterburn Lodge!--especially when one's at the Manor instead. By the by, there's Monica. She's surely not come to play tennis? It's too hot."

"Fifteen degrees too hot," agreed Monica, throwing herself down on the grass beside the others and fanning herself with her hat. "Out on the road the heat's at simmering-point. I came to bring a message to Miss Russell, and I hear she's gone to Linforth and won't be back until half-past four. I think I shall wait for her."

"Oh, do!" cried the others. "We'll have a 'palaver' here under the trees."

"What's a 'palaver', please? I hope it's something cool and fizzy to drink."

"No, it's nothing of the sort. It's a kind of meeting, where everybody has to tell a story in turn."

"But I'm rigidly truthful!" objected Monica, with a twinkle in her eye.

"You naughty girl! You know we don't mean telling falsehoods. It's telling tales," said Irene.

"I'm no tell-tale either!"

"Don't be too funny. Your story will have to be longer than anyone else's to make up for this. Mildred, you explain, as I don't seem able to express myself properly."

"It can either be a story you have read, or one of something that has happened to yourself," said Mildred. "We prefer people's own adventures if we can get them."

"So few people have any adventures in real life!" said Monica.

"Then you can tell something out of a book."

"Suppose I can't remember anything?"

"You must. It needn't be grand; we're not a critical audience."

"I'm very stupid at telling things," said Monica; "might I read you something instead?"

"If you've got it here."

"As it happens, I have," replied Monica, opening a bound volume of a magazine which she held in her hand. "I brought this book to lend to Miss Russell, as I knew it would interest her. It has a story about the old Manor in the times of the Wars of the Roses, and how Sir Roger Courtenay came to win it for his own. I dare say you might like to hear it."

"If it's about the Manor I'm sure we shall," said Irene. "Who wrote the tale?"

"A gentleman who stayed in the village a year or two ago. He was very enthusiastic about Haversleigh. I suppose he made it up from the short account in the guide-book. All the facts are quite true, though he must have used his imagination for the details. The worst of it is that it's a fairly long story, and if I read it I'm afraid there won't be any time left for you to tell yours."

"Oh, we don't mind that!"

"So much the better!"

"Fire away!"

"Do go on!"

Thus encouraged, Monica found her place and, the girls having clustered round her in a close circle so as to hear the better, she began her tale:

SIR MERVYN'S WARD

The middle of the fifteenth century was one of the most stormy periods that the pages of English history have ever recorded. The rival claims of the houses of York and Lancaster had led to those disastrous Wars of the Roses that wiped away the flower of chivalry and made the fair land one bloody battlefield. In the autumn of 1470 Edward IV had been driven from his throne by the powerful Earl of Warwick, known as the Kingmaker, and Henry VI had been once more restored to power, though for how long a period none could venture to guess. They were hard times to live through, especially for those lesser gentry and yeomen who had not placed themselves definitely under the protection of any of the greater barons, and still strove to keep their estates in peace and quiet. The turmoil of the great struggle had not spared even the obscure village of Haversleigh. The inhabitants went about their tasks with an air of unrest. It seemed scarcely worth while to plough the fields, and sow corn which might be trampled underfoot by the soldiery before there was a chance to reap it. There were loud and deep murmurs among the villagers at the many exactions and tyrannies of Sir Mervyn Stamford, the then occupant of the Manor, the estates of which he administered on behalf of his ward, Catharine Mowbray. Catharine's father, Sir John Mowbray, had fallen in battle on the side of the Yorkists, but with the return of Henry VI to power, Sir Mervyn, a stanch Lancastrian, had bought the rights of her guardianship from the half-imbecile king, and had not only assumed control of her property, but had announced his intention of wedding the maiden, either with or without her consent.

This was a state of affairs which, however satisfactory to Sir Mervyn himself, was by no means pleasing either to Catharine or to her lover, Roger de Courtenay, a young gentleman of high lineage though broken fortunes. Sir Mervyn was indeed a man whom any girl might have dreaded. Dark, stern, and forbidding, his face seamed with scars, he was a harsh master, a relentless foe, and a cruel tyrant to any who dared not resist his authority. He was cordially hated in Haversleigh, the inhabitants of which were Yorkists to a man, but he had garrisoned himself so strongly in the Manor, with so formidable a band of retainers, that the wretched villagers could do no more than groan under his oppressions, and bewail the advent of the day when, by his marriage with the unwilling Catharine, he would become their legal lord.

Matters were at this crisis one April morning in the year 1471 when Diccon of the Moat Farm came slowly down a path through the forest from Torton. He led a horse laden with a sack of flour, which he had taken to be ground at the mill of the convent of St. Agatha, to avoid the heavy dues imposed by Sir Mervyn on every sack ground within the jurisdiction of the Manor. In consequence he looked warily about him, since, should he chance to meet any of Sir Mervyn's retainers, not only would his flour be confiscated, but his own back would receive such a cudgelling as would lay him up for a month or more. For this reason he had avoided the main road, and chosen a little-used bridle path; and he glanced cautiously up and down each green alley, and listened for every sound that might give a hint of approaching footsteps. It was with a sense of swift alarm, therefore, that he saw a figure suddenly step out from behind the shelter of an oak in front, and heard himself challenged by name. The newcomer was a young man, tall and of fine build, and his commanding presence belied the shabbiness of his poor and travel-stained attire.

"I am an honest man minding mine own business, and sith ye are the same, seek not to hinder me," replied the owner of the Moat Farm.

"Nay, Diccon! Hast thou forgot thine old friend? Come hither, I pray thee, for in good sooth I have tidings of great import."

So saying, the stranger dropped the cloak with which he had so far partly concealed his face, and showed his features more fully.

"Master Roger!" gasped Diccon. "This is indeed a rash venture. An Sir Mervyn find you within a five mile of the Manor there will be an arrow through you ere nightfall."

"I am more like to send an arrow through him," replied Roger fiercely. "He hath done me ill enough already, and now to crown it all he purposes to wed my betrothed. Catharine is mine, not only by her choice, but by the law of the land. She was affianced to me by King Edward himself. Have her I will, or leave my body for the crows!"

"Brave words, Master Roger, brave words!" said Diccon, shaking his head. "'Twill need more than a single sword to cross Sir Mervyn in the matter."

"Where a sword can naught avail, craft and guile must find a way," returned Roger. "List you, I have brought tidings. Edward has come to his own again. But two days since did his arms meet those of Lancaster at Barnet. The Red Rose is trampled under foot, and Warwick and Montague lie dead upon the field."

"In sooth if this be true it were news of great import."

"I met one who carried a letter from my lord of Gloucester. He rode to gather the supporters of York in the West. Margaret the Queen hath landed at Weymouth, and is calling the men of Devon and Cornwall to the standard of the red rose. I hied me in all haste to my lord of Norfolk, and he hath given me a band of stout fellows that are even now hid under the brushwood yonder. An I can surprise Sir Mervyn ere he hears that the emblem of Lancaster is raised in the west it will strike a blow for York in Somerset, and moreover I shall win me my bride. I must myself to the Manor. I would see how it is garrisoned, and convey a message to Catharine alone."

"You are a dead man first!" exclaimed Diccon. "This were folly, Master Roger. A lion's den were safer than the Manor."

"None shall pierce my disguise if you, good Diccon, will but aid to trick me out for the part I fain would play. I wot I could count on your faith!"

"To the last drop of my blood. Yet it is a rash venture, and one that ill pleases me," replied the old man sadly.

Late that same afternoon the golden shafts of the warm spring sunshine were finding their way through the narrow windows of an upper room in the Manor. The house in those days was but a quarter of its present size; it was strongly fortified, and bore more resemblance to a medieval keep than to the Tudor mansion of later times. Strength and defence had been considered before beauty and elegance, and there was little even of comfort to be found inside the stern, forbidding walls. In the apartment in question some rude attempt had been made to render things more habitable than in the rest of the grim establishment. A few pieces of tapestry covered the rough masonry, and the floor was strewn with fresh rushes. On a carved wooden bench by the window sat a fair and beautiful girl of seventeen, who was occupying herself with a piece of needlework, and talking earnestly meanwhile to her attendant, a maiden of her own age, busy also with her tambour frame.

"I tell thee, Anne, I will not wed him--not if he drag me by force to the altar! Verily, it is a pretty case. Here be I a prisoner in mine own manor, my estates squandered, my tenants oppressed and robbed, my retainers dismissed, save only thee, my poor faithful Anne; and in return I am to wed him to boot! Nay! Rather will I take the veil and give all my goods to the convent of St. Agatha at Torton; though thou knowest I have scant mind to be a nun."

"It wants but five morns now to the bridal day," sighed Anne. "If I mistake not, lady, Sir Mervyn will wed you even against your will and despite the convent."

"Then I will die first! Oh, Roger, Roger!" she added softly to herself, "only a year ago, and I was thy betrothed! It is six months since I had tidings of thee, and whether thou art alive or dead I know not."

"Nay, weep not, sweet lady--weeping cures no ills," said Anne; then, wishful to divert her mistress's sad thoughts, she directed her attention to a commotion which was going on in the courtyard below. "Some stranger hath arrived. If I mistake not, 'tis a huckster come to spread out his wares. An it be your pleasure, I will hie me down and bring you tidings of what he hath."

Receiving a half-hearted consent, she hurried to the great courtyard, where many of the servants and retainers were already gathered to look at the contents of the pedlar's pack. At that period the arrival of a travelling merchant was an event at a remote country house, and even Sir Mervyn himself did not disdain to examine the cloths and buy an ell or two of velvet for a doublet. The pedlar, a white-haired man, much bent, and with a strange hood of foreign fashion drawn over his face, was proclaiming the virtues of his goods in a lusty voice.

"What do ye lack? What do ye lack?" he cried. "I have here hosen, shoon, caps, gloves, girdles, such as ye never might see out of London town. Here be beside cloth of silk and damask fit for the Queen. Is there no worshipful lady of this noble lord before whom I might spread forth my choicer wares?"

"My mistress would gladly have silk for a kirtle, an I may summon her to the courtyard," Anne ventured to whisper to Sir Mervyn.

Receiving a grudging permission, she hurried panting up the stairs with her tidings. Catharine at first would hardly be persuaded to descend from her chamber into the hated presence of Sir Mervyn, and it was finally more to please her maid than herself that she assented.

"Fair apparel is of scant use to one who hath a mind to wed the Church," she said, "but thou shalt have a riband for thyself, Anne, and a silk girdle withal."

No one remarked the swift, eager glance that the pedlar bestowed upon Catharine as she appeared in the doorway, nor how his hand shook as he untied his second pack. With apparent lack of intention he managed skilfully to draw her a few steps away from the rest, under pretence of exhibiting his silks in the best light; then, whispering: "Keep secret! Betray not that you receive this!" he rapidly thrust a small piece of parchment into her hand. Full of surprise, Catharine yet had the presence of mind to utter no exclamation, and to conceal the parchment in the folds of her gown. Hastily completing her purchases, she retired again to her chamber, where, dismissing Anne, she was able to examine the letter in private. It contained but a few lines:

"Right dear and well beloved,

"The White Rose musters again in the west, and I have hope of your release. Ope the west postern ere sunrise. Till then God keep ye.

"Written in great haste this eve of St. Withold by the hand of him who would remain ever yours,

"ROGER COURTENAY."

Catharine's wild excitement on the perusal of this missive can be more readily imagined than described.

"He is alive! He comes to my rescue!" she exclaimed. "Perchance it was even Roger himself disguised as the pedlar. He was ever one to venture a bold deed. Alack! that I should have been so near, and not have known him!"

She did not dare to confide her secret even to her faithful maid, Anne, but retiring as usual at nightfall she lay awake, waiting in burning anxiety for the earliest peep of dawn. When the first faint glimmer of light stole into her room she rose and crept softly down the stairs. She was obliged to make her way through the great hall, where the men-at-arms lay sleeping on the rushes. A dog sprang up and growled, but she managed to quiet it with a caress, and passed on without disturbing the sleepers. The little west postern door was heavily barred, and it took all the strength of her white hands to pull back the bolts. Cautiously she peered out into the half-darkness. At the same moment a tall figure stepped from the shadow and clasped her in his arms.

"Sweet, you must fly! This is no place for ye now," whispered Roger. "Diccon waits with a trusty steed to conduct ye to Covebury. Take sanctuary at the convent of the Franciscans till I come to claim ye. I have stern work to do here."

Wrapping her hastily in a cloak, and helping her to mount, Roger waited till he judged the fugitives to be at a safe distance; then, giving the word of command to his followers, he commenced his attack on the Manor. Sir Mervyn and his retainers, surprised in their sleep, nevertheless offered a determined resistance. A fierce combat was waged in the great hall and in the courtyard, till, pressed from one point of vantage to another, the defenders made a desperate sally, and rushing helter-skelter down the village sought refuge inside the ancient church. It was of no avail; the villagers, hastily armed with swords and pikes, had joined in the fray. Determined to avenge themselves upon Sir Mervyn for his many acts of tyranny and injustice, they set upon him without mercy, and without respect even for the sacredness of the edifice. Chased from the choir to the Lady Chapel, and from the Lady Chapel to the tower, he fled up the narrow steps to the belfry, where he turned at bay, and held the staircase with the courage of despair. Driven from this last standpoint, he climbed yet higher to the rafters where hung the bell, and slew six men in succession before he fell, at length, shouting curses upon his foes.

Roger Courtenay had scant time to enjoy his triumph. The Yorkist army was mustering for a great struggle; so, having left a small garrison in charge of the Manor, he rode away immediately with the rest of his followers to join the adherents of the White Rose. The result of the battle of Tewkesbury is a matter of history. The unfortunate remnant of Lancaster took to flight, and York gained a final and triumphant victory. Roger, whose bravery was conspicuous throughout the day, worthily won his spurs, and was knighted on the field by Richard of Gloucester. His forfeited estate was restored to him, and King Edward himself forwarded his union with Catharine Mowbray, so that before the summer was over the ancient parish church of Haversleigh, which but lately had rung to the clash of arms, now echoed instead to the merry peal of wedding bells.

CHAPTER XI

Sir Mervyn's Tower

"Is that all?" asked the girls, as Monica finished her story and closed the book.

"Why, yes. It's a fairly long tale, I think."

"Not long enough. I want to know so much more about them," said Irene.

"Is it perfectly and absolutely true?" enquired Cicely.

"Yes, it is quite true. It was Sir Roger Courtenay who began to build the Manor as it stands to-day. All the central portion was put up in his time, and the coats of arms over the porch are those of himself and his wife, Catharine Mowbray. Their tomb is in the church too--that big carved monument in the side chapel. They had seven children--five sons and two daughters. The eldest son, Sir Godfrey Courtenay, married a relation of Sir Thomas More. Her name is mentioned in one of the Paston Letters."

"Was it really in Haversleigh Church that Sir Mervyn climbed into the belfry and was killed?"

"Or did the writer make that up?"

"No, that is true too," replied Monica. "The tower is still called 'Sir Mervyn's Tower', and it is said there is the stain of his blood on the great bell, and that nothing can ever take it off."

"Have you seen it?"

"Yes, once. It's only a patch of rust."

"Was Sir Mervyn buried in the church too?"

"There's no monument to him, and no record in the old church documents of his grave. I should think it was much more likely that his followers were allowed to carry him to his own estate near Appleford, and bury him in the church there. The story runs that his ghost haunts Haversleigh Tower and walks up the belfry stairs, but of course that's nothing but superstition and nonsense."

"Don't you believe in ghosts?" asked Cicely, who was sometimes a little afraid of the dark passages at the Manor.

"No: when people are dead, I think if they were good they are either resting until the resurrection, or have something so much better and nobler to do in another world that they could not revisit this, any more than a butterfly could turn again into a chrysalis; and if they were bad, I am sure they would not be allowed to come back simply to terrify the living."

"Quite right," agreed Mildred. "In most of the stories one reads about ghosts, they never return for any useful purpose, only to make silly people run and scream."

"There was one thing that didn't seem perfectly clear in the story," said Lindsay. "Was it really Roger who came to the Manor disguised as an old pedlar?"

"Evidently it was. He couldn't trust anyone else to give the letter to Catharine, and he wanted to see for himself how Sir Mervyn was prepared to defend the Manor. There is still part of a ruin left of the old Franciscan Convent near Covebury, where Catharine took sanctuary. It's not much though--only a few pillars and a tumble-down wall."

"Why didn't she go to the Convent of St. Agatha at Torton? It was so much nearer to ride."

"Because the nuns there wished to persuade her to take the veil, and she wanted to marry Roger."

"Were they very angry with her?"

"How can I tell, Cicely? You must ask the writer of the romance; he has a better imagination than I have. I wonder if Miss Russell has come back yet? I'm going indoors to see. By the by, I want to ask a favour. I practise the organ every Wednesday evening at the church, and to-night Judson, the old clerk, will be too busy to blow for me as usual. Would anybody be charitable enough to volunteer? And would Miss Russell allow it, do you think?"

"I expect Miss Russell wouldn't mind," said Mildred. "I'd go with pleasure if I could, but I have an hour's practising to do myself to-night, as well as preparation, and so have Irene and Mary."

"Oh, Monica, could we blow the organ?" cried Lindsay. "Cicely and I have both finished our practising, and if we were to learn our French at once, before tea, I believe Miss Frazer could be persuaded to excuse us from prep. We'd simply love to come."

"Thank you, Lindsay. I'll ask Miss Russell. If she says 'Yes', will you meet me at the church at seven?"

Miss Russell was lenient enough to give the required permission, having ascertained that all lessons for next day were duly prepared; so Lindsay and Cicely, much envied by the rest of their class, betook themselves with zeal to try their 'prentice hands at the task of organ blowing. The church was open, and Monica was already waiting for them in the porch. She soon showed them how to work the bellows, and after telling them to stop and rest as soon as they were tired, seated herself at the keyboard and began her practice. Both the younger girls felt it a decidedly novel and interesting experience to be in the little space behind the pipes, working away at a long handle. As they took it in turns they were able to keep the organ going fairly steadily, and only once left Monica without wind in the middle of a piece. As a reward she allowed them to try the instrument before she locked it up, showing them the various stops and pedals, and how they were to be used.

"It's much more difficult than the piano," sighed Cicely, after a rather unsuccessful attempt, "and yet it's simply grand to hear the lovely big notes sounding through the church. I should like to learn myself sometime when I'm older."

"Saint Cecilia was the patroness of music, and is always represented playing the organ, so you might very well justify your name by following in her footsteps," said Monica. "Now I simply must go, because my mother will be wanting me. I've been far longer than usual to-night."

"It's our fault, I'm afraid," said Lindsay. "We kept making you pull out the stops."

"No, you were dears to come. Perhaps Miss Russell will let you blow for me some other evening; then we'll start earlier, and I shall have time to let you both try again."

They had passed under the old yew trees of the churchyard and out through the lich-gate into the road, when Monica suddenly looked over her music and exclaimed:

"How stupid! I've left my little copy of *Lux Benigna* behind. It doesn't really matter much, only I don't care to get my pieces mixed up with the organist's, and he will be there at a choir practice to-morrow."

"Shall we go back?" suggested Cicely.

"No, I'm in too great a hurry. I want to get home at once."

"Then we'll fetch it for you," said Lindsay.

"Oh, thanks so much! Will you take it to school, please, and give it to me to-morrow, so that I needn't wait now? Good-bye!" and Monica hastened away as fast as possible in the direction of the cottage.

Lindsay and Cicely walked leisurely into the church again, and found the missing piece of music lying on a seat near the organ. They were returning down the aisle when Cicely said:

"Which is the tomb of Sir Roger Courtenay and Catharine Mowbray?"

"Monica said it was the one in the small side chapel," replied Lindsay. "Shall we go and look at it?"

What an old monument it was! Four centuries had passed away since it was placed over those who slept beneath. The carving was chipped and the marble scratched; part of Sir Roger's head was broken away, and one of poor Dame Catharine's clasped hands; and the letters of the inscription were so worn and effaced that it was with difficulty the girls could make out even a few words.

"It's in Latin, so we couldn't have understood it in any case," said Lindsay.

"How funny her costume is!" said Cicely. "She has a coif on her head, and very long sleeves; and he is in full armour. It makes them seem much more real people when we know their story."

"Can you imagine them living at the Manor?"

"I can hardly believe there was ever a fight going on inside this church."

"And people killing one another!"

"I suppose Sir Mervyn ran through this door up into the tower."

"I wonder if the stain is still on the bell?" said Lindsay.

"The story was that nothing could ever take it off."

"Shall we go up and see if it's really there?"

"What! Up into the belfry?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well, isn't it getting too late, and a little dark?"

"Not yet."

"All right, then," assented Cicely, agreeing as usual with Lindsay's proposal.

The small, nail-studded oak door leading to the tower stood open, and they could see that there was a winding staircase inside. There was nobody to forbid them to explore, and though they knew they were due back at the Manor they considered they might allow themselves a little latitude in the way of time. It was rather dark up the corkscrew stairs, though there was a slit every now and then in the wall to admit air and light. At the top they found themselves in a square room, where the clerk evidently pulled the bell on Sundays, for the rope was hanging within easy reach. The roof was made of enormous oak rafters, and through it ran a ladder reaching higher than they could see.

"That will be the way up to the bell," said Lindsay.

"What a horrible place for Sir Mervyn to climb!" commented Cicely. "I can imagine him rushing up with a dagger in his hand, and the others swarming after him. I'm almost sorry they killed him. He was very brave, although he was so bad. You go first, Lindsay."

Up and up they toiled, till they thought they should never reach the top.

"The bell's hung very high," panted Cicely.

"We're nearly there now," replied Lindsay.

The ladder ended in a rough platform which was built round the bell, probably to allow workmen to attend to it now and then in case it were not hanging safely. It looked a great mass of metal, so large and heavy that even the clapper must be an enormous weight.

"There's a very queer mark on it here," said Cicely, in rather an awed voice.

Lindsay walked round to the other side of the platform. There was a most curious stain running along a portion of the bottom of the bell—a dull, irregular mark that might well have had its origin in some dark and dreadful deed. Cicely touched it cautiously, and then looked at her finger as if she expected to find the traces red on her hand.

"I think we'd better go down again," she said, with a shiver.

"All right, only I want to look out of the window first. Oh, what a glorious view!"

There was indeed a splendid prospect to be seen from the old church tower—a vista of village roofs, and tree tops, and fields, and winding high road, and distant woods and hills, all bathed in the beautiful, rosy light of sunset. It was so lovely that the girls stood for some time watching the sky turn from pink to crimson, and great bands of dappled clouds catch the reflection from the glow beneath. They quite forgot that supper would probably be over at the Manor, and that Miss Russell would be wondering why Monica had kept them so long, and wishing she had not allowed them to go without Miss Frazer or one of the monitresses to escort them back.

At last they tore themselves reluctantly away. It was much harder to come down the ladder than it had been to climb up. Cicely turned quite giddy, and they were both glad when they reached the square room where the bell rope was hanging. It was very dark on the winding staircase; they had to feel their steps most carefully, and keep a hand on the wall as they went. The church looked dim and gloomy as they found themselves once more in the nave. Cicely turned her back upon the monuments. She did not want to give even a glance in their direction just then. Perhaps Lindsay felt the same, for she also hurried quickly towards the door. To their utter amazement it was closed, shut tight and firm; and though they lifted the latch, and tugged and rattled and pulled with all their might, they could not open it. They stared at each other with blank, horror-stricken faces. They were locked up alone in the empty church!

"Let us call," quavered Cicely.

"Perhaps someone may be in the churchyard. I can't believe they've really left us shut up here. Somebody must be coming back," said Lindsay.

She knew in her heart of hearts all the same that it was a forlorn hope. The old sexton had probably seen Monica walk through the village, and had come to lock the church as usual after her practice, quite unaware that anyone was exploring the belfry. By this time he would be at home again, with the keys in his pocket. The two girls shouted themselves hoarse, and kicked and beat against the door, but there was no reply except hollow echoes that resounded from the vaulted roof. The church was just out of earshot from either the village on one side or the rectory on the other, and it did not seem likely that anybody would happen to pass through the churchyard at that hour in the evening. No doubt they would soon be missed at the Manor, but Miss Russell would be sure to go first to Monica to enquire about their absence, and it might therefore be some little time before anyone came to look for them inside the church.

"What are we going to do?" asked Cicely.

"We must get out somehow," replied Lindsay desperately. "Let us walk all round, and see if there is any window it would be possible to climb through."

They went up the aisle, looking carefully at the windows; but all were equally impracticable, being built high up in the walls, and the only panes that opened were at the top.

"There may be a lower one in the vestry," said Lindsay, after they had examined the side chapels and transepts. "Here's the door, and fortunately it's not locked."

Again they were doomed to disappointment. The vestry was one of the oldest portions of the building, and the tiny diamond-paned casement was fully ten feet above their heads. Plainly it was useless to think of escape there.

"We'd better go back to the door," said Cicely, "just in case anyone should be coming down the road, and might hear us."

The light was rapidly growing dimmer and dimmer, the pillars cast long shadows, and the corners were already wrapt in darkness, through which here and there a figure on a monument stood out white against the gloomy background. Once more the girls thumped at the door and shouted, though they feared it would be of no avail.

"There's only one thing left to be done, Cicely," said Lindsay at last.

"And what's that?"

"Go up into the belfry again and ring the bell. Everybody in the village would hear that, and Judson would come to see what was the matter."

"Yes," replied Cicely with some hesitation, "I suppose we must--but----"

"But what?"

"We should have to walk up the belfry stairs."

"Well?"

"Oh, Lindsay, Sir Mervyn! Suppose we were to meet him on the staircase? The village people say he walks!"

"And Monica said it was nothing but nonsense and superstition."

Lindsay tried to sound brave, but she held Cicely's arm tightly notwithstanding.

Poor Cicely felt "twixt Scylla and Charybdis". To toll the bell seemed their only chance of escape, and to do so they must certainly mount into the square room where the rope was hanging. On the one hand was the prospect of spending some time in a building which was rapidly growing darker and darker, and on the other, there was a quick dash up the winding staircase, which was the centre of all her nervous fears.

"We must do it," urged Lindsay. "Come along! Let us go now, before you think about it any more."

It was very dark when they went through the small door and began groping their way up the narrow steps. There was not room for both to walk abreast, so Lindsay went first and Cicely clung tightly on to her skirt behind, ready to turn and flee precipitately if she heard the slightest sound from above. The stairs seemed twice as long as when they had mounted them before, and far narrower and steeper.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Lindsay, when at last they found their feet on the flooring of the tower room. There was just

light enough to faintly distinguish objects, and they were making straight for the bell rope when Cicely grasped Lindsay's arm in a panic of fear.

"What's that noise?" she whispered breathlessly.

"Where?"

"There! Up the ladder in the roof!"

Both girls listened, their hearts beating in great thumps. Cicely was not mistaken. There was a faint rustling, as if someone were moving softly about in the tower above. Too terrified even to run away, they stood with their eyes fixed on the open trapdoor that led up to the bell.

"He's coming!" shrieked Cicely, as something large and white appeared silently through the aperture and glided down into the room. There was a sudden weird, uncanny cry, like a mournful, despairing wail, and a large pair of wings flapped through the open lattice that served for a window out into the thickness of the yew trees beyond.

"It's an owl--a big white owl! That's your ghost, Cicely!" cried Lindsay, with intense relief.

"It's gone, at any rate. Oh, what a fright it gave me! I thought it was Sir Mervyn himself."

"I expect it sleeps up there during the day, and then goes out hunting at night for birds and mice. What a fearful screech it gave!"

"Let us go and ring the bell before we have any more scares."

They dashed across the room and seized the rope. Surely since the day it was first hung the poor old bell had never been tolled with such frantic, hurried jerks. It was like an alarm of war or fire as the swift, short strokes went echoing from the tower. The girls pulled and pulled until they were both nearly exhausted.

"Somebody must have heard us by this time," said Lindsay. "Let us go down into the church and wait by the door."

"I don't feel so afraid of Sir Mervyn now I know he's only a white owl," declared Cicely.

They stumbled down the stairs and across the dark nave, then stood waiting anxiously for some sign of coming relief. Was that a distant footstep? Yes; they heard the creaking of the lich-gate, the sound of voices, and the crunching of boots on the gravel path. They sprang at the door, knocking and shouting for help with all their might. In another moment the great key turned in the lock. It was Judson, the sexton, who stood outside, with quite a number of people from the cottages behind him. All the village had been roused by the tolling of the bell, and everyone expected to find either a gang of thieves at work or the building on fire, instead of only two frightened little schoolgirls from the Manor.

At that moment both Miss Russell and Monica came hurrying up, the latter reproaching herself keenly for not having seen her companions safely home, and the former very angry at their escapade. As Lindsay had supposed, they had been expected back more than an hour ago, but Miss Russell thought Monica must have had an unusually long practice. When their bedtime arrived, and still they were missing, the headmistress had grown uneasy, and started in search of them. She had gone first to the church and found the door locked (it must have been while they were in the vestry), so concluded that they had returned with Monica to the cottage. She had been seriously alarmed to find they were not there, and her anxiety was shared by the Courtenays; and both she and Monica were on the point of rousing the whole village to aid in discovering their whereabouts when the sudden clanging of the bell made them hasten to the church. The girls gave a brief account of their adventure in reply to the many enquiries of their rescuers.

"I thought I could have trusted you to return straight home," said Miss Russell reproachfully. "No, Monica, it is not in any way your fault. Lindsay and Cicely knew perfectly well they had no right to linger behind, nor to enter the tower. I am disappointed in them, for I certainly should not have allowed them to go and blow the organ if I had believed there was the slightest opportunity for such behaviour. They have only themselves to blame, and I consider they thoroughly deserved the fright they have had."

CHAPTER XII

An Enigma

Though most of the delights of the summer term at the Manor consisted of outdoor amusements, other interests were not entirely lacking. In a magazine which Miss Russell took in for the school library there was an announcement of a competition which offered a prize to children under thirteen for the largest number of poetical quotations descriptive of wild flowers. Both Lindsay and Cicely were anxious to try, and ransacked all the volumes of poetry they could get hold of for suitable extracts.

"I think it's too much bother," said Nora Proctor. "It means looking through such a heap of books, and then copying out the pieces so neatly afterwards. It would take one's whole recreation time."

"And probably one wouldn't get anything for it in the end," said Marjorie Butler.

"I began," said Effie Hargreaves, "but, as Nora says, it's far too great a fag. I got ten quotations from Shakespeare, and six from Tennyson. I'll give them to you, Cicely, if you like."

"Oh, thanks, if they're not the same as I have already!"

"I tried for a prize once in a magazine," said Beryl Austen, "but I only got highly commended. I'm afraid my writing wasn't good enough."

Though the other girls did not care to compete themselves, they were interested in Lindsay's and Cicely's lists, and gave them any assistance they could in hunting out fresh quotations.

"I'll tell you what," said Beryl, "you ought to ask Monica. She reads a great deal, and I believe she's rather clever at botany. I heard her talking about the wild flowers of the neighbourhood to Miss Russell."

"Yes, I believe she has a nice pressed collection," said Effie. "She promised to show it to us some day."

Lindsay and Cicely took Beryl's advice, and waylaid Monica as she came to the French class next morning.

"I'm glad you asked me," she replied. "I've no doubt I shall be able to help you; I have a good many beautiful books on botany in the library. I'll bring the key this afternoon, and unlock the case for you."

Monica always kept her promises. She arrived about four o'clock, and opened the large glass doors that preserved the handsome calf-bound volumes from dust and dirt.

"Here they are," she said. "Some are very dry and scientific, and some are popular, and have coloured pictures. There are catalogues of plants, and schedules of species, and old herbals, and every kind of book you can imagine that has a bearing on the subject. Some are about British flowers and some about foreign ones, and there are others on mosses and ferns and fungi. They used to belong to my uncle; he was extremely fond of botany."

"Have you read them all?" asked Cicely.

"No, I'm afraid I have rather neglected them. You see, I have had so many lessons to learn. One can't study everything at once, and Mother particularly wants me to work hard at French. Perhaps some day I may attack the natural orders. It will take you a long time to look through every one of these books. I'll leave the case unlocked, so that you can get them out when you like. I know I can trust you not to spoil the covers, and to put each back in its proper place."

"We'll be very, very careful of them," Lindsay assured her. "We won't carry them into the garden. We'll sit and read them here at the table."

"That will be all right, then," said Monica. "I feel they are rather a particular charge, because they were left to me as a special legacy. I believe my uncle valued them more than anything else in the world. I often think I don't appreciate them as much as I ought."

As Monica had said, it took considerable labour to thoroughly examine all the books and search for extracts. Some merely contained long lists of Latin names, and others were far too learned and scientific to interest schoolgirls. A few, however, treated the subject from its romantic side, and quoted passages of poetry such as they wanted. Miss Russell, who had encouraged them to try for the prize, gave them permission to use the library when they pleased; so for the next few days they spent most of their spare time there.

It was a pleasant occupation, and one that seemed to bring them into touch with the old poets who had loved Nature

so dearly, and sung so charmingly about her blossoms. It was quite wonderful to think that nearly six hundred years ago Chaucer had noticed and recorded the little golden heart and white crown of the daisy; and that King James I of Scotland, while pining as Henry IV's prisoner in Windsor Castle, could remember and write of--

"The sharpe, greene, sweete juniper,
Growing so fair with branches here and there".

The competition proved most interesting, and, as it happened, was to be connected with unforeseen occurrences.

One afternoon, Cicely, who was trying to work her way systematically along the shelves, brought down a thick, bulky volume, bound in brown leather, with metal corners, and entitled *Floral Calendar*.

"This must be an old one," she remarked. "Look how yellow the paper is, and there are actually long S's. Someone has scribbled notes all round the edges of the pages."

"I wonder if it was Sir Giles Courtenay?" said Lindsay.

Cicely turned to the flyleaf at the beginning. Yes, in exactly the same rather straggling hand was the inscription:

"GILES PEMBERTON COURTENAY,
HAVERSLEIGH MANOR,
SOMERSET."

"He seems to have been fond of writing in his books," said Lindsay. "What's this opposite his name?"

On the inside of the cover quite a long piece of poetry had been copied. It appeared to be something in the nature of an acrostic or charade, and it ran thus:--

ENIGMA

My *First*, among flowers you can't find a better,
'T was used by a king for securing a letter.
My *Second*, whose blossoms of yellow soon fade,
Comes out every night in the calm evening shade.
My *Third*, oft called Iris, is much in demand,
It grows on an island named Van Diemen's Land.
My *Fourth*, a wild flower with sweet golden eye,
Is more blessing than "torment" to all who pass by.
My *Fifth*, with great trusses of lavender hue,
Is the sweetest of shrubs that the spring brings to view.
My *Sixth*, an old blossom in medicine once famed,
Was good for the eyesight, and thus it was named.
Now if you have guessed all these flowers that I prize,
Please take my initials and finals likewise:
The former you'll find to be hiding the latter;
If you've solved the enigma you'll see 'tis a matter
Perchance may provide you with just a lost link,
And bring you a greater reward than you think.

G. P. C.

Both Lindsay and Cicely were particularly fond of any kind of riddle. They seized upon this floral enigma with delight, and began to puzzle it out with the help of the illustrated catalogue of plants given in the old volume.

"How funny of Sir Giles Courtenay to have written it inside a botany book!" said Cicely.

"I suppose he was quite mad," replied Lindsay.

"He must have made it up himself, as it's signed with his initials," continued Cicely. "It was rather clever of him, wasn't it?--especially if he was mad. I'm sure I couldn't invent verses, however hard I tried."

"My *First*, used by a king for securing a letter', is evidently 'Solomon's Seal'," said Lindsay. "Give me that spare piece of paper, and I'll put it down."

"My *Second*' must be 'Evening Primrose'," said Cicely. "I can't think of any other yellow flower that comes out at night."

The third for a long time baffled the efforts of both girls to discover it. They searched through the lists of wild and garden flowers in vain.

"Irises are sometimes called 'flags'," ventured Cicely at last, turning to the page of 'F' in the index. "Why, here are quite a number. There are Asiatic flag, and corn flag, and dwarf flag, and Florentine flag, and German flag. Oh! and a heap more, too--golden flag, and Iberian flag, and Japanese, and Persian, and Missouri, and Tasmanian."

"That's the one!" said Lindsay. "Van Diemen's Land is the old name for Tasmania. 'My *Third*' must be Tasmanian flag."

"Why, of course. We're getting on, aren't we?"

The fourth, as it was stated to be a wild flower, was sought for in the list at the end of *British Flora*. It did not take a very large amount of penetration to fix it as 'tormentilla', especially as they could identify its golden eye in the coloured picture.

"The great trusses of lavender hue, growing on a shrub in spring, will mean lilac. I'm getting quite proud of our guessing," declared Lindsay.

"We've only one more left now," said Cicely.

The last proved the most difficult of all. I doubt if they would have been able to solve it, had not Lindsay chanced to take down an ancient herbal, and found a list of plants once employed for medicine.

"Amid all herbes that do grow, and are of greatest comfort and solace to mankind," so ran the passage, "a foremost place hath the euphrasy. Though it be but an humble plant scarce an inch in height, yet it maketh an ointment very precious for to cure dimness of sight. Thence it hath been called in the vulgar tongue 'eye-bright', nevertheless its true name is euphrasy, and thus it is known among apothecaries."

"It must be right," said Lindsay. "It's the only one that is said to do any good to the eyesight. The others seem to be for toothaches or agues."

"Or to heal wounds or sores," said Cicely. "People must have been continually hurting themselves in those days, if they needed so many 'salves' and 'unguents'."

They had now discovered all the six flowers, and wrote the result neatly down on a piece of paper.

S olomon's Sea	L
E vening Primros	E
T asmanian Fla	G
T ormentill	A
L ila	C
E uphras	Y

"The initials read 'settle' and the finals 'legacy'," said Cicely. "How very queer! That hasn't anything to do with flowers."

"Let us look at the end lines again," said Lindsay, and she read aloud:

Please take my initials and finals likewise:
The former you'll find to be hiding the latter;
If you've solved the enigma you'll see 'tis a matter
Perchance may provide you with just a lost link,
And bring you a greater reward than you think.

"The initials hide the finals. 'Settle' hides 'Legacy'," repeated Cicely meditatively.

"Why, I see it now!" burst out Lindsay suddenly. "Oh, Cicely, I believe it means a great deal more than an ordinary riddle! It has something to do with the lost treasure. Don't you understand? The settle is hiding the legacy--Monica's legacy!"

"Oh, surely not!" exclaimed Cicely, bouncing up in great excitement.

"But I really think so. The poetry says the enigma is 'to provide the lost link' and 'bring a greater reward than you think'. This is indeed a discovery! It's evidently intended to tell Monica where her money is to be found."

"Can we be quite, quite certain?" hesitated Cicely.

"Well, everything seems to point to it. Don't you recollect Irene Spencer said that in old Sir Giles' will he left 'the Manor and all that it may contain to my great-niece Monica, especially commending to her the volumes in my library, and advising her to pursue the study of botany'? I remember those were the exact words. This must have been the reason. He had written the secret of the hiding-place inside the *Floral Calendar*, and he thought she would find it there. Perhaps he wasn't so very mad after all."

"I wonder if Monica has seen it and puzzled it out?"

"I don't know. She said she didn't often trouble about the books."

"Then is the treasure hidden inside some old settle in the house?"

"It seems likely."

"In that case we must be wrong about the lantern room."

"Perhaps we are. Well, at any rate this throws new light on the subject, and gives us a clue as to where to hunt. We'll go over the Manor again, and look carefully at every settle."

"I hope we're really on the right track at last," sighed Cicely. "What a glorious day it would be if we could actually say to Monica: 'Here's your fortune!'"



CHAPTER XIII

Lindsay Makes a Resolve

Lindsay and Cicely thought they understood what a settle was, but, to avoid the possibility of any mistake, they looked the word up in the dictionary. "Settle--a long bench, with high back, for sitting on," was the explanation given by that authority.

"So it 'settles' the matter," said Cicely, trying to make a pun.

"Well, it shows us it's not a chest, anyhow," replied Lindsay, "though the oak bench in the passage near the top of the stairs has a kind of box under it. The seat lifts up like a lid."

There were four pieces of old furniture in the Manor which might claim to answer to the description given in the dictionary. Two were in the dining-room, one in the picture gallery, and another, as Lindsay had said, at the head of the stairs. The girls made a most lengthy and careful inspection of them all, but without the slightest result. Neither their backs nor their seats were hollow, or capable of containing anything. Three of them stood upon carved oak legs, like chairs, and though the last was made in the fashion of a chest, it proved on investigation to be absolutely empty. It was a bitter disappointment.

"Can we have been mistaken about the enigma?" said Cicely, almost in tears.

"I don't believe so. What I think is, that Mrs. Wilson and Scott have been clever enough to find the money and carry it off. Perhaps there was another settle somewhere in the house, and they took it bodily away."

"Wouldn't Monica have missed it?"

"It may have been done just after Sir Giles died, and before she came to the Manor."

"Where would they put it?"

"Possibly in the lantern room, inside some hiding-place they know of."

"Then, until we can find out the secret of the lantern room, it seems to me we can't get any farther."

"And we don't even know that the treasure is still there, because it may be buried in the garden," groaned Lindsay.

The whole affair of the lost legacy was most aggravating and tantalizing. They seemed so continually on the point of unravelling the mystery, only to find themselves again defeated and baffled. Cicely was tempted to throw it up altogether in despair, but Lindsay had a native obstinacy of disposition that could not bear to be beaten.

"I shall go on trying as long as we're at Haversleigh, on that I'm entirely resolved," she declared. "I don't mean to give up until we're actually on our way to the station on breaking-up day."

"And that's only three weeks off now," said Cicely.

The summer term at the Manor had proved so enjoyable that the girls were not nearly so enthusiastic as usual for the advent of the holidays. Most of them felt a keen regret at leaving the beautiful old place, and bewailed the fact that the alterations at Winterburn Lodge were reported to be progressing favourably, and that the drains there would be in perfect order long before they need return in September.

"Couldn't we have school here always instead of in London?" they suggested hopefully to Miss Russell.

"No," said the headmistress; "there are many considerations which would make it impossible. Mrs. Courtenay and Monica will want to live in their own home again, and Haversleigh is too inconvenient a place for a permanency. We have managed wonderfully well for a few months with only Mademoiselle, but we certainly miss Herr Hoffmann's and Monsieur Guizet's classes, to say nothing of drawing and dancing lessons. Visiting masters cannot arrange to come so far away from town. There are no proper educational advantages to be had in the depths of the country."

"We shall be sorry when it comes to good-bye," declared the girls.

"We must make the most of our remaining time here then," said Miss Russell, "and try to see all we can in the neighbourhood before we go."

The mistress's birthday, falling on the following Wednesday, offered a propitious opportunity for an excursion such as she suggested. The girls were accustomed to celebrate the occasion with some little festivity, and were delighted when

it was arranged that they should visit the town of Appleford, about ten miles away.

"There is the Dripping Well to see, and a fine old church," said Miss Russell. "I am sure we shall be able to spend a very pleasant afternoon there. We must ask Monica to come with us."

There was some doubt at first as to whether Monica would be able to accept the invitation. She had missed her French lesson one day, and arrived at school late on the next, looking pale and upset. Mrs. Courtenay had been very ill, so she explained. The doctor had been sent for, and had given an unfavourable report. Naturally extra care and attention were needful, and who could give these so well as her own daughter?

On the day of the picnic Monica turned up with rather an anxious face.

"I scarcely like to leave Mother," she said, "but she wants me so much to have this treat that she would not rest content until she had seen me put on my hat and start off. Fortunately Jenny is a good nurse, and will look after her nicely. Still, I always feel uneasy when I am long away from her."

The girls were to drive the whole distance to Appleford, and the prospect was so exhilarating that everyone was at the high-water mark of enjoyment. Even poor Monica caught the prevailing spirit, and for the moment, at least, began to forget her cares. There was just room to pack both teachers and pupils into the four wagonettes which arrived from the George Inn, but nobody seemed to mind crushing, and even Mademoiselle was in a good temper.

"I smile because I shall again see shops and streets," she declared.

"I believe Mademoiselle will be delighted to go back to Winterburn Lodge," said Marjorie Butler, who was in another wagonette, but overheard the remark.

"Yes, I think she's absolutely yearning for pavements and lamp-posts," said Cicely. "She'll weep with joy at the sight of a tramcar. She says it is terribly 'triste' here."

"Mademoiselle is French," observed Effie Hargreaves scornfully.

"What a very original remark! You didn't suppose we took her for a German?"

"Well, I mean she's a foreigner at any rate, so we can't expect her to like the country," replied Effie, with true British prejudice.

There were several small excitements on the journey. Beryl's hat was blown by a sudden puff of wind over a bridge, and was in great peril of descending into the river when it was rescued by the driver; the door of the second wagonette burst suddenly open, and nearly precipitated Irene Spencer into the road; while the whole cavalcade was brought to a standstill at a narrow turning by finding a broken-down motor-car blocking up the way.

Appleford proved to be a delightfully quaint old country town, with twisting streets and black-and-white houses.

"I'm afraid Mademoiselle will be very disappointed with the fashions. She certainly won't find Paris modes here," laughed Marjorie Butler, looking at the one row of small shop windows that appeared to satisfy the wants of the population.

"I'm glad there's a confectioner's, anyhow," said Effie Hargreaves, who was burning to spend her pocket-money on chocolates.

"And a place for picture postcards," added Nora Proctor; "I can see a whole tray full of them standing outside that door."

The arrival of four wagonettes containing so many schoolgirls evidently caused quite an excitement in the usually quiet street. Heads were popped out of windows, shopkeepers came to their doors, and people began to collect at corners and stare.

"Almost as if we were a wild-beast show!" said Cicely.

"I believe they hope we're going to march in procession round the market square and sing, or play as a band," declared Nora Proctor.

"Come along, girls! I am afraid we are attracting too much attention," said Miss Russell. "Let us set off for the Dripping Well as fast as we can. You must make any purchases you want when we return; I cannot let you wait now."

Effie Hargreaves had already dived into the toffee shop, and issued with several paper packages in her hand; so she went on her way rejoicing that she had seized the opportunity while there was yet time. Fortunately for the others, she

was of a generous disposition, and ready to share her sweets.

"We'll pay you back when we get some of our own," said Marjorie Butler, blissfully sucking a caramel.

The Dripping Well was situated in a wood, about a mile from the town, and was, as the guide-book described it, "a most curious natural phenomenon". The water trickled slowly over a large rock, and was so charged with lime that it left a thin deposit over everything it touched. Articles hung up there, after a short time bore the appearance of having been turned to stone. All kinds of objects were suspended from the rock, in the process of being encrusted by the lime--top hats, boots, stockings, gloves, loaves of bread, and even bunches of flowers.

"It looks just as if the Gorgon had stared at them and petrified them with a glance," said Nora.

"I wonder, if we were hung up, should we turn solid too?" said Lindsay.

The caretaker of the well had many specimens to show them which he had polished, and was anxious to sell. There was quite a large collection in his cottage. The girls, after hastily conferring together, bought a stone bouquet as a birthday present for Miss Russell, an offering which she declared should grace the school museum when they returned to Winterburn Lodge.

"I thought she'd have put it in the drawing-room," said Beryl Austen, rather disappointed.

"Well, of course it is more of a curiosity than an ornament," said Mildred Roper. "It wouldn't have looked very beautiful decorating the mantel-piece, I'm afraid--not nearly so nice as a real bunch of flowers."

Close to the well was a cave in the cliff which a hermit had once used for his cell--a very picturesque spot to have chosen for his meditations, so the girls decided.

"But horribly damp; the poor man must have been racked with rheumatism," said Miss Frazer, who was of a practical mind.

"Perhaps, like Friar Tuck, he didn't often use it, and preferred to hunt venison in the woods," suggested Kathleen Crawford.

"No, he was a really devout hermit, who told his beads, and lived on bread and water," said Monica. "He dug his own grave in the rock about a hundred yards from here. You can see it still, though his bones have long ago been taken away for relics."

"I wonder if they petrified them first in the well," said Nora Proctor, "and how much they sold them for? There are more than two hundred bones in the human body, so a hermit ought to have been worth a good deal when he was properly divided."

"You naughty, irreverent girl!" said Monica.

Tea had been prepared at the old-fashioned inn in the market square. Afterwards they went to look through the church, where there were some fine examples of Gothic carving, and several beautiful stained-glass windows. One in particular, which Monica pointed out, was in memory of a member of the Courtenay family. There was a chained Bible, besides a black-letter Prayer Book, a pair of tongs for turning dogs out of church, and several other curiosities shown by the old verger; so time passed rapidly, and everyone was quite surprised when Miss Russell looked at her watch, and announced that they must be returning home.

"Will someone fetch Monica? I believe she is in the churchyard with the Rector's wife," she said.

Lindsay and Cicely volunteered to go, and found their friend under a big yew tree, engaged in talking to a lady who was evidently making enquiries about Mrs. Courtenay. Not liking to intrude and interrupt the conversation, they stood waiting until they should be noticed.

"The doctor was over yesterday," Monica was saying, with a choke in her voice. "He told me our only chance is to send to London for Sir William Garrett. And how can we? His fee is a hundred guineas."

"That is a heavy amount."

"Impossible for us. You know how gladly I would sell even the Manor to raise the money, but I cannot touch a penny of my property until I come of age, and that won't be for more than four years. I try not to blame Uncle Giles, yet sometimes----"

Here Monica broke down altogether, and wiped her eyes.

"You mustn't give up hope, my dear child," said the Rector's wife kindly. "Perhaps your mother may be spared to you after all. Strange things come to pass sometimes, and good can often result from evil."

"I wish I could believe so," sobbed Monica. "I don't care in the least about the fortune for myself; I only want it when I think of what it might do for her!"

"Cicely!" said Lindsay solemnly the next morning, as she tied her hair ribbon before the looking-glass, "we simply must have another try to find that treasure."

Cicely paused with her brush in her hand.

"It's dreadful that Mrs. Courtenay may die because they can't scrape together a hundred guineas," she agreed.

"And Monica is breaking her heart over it," continued Lindsay. "She goes about looking so unhappy, it makes me quite miserable too. I'd give everything in the world I have to help her."

"I don't know where we're to hunt next. We seem to have explored every corner, and we never have any luck."

Cicely's voice sounded utterly despondent.

"We can only go to the lantern room again. It's the one place where we're sure there's a secret. If Merle could discover something there, why shouldn't we?"

It appeared a forlorn hope, but anything was better than just sitting down and making no effort at all. Monica's troubles weighed much on Lindsay's mind. The idea that the invalid must slip out of life for lack of the money that might save her seemed too cruel to be endured.

"I wish I had a hundred guineas of my own to give them," she thought sorrowfully. "Oh dear! it's such a big sum—one might as well wish for the moon. I'm afraid there's not the slightest chance for poor Mrs. Courtenay unless the legacy turns up."

It was in rather a dejected mood that the girls betook themselves to the upper landing that afternoon, and once more climbed the now familiar winding staircase. The lantern room looked exactly the same as on their two former visits. There was nothing in it to excite interest or arouse curiosity. A more unromantic chamber could not be conceived.

The window was closed, the rusty firegrate contained only a few ashes, and the door of the cupboard stood open, revealing rows of empty shelves. The one object worthy of notice was the ancient lantern, which hung from a hook in the middle of the ceiling. That, at any rate, was curious. It was of a quaint, medieval pattern, and the sides, instead of being of glass, were of thin pieces of horn.

"It's a funny old thing," said Lindsay. "I suppose they used a dip candle for it. I wonder if there's a piece left in it still?"

She stood on tiptoe, and made an effort to open the lantern, but it was hung too high to allow her to peep inside. Reaching up as best she could, she gave it a jerk, to try to lift it down. Quite suddenly and unexpectedly the lantern and hook descended by a chain from the ceiling. There was a strange grating sound, and, turning round, the girls saw a sight which made them gasp with amazement.

CHAPTER XIV

The Lantern Room



THE SECRET DOOR

Lindsay and Cicely might well cry out with surprise. A most peculiar thing had happened. A part of the back of the cupboard had opened like a door, revealing a narrow passage behind. Here at last was the hiding-place for which they had sought so long in vain.

They had never suspected the cupboard. It looked so ordinary, with its rows of shelves, that no one would have dreamt it concealed a secret exit. By a clever arrangement the lantern evidently worked a spring, and when pulled down caused the door to unclose automatically. Somebody in days gone by had no doubt constructed it thus to form a refuge in time of danger. The girls were in raptures of delight.

"This, of course, was where Mrs. Wilson vanished," said Lindsay.

"And what Merle saw," added Cicely.

It was an intense satisfaction to have found it out for themselves, especially when they had come upstairs with such small expectation of success. Where did the passage lead? That was naturally the first question they asked each other.

"It looks very dark," said Cicely, peering rather nervously into the opening.

"I wish we had a candle," said Lindsay. "There isn't even an end left inside the lantern, and we've no matches either."

"Shall I go downstairs and fetch some?" suggested Cicely.

"No, no! You might meet 'The Griffin' on the way. We'd better explore now, as quickly as we can, while the coast is clear."

It needed a little screwing up of courage to plunge into the dim obscurity before them. Lindsay went first, with Cicely clinging particularly closely on to her arm behind. The passage seemed to lead along the inside of the wall for about two yards, then took a sharp turn, and ended at the foot of a kind of ladder stairway.

One gleam of light fell from above, as if through some small chink in the roof, just sufficient to allow them to distinguish their surroundings and enable them to scramble up the rough steps. At the top they found themselves in a huge garret, how big they could not tell, for the corners were completely lost in black nothingness. The floor was thick with dust (such old dust!), and was so worm-eaten and rotten that it felt quite soft and crumbling under their feet.

They were close beneath the tiles, to judge from the rafters overhead. The air was hot and stifling, and had that stale, mouldy smell noticeable in places long shut up. They began to walk cautiously along, peering on all sides as their eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness.

"It's just the place for them to have put the treasure," said Cicely.

"If we only had a light!" sighed Lindsay. "I want to go nearer the wall, and see if I can find any heaps of money or silver tankards."

She groped her way a little more boldly across the room, and, putting out her foot, began to feel about.

"Do be careful!" begged Cicely.

It was a most necessary warning. The ancient, rotten boards could not stand the strain of Lindsay's weight, and down went her leg, making a great hole in the floor. Luckily she was not seriously hurt, only scratched and considerably frightened. With Cicely's help she managed to extricate herself, and withdrew to the safer middle of the garret.

"The old house must be almost ready to tumble down," she declared.

"Monica said parts of the Manor were very much out of repair," replied Cicely. "Besides, if this is a secret place, no one could ever come up to mend it."

"I wonder where my leg went to?" said Lindsay.

"Perhaps into some room below."

"In that case Mrs. Wilson will notice a hole in the ceiling, and will know somebody has been up here."

It was not an encouraging incident, but they were determined to venture farther all the same.

"We couldn't think of turning back now," said Lindsay.

At the far end of the room there was a door that seemed to lead into an attic even darker than the first.

"It's not much use going in there without a light," said Cicely.

"Just a few steps," said Lindsay.

She entered, and put up her hand to feel the height of the roof above. Instantly there was a tremendous rushing sound around them. The air seemed filled with flapping, shadowy forms, which brushed lightly against their cheeks. In an agony of fear poor Cicely shrieked and shrieked again, and clung to Lindsay desperately, as to the one substantial and human thing in the midst of what was horrible and unknown.

"All right, they're only bats," gasped Lindsay, in a rather quavering voice. "We've disturbed them, I expect."

Slightly reassured, Cicely dared to raise her head from her friend's shoulder and look round. They were surrounded by the fluttering wings of the bats. These little denizens of the darkness must have been hanging in numbers from the ceiling, and Lindsay's entrance had disturbed them. With strange squeaks and hisses they flitted to and fro for a few moments, then flew off to seek some safer retreat.

"I hope they've really gone," said Cicely, heaving a sigh of relief. "Don't go any farther in there, Lindsay. You can't see

an inch before your face."

"But it may be the one important place," said Lindsay, yielding reluctantly as Cicely pulled her back into the outer garret. "I'd exchange all my next birthday presents for a candle."

"Hush! I want to listen. I thought I heard something."

"What?"

"A kind of rustling."

"I expect it was the bats, or a rat."

Cicely gave an apprehensive glance behind. Her nerves were not so strong as Lindsay's. Though she had had time to grow accustomed to scratchings inside the wainscots at the Manor, she could not overcome her dread of rats. Perhaps Lindsay was less valiant in her heart of hearts than she would have liked to confess. After all, it was little satisfaction to explore a room where she could see nothing.

She was just deciding to go, when Cicely once more clutched her arm.

"Oh, what is it?"

The exclamation burst simultaneously from the lips of the two girls. Close, almost, as it seemed, in their ears, echoed that horrible low groan which had so terrified them twice before. Heard amidst such strange and dim surroundings, it was more than flesh and blood could stand. Without waiting to make any further investigations, they turned and fled.

They hardly knew afterwards how they had stumbled across the rotten floor and scrambled down the ladder. With blinking eyes they looked into each other's scared faces as they emerged from the dark passage into the bright daylight of the lantern room again.

"What a dreadful place!" shuddered Cicely. "I'm thankful we've got safely away from it. I don't believe I'd venture up there again for all the fortunes in the world."

"We must close the entrance," said Lindsay anxiously. "We must take care to leave everything as we found it."

The secret door shut with a spring, and in a moment there was nothing to be seen again but the innocent-looking cupboard. The lantern had ascended to its former place in the ceiling; the chain worked on a pulley, and, as it ran up or down, it fastened or unloosed the lock.

Cicely, at any rate, was not sorry to descend to the more civilized portions of the house.

"I wonder if Merle explored as far as we did," she said.

"I hardly think so," returned Lindsay. "She couldn't have had time. I believe she must have met 'The Griffin' coming out, and have been frightened into not telling."

The more the girls talked the matter over, the more complicated seemed the mystery. Though they had found Mrs. Wilson's hiding-place, they were no nearer ascertaining whether the treasure was concealed there or elsewhere. Out in the sunshine Lindsay's courage returned, and she began to reproach herself for having given up the search so soon.

"We'll go some other day, and take two candles and a box of matches with us," she announced.

"Is it really any good?"

Cicely's spirit quailed at the prospect of once more encountering the unknown horrors that might be lurking in that dark attic. She could not forget the groans she had heard there.

"Of course it is! I didn't think you'd be the one to draw back," said Lindsay reproachfully. "We've both pledged ourselves to do everything in our power to help Monica. It would be mean and cowardly to give in just because we felt afraid. If you don't care to come with me, I shall have to go alone. I'm only waiting for a good opportunity."

For several days the opportunity tarried. Mrs. Wilson was too often about the passages to make the expedition safe. On one occasion Cicely went to act scout, but found the housemaid sweeping the top landing, and had to beat a hasty retreat.

They were not able to discover where Lindsay's leg had descended so suddenly through the rotten floor, or whether any of the ceilings in the upper rooms had suffered in consequence. If Mrs. Wilson had found out the damage, she kept her own counsel. When at last they managed to seize a favourable chance, and to steal up the winding staircase, a

sad checkmate awaited them. The door of the lantern room was securely fastened with a padlock.

"Scott said he was going to put one on," said Lindsay, after staring blankly at the unwelcome impediment. "Don't you remember, when he was talking to 'The Griffin' in the picture gallery, and she told him we had been here?"

"I'm certain they suspect us," returned Cicely. "Perhaps they only took part of the silver or jewellery away in that sack, and the rest is still up in the garret."

The sole plan of action they could think of after this last disappointment was to keep a watch upon Scott. If he had really concealed a portion of the treasure in the garden, he would probably go to look at it occasionally, to make sure of its safety. At Cicely's urgent request they had already made a careful examination, with a trowel, of the bank where Scott had been digging when they surprised him in the dark. It was fruitless work, however; nothing was there.

"I told you beforehand they wouldn't be so foolish," said Lindsay.

"I thought they might have dropped a piece of money, or an ear-ring perhaps, in their hurry--just something to show us what had actually been here," said Cicely, grubbing about in the loose soil.

"Trust Scott and Mrs. Wilson! They're an uncommonly clever couple. You may be sure they'd take care not to leave even a sixpence behind them."

"I've heard that criminals can't keep away from a place where they've buried anything," continued Cicely. "They always haunt the spot."

"Then we must notice where Scott goes most frequently," replied Lindsay.

For the present, Scott seemed to be particularly attracted to the cucumber frames.

"He's there constantly," said Cicely.

"Far oftener than is necessary, I'm sure," agreed Lindsay.

"It might be a likely place, too," added Cicely meditatively.

Several small incidents seemed to confirm their surmises.

"He was so cross last night when Marjorie Butler sent her ball over the hedge into the kitchen-garden, and went to fetch it," said Lindsay.

"Yes, he said she might have broken the glass in one of the frames; but I don't suppose that was the real reason. She may have gone near him just when he was putting something back."

"I heard Miss Russell asking him when the cucumbers would be ready, and he answered in a great hurry: 'Not for ever so long yet'. And then he said it was 'best not to be lifting the frames, and disturbing them more than needful'."

"He was evidently afraid she was going to ask to see them."

The idea that silver cups, jewels, or spade-guineas might be lying hidden under the glossy leaves of the cucumber plants began to obtain possession of the girls' minds.

"If we could only manage to look while he's out of the way," suggested Cicely eagerly.

Scott's close attention to his duties was most annoying. There really appeared to be something in Cicely's theory of criminals haunting a particular spot. He seemed never absent from the kitchen-garden, at any rate when they were in its vicinity. They could hear him mowing the lawn during lesson hours, but when recreation arrived, and they ran out hopefully to reconnoitre, he would be weeding the strawberries, or gathering peas within a few feet of his cherished hotbeds.

"There's only one way for it," said Lindsay. "We shall have to make a plot. You must hide near the kitchen-garden, and I'll do something to take him off; then, while he's gone, you must rush to the frames and open them."

"That would be grand! What will you do?"

"I shall have to think it over. I know! We'll wait till this evening, when he's watering the cucumbers. I'll stand on the pipe of the hose; that will stop the water, and he'll go to see what's the matter."

"Capital!" agreed Cicely.

It took a little scheming to arrange their plan satisfactorily. They were much afraid lest Scott should do his watering

earlier than usual, and greatly relieved when they ran out after preparation to find him only just beginning to uncoil his hose. He used a small tank on wheels, which he generally left on the gravel walk outside the kitchen-garden, bringing the indiarubber tubing through the hedge.

To the girls' extreme annoyance, Marjorie Butler spied them, and, coming up, insisted upon reading aloud to them a letter she had received that morning from a sailor cousin. Would she never go away? It was too tiresome of her to confide in them at such an inappropriate time.

"Don't let us keep you, if you want to play tennis," begged Lindsay, with cold politeness.

"Oh, I don't mind at all, thank you! I thought you'd be interested to hear about Cousin Cyril," replied Marjorie.

Lindsay wished sincerely that Cousin Cyril had been at the bottom of the sea, instead of sailing over it and writing long descriptions of its charms. The precious moments were passing by. She could hear the gentle swish of the water as Scott applied the hose; if they were not quick, he would have finished, and the opportunity would be gone.

"I believe Miss Russell is coming out to play croquet to-night," she ventured desperately.

"Is she? Oh! she promised I might be on her side next time. I wonder if she's there yet? I must go and see at once."

"Thank goodness!" ejaculated Lindsay, as their classmate's blue-linen dress disappeared along the avenue. "Now, I'm going to put this heavy stone on the hose pipe, just where it goes through the hedge. Then we'll both creep through that hole into the kitchen-garden."

Without wasting another minute, Lindsay hastily did as she had said, concealing the stone among the long grass, after which both girls crawled through the hedge into the midst of a bed of Jerusalem artichokes. As they had expected, their plot answered admirably. Scott gave a grunt of vexation, and looked at his hose. His water supply had undoubtedly failed him. He stumped away, grumbling, to examine the tank.

"I don't believe he'll ever look amongst the grass. He'll think something's wrong with the tap," chuckled Lindsay.

The moment Scott had vanished through the gate, they dashed (regardless of the artichokes!) in the direction of the frames. Lindsay slid her hands rapidly in a search under the large, vine-like leaves; and Cicely, armed with a trowel, began to dig furiously. All in vain! Though they prodded the soil with sticks they could not feel anything particularly solid underneath, and there was no time to make very deep excavations.

"He's coming back!" panted Lindsay. "Smooth the earth over in that corner, and place that leaf to hide it. Quick, or he'll catch us! Don't go through the artichokes; we must run the other way!"



CHAPTER XV

Hide-and-Seek

The July days literally flew, and the term was drawing rapidly to a close. Miss Russell seemed determined to make the very most of the last weeks at the Manor, and arranged something fresh for nearly every afternoon. On one day there was a cricket match, on another a putting contest, and on a third a tennis tournament, all of which caused much excitement in the small world of the school.

Both Lindsay and Cicely were fond of games, and anxious to win their share of distinction, so by mutual consent they decided to relax their watch on Scott until after the athletic sports. These were always considered a great event, and this year were to be on a larger scale than usual.

"It's so splendid to be able to have them in these lovely grounds," said Mildred Roper. "There never seemed half enough room on the lawn at Winterburn Lodge."

"I hear Miss Russell is going to give quite a party," volunteered Nora Proctor. "She's invited the Rector and Mrs. Cross and all the people who have called on her at Haversleigh, so we shall have plenty of spectators."

"I wish Mrs. Courtenay could come," exclaimed Cicely.

"I wish indeed she could. I'm afraid she must be worse to-day, as Monica was not at the history class," said Mildred.

All the girls were busy "getting into good form", as they expressed it. The elder ones worked untiringly at tennis, while the younger ones practised running with a zeal worthy of candidates for a Marathon race.

"Miss Russell says there'll be several handicaps, but she won't tell us what they are," remarked Beryl Austen.

"Well, it's much more fun if you don't know beforehand," returned Effie Hargreaves. "They wouldn't be handicaps if we could do them too easily."

"I found a piece of four-leaved clover yesterday," observed Cicely, "so I ought to be lucky. I showed it to Mademoiselle, and she was quite envious. 'Vous aurez la chance!'" she said.

"How jolly! Have you kept it?"

"Rather! I've left it to press between two pieces of blotting-paper, under a pile of books. I'm going to have it put in a locket when I go home."

"I don't believe in luck," declared Nora. "I'm sure all the four-leaved clovers in the world wouldn't make Marjorie Butler win a race. She's out of breath before she's run ten yards."

"Is Monica going to take part?" asked Beryl.

"I don't know. She said she had put her name down provisionally. If she does, I expect she'll astonish us all. She can jump most beautifully--she's as light as a feather."

The afternoon of the sports was brilliantly fine. By half-past two the guests had assembled on the big lawn. They looked quite a small crowd. The school had aroused interest in the neighbourhood, and people had come from several miles' distance in response to Miss Russell's cards of invitation. Irene Spencer was the only girl who could boast of having any relations present, her uncle, aunt, and several cousins having driven over from Linforth Vicarage. The visitors were evidently prepared to enjoy everything.

"It is not often we have an opportunity in the country of witnessing Olympic games. I am looking forward to seeing so many young Atalantas run races. Where are the wreaths of laurel and parsley that are to grace the occasion?" said Mr. Cross, the genial rector, who was fond of a joke, and at home among schoolgirls.

"There aren't any," laughed Cicely. "Miss Russell uses the laurel leaves to flavour the custards, and the parsley to garnish the hams."

"I'm astonished at her putting such classic plants to such ignoble purposes. She has asked me to distribute the prizes, and I thought I should be expected to place green chaplets upon the brows of the victors. It's too bad, when I had composed a speech on purpose. You suggest I should make up another? Not so easy, my dears. I shall come to some of you for assistance. I wonder if Miss Frazer would be equal to the occasion?"

"I'm sure she couldn't think of anything funny," declared Cicely.

"Then I shall have to trust to what I can say on the spur of the moment. If you notice I'm breaking down, please begin to clap, and then everybody will suppose I have finished. Here comes Miss Russell. I believe she wants me to act umpire too. Greatness is being thrust upon me. I hope I shan't disgrace my high position."

In spite of the Rector's mock protestations, he seemed very capable of managing the sports, and reviewed the rows of waiting girls with the eye of a general.

"It takes me back to my own schooldays," he said. "I used to think then I would much rather win the long jump than be made Archbishop of Canterbury; and I considered the captain of our cricket club a far bigger fellow than the Prime Minister. Where's Monica? Isn't she joining in to-day's doings?"

Monica arrived at the last moment, just when everybody had given her up, and took her place quietly among the members of the first form.

"I was afraid I couldn't come at all," she explained; "but Mother is asleep now, so I can leave her for an hour, at any rate. I have told Jenny to send for me if she wakes."

The first item on the programme was a tennis contest, limited to the elder girls. It was a hard-fought battle, as the competitors were evenly balanced, and it ended in a victory for Mildred Roper and Kathleen Crawford. Monica played well, but she had not been able to spend so much time at practice as the others, and she missed several balls.

"It was very stupid of me," she apologized. "I never seem to grow accustomed to Mildred's fast serves."

A race followed for the second class, which Irene Spencer, much cheered by her cousins, nearly succeeded in winning, though she was beaten at the last by Merle Hammond, who made a sudden and unexpected spurt. It was now the turn of the third-form girls. They were to run a handicap, and awaited particulars with much eagerness.

"Miss Russell seems to set as severe tasks as the wicked stepmother in the fairy tales," said Mr. Cross. "She decrees that you are each to be given a small box of peas and beans and buttons mixed together, and that you are to sort them before you start to run the race. Will you please all kneel on the grass with your boxes in front of you. Are you ready? One--two--three--off!"

It was a question of deftness of fingers. Effie Hargreaves justified the old proverb, "More haste, less speed", by upsetting her box; and Marjorie Butler got her piles mixed in her agitation. Cicely finished first, and was halfway across the lawn before Nora Proctor overtook her. It was a keen struggle between these two. All the others were some distance behind, for Lindsay was not so fleet of foot, and Beryl Austen slipped and fell on the dry grass.

"It's Nora! No, it's Cicely!" cried the girls. "Well done, Cicely! Go on, Nora! She's gaining! No, she isn't! Why, it's Cicely after all!" as the latter reached the winning-post a couple of yards in advance of her opponent.

"Well run!" said the Rector. "You got over the course like young greyhounds. If you learn lessons at the same speed, you will turn out prodigies. Why is Miss Russell shaking her head? She says there is no danger of that. Really, I feel quite relieved to hear it. I was beginning to be almost afraid of you. I believe you are expected to pick up the beans before we continue our proceedings."

The programme was arranged so as to be as varied as possible. There were a round at clock-golf, a skipping tournament, an egg-and-spoon race, and an archery contest.

"It's jumping next," said Lindsay, as Miss Frazer and Miss Humphreys came forward, carrying a rope; "the first-form girls are to begin. I particularly want to see Monica."

Monica had taken her place modestly at the very end of the line, so that at each trial she was the last to compete. Her movements were very light and graceful, and the girls watched her with approval. One by one, as the rope was raised higher, the competitors began to thin, till at length their number was reduced to three--Kathleen Crawford, Bertha Marston, and Monica.

All looked eagerly to see the next attempt. Kathleen just managed to scramble over, Bertha failed utterly, but Monica took the jump with absolute ease.

"This will be the final test, I expect," said Miss Russell, when the two successful ones returned to the starting-point.

"I don't think they can do that!" murmured Lindsay, gazing with awe at what was to her the impossible height required.

It was too much for Kathleen. She ran, balked, and made another vain effort, to give it up.

"Now, Monica!"

The name was on everybody's lips.

Monica appeared to be perfectly cool, far less excited, indeed, than the spectators.

"Rest a moment, my dear, if you are out of breath," suggested Miss Russell.

"No, thank you. It would hardly seem fair to Kathleen. I'll try now."

"Took it like a bird!" cried the Rector, clapping his hands, as the rope was once more successfully cleared.

The girls raised a storm of cheering, to show partly their admiration for the skilful deed, partly their appreciation of Monica herself.

"She is a great favourite in the school," Miss Russell explained to Mr. Cross.

"I am delighted to see her mixing with other young people," he replied; "she has a dull time, poor child, as a rule, and has felt the disappointment about her uncle's property more than she cares to confess. Mrs. Courtenay's illness is very distressing. My wife was speaking to the doctor yesterday: he considers Sir William Garrett ought to be sent for at once; in a few weeks it may prove too late."

"You have known the family a long time?" asked Miss Russell.

"Since Monica's birth. I was as well acquainted with old Sir Giles as he would allow anyone to be. I used to call and see him sometimes, and discuss botany, the only subject in which he showed any interest. He lived so penuriously that his income must have accumulated for many years. He rarely spoke of business matters, but on one occasion he requested me to sign my name as witness to some document, the contents of which he did not tell me.

"He referred, however, to Monica as if she were to benefit substantially under his will, and asked me if I considered it harmful for a girl to be left an heiress. I assured him it would not be so in her case; both her disposition and upbringing were such that money could not spoil her.

"A season of adversity is often the best preparation for prosperity," he replied.

"I have remembered his words ever since.

"He sent for me on his deathbed, and I have sometimes wondered if there were any secret he wished to confide to me. Most unfortunately I was visiting a sick parishioner several miles away, and did not get the message in time. When I arrived at the Manor he was past speech. He tried to scrawl a few lines on a piece of paper, but the writing was quite undecipherable. If he regretted any earthly act, it was too late then to alter it; he was going to settle his great account."

While the Rector and the headmistress were talking, tea had been carried into the garden, and the girls now busied themselves in attending on the guests.

"I think the competitors must need refreshment more than we do," said Mrs. Cross, as Cicely handed her the cream.

"They are not forgotten," said Miss Russell, "but they are only too pleased to make themselves useful first."

Certainly the girls could not complain of being neglected; both cakes and strawberries were waiting for them on a separate table, where Miss Frazer was presiding.

When tea was over, the prizes were brought out, and the Rector, with a few appropriate remarks, began to distribute the awards. Cicely went up proudly to receive a pencil-case, and Nora Proctor, who had won the egg-and-spoon race, was presented with a box of chocolates.

"First prize for high jump, Monica Courtenay," announced Mr. Cross.

Everyone looked round for Monica, but she was nowhere to be found.

"She was here just before tea," said Miss Humphreys.

"I saw their maid come and speak to her during the archery competition," said Beryl Austen. "She went away immediately."

"She was obliged to go to her mother, no doubt, and did not wish to interrupt the shooting by saying good-bye," commented Miss Russell. "We must keep her prize for her."

"She won't get the clapping, though," lamented Lindsay.

"I think Monica will be rather glad to avoid that," said Mildred Roper. "She's so shy and retiring, she doesn't like to be made a public character."

The day following the sports was hopelessly wet. Lindsay and Cicely were awakened in the morning by the drip, drip of the rain on the ivy outside, and the splashing of water as it fell from the spout into the butt underneath. It was an absolutely drenching downpour, coming from a leaden sky that showed no prospect of clearing.

The weather had been so glorious during their stay at the Manor that they felt aggrieved at the change. It was particularly annoying, because Irene's uncle and aunt had invited all the girls to walk over to Linforth that afternoon, promising to show them the church, and to regale them with cherries afterwards in the Vicarage orchard.

"Wet at seven, fine at eleven!" said the sanguine Cicely.

"Not to-day, I'm afraid," replied Lindsay. "The glass was dropping last night. It's set in for a deluge."

The whole school seemed slightly depressed in spirits in consequence of the rain. No doubt it was a reaction from the excitement of the afternoon before. All their favourite occupations lay outside, and it was so long since they had been weather-bound that they seemed scarcely able to amuse themselves in the house. Everybody lounged about idly during afternoon recreation, looking dismally out of the windows at the lawns, where the markings of the tennis courts were being rapidly washed away.

"It's no use staring at the puddles," said Lindsay. "We can't possibly go to Linforth. It's just a piece of abominably bad luck. Everything's horrid!"

Lessons had not been a success that morning. Perhaps Miss Frazer also felt the influence of the gloomy day. Her pupils, at any rate, had been unusually stupid and inattentive; Lindsay, in particular, had merited a sharp scolding, and was dejected in consequence.

"We must do something," said Cicely. "I vote we hunt up the rest of our class, and go upstairs and have a really good game of hide-and-seek."

As anything seemed better than sitting still, the other girls agreed readily to come and play.

"Two can hide and four can look," said Marjorie. "Only, we'll keep on this landing."

The old Manor offered a splendid field for the purpose; it was so full of cupboards and crannies and odd nooks that it was quite hard to find anybody. The dull day improved the fun, for twilight reigned in most of the passages, and rendered many hairbreadth escapes possible. Nora actually had her hand on Beryl's foot without discovering the fact; Effie crept inside a suit of armour, and baffled pursuit for ever so long; and Marjorie was almost given up, but at length was discovered crouching in a dark angle which the others had passed several times without noticing her.

It was now the turn of Lindsay and Cicely to hide. They were determined to choose a specially good place, and debated the point until the latter grew impatient.

"Do be quick!" she exclaimed. "They'll soon have finished counting a hundred."

"I can't make up my mind whether it's better behind the tapestry or under the ottoman," deliberated Lindsay.

"Cuckoo!" cried Beryl's voice.

"They're coming! We've no time for either. We must get into the old box-settle."

It was the only possible retreat near at hand. Already they could hear the girls' footsteps creaking along the oaken boards of the picture gallery; in another moment they would have turned into the passage, and reached the top of the stairs. Without more ado both hiders scrambled inside the settle, and pulled down the lid over their heads.

It was a very tight fit indeed for two, and most uncomfortable.

"Could you let me have an inch more room?" begged Cicely in an agonized whisper.

"I'll try," returned Lindsay.

It was difficult to stir in such narrow quarters. To move at all, she was obliged to make a vigorous heave towards her end of the chest. The effect was as unexpected as extraordinary. Lo and behold! the entire bottom of the settle seemed to give way, and without any warning the two girls were precipitated into some unknown place below.

CHAPTER XVI

A Surprise

So sudden was their descent that Lindsay and Cicely had no time even to cry out. They evidently had not fallen far, and though for a moment they both thought they were killed, they soon found that beyond a few bruises neither was hurt. They picked themselves up in a state of bewilderment, and stared around them as if hardly realizing yet what had happened.

They were in a little low chamber about eight feet square. The walls were of unpolished oak timbers, roughly plastered in between, and the floor also was of oak beams. In one corner there was a tiny window, covered with a mass of cobwebs, through which nevertheless came sufficient light to enable them to see their surroundings. The trapdoor in the ceiling, through which they had dropped so unexpectedly, must have worked on a swivel, for it had righted itself again, and was once more closed above them.

Still half-dazed, the girls stood for a moment trying to recover their scattered wits, too shaken and amazed even to speak.

"Well!" exclaimed Lindsay at last, with a volume of meaning in the monosyllable.

"This is a house of surprises!" cried Cicely.

"Where are we?"

"How can I tell?"

"We seemed to tumble through the bottom of the settle."

"Yes, after you gave that great lurch to your end."

"We must be in another secret hiding-place."

"Then I vote we hunt about, and see what's in it."

One side of the small room was completely filled, as high as the ceiling, with a pile of boxes. They seemed a very miscellaneous collection. There were ancient hair trunks, such as were in use seventy or eighty years ago, made of wood covered with cow hide, with the hair left on; there were leather portmanteaux with strong brass corners, tin trunks, and even plain wooden packing-cases. On the floor, and leaning against the boxes, stood a row of fair-sized linen bags, and a couple of larger sacks.

It seemed to the girls as if they must have penetrated to some forgotten lumber room. Everything was thickly covered with the accumulated dirt and cobwebs of years. They could have written their names in the dust. As if she were moving in a dream, Lindsay stooped, and picked up one of the linen bags.

"How heavy it is!" she said. "I wonder what's inside?"

"It feels like something hard," replied Cicely, pinching it critically with her finger and thumb.

The mouth was secured by a cord, and Lindsay fumbled long trying to untie the knot.

"Oh! don't bother over it; here's my penknife," cried Cicely, waxing impatient.

In another moment she had cut the string, and a shower of golden sovereigns came pouring out on to the floor. The two girls looked at each other, with faces that were almost awe-stricken.

"Cicely!" said Lindsay solemnly. "I verily believe we have found Sir Giles's fortune!"

A further examination established the matter beyond any doubt. The bags were filled to the brim with gold pieces. In a state of intense excitement the girls continued their investigations. The two large sacks contained salvers, tankards, and goblets, dull and tarnished indeed, but unmistakably of silver. It was difficult to get at the boxes, but they managed to clamber up and open one at the top of the pile, disclosing more silver articles and some ornaments of gold.

"Don't let us pull out too many things, or we shan't be able to stuff them back again," said Cicely, trying to close the lid of the overflowing hair trunk.

"No doubt these underneath are filled with money or jewels," said Lindsay rapturously.

"This little box seems made of silver," remarked Cicely, taking up a small antique casket that specially claimed her attention. Its sides were beautifully chased in classic designs, and it bore the Courtenay arms on the lid.

"It's full of pieces of paper, with figures on them," she continued.

"Let me look!" cried Lindsay. "Why, don't you see?--they're bank notes!"

They were certainly in the midst of treasures. The extent of Sir Giles's hoard had evidently not been exaggerated. At the bottom of the casket lay a letter addressed:

"TO MY GREAT-NIECE MONICA COURTENAY."

"The writing on the envelope is exactly the same as in the *Floral Calendar*," said Cicely. "I remember those funny flourishes, and the 'a's' not closed at the top."

"So it is; I should know the sprawling look of it anywhere."

"It's such funny, old-fashioned writing, as if it were done with a quill pen. I think we had better put this away again."

Lindsay replaced the letter carefully with the bank notes inside the silver box.

"Then Sir Giles did intend the enigma for a guide," she observed. "The last lines were right.

'... you'll see 'tis a matter
Perchance may provide you with just a lost link,
And bring you a greater reward than you think."

"And the settle concealed the legacy after all!"

"Yes, a great deal more safely than we supposed."

"I never imagined the treasure would be in a place like this, all stowed away in old boxes! I thought we should press a secret spring, and a panel would fly open in the wall, and then we should see money and jewels lying together in a big heap!"

"I don't mind how we've found it, so long as it's here."

"Still, it's a surprise!"

"It will be a splendid surprise for Monica. This is actually her very own."

"She would have been content with a hundred guineas, and there are more than a hundred guineas here," said Cicely, letting some of the sovereigns slide through her fingers with a sigh of satisfaction.

"She ought to know about it at once," returned Lindsay. "If you can tear yourself away from these money bags, we'd better be thinking of going."

"Yes, I suppose it's time we went back. By the by, how are we to get out of this place?"

Ah! How to go back?--that was the question! The trapdoor had shut itself high above their heads.

"I expect if we stand on one of the boxes, we can push it up!" said Lindsay.

With much difficulty they dragged a heavy chest across the floor and climbed upon it. It was a fruitless effort. However hard they might try, the trapdoor would not budge an inch.

"There may be a secret spring," faltered Cicely, feeling in every direction to find some bolt or knob, but all in vain. Then the horrible truth broke upon them. They were locked up as securely as the legacy!

"What are we to do?"

Lindsay's pink cheeks were white with alarm.

"Let us call. Perhaps the girls are hunting for us still in the passage, and they may hear."

Both shouted until they were hoarse, yet there was no reply. This was indeed hide-and-seek with a vengeance. Their game had turned out more than they had bargained for.

"I'll bang on the ceiling. It may sound louder than calling," said Lindsay. "The girls must have given us up, and gone downstairs, for nobody seems to hear," she continued, after belabouring the trapdoor for several minutes.

"Perhaps they're at tea," suggested Cicely.

They examined the little window in the corner, but the fastenings were so rusty from long disuse that, tug as they would, they could not open it. They wiped away the dust and cobwebs from it, and peeped out.

"If it overlooks the garden, we could smash the glass and wave a handkerchief, at any rate," proposed Lindsay. "Scott would be almost sure to notice it, even if nobody else were out in the rain."

Alas! the window appeared to be securely hidden away among the gables, and absolutely out of sight from below.

"Would it be possible to crawl on to the roof?"

Lindsay shook her head in reply. The frame was too small for even the slim Cicely to squeeze through. The girls sat down and surveyed the piles of treasure around them with dismay. If they had required a sermon on the vanity of riches, it was there without any need of words.

"We can't eat bank notes, nor sleep on beds of sovereigns," remarked Lindsay at last.

"We may be shut up here for days and days before they find us," said Cicely blankly.

"They'll miss us directly, of course; but they won't know where to look. Even if they peeped inside the settle, they wouldn't be any the wiser."

"Do you remember the piece of poetry we read last week about Ginevra? She hid inside a chest on her wedding day, when they were playing hide-and-seek, and the lid snapped with a spring lock. They never found her--only her bones, years afterwards!"

"Don't talk of such horrible things."

"How long does it take people to starve?" continued Cicely in a tremulous voice.

"About ten days, I believe. They grow gradually weaker and weaker."

Cicely groaned.

"There isn't anything to drink either, and I'm getting so thirsty," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

"We must try again," declared Lindsay, jumping up. "Let us pull out another trunk, and manage to lift it on to the chest. I believe if I were nearer the ceiling I should be able to push harder."

The boxes were arranged in a rather random fashion, so that as the girls dragged one from the bottom, the whole pile came tumbling down in confusion. They had to jump aside to avoid being hurt. When the upset was over, Cicely pointed silently to the wall opposite. In the part which before had been hidden was a small, low door. Here, surely, was a chance of escape.

They scrambled over the packing-cases and trunks without troubling to look inside them, though some had burst open in the fall. To find a way out seemed at present far more important than more silver tankards and salvers.

Was this exit also secured? With trembling hands Lindsay raised the latch. To her intense relief the door opened, showing a very narrow, unlighted passage.

After their experience in the garret it was not encouraging to find themselves once more obliged to explore in the dark, but there seemed nothing else to be done.

"It must lead somewhere," said Cicely. "I'd rather go anywhere than stay here."

"We'd better step carefully, in case the floor is as rotten as it was in the other place," cautioned Lindsay. The passage smelled dank and close. The air in it had probably been unstirred for many years. The faint light which entered it from the treasure room was soon lost, and they were obliged to grope their way by feeling along the walls. On and on they went for what appeared to be a considerable distance, sometimes turning sharp corners, and sometimes going up or down rickety steps.

"It must run half round the house," said Cicely. "Shall we never get to the end?"

Suddenly Lindsay, who was walking first, came to a halt.

"I can't go any farther," she faltered; "there's a wall in front."

The poor girls were almost in despair. They had been so confident that the passage would surely be taking them to the

outer world; to find themselves once more at a full stop was a terrible blow.

"Must we go all that dreadful long way back?" wailed Cicely.

"I expect there is some door that we've passed without knowing it," replied Lindsay, rather chokily.

"Then we can never find it in the dark. It's no use. We shall both starve to death here, and they'll discover our skeletons a hundred years afterwards."

Cicely had utterly broken down, and was sobbing bitterly.

"We won't give up too soon," said Lindsay, whose sturdy courage stood her in good stead on this occasion.

She had been feeling about here and there on the blank wall that faced them, and her fingers at last encountered something that seemed like a sliding bolt. She pushed it back eagerly. A door opened outwards, letting in a blaze of light. To their utter amazement they were gazing down into the picture gallery!

It did not take them many seconds to spring to the floor and turn round to look through what aperture they had made their escape. It was the portrait of Monica Courtenay that formed the secret exit. It had swung out, frame and all, into the gallery, and appeared to be fitted with hinges so as to close and unclose quite easily.

"Now I see why the picture shook in its frame that day!" exclaimed Cicely. "I wonder we never thought of this before."

"And of course that was why she was supposed to guard the fortunes of the Courtenays. No doubt they always kept their valuables in this hiding-place, and only the head of the family would know the way to it."

"So old sayings do generally mean something, and aren't just nonsense."

"Let us go and tell at once. Everybody'll be wondering where we are. They must be doing prep. now, and Miss Russell will be sitting with the first class."

The headmistress's tranquil demeanour was not usually easily ruffled, but she sprang up in excitement as her two missing pupils burst into the library proclaiming the glorious news.

"Lindsay and Cicely! Where have you been? I was growing most uneasy at your absence. You say you have actually found Sir Giles's treasure? It is hardly to be credited. Girls, girls, try to calm yourselves and give me an intelligible account!" as first one and then the other took up the tale in disjointed sentences.

"We played hide-and-peek--and fell through the bottom of the settle--there were great bags of gold--and boxes of silver things and bank notes--won't she be rich? And he'd written it in an enigma--we thought we were going to starve there like Ginevra--and we climbed down through the portrait--oh, may we go and tell Monica about it now?"

"This is indeed a most extraordinary discovery," said Miss Russell, when at length she had drawn from them a more lucid statement of affairs. "Monica must certainly know, but no one is to tell her except myself. I will go down presently to the cottage and see her, and warn her to break the news very gently to her mother. If Mrs. Courtenay were to hear of it suddenly, the shock might be exceedingly dangerous, in her weak state of health."

The news that something of great importance had happened seemed to spread like wildfire through the school. Both teachers and pupils, abandoning their books, came crowding into the library to hear particulars. Even the servants hurried to the spot.

"Oh, bless you, bless you!" cried Mrs. Wilson, who had pushed her way among the girls to the central source of information. "This is indeed a day of rejoicing--a day to remember and give thanks for to the end of one's life!"

Lindsay and Cicely stared at her in amazement. Was it actually "The Griffin" who was speaking? And were those tears that were trickling down her hard cheeks? What did it mean? Was she acting a part? Or had they after all misjudged her? There was no time then for either surmises or explanations. They were the heroines of the hour, and had to repeat their story afresh to those who had not yet heard it at first hand.

"We couldn't imagine where you were hidden," said Marjorie Butler. "We were hunting in the picture gallery for ever so long. Beryl peeped inside the settle, and said it was empty."

"We were still more puzzled when you didn't turn up for tea," said Nora Proctor. "Do tell us again about the bags of money!"

Miss Russell, however, thinking the excitement had lasted long enough, interfered and put a stop to the recital.

"Everybody must go back to preparation at once," she decreed. "Lindsay and Cicely have had no tea. Are you hungry?" she added, turning to the adventurous pair.

"Starving," they replied laconically.

"Then I will excuse your preparation to-night, and you may come with me to the dining-room. It would be rather hard to expect you to set to work upon lessons immediately after such an experience."



CHAPTER XVII

Good-bye to the Manor

Monica's agitation, when she heard that her uncle's legacy had been found, was extreme. At first she refused to believe it; but when she was told the story of Lindsay's and Cicely's strange adventure, she began slowly to realize that it was no fairy tale, and that the fortune, so sorely needed and so much longed for, was lying awaiting her disposal.

"The money is there, and I can have some of it now?" she asked, still almost incredulously. "Will there be as much as a hundred guineas?"

"Far more than that, my dear, from the girls' account."

"Then we can send for Sir William Garrett!" she said, with a sigh of intense relief.

Miss Russell, who did not like the responsibility of being even a temporary custodian of such riches, had informed the Rector of what had occurred, and requested him to come to the Manor and help her to investigate the matter. As he was Monica's guardian, he seemed the proper person to take charge of her affairs. He arrived next morning, and, accompanied by Miss Russell and Monica, made a careful examination of the hiding-place and its contents. At the mistress's urgent request, he promised to arrange that all the valuables should be removed as speedily as possible to the bank.

"I could not sleep with them in the house, I should be so afraid of burglars, now the news of the discovery has been spread abroad," declared Miss Russell.

"They were only too safe here," said Monica.

"Yes, when their whereabouts was a mystery. It is different when everyone knows."

The wealth which old Sir Giles had stored in the secret room was considerable. He had evidently distrusted investments, and, following his own singular whim, had hoarded his money in gold and bank notes. There were precious stones also, in themselves worth a small fortune, which he must have collected, in addition to the family jewels and the old silver plate that had been handed down through generations of Courtenays.

After looking through some of the boxes, the Rector picked up the casket, and made a short scrutiny of its contents.

"This envelope is addressed to you, Monica," he observed.

The girl took it hesitatingly, then passed it back to her guardian.

"It seems like a message from the dead," she said. "I think, please, I would rather that you should read it aloud."

The letter was well in keeping with its writer's eccentric and morbid character. It ran thus:--

"MY DEAR MONICA,

"Gold, silver, and precious stones are but vanity of vanities, a snare to many, and the root of all evil. By the time you claim these, I trust you will have found how easy it is to dispense with them, and that you will despise them as much as I do.

"They have never brought me any happiness, and I am uncertain whether it is a kindness to bequeath to you what to me has been but an irksome encumbrance. After giving long and earnest thought to the matter, I have decided to leave it in the hands of destiny.

"I shall lay by these possessions in the hidden chamber, the existence of which was told me by my grandfather, and now is unknown to any except myself. I have concealed the secret, however, in an enigma, which, if you have followed my advice concerning the study of Botany, you will have found written inside the cover of the *Floral Calendar*.

"Should Heaven ordain that you are to take up this burden, then you will read my riddle aright. Should it be otherwise decreed, this message will never meet your eyes. Believe me that I have striven to act for your best good.

"From your uncle and well-wisher,

"GILES PEMBERTON COURTENAY."

"He seemed quite afraid for me to have this money," faltered poor Monica, on whom the letter had left a deep

impression. "Shall I regret it? Is it really such a dangerous thing?"

"Not if you make a wise use of it. In your hands I hope it may prove a blessing instead of a curse," answered the Rector.

"It does not seem to have brought any happiness to Uncle Giles. He calls it a burden."

"Riches can never bring happiness unless they are being employed for the benefit of others."

"It is sad to think how long these have lain idle," remarked Miss Russell. "Monica will be able to do much good with them."

"Then you are sure I may take them?" asked Monica, turning to her guardian. "I didn't find out the enigma myself, you see."

"I am certain you may receive the legacy without scruple, my dear child! Your uncle himself said he had left matters to the disposal of destiny. It appears to me as if Lindsay and Cicely had been led just at the right time to this happy discovery. You must accept your fortune as a special gift of Providence. So far it has been a talent laid up in a napkin; it can now be your care to let it yield ten talents in return."

Though Lindsay and Cicely had satisfactorily accomplished their quest, they felt there were many points in connection with their adventure at the Manor that still puzzled them. The mystery surrounding the lantern room had not yet been cleared up, neither had the strange behaviour of Mrs. Wilson and Scott been accounted for.

So anxious were they to decide these perplexing points that they determined to confide the whole affair to Monica, and see if she could offer any explanation. A month ago it would have been impossible to get her for half an hour to themselves, but since their finding of the treasure the other girls were ready to allow them a special claim to her society, and took it as a matter of course when they carried her off to the summer house for a private chat.

Monica listened attentively to the story of their various experiences and suspicions. At the end she laughed heartily, then suddenly looked grave.

"You dear silly children!" she exclaimed. "It was a case of much ado about nothing, and yet you nearly ran into such great danger that it makes me shudder even to think about it. There certainly was a reason for visiting the attic, though not at all of the kind you imagined. It contains a large cistern, which supplies the water for the bath and the kitchen boiler. This is fed by a tank on the roof that catches the rain, and in dry weather it is apt to get out of order. If it is not working properly, it makes a curious blowing noise."

"Like groaning?" asked Cicely.

"Yes, very like groaning, though it would need a gigantic prisoner to utter such fearful moans of distress. No wonder you thought somebody was being tortured!" and Monica laughed again.

"You can understand," she continued, "that with so many girls in the house requiring baths, we were afraid lest the tank should run dry, and were continually examining the cistern, to make sure that the water was flowing properly. If it had stopped even for an hour, it might have caused the kitchen boiler to burst."

"Did Mrs. Wilson go to look, then?" enquired Lindsay.

"Either Mrs. Wilson or Scott went every day. My mother was so anxious about it that I several times ran up myself, so that I could tell her all was perfectly safe. Mrs. Wilson was equally nervous. We had so little rain in June that she was sure the tank must be nearly empty."

"Then that was what she and Scott meant about the noise and danger, when they were talking in the picture gallery!" interposed Cicely.

"Yes," replied Monica. "When people try to overhear conversations, and put two and two together for themselves, they rarely succeed in coming to a right conclusion."

Lindsay and Cicely blushed. They had known from the first that Monica would not approve of either eavesdropping or peeping through keyholes. This was the part of the business of which they both felt rather ashamed; they were conscious that there had been a great deal of curiosity mixed up with their efforts on her behalf. Monica, however, took no notice of their heightened colour, and went on:

"Both Scott and Mrs. Wilson were quite right in wishing to keep you away from the attics; you will understand when I explain why. The hiding-place in the lantern room is a relic of the times of King James I. Have you learnt yet in your history books what severe penal laws were made against Roman Catholics in those days? Any priest found celebrating Mass might be executed, and often he was tortured first to make him tell the whereabouts of his companions. Our ancestors, who lived then at the Manor, still belonged to the old faith, and they needed some spot where they could worship without fear of being disturbed; so they made the secret entrance through the cupboard, and private services were held in the great garret. Even with such precautions it was a very dangerous thing for a priest to remain long in a country house. If his presence were suspected, and information given, a party of soldiers would at once come with a search warrant to hunt for him.

"Then he would have to be ready to hurry away into some safer retreat still, in case his first place of concealment were discovered. At the end of the farther attic there is a small cupboard most cunningly hidden in the wall. In front of it there is a shaft, a great, horrible, yawning chasm, several feet wide and very deep, going quite to the basement of the house. It was intended as a trap to baffle pursuers, who would fall down it in the dark when chasing their fugitive."

"Is the shaft still there?" asked Cicely.

"Yes, it is quite untouched and open. It is in such a far-away part of the attic that nobody has considered it worth while to go to the trouble of having it covered in. Now you can understand how alarmed Mrs. Wilson was when she found that some of you had been in the lantern room. She didn't believe you would really be able to find your way through the cupboard; still, she was never easy when she thought of the danger you might perhaps run into. She couldn't rest until Scott had padlocked the door."

"We were very near it," said Cicely, with a shiver.

"It was the greatest mercy you didn't venture any farther. I can't be too thankful that the cistern made a noise just at that moment, and frightened you down again."

"Then you knew of this secret door, though not of the one in the picture gallery?" said Lindsay.

"Yes; it was discovered two centuries ago, in the reign of Queen Anne, I believe. In many old manor houses there are equally clever contrivances for hiding-places. They are often called 'priests' holes'. I've heard of one under the steps of the stairs, and another in a window-seat, or up a chimney, or even behind a picture."

"Like ours," said Cicely.

"No doubt the one under the settle may have been a 'priests' hole' too, and perhaps had the second entrance for extra security. Very sad stories are told about some of the hiding-places. Sometimes the poor fugitive couldn't find an opportunity to get away, and the person who knew the secret, and should have brought him food, was killed or taken prisoner. Then he either had to come out, and deliver himself up to the soldiers, or to remain and die a slow, lingering death of starvation."

"I thought we were going to do that when we were locked in with the treasure," remarked Cicely.

"How much did Merle find out in the lantern room?" interposed Lindsay.

"She happened to pull at the lantern, and had just the same surprise as you," replied Monica. "She had gone a few steps into the passage when I came down from looking at the cistern, and met her, much to her astonishment. Of course I explained everything, and begged her not to tell, because we didn't want any more schoolgirls to start exploring."

"Then it was to you she gave that mysterious promise?"

"Certainly it was to me. I'm glad to hear she kept it so well."

"But I still don't half understand," said Lindsay. "We thought Mrs. Wilson and Scott were hiding the treasure up there. We saw them take a sack into the garden one night and bury something."

"You managed to give poor Scott a great fright," laughed Monica. "He told me about it the next day. He was doing nothing more dreadful than digging out a wasps' nest. Mrs. Wilson had discovered it in the bank, and she went with him to show him the place and help him. Of course it could not be done by daylight, when the wasps were flying about; but at dark, when they were all safely inside their hole, Scott burnt tobacco to stupefy them, and then took the nest. He said two of the young ladies had suddenly tumbled down the bank while he was at work, and startled him terribly."

"So he and Mrs. Wilson weren't burying the treasure after all? They didn't even try to steal it?"

"No, indeed! I feel sorry to think they should have been suspected for a moment of such bad intentions. Mrs. Wilson

may be rather gruff and blunt in her manners, but she is a faithful old soul, and devoted to Mother and me. I believe she would have starved rather than touch a penny that belonged to us. And Scott too is absolutely honest. I assure you he keeps nothing stowed away inside the cucumber frames! Naturally Mrs. Wilson had often looked for the hiding-place, but it was all on my behalf, and nobody rejoiced more heartily than she did when it was found."

"We were on a completely wrong track," said Lindsay. "The only right clue was the enigma. I'm glad we puzzled that out, though we didn't win any prizes in the competition."

"And yet the enigma was no real use," put in Cicely. "We shouldn't have gone through the bottom of the settle if we hadn't been playing hide-and-seek. Isn't it queer that when we tried so hard to find the secret room we couldn't, and then that we should come across it just by accident?"

To Monica the affair seemed no accident, but, as the Rector had said, a merciful arrangement of Providence. It enabled her to send for Sir William Garrett, and the great specialist arrived in the course of the next few days. After examining Mrs. Courtenay, he gave a more favourable report on her case than her own physician had dared to hope.

"You have consulted me in the nick of time," was his verdict. "I trust to be able to effect a complete cure. A winter in the south would work wonders, and, if my treatment is thoroughly carried out, she should return to Haversleigh in the spring with restored health."

It was an intense relief to be thus reassured. Monica felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her mind. When the doctors had finally taken their departure, she ran to share her good news with her friends at the Manor.

"Of course," she explained, "Mother will require the greatest care, but we can give her anything now that she needs. Sir William Garrett has promised to send a nurse from London who understands his special treatment, and who could go with us to Italy in the autumn. Oh, how splendid it will be when I can bring her back absolutely strong and well! I can hardly feel thankful enough. And it is all owing to you," she added, kissing Lindsay and Cicely with tears in her eyes.

It had come at length to the very end of the term; the girls were making up their minds to bid a reluctant good-bye to the beautiful old house where they had spent such a pleasant and eventful twelve weeks.

"If we weren't going home, I couldn't bear to leave it," said Cicely. "I've grown so fond of everything. Our dear bedroom, with its big four-poster (I love those yellow brocaded curtains), and the roses round the window that smell so delicious first thing when one wakes in the morning, and the dining-hall, and the picture gallery, and the library, and the oak parlour where we have lessons, and, above all, the garden. Oh dear, it makes me quite sad to think perhaps I may never see them again! What a change to settle down at Winterburn Lodge in September!"

"I suppose life can't be all honey; we shall have to go back to plain bread and butter now," replied Lindsay philosophically. "But I'll tell you a secret to cheer you up. Monica says her mother has promised that when they return from Italy she'll ask you and me to spend part of the summer holidays at the Manor. But she doesn't wish us to let any of the other girls know of the invitation just at present."

"How perfectly delightful!" exclaimed Cicely, with shining eyes.

"It's a whole year off yet."

"I don't mind, so long as I can think of coming here again some time, and being Monica's visitor. It's something to look forward to."

The last day arrived, as last days invariably do, whether one is longing for their advent or the reverse. Boxes had been brought down and packed, and Miss Russell's linen and silver had been collected and stowed away in great wicker baskets, which were already dispatched on their road to London. The girls, marshalled in order on the drive, were only waiting for the word "March!" to start for the railway station.

Monica stood on the steps to see them off, her pretty, fair face and rich chestnut hair framed in the oak doorway.

"I shall miss you all dreadfully," she said. "It has been a great pleasure for me to have you here. Please don't forget me."

"We're not likely to do that," replied Mildred Roper, speaking for herself and the rest. "We've spent a glorious three months. It's been more like holidays than school. I think every one of us, to the end of her life, will remember this summer term at the old Manor. Good-bye!"