

Angela Brazil

The Third Class at Miss Kayes



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The Third Class at Miss Kaye's

BY ANGELA BRAZIL

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"THE WHEELBARROW SUDDENLY SEEMED TO PLUNGE INTO THE GROUND"

[See text](#)

The Third Class at Miss Kaye's

A School Story

BY
ANGELA BRAZIL
Author of "The Fortunes of Philippa"

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CHAPTER I

A Wet-day Party

Drip, drip, drip! The rain came pouring down on a certain September afternoon, turning the tennis lawn to a swamp, dashing the bloom off the roses, spoiling the geraniums, and driving even the blackbirds and thrushes to seek shelter inside the summer house. It was that steady, settled, hopeless rain that does not hold out the slightest promise of ever stopping; there was not a patch of blue to be seen in the sky sufficient to make the traditional seaman's jacket; several large black snails were crawling along the garden walk as if enjoying the bath; and the barometer in the hall, which started the day at "Set Fair", had now sunk below "Change", and showed no signs of intending to rise again.

Curled up in a large armchair placed in the bow window of a well-furnished morning-room, a little girl of about eleven years old sat peering out anxiously at the weather.

"It's far too wet!" she remarked cheerfully. "It never means to clear to-day, and it's four o'clock now. They can't possibly come, so I shall just settle down and enjoy myself thoroughly."

She spoke aloud to herself, a habit often indulged in by solitary children, and, opening a copy of *Ivanhoe*, screwed herself round into an attitude of still greater comfort, and set to work to read with that utter disregard of outer happenings which marks the true lover of books.

She was rather a pretty child; her features were good though the small face was pale and thin; her hair was fair and fluffy, and she had large hazel-grey eyes which looked so very dreamy sometimes that you could imagine their owner was apt to forget the commonplace surroundings of everyday life and live in a make-believe world that was all her own. Equally oblivious of the driving rain outside and the cosy scene within, Sylvia read on, so lost in her story that she did not even notice when the door opened and her mother entered the room.

"Why, here you are, darling! I thought I should find you in Father's study. I'm so sorry it's such a dreadful day for your party."

Sylvia put down her book with a slam, and dragging her mother into the big armchair, installed herself on her knee and administered a somewhat choking hug.

"Oh, Mother dear, I'm so glad!" she declared. "I didn't want a party, and I've been watching the rain all the time and hoping it would go on pouring."

"Sylvia! I thought you would be terribly disappointed. Don't you want to see your little friends?"

"Not very much."

"But why, sweetheart?"

Sylvia squeezed her mother's hand in her own and sighed, as if she found it rather difficult to explain herself.

"Lots of reasons," she said briefly.

"Tell me what they are."

"Why, for one thing, I've just got to the middle of *Ivanhoe*, where Rowena is shut up in Front de Boeuf's castle, and I want to see how she escapes. I'd much rather stay and read than go racing round the garden playing at 'I spy!'"

"But I thought you liked Effie and May and the Fergusson boys."

"I hate boys!" declared Sylvia dramatically. "At least, not Cousin Cuthbert and Ronald Hampson, but boys like the Fergusson boys. They do nothing but tear about and play tricks on one. They're perfectly hateful! I didn't enjoy my last party there one scrap. They tease me most dreadfully every time I meet them."

"What about?"

"They call me 'The Tragic Muse', because they got hold of one of my pieces of poetry. They made the most dreadful fun of it. And it wasn't tragic at all. It was about the Waltons' baby, and its blue eyes and curls and dimples. I did put dimples, though they read it out pimples! I don't believe they know what tragic means, or a muse either, and I do, because I learnt them in Greek history last month. Mrs. Walton liked the poetry though. She said I must copy it into her album and sign my name to it, and she thought I might be a poetess when I grew up, and she expected it was that which kept me so thin, and had you tried giving me cod-liver oil, because she was sure it would do me good. You're not

going to, are you? I took some once at Aunt Louisa's, and it was the most disgusting stuff."

"I don't think you need any more medicine just at present, so we will spare you the cod-liver oil," said Mrs. Lindsay, smiling. "Perhaps Roy and Donald would have forgotten about the poem by this afternoon."

"No, they wouldn't. They never forgot anything if it's possible to tease. I'd far rather they didn't come. I don't want the Waltons either, or the Carsons. It's so nice and quiet in here, and Miss Holt's out, and it's such a wet day that there won't be any callers, and I can have tea with you in the drawing-room, and Father said perhaps he would be back from the office by half-past five, and he promised the next time he was home early that he'd go through my museum and help me to label all the shells, and that would be far nicer than a party."

"I thought you enjoyed playing with other children, dear," said Mrs. Lindsay rather gravely.

"I don't think I do," replied Sylvia. "It's so hard to make them play properly. They never can imagine things. When I tell the Waltons there's a witch in the cupboard, they look inside and say there isn't anybody there. They can't understand that you can pretend things until they seem quite real, and yet it's only pretending. When I told Beatrice and Nora Jackson that I knew a dragon lived in their coal house, they went and told their governess, and she said she was afraid I was not a truthful child!"

"That was too bad!"

"Yes, wasn't it? I'd rather not go to tea at the Jacksons'. Mrs. Jackson always says I don't eat half enough. Beatrice and Nora have four thick slices of plain bread and butter before they begin with jam or honey, and great basins of bread-and-milk or soup plates full of porridge for breakfast. I think it's rather rude of people to make remarks on what you eat when you go out to tea. Don't you?"

"It just depends," said Mrs. Lindsay.

"Well, they don't like it themselves," continued Sylvia. "The last time the Jacksons were here, when their nurse came to fetch them I told her I was sure they had enjoyed themselves, for Nora had eaten four buns and three sponge cakes, and Alfie had ten jam sandwiches and a piece of Madeira cake. I thought it would please her to hear they had had so much, when they scold me for eating so little, but she went quite red in the face and said they were not greedy children anyway."

"It was hardly a happy remark, I am afraid," said Mrs. Lindsay. "You will be wiser next time."

"People in books are so much nicer than real people," said Sylvia plaintively. "If I could have a party and invite Little Lord Fauntleroy, and Alice in Wonderland, and Rose out of *Eight Cousins* and Rowena and Rebecca, and perhaps Queen Guinevere, and Hereward the Wake, then I should really enjoy myself."

"Can't you pretend that your friends are heroes and heroines of romance?" said Mrs. Lindsay, pinching Sylvia's pale cheeks. "You're so fond of make-believe that it ought to be quite easy to imagine them princes and princesses."

"It's not so easy as you'd think," replied Sylvia, shaking her head. "I make up lovely stories about them sometimes, and they just go and spoil it all. I played one afternoon that Effie was an enchanted princess, shut up in a magic garden; but she kept on eating green apples instead of simply looking lovely among the flowers, and when I put a wreath of roses round her hair she said it had earwigs and spiders in it, and she pulled it off. I didn't dare to tell her what I was playing, because she laughs so, but I began a piece of poetry about her, only it's never got beyond the first verse. Then there's that boy who lives in the house with the green railings down the road. I don't know his name, but he has blue eyes and very light curly hair. Once I played for a whole week that he was Sir Galahad--he's exactly like the picture Father showed me in that big book on the drawing-room table; but just when I'd made up my mind that he was starting off to find the Holy Grail, he threw a snowball at me, and trod hard on Lassie's tail on purpose. Somehow I never could manage to think of him as Sir Galahad after that. Now, Mother, don't laugh!"

"It would be rather difficult, I own," said Mrs. Lindsay, trying to straighten her face. "I'm afraid you made an unfortunate choice in your knight."

"It's just as bad," continued Sylvia, "if you pretend you're somebody out of a book yourself. So much depends upon other people. I was Rowena in *Ivanhoe* yesterday. I had to be rather haughty; because, you see, I was a Saxon princess, and everybody was accustomed to obey my slightest wish. But Miss Holt didn't understand it in the least; she said if I spoke to her again like that she should send me out of the room. So I had to be Peter Pan instead, and Miss Holt asked me if I had taken leave of my senses. She was really quite angry with me."

"I don't wonder. It doesn't do to mix up pretending with your lessons. Do you know, it isn't raining nearly so fast now, and I certainly hear a cab coming up the drive. I believe some of your friends are arriving after all to have tea with

you."

"Why, so they are!" exclaimed Sylvia, jumping up and running to the window which commanded a view of the front door and steps. "What a nuisance! It's Effie and May, and they've brought the little Carsons with them. They'll have to play in the schoolroom, and they always want my old dolls' house. I've put it away in the cupboard, and now I suppose I shall have to rummage it out again. It's too bad! I thought they wouldn't ask for it if we played in the garden. Don't you think I might say I can't get it?"

"Oh, no, dear! If it will give them pleasure you must certainly let them have it. Run along quickly, and open the hall door to welcome them. It is very kind of Mrs. Walton to send them in spite of the rain."

Sylvia went, but not too fast or too willingly. She was not at all pleased to see her guests, and would much have preferred the afternoon to herself.

"I never thought you'd come," she began, as the children sprang quickly from the cab and ran up the steps into the porch.

"We were so dreadfully disappointed," said Effie. "We'd been watching the weather all day. May nearly cried when it didn't clear up, and Mother said it would be quite as disappointing for you, and she thought we could play indoors; so she telephoned for a cab, and we called for Bab and Daisy on our way, and brought them with us." So saying she led in the two little mites in question, who were beaming with smiles at their unexpected drive.

"Oh! our shoes!" cried May; "I've left them in the cab and the man's driving away. Stop! Stop!" And she rushed out wildly into the rain.

The coachman drew up, and, dismounting from his box, gave her the parcel, and she hurried in before Mrs. Lindsay had finished saying good afternoon to the other children.

"We're goin' to play wiv the dolly house," announced Daisy as Sylvia took her hand to lead her upstairs.

"And all the lickle chairs and tables," added Bab, as her fat legs toiled after.

Sylvia said nothing. She was annoyed, for the dolls' house had been a favourite toy. Though she was now too old to care to play with it, she liked to keep its treasures intact, and feared Bab's and Daisy's small fingers might work havoc among the miniature furniture and dainty glass tea services. She had no brothers and sisters of her own to spoil her things, or interfere with any of her plans or games, no one, in fact, to consider except her all-important little self, and she was so accustomed to keep the schoolroom as her special kingdom that it put her out to be obliged to share it even for one afternoon. She helped, however, to take off the Carsons' hats and coats, to unbutton their boots, to tie Bab's hair ribbon, which had come off, and to fasten May's pinafore, then escorted her unwelcome visitors downstairs again with the best grace she could. It was not half so interesting to have tea in the dining-room with four children, she thought, as alone in the drawing-room with her mother, a privilege which, owing to Mrs. Lindsay's many social duties, she did not often get the chance to enjoy, and she wished with all her heart that either Mrs. Walton or the cabstand had not been on the telephone.

If Sylvia were an ungracious hostess, however, her small friends at any rate seemed thoroughly determined to enjoy themselves. They much appreciated the honey, the raisin buns, and the iced sponge cake, and were especially delighted with the crackers which Mrs. Lindsay brought out at the conclusion of the meal.

"Crackers, though it's not Christmas!" cried Effie in astonishment.

"Why not?" said Mrs. Lindsay. "They are as much fun now as in December, I think. Here are two for each of you, and you may take them upstairs to the schoolroom and pull them when you get there."

There was a general stampede for the stairs, the four guests racing up with great enthusiasm, while Sylvia followed leisurely behind, debating in her mind whether it would be possible to lose the key of the cupboard, and thus preserve her dolls' house from meddlesome hands.

"The crackers will keep them busy for a short time," she reflected, "and then I can just turn the key in the lock and hide it away behind the bookcase. I'll give them the picture puzzles and a box of bricks instead."

It is all very well, however, to make plans, but it is quite a different thing to carry them out. The young Carsons knew perfectly where the dolls' house was kept; they ran in front of Sylvia into the schoolroom, and, flinging their crackers on to a chair, had opened the cupboard and were begging her to lift down the coveted toy long before she had any opportunity of locking the door, so there was nothing for her to do but yield to their request, though she certainly felt decidedly cross. She placed the dolls' house on the floor in a corner of the room, and, having rescued one or two of the

most fragile ornaments, left Bab and Daisy to amuse themselves and turned her attention to Effie and May. They were jolly, rollicking little girls of eight and nine, who liked to run about playing boisterous games much better than sitting quietly reading books. They had soon pulled their crackers and taken out the whistles and locket which they contained, and now began to ask eagerly what they should do next.

"Can't we play 'Tig' on the landing?" said Effie.

"Or Tom Tiddler's Ground?" suggested May.

"There aren't enough of us," said Sylvia. "Besides, I don't expect Mother would like it. The last time we played there we broke the big Japanese jar, and Father was so angry about it. You haven't seen these puzzle maps. Wouldn't it be fun to try and fit them together?"

"No, thanks; too like lessons," said May, pulling a face.

"We hate geography," added Effie.

"Would you care for Halma?"

"Don't know how to play," replied Effie.

"I could soon show you."

"Oh, we don't like learning new games!" said May. "I wish the Fergussons had come."

"I'm thankful they didn't," thought Sylvia, who was not at all in a nice temper to entertain her friends. "What a bother Effie and May are! I wish they'd do something by themselves and not trouble me. I don't mean to show them my museum, even if they ask. Shall I get out the bagatelle?" she added aloud. "You know how to play that at any rate."

"Oh, yes!" cried the little girls, helping her to lift the large board and unfold it on the table. "That's ever such fun! Don't you remember last time we made bigger scores than you did?"

"I forget," answered Sylvia. "But I think it's a better game for two than three; you get more turns."

"Aren't you going to play then?" exclaimed Effie.

"No, I shall only spoil it for you. Besides, I have to look after Bab and Daisy. You start and I'll come and score for you presently."

The small Carsons were so happily employed with the dolls' house that there was not the slightest need for Sylvia to neglect her other visitors on their behalf. Making them the excuse, however, she allowed Effie and May to grow interested in their game, then, creeping quietly out of the room, she fled downstairs to the study, where she had left *Ivanhoe* in the big armchair, and, returning with it to the schoolroom, she settled herself in the window seat, and was soon so absorbed in the storming of Torquilstone Castle that she forgot the very existence of her companions.

Now, as fate would have it, the rain cleared up sufficiently for Aunt Louisa to come about five o'clock and pay a call upon Mrs. Lindsay. If she had not arrived on that particular day, and at that particular hour, it is quite probable that the events recorded in this story might never have happened at all. Sylvia was not sure whether she altogether liked Aunt Louisa, who, though kind on the whole, and liberal in the matter of birthday and Christmas presents, had a very keen pair of eyes that seemed to notice directly when people were selfish, or conceited, or trying to show off, and saw through excuses and humbug in a moment. She considered Sylvia spoilt, and did not hesitate to say so; but, on the other hand, she proved so good-natured when her niece spent a day at Laurel Bank, and treated her as such a sensible, almost grown-up person, that Sylvia invariably enjoyed herself, and looked forward to going again.

It was about half-past five when Mrs. Lindsay and Aunt Louisa, having finished their chat in the drawing-room, walked upstairs to take a peep into the schoolroom and see how the children were getting on. They found Bab and Daisy seated on the floor, much occupied in giving the dolls' house babies their evening baths, while Effie and May were playing bagatelle by themselves with a good deal of noise and shouting.

"And where is Sylvia?" asked Aunt Louisa, looking round in some astonishment for the absent hostess.

"She's there," said Effie, pointing to the window seat. "She doesn't care about playing. Go on, May, it's your turn."

Mrs. Lindsay walked across to the window, and, drawing aside the curtains, disclosed Sylvia, squatting on her heels like a Turk, in the corner of the seat, entirely taken up with the adventures of the black knight and his outlawed companions. Her mother pulled the book from her hand.

"Sylvia!" she exclaimed. "Don't you know it is extremely rude of you to sit reading and leave your guests to amuse themselves? Get up this minute!"

Sylvia obeyed with a very red face. She had never expected to be caught like this.

"They were quite happy without----" she began, but meeting Aunt Louisa's eye she wisely left the sentence unfinished.

"I'm sure they would enjoy some game you could all play together," said Mrs. Lindsay. "If we push the table aside there will be plenty of room for Blind Man's Buff."

"Oh! Yes! Yes!" cried the little Carsons, bundling the dolls back into the dolls' house, and dancing up and down with excitement, while Effie and May, equally pleased, helped Sylvia to put away the bagatelle.

"Let Bab be blind man," begged Daisy.

"And turn me round three times," added Bab, beginning to revolve already in delighted anticipation.

Both Mrs. Lindsay and Aunt Louisa were kind enough to join in the game, and to institute several others afterwards, so that for an hour the children had a most enjoyable romp, which continued until the Carsons' nurse arrived to take Bab and Daisy home. Even Sylvia raced about when she found her elders doing the same, and grew so rosy in the effort that her mother looked at her pink cheeks with approval.

"Goodbye!" called the four small visitors, when at last hats, coats, and boots had been put on, and they all hurried to start before a threatening cloud brought down the rain again.

"They seem to have had a lovely time, and enjoyed themselves so much, m'm," said the nurse, gathering up the parcels of shoes and taking Daisy's hand.

"Did you enjoy it, Sylvia dear?" asked Mrs. Lindsay, as they stood in the porch watching Bab's plump legs waddling along the drive in an effort to keep pace with Effie's longer strides.

"No," replied Sylvia, "not nearly so much as having tea with you."

"Why don't you care for your friends, sweetheart?"

"Because I like being with you and Father better. That's the very whole of the reason. Anybody else is such a bother!"

Mrs. Lindsay smoothed the fluffy hair, which was hanging in some disorder after an uproarious game of Fox and Goose, and bent down to kiss the little face that turned up so readily to meet her own.

"My precious pet!" she murmured fondly.

But Aunt Louisa shook her head.

CHAPTER II

An Important Decision

"GORDON," said Mrs. Lindsay to her husband on the following evening, when he was enjoying his after-dinner cup of coffee in the drawing-room, and she judged him to be in a suitable mood to discuss knotty problems, "I am not at all happy about Sylvia."

Mr. Lindsay paused to take an extra lump of sugar, and to help himself deliberately to some more cream.

"Why, what's wrong with the child?" he asked. "I thought she was looking much as usual to-day."

"She looks quite well," replied Mrs. Lindsay; "but I don't feel satisfied, all the same."

"Try a fresh tonic," suggested her husband, stretching himself lazily in his chair as he spoke.

"A tonic would be of absolutely no use."

"Then you had better send for Dr. Fergusson to-morrow, and let him see her; it's as well to take things in time."

"It's not a case for Dr. Fergusson, yet it has been distressing me for some months. Louisa was here yesterday, and she noticed it also, and spoke to me most seriously about it."

"Really, Blanche, you alarm me! What's the matter with Sylvia? If Dr. Fergusson can do no good we must take her to a specialist."

"It's not her body, Gordon, it's her mind. She's a dear child, but she's growing so old-fashioned and sedate, she's more like a little old woman than a girl of scarcely eleven. Louisa says it's most unhealthy."

"I wish Louisa would mind her own business," said Mr. Lindsay, frowning; "I can't see anything amiss with Sylvia. I think her old-fashioned ways are particularly charming."

"Yet they are not natural at her age. She's living in a world of dreams and make-believe. Books are all very well, but it's not good for her to be entirely buried in them."

"She has a strong imagination," replied Mr. Lindsay, "a thing Louisa can never appreciate. She inherits it from me, and I fully sympathize with her funny little pretendings."

"Yes, when pretendings don't take the place of real life. Sylvia has been such a solitary child, so accustomed to play by herself and make her own amusements, that she has almost lost the desire for young companions."

"I thought she had plenty of friends. Didn't I meet some of them going away yesterday as I returned home?"

"Yes, but she doesn't enjoy having them here. I should be sorry, Gordon, to believe our darling was selfish."

"That she most certainly is not!" declared Mr. Lindsay emphatically.

"Not with us, but I'm afraid she doesn't like her small plans disturbed by other children. She's not very ready to give up her own way; indeed I was obliged to scold her yesterday for reading a book instead of entertaining her visitors."

"She gets absorbed in her books."

"Too much so. She needs to be made to run about more. She's such a gentle little mouse, she always prefers quiet games to a romp. It's not healthy for a child to live continually with only grown-up people. We've thought so earnestly about her education, and she has been taught so carefully and well, that I really believe we've given her a kind of mental indigestion!"

Mr. Lindsay laughed.

"She's very bright for her age," he said. "She can talk about botany and antiquities as well or better than many an older person. I'd rather have Sylvia for a companion than half the people I know."

"But she mustn't turn out a prig, and I fear she's in sad danger of doing so if we don't take matters in hand at once. Intellectual interests are delightful, and we want her to have them, but they hardly supply the place of tennis and rounders at eleven years of age. She's far too thin and pale and fragile looking. Louisa says we have been developing her mind at the expense of her body."

Mr. Lindsay groaned and wrinkled up his forehead into lines and puckers.

"What does Louisa propose that we should do then?" he enquired. "I've no doubt she has some plan to suggest."

"She thinks Sylvia ought to be sent away to school."

"Then there is plenty of time to talk it over before Christmas."

"Not at Christmas. At once. The September term has only just begun, and it's not at all too late."

"Whew! But what about Miss Holt? We couldn't pack her off at a moment's notice."

"Her brother's wife died during the summer holidays, and she would be only too delighted to go to keep house for him in Derbyshire and look after his motherless children. I believe she didn't wish to return here, only she didn't like to break faith with me. We needn't take her into consideration."

"Then you actually propose to send Sylvia away immediately?"

"I am sure it would be for the best."

"But where?"

"Louisa knows the very school; Miss Kaye's at Aberglyn, where Bertha Harding was educated. It seems satisfactory in every way, and the Welsh mountain air would suit Sylvia; she looked so well after that fortnight we spent at Llandudno."

"I should like to know a little more about it first. Sylvia is such an unusual child, and would be miserable if she were popped down amongst an unsympathetic number of girls and a set of teachers who didn't understand her."

"Miss Kaye is a clever woman. I think her system seems excellent."

"I don't wish Sylvia to grow up a kind of walking dictionary, with her mind so crammed full of Greek, Latin, and Euclid that there's no room for an original idea."

"She won't there. The girls lead a very rational, healthy life, with plenty of time for games and outdoor exercise."

"Neither do I want her conversation to consist of nothing but golf and hockey, like some of the young ladies of my acquaintance, whom I'm afraid I scarcely admire."

"Gordon, how perverse you are! Louisa shall talk to you herself, and tell you everything about the school that you can possibly wish to know. She's coming to-morrow, when we can discuss the question thoroughly, and in the meantime we must take care that Sylvia doesn't get the least idea of what is in the wind."

If our little heroine could only have known the consultations which were taking place about her future she would no doubt have acted very differently on the following day; but as she was quite unaware that any change was proposed, she naturally went on in her accustomed way, with the result that her father, who was regarding her from a new standpoint, noticed a good many things to which he had previously been absolutely blind. In the first place she was dainty at breakfast; refused her egg because it did not happen to be a brown one, left her toast when she found that the crust was burnt, and helped herself to an enormous serving of marmalade, which she did not finish. She argued hotly with Miss Holt about some trifling point, and even took upon herself to correct her mother. She never passed anything at table without being asked, jumped up and began to read a book before the others had finished, pretended not to hear when she was requested to ring the bell, and had to be told twice that it was nine o'clock before she would go upstairs to the schoolroom.

"It's certainly high time we sent her away," thought Mr. Lindsay. "I'm afraid, with the best of intentions, we've completely spoilt her. Louisa's right. She needs to be among other girls, to have her corners rubbed off. At school there's no allowance made for fads and fancies, and she would be obliged to fall in with the general rules. It will do her good to be of a little less importance than she is at home. Strange that I never noticed all this before!"

When Aunt Louisa arrived, therefore, in the evening, prepared to encounter a great many objections to her suggestion, she was surprised to find that her brother agreed with her so easily, and, after listening to her detailed accounts of Miss Kaye's excellent arrangements, consented quite readily that Sylvia should be sent there as soon as the necessary preliminaries had been settled and her clothing should be considered in due order.

"A week will be ample time for that," said Aunt Louisa. "Miss Saunders will soon run her up a school frock, and you could send anything else she requires afterwards, Blanche. It would be a pity for her to lose more of the term than we can help. She won't like to find herself behind-hand in the classes, and now you have made up your minds it will be

better not to let her have too long to think it over."

"I don't know what Sylvia will say!" sighed Mrs. Lindsay, who half repented of parting with her darling. "I'm afraid she will never forgive us."

"I shouldn't ask her," replied Aunt Louisa firmly. "She will like it very much when once she gets there, and the improvement which it will make in her is well worth a few tears at the start. I beg, Blanche, that you will not be foolish now, and stand in the way of the child's real good."

"I'll try not," said poor Mrs. Lindsay, wiping her eyes; "but when you've only the one, and she's never been away from you before, it seems so hard to let her go."

"Oh, you'll get over that! I felt just the same when Cuthbert first went to school, and I'm quite accustomed to it now. We can't expect to keep our children always tied to our apron strings."

"I suppose not, but boys are different from girls, and Sylvia has been such a pet. If she's not happy at Heathercliffe House she'll simply make herself ill with fretting, and the cure will be worse than the disease."

"I'm sure she will not do so. She will be so interested in her work and her new companions that, after the first few days of homesickness are over, she will settle down and like her fresh life immensely."

"You really think so?" said Mrs. Lindsay. "Well, the decision is made and I suppose we must keep to it now; but I'm dreading the moment when I shall have to break the news to her."

To Sylvia the announcement came as a great shock. She was totally unprepared for it, and the idea of such a sudden change was anything but a welcome one. When she fully understood that in one short week she was to be banished to a strange place, among people whom she had never seen, she clung to her mother in such a passion of tears that if it had not been for the thought of what Aunt Louisa would say, Mrs. Lindsay would have yielded and have begged her husband to keep the child at home after all. As it was, she did her best to soothe her, and to paint the future in as bright colours as her fancy could depict.

"I'll never be happy again, never!" sobbed Sylvia. "I shall be as miserable as Evelyn in *The Little Heiress* or Rosalie in *The Orphan Cousin*. They both broke their hearts until the last chapter, and so shall I."

"Nonsense, darling, you must try to be brave! Heathercliffe House is a most charming school, and I'm sure you will be happy. You'll find ever so many nice little girls of about your own age who will be ready to make friends with you, and there will be plenty of fun going on as well as lessons. I want you to make some more friends."

"I have Effie and May."

"They're too young for you. You would get on better with girls rather older than yourself, I believe. It will be quite a new thing for you to be one of a class. I'm sure you will like Miss Kaye."

"If she's like the mistress in *Sara Crewe* I shall hate her," declared Sylvia.

"But she's not. She's very kind and not at all prim. She takes the girls the most delightful country walks, and sometimes they go down to the beach. You're so fond of the seaside, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Sylvia doubtfully, "when it's holidays, and you and Father are there. I shall have to pretend I'm an outlaw or a hostage, like Richard in *The Little Duke*, and that my subjects are busy fighting to keep my kingdom while I'm away."

"Imagine anything you wish, dear; but I don't suppose you will need to amuse yourself with pretendings at Aberglyn. You will find some fresh books there, at any rate; there is a large school library."

"I'd like that. But oh, Mother, I shall have my birthday at school!"

"I'm sorry for that; but we can send you your presents, and you shall have your party when you come home. Now, won't you be my brave girl, and cheer up? I want to begin to decide what things you're to take with you, and what must be left behind."

So much had to happen during Sylvia's last brief week at home that from morning till night the days seemed completely full. Her usual lessons with her governess were given up, and the schoolroom turned for a time into a kind of outfitting establishment. Miss Saunders, the dressmaker, was installed at the table with her sewing machine, working at a school frock and a new autumn coat, while her mother and Miss Holt between them hastily finished winter underclothes.

"We don't know how soon the weather may turn cold," said Mrs. Lindsay, "and it's as well to send everything at once if we can, though I expect the thick nightdresses will have to follow."

Sylvia found it really rather exciting, and if it had not been for the thought of parting from her father and mother she would have quite enjoyed being a person of such great importance. It was decidedly gratifying to have Aunt Louisa coming in every day to consult about her clothes and assist in choosing her new hat; she had never taken so much notice of her little niece before, except occasionally to express disapproval, and Sylvia felt that at last her aunt was giving her the consideration which was only her due. Then the shopping expeditions were great fun; it seemed nice to buy yards of hair ribbon at a time, and several pairs of boots and gloves, as well as a dozen pocket handkerchiefs, a mackintosh, and a pair of goloshes. Miss Holt was kept busy marking her new possessions, stitching tapes on stockings, and lengthening her winter petticoats.

She had quite a number of presents given her to take to school. Aunt Louisa surprised her one day with a lovely green Russia-leather writing case, fitted inside with notepaper, envelopes, postcards, and everything she would be likely to need for her letters home, including a pen with an ivory handle, and six gilt nibs. There was a key that would lock and unlock it, and her initials were stamped in gold letters on the top flap. To say that she was pleased would hardly express her satisfaction. Uncle George sent her a paintbox—not the ordinary children's kind which she had always had before, but one with china pans of good colours and proper sable brushes that had the most delicate points and would go neatly into corners that her old camel-hair ones would have certainly smudged. Her mother gave her a beautiful new Bible, bound in dark-purple morocco, with many illustrations of Eastern scenes, and maps and a concordance at the end.

"You must read a little piece every day, darling, as you do at home, though I shall not be there to explain it to you. Miss Holt has made you this pretty marker to keep your place, and I have put a sprig of lavender at our favourite chapter."

Father had bought her a Prayer Book and hymnbook in a case to take to church on Sundays, and added a tiny purse in which to keep her collection money. Cousin Cuthbert sent a cedarwood pencil box containing a blue-handled penknife, several new lead pencils, an indiarubber, and an ink eraser; the cook made her a box of toffee, and the housemaid crocheted a toilet tidy to hang on her dressing table. A large new trunk had arrived, and stood in the spare bedroom all ready to be packed, and so many parcels were being delivered from various shops that it was quite an excitement to carry each fresh one upstairs to the schoolroom and open it.

"I hope Miss Kaye will find you as well on as other girls of your age," said Miss Holt anxiously, as she sorted out a few lesson books and some pieces of music for Sylvia to take with her. "Do remember that *aller* is an irregular verb! I should be so ashamed if you began '*j'alle, tu alles, il alle*,' as you did last week! I wish you would look up the dates of the kings and queens of England before you go, and your weights and measures. I'm afraid you are not very certain of some of them, especially square and cubic. I think you are pretty good at spelling, but I'm sure they will consider you write badly for nearly eleven years old; you don't hold your pen properly, and you make so many blots. I hope they won't ask you for the geography of Europe, for you've only learnt England and physical outlines; and when you play Clementi's second sonatina, don't forget that you always count the time wrong in the fourth bar. I have told you about it so often."

"All right, Miss Holt!" replied Sylvia, "I'll do my best, but I wish we could lose old Clementi; I do so hate the sonatinas. I hope my new teacher will give me some fresh pieces, and won't bother with the metronome. I think it's that which makes me count wrong. I'll tell her it's not your fault, anyway. Are you going to teach your nephews and nieces in Derbyshire?"

"No, they all attend a day school except the baby, who is too young for lessons. I shall have plenty to do in looking after them and the house. I hope you will be happy, Sylvia, in your new life. I have tried to ground you thoroughly, and any future teachers ought to find you fairly well-informed upon most subjects."

There was very little time left even for the final instructions which Miss Holt considered necessary; the days seemed literally to fly, and the last one came only too soon for all concerned. Effie and May called to say good-bye, much distressed at parting with their playfellow, and immensely impressed by the preparations, which Sylvia was secretly extremely proud of being able to show to them.

"You'll be too big to play with us when you come back," said Effie wistfully.

"No, I shan't," replied Sylvia, kissing them in a rather superior and patronizing manner. "I shall like to have you just as much at my Christmas party; but perhaps I shan't care to romp about quite in the same way, because, you see, when I come back I shall be eleven years old, and one of Miss Kaye's girls at Heathercliffe House."

CHAPTER III

The Third Class

HEATHERCLIFFE HOUSE was a large modern building which stood in its own grounds about a mile from the sea, and an equal distance from the railway station at Aberglyn. It looked bright and cheerful on the October afternoon when a cab containing Mrs. Lindsay and Sylvia turned in at the gate and drove slowly up the drive to the front door. Sylvia, gazing with eager eyes from the window, noticed the trim garden, the shrubbery of laurels and rhododendrons, the beds still gay with geraniums, and the smooth lawns where in the distance she could just catch a glimpse of girls playing tennis. As the cab passed under a big chestnut tree she saw a little girl of about her own age run rapidly to the top of a bank, and, hiding behind a broom bush, peep down with evident curiosity at the newcomers below. She was a bonny child with a creamy complexion, blue eyes, and thick, straight, brown hair, tied with a ribbon that at present hung over her left ear; she stared hard at Sylvia as the latter leaned out of the window, then, seeing Mrs. Lindsay in the background, she took fright and dashed away among the shrubs even more quickly than she had come.

"I wonder what her name is, and if I shall like her!" thought Sylvia. "She looks nice. Oh! There are some more of them!" as about half a dozen older girls paused in a game of croquet to glance at the cab, and several little ones, playing under a tree, pointed eagerly, for which they were evidently reprov'd by a teacher who was with them. There was no time, however, to see further; the cab had drawn up at the front steps, the cabman was ringing the bell, and Mrs. Lindsay was collecting small parcels and telling Sylvia to jump out first.

Sylvia felt very serious indeed when they were ushered into the drawing-room, and Miss Kaye came forward to meet them. She was a tall, pleasant-looking lady, still fairly young, with a fresh colour, brown eyes, and thick coils of smooth auburn hair. She had a brisk, cheerful manner, and was not in the least like the old-fashioned severe sort of mistress about whom Sylvia had read in *What Katy did at School* and *Sara Crewe*, and whom she had been expecting to see. She welcomed her new pupil kindly, and ordered tea to be brought in at once.

"Our usual schoolroom tea is at five o'clock," she said, "but to-day you shall have yours here, as I know you will wish to be with your mother as long as possible. Then, when you have seen your bedroom, and taken off your things, you will be ready to make friends with some of your companions."

Sylvia sat very solemnly during tea, listening to the talk between Miss Kaye and her mother, and though the mistress sometimes addressed a question to her she was much too shy to answer anything except "Yes" or "No". She was glad when the ordeal was over and Miss Kaye suggested that, as Mrs. Lindsay had only a short time left before she must return to the station, they would like to look through the school, and see both classrooms and dormitories.

When she tried afterwards to recall her first impressions of Heathercliffe House she had only a confused remembrance of clinging very tightly, almost desperately, to her mother's hand, as they were shown the neat bedrooms, the large empty playroom, the schoolrooms with their desks and blackboards, and took a peep into the dining-room where rows of girls of all ages were sitting round two long tables having tea. Then came the moment which she had been dreading from the beginning, that hurried last goodbye, that final hug as Mrs. Lindsay kissed her again and again and hastened down the steps into the cab, the rumble of the departing wheels, and the sudden sense that she was left alone in a school of more than thirty girls, and that she did not yet know one of them even by name. An overwhelming rush of homesickness swept over her, so bitter in its force that she almost cried out with the intensity of the pain; she stood still in the hall with the dazed expression of one newly awakened from a dream, turning a deaf ear to Miss Kaye's well-meant efforts at consolation, and longing only for some safe retreat where she might escape to have a little private weep, out of reach of watching eyes. Seeing the mistress pause to speak to a teacher who came at that instant from the dining-room, she seized the opportunity, and dived into the drawing-room, where she ran to the window to catch the last glimpse of the coachman's hat as he drove through the gate, and disappeared behind the trees and bushes which bordered the road. Miss Kaye did not follow her; perhaps long experience had taught her that it was sometimes best to leave new girls judiciously alone, and for a few minutes she stood playing absently with the tassel of the blind, and struggling hard to keep back her rising tears. Why had she been brought to school? Why had she not begged her mother to take her home with her? It was cruel to send her away. It was all Aunt Louisa's doing, she was sure. She could never make herself happy, and she should write to-night to her father and tell him so. Perhaps he might relent and come to fetch her.

"I shall be the most miserable girl in the school," she said to herself. "Far worse than Florence in *The New Pupil*; she only 'shed a few tears', and I'm going to cry quarts, I know I am."

She took out her handkerchief ready for the expected deluge, but life is often very different from what we propose,

and before she had time to do more than wipe away the first scalding drop she was startled by a voice at her elbow. Turning round hastily she found herself face to face with the little girl who had run to the top of the bank to peep at her as she came up the drive, and who now stood smiling in a particularly friendly fashion.

"Miss Kaye has sent me to take you to the playroom," she said. "We've just finished tea. You've had yours, haven't you? So come along."

"What's your name?" asked Sylvia, stuffing her handkerchief back into her pocket in a hurry, and blinking the remains of a drop off her eyelashes. She was too proud to care to be caught crying like a baby, and hoped her companion had not noticed.

"Linda Marshall. I know yours. Miss Kaye told us this morning. You're going to be in our class, and you're to sleep in my bedroom, because I'm the only one who hasn't got a room mate. Do come! Miss Kaye'll be cross if we're not quick. We're not allowed in the drawing-room at all, only she sent me in to fetch you."

"Do you like being here?" asked Sylvia, following her new friend with some deliberation.

"Sh! we mayn't speak in the hall! There, I can talk to you now we're down the passage. Yes, of course, I like it. Everyone does; we have such jolly times. Now come here," pausing with her hand on the door handle, "I want to go in quite suddenly and surprise them."

She flung the door open, and, with a giggle, announced "Miss Sylvia Lindsay", giving our heroine such a vigorous push forward that she nearly fell into the midst of a group of girls who were standing close by. There were six of them, and they had evidently been waiting to see the new arrival, though they pretended they were only finding some books and putting away their paintboxes. They looked steadily at Sylvia, but no one volunteered a remark, and the silence would have grown oppressive had not Linda come to the rescue. "Now then," she cried, "have you all gone dumb? Sylvia, this is our class. I'll tell you their names. Connie Camden, Hazel Prestbury, Marian and Gwennie Woodhouse, Nina Forster, and Jessie Ellis. There were only seven of us before, and you'll make eight. It's a much nicer number, because we can just get up a set of lancers by ourselves now, without one of the second class joining. I hope you know the lancers?"

"A little," said Sylvia, who felt rather overwhelmed by the six pairs of eyes fixed upon her.

"We'll soon teach you if you don't. The dancing lessons begin next week, and they are such fun. Miss Delaney is a perfect dear. We all adore her. I'm sure you'll think she's sweet; won't she, girls?"

"Of course she will," said Marian Woodhouse. "I ought to know, because I learnt from Miss Delaney before I came here. We're to have the tarantella this term."

"And a skirt dance," added Hazel Prestbury. "Have you brought an accordion-pleated dress with you for dancing?"

"I don't think so," replied Sylvia. "But Mother was going to send some of my clothes afterwards. I came away in rather a hurry."

"You're late though," said Connie Camden. "It's nearly three weeks since we started the term. We came back on the 14th of September."

"Why didn't you come then?" asked Nina Forster.

"I don't know. Father only decided to send me a week ago."

"Well, you can try to catch us up, but we've done twenty pages of the new history," said Marian Woodhouse, "and read the first canto of *Marmion*. We shall have to tell you the story."

"I know it, thank you," replied Sylvia. "I had it with my governess at home."

"Oh!" said Marian, looking rather disgusted. "But I don't suppose you took any of the notes, and Miss Arkwright explains it quite differently from anyone else. What sums are you at?"

"Weights and measures," said Sylvia.

"Why, we did those in the baby class! We're doing fractions now."

"We've only just begun them," said Linda. "Don't bother about lessons, Marian. We've barely ten minutes before prep, and I want to show Sylvia her locker."

The six children who, with Linda and Sylvia, made up Class III at Miss Kaye's, were all very much of an age. Hazel

Prestbury was the eldest; a tall fair girl of twelve, with regular features and a quantity of pretty light hair which fell below her waist, and of which she was exceedingly proud. She could be rather clever when she troubled to work, but as that did not often happen she rarely stood high in her form, though she was well advanced in music, and played better than many girls of thirteen and fourteen. Marian Woodhouse, only an inch shorter, had a good complexion, and curly ruddy hair plaited in a thick pigtail. So far she had easily kept head of the class, for she was bright, and such a good guesser that she often contrived to make Miss Arkwright think she knew more than was really the case. She liked to manage other people, to take the lead, and keep everybody up to the mark, and was more of a favourite with the teachers than she was with her companions. There could have been no greater contrast to her than her sister Gwennie, a round, rosy dumpling of a girl, so gentle and quiet and unassuming that she scarcely ever seemed to have an opinion of her own, being content to follow Marian blindly, whom she considered the cleverest person in the whole world. The girls often called the pair "Voice and Echo", because poor Gwennie so faithfully upheld everything which her elder sister said, no matter whether it proved right or wrong. Connie Camden was the jolliest little romp imaginable. She was not at all pretty, and wore her lank, colourless brown hair cut short like a boy's, but she had frank grey eyes, and though she was continually getting into scrapes, her honest, straightforward ways atoned for much that was lacking in other respects. She was one of a large family, and had three sisters in the school, all with the same reputation for endless jokes and high spirits. Nina Forster, a graceful, delicate-looking child of ten, spoilt by her weak mouth and indecisive chin, was generally lost in adoration of some favourite among the bigger girls. Her friendships were of the briefest, but very hot while they lasted, and she seemed able to change her affections so easily from one object to another that she had a different idol nearly every week. Jessie Ellis, whose plain, freckled little face could look almost pretty when she smiled, had been placed in the third class solely because she was too big to remain any longer in the Kindergarten. She was dull at lessons, having a poor memory and a lack of any power of grasping a subject; she was the despair of Miss Arkwright, and took her seat placidly at the bottom of the form as regularly as Marian Woodhouse occupied the top.

Sylvia was excused from preparation on this first evening, and was taken instead by Miss Coleman to unpack her box and arrange her drawers.

Heathercliffe House had been specially built for a school, and was so designed that, instead of long dormitories or curtained cubicles, there were rows of small bedrooms, each intended to accommodate two girls. The one which Sylvia was to share with Linda Marshall stood at the end of the upper corridor. It was a pretty little room with a pink paper, and a white-enamelled mantelpiece. The furniture was also in white enamel, and consisted of a washstand, two chests of drawers, and a large wardrobe fixed into the wall, containing two separate compartments with a drawer for best hats at the bottom of each. The beds had pink quilts to match the paper, the jugs and basins were white with pink rims, while even the mats on the dressing table were made of white muslin over pink calico.

Sylvia looked round with approval. She had expected school to be a bare, cheerless place, but this was as dainty as her own room at home. The walls were hung with pictures in oak frames, there was a small bookshelf beside each bed where Bibles and favourite volumes could be kept, and the mantelpiece was covered with tiny china cats, dogs, and other animals, which Miss Coleman said belonged to Linda.

It took some time to arrange Sylvia's possessions, for the mistress was very particular as to where they were put, and informed Sylvia that she would be expected to keep them exactly in that order, and her drawers would be examined once a week.

"Your dressing gown is to hang behind the door; there is a hook here for your bath towel, which, by the by, you are never to leave in the bathroom; your sponge must go in the lefthand sponge basket, and your bedroom slippers under this chair. Your coats must, of course, always be kept in the wardrobe, but your boots are to go downstairs. You may lay your writing case and paintbox on the chest of drawers, or keep them in your locker in the playroom."

"I'm glad I brought a white nightdress case," thought Sylvia; "it looks much nicer on the pink bed than the blue one Mother nearly packed instead. When I've put out my photos it will feel more homey. I'll write to Mother to-morrow and tell her all about it."

When at last everything had been tidily set in its right place, and a servant had carried the empty box to the boxroom, Miss Coleman took Sylvia to the playroom, and, giving her a book, told her she might read until her companions came to join her. The girls of the third class did preparation and practising until seven, after which they were allowed half an hour's recreation until supper. They had the playroom to themselves, as the little ones had gone to bed by that time, and the elder girls had a separate sitting-room of their own. Precisely as the clock struck seven Linda Marshall, Hazel Prestbury, Connie Camden, and Nina Forster came tearing in.

"I thought we'd find you here," cried Linda. "We're just through prep., but I don't know my history in the least. Do you, Hazel?"

"Not a morsel. Miss Arkwright will scold to-morrow. It's dreadfully hard, though; I don't suppose anybody will know it properly."

"Except Marian," said Nina.

"Oh, yes, Marian! She'll scrape through somehow. She always does. Look here, Sylvia! If you're clever, I wish you'd take down Marian Woodhouse. We're quite tired of seeing her always top."

"She's so conceited about it," said Connie Camden.

"She thinks no one else can do anything but herself," said Nina Forster.

"Yes, do try, Sylvia," said Linda; "it would be lovely if you got above her. It would do her ever so much good."

"Oh, do!" pleaded the others.

"Why don't you try yourselves?" asked Sylvia.

"Oh, we can't; it's no use!" said Connie; "but you look clever, and I'm sure you'll be able to learn things. She needn't think she's going to have it all her own way this term, because----"

"Hush, she's here!" said Hazel quickly, as the door opened, and Marian came in, carrying her music case, followed shortly afterwards by Gwennie and Jessie Ellis.

"What shall we play to-night?" asked Connie, who had gone rather red. "I don't think she heard," she whispered to Hazel.

"Word-making," said Marian decisively. "Here's the box."

"Oh no!" exclaimed Nina and Hazel, "that's a stupid game. We don't like it at all."

"Yes, you do. Don't be silly. Come along."

"I vote for telegrams," suggested Linda.

"No!" cried Marian.

"Yes!" cried the others in such overwhelming majority that Marian had to give way, though she looked anything but pleased.

Pencils and pieces of paper were collected, the eight girls seated themselves round the table, and each set to work to concoct a telegram the words of which must commence with twelve letters read out at random, in the order in which they were given. The letters were: T, C, M, I, C, D, C, I, W, E, A, B. They proved a little puzzling to fit together, but after much nibbling of pencils, and knitting of brows, everybody managed to get something written, and Marian volunteered to read them out.

The first happened to be Sylvia's. She had put: "Tell Charley Mother ill. Cook dead. Come immediately. Will explain all. Bertha."

"It's not bad," said Marian condescendingly, "but you don't know how to spell. You've written C-h-a-r-l-e-y."

"Well, and that's the right way too!" said Sylvia.

"Indeed it's not, it's C-h-a-r-l-i-e. Why, even Jessie Ellis knows that."

"I've seen it C-h-a-r-l-e-y in a book," objected Sylvia, who meant to fight her own battles.

"Then it must have been a misprint."

"I believe you can spell it both ways," said Hazel, "just like Lily or Lillie."

"Then it's old-fashioned, and my way's the best," declared Marian, who loved to argue.

"Oh, get on and never mind!" cried Linda. "We want to hear the other telegrams. What does it matter how we spell them?"

At half-past seven a tray with glasses of milk and plates of bread-and-butter and biscuits was brought into the room, and, when supper was finished, Mercy Ingledew, the monitress, came to see that all went off to their bedrooms, going upstairs with them to help to plait their hair and superintend the due brushing of teeth and the tidy disposal of clothes.

From the beginning it had seemed so new and strange and exciting that Sylvia had not yet found time for the tears which she had fully intended to shed, and it was only when she was in bed and the light turned out that she suddenly remembered how homesick she was. Even then the fresh events kept mixing themselves up with her regrets, and as she mopped her cheeks with her damp pocket handkerchief she thought: "It's much more interesting than I expected. I shall like Linda. But Marian Woodhouse needn't think she's going to teach me everything. I dare say I can learn lessons as well as she does. It would be lovely if I could be head of the class. I'm going to try and try just as hard as I possibly can, and then I could write to Mother and tell her I was top."

And with this meritorious resolution she fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

A First Day at School

THERE were thirty-three girls at Heathercliffe House, and they were divided into four forms. Miss Kaye herself taught the first class, Miss Barrett the second, Miss Arkwright the third, and Miss Coleman the Kindergarten, while Mademoiselle took French and Needlework, and Miss Denby the music, a few elder girls, however, learning from a master, who came twice a week to give lessons.

Sylvia found that she very soon settled down into the ordinary routine of her new life. Miss Kaye was kind, and tried to make school seem as much like home as possible. There were a certain number of clearly defined rules, but on the whole the pupils were allowed a good deal of liberty, which she trusted to their sense of honour not to abuse. Four of the eldest girls were monitresses, responsible for the behaviour of the third and fourth forms, and the younger ones were encouraged to come to them with their troubles or difficulties.

"You see, telling a monitress isn't like telling a teacher," said Linda, "and Mercy Ingledew's so nice she never makes mischief. I'm glad she's on our landing instead of Kathleen Gilchrist."

To Linda Sylvia had been attracted at once, and when she found that her room-mate liked the same occupations and the same books as herself, had read *Eight Cousins* and *The Little Duke* and was just beginning *Ivanhoe*, she felt the friendship was sealed. Linda was certainly a very different companion from Effie and May or any of the other children whom Sylvia had known at home. She seemed so much older and more sensible, and was interested in many things which she was only too pleased to explain to her new friend.

"You must come and see our gardens," she said on the first morning, when lessons were over and the girls were amusing themselves in the grounds. "They're over here at the other side of the lawn. We may each have a small one of our own or share a double one. They don't look very nice now, because of course we couldn't take care of them in the holidays and the weeds grew so dreadfully, but it's getting time to dig them up and plant bulbs. This is mine. There isn't much in it now the annuals are over. If you like I'll give it up and join at a larger one with you."

"That would be jolly," said Sylvia, "if there's one to spare."

"Oh yes! Nobody has that big double one by the cucumber frame. Shall we begin now to weed, and on Saturday we can move out any plants we want and decide what we'll put in it. Come along for the gardening tools. I shall have to lend you mine."

The tools were kept in a shed at the back of the house. Linda had a dear little set of spade, rake, hoe, trowel, and basket, so the pair set to work at once upon the new patch of ground.

"Please dig carefully," said Linda, "in case we come across any treasures. This piece belonged to Ellie Turner and Sophy Hardman, and they may have left something in it. Yes, I believe that's a clump of daffodils. I remember they had some, and there was a root of forget-me-not in the corner if no one else has taken it away."

"Couldn't we do anything special with our garden?" asked Sylvia.

"What do you mean by special?" said Linda.

"Something that would be different from anybody else's. Couldn't we put our names in flowers?"

"We might sow them in mustard and cress in the spring."

"Yes, but now. Suppose we put Linda at one end and Sylvia at the other in white stones."

"Oh, that would be lovely! What a glorious idea! We'll borrow Sadie Thompson's wheelbarrow and do it at once. How did you think of such a jolly thing? I wonder where Sadie is. We'll go and look for her."

It was a vain search, however, for Sadie could not be found, and nobody appeared to know where she was; so after hunting for some time Linda gave it up.

"What a nuisance!" she cried. "I shall take it out without asking her; we really can't wait. I don't suppose she'll mind. We shan't do it any harm." And she trundled the little barrow out of the shed and wheeled it to the farther end of the back carriage drive, where she thought they might find some stones.

Heathercliffe House had the most delightful garden. In front were two large lawns, an upper one used for croquet

and a lower one for tennis. Between the two was a rosery where a great many beautiful roses were still blooming, although it was now October.

"On Miss Kaye's birthday," said Linda, "we always make her a garland and put it on her head. She laughs, but she wears it for a little while and it looks so nice."

The front carriage drive was well rolled and kept very neatly, but the back one was just like a country lane; there were thick trees on each side with grass and wild flowers growing between, and in a corner near the gate was a small disused quarry, with high, rocky sides covered with gorse bushes and long brambles. Linda could not have chosen a better place to find stones; there were any number lying about, and though they were not white ones, they were a very light grey colour. There were a few blackberries still remaining on the brambles, but the ripest hung far out of reach and were quite impossible to pick, though Sylvia scratched herself in a vain attempt.

"It's no use. I'd best give them up and stick to the stones," she said. "If we ever go down to the beach we might bring back some shells too. Do you find any here?"

"Yes, lots, at one particular place, pink and white and yellow ones. They'd look pretty as an edging, but it would take a fearful long time to fetch enough to go far. I expect we shall need a great many barrows of stones before we can make both our names. I wouldn't pick up too small ones if I were you. There, I can't possibly wheel any more, so we'd better start."

The barrow was heavy and they took it in turns. It seemed a long way all round the back drive, through the rosery, and along the apple-tree avenue till they reached their own garden and tipped the stones down in a heap. A very small pile it looked, too, only sufficient for about three letters, and they sighed to think of the number of journeys that would be needed before their great scheme was complete. Off they went again, however, to the quarry and refilled the barrow as fast as they could.

"There can't be very much time before dinner," said Linda, "though I haven't heard the first bell yet. We must get on as quickly as we can, because I don't know what I should do if there wasn't time to put Sadie's barrow away. We have to run in the very second we hear the bell, and wash our hands."

"It's full enough now," said Sylvia. "I'll start with it first. Don't jog me or I shall upset it."

"I think we might make a short cut," suggested Linda. "Instead of walking all round the drive and the avenue we'll go straight through the shrubbery, it will take off an enormous corner and save us the hill by the rosery. We're not supposed to go there, but no one will notice."

They plunged therefore under the trees, wheeling the little barrow with some difficulty over the grass and among the rhododendrons, and were just getting in sight of the lawn when Linda suddenly stopped and clutched Sylvia by the arm.

"Look!" she cried. "There's Sadie Thompson coming with Gertie Warburton. What will she say when she finds we've taken French leave with her barrow? She'll be ever so cross. Give it me quick and we'll rush over here amongst the bushes. Perhaps they won't see us."

She seized the handles from Sylvia's grasp and they scuttled as fast as they could under the over-hanging boughs of a particularly big rhododendron, which appeared to offer a safe retreat.

"Quick, quick, they're looking!" cried Linda, bending low to avoid the branches and scrambling farther under the bush. "Hullo! Why! Oh! I say! What's happened?" She might well exclaim, for to her extreme astonishment the wheelbarrow suddenly seemed to plunge into the ground, and she saw before her nothing but the tips of the handles standing out from among a quantity of dead and withered leaves.

"How very peculiar!" she said. "There must be a hole here. Why, it's a sort of pool, I believe. Look, it's all horrid black mud and water under the dead leaves. What a disgusting mess the barrow is in! How are we to get it out?"

"We've lost all our stones," said Sylvia, kneeling at the edge and breaking off a stick to poke into the muddy depths below. "What a queer place it is!"

"I don't mind the stones, because we can find some more, but I do mind the barrow. Even if we fish it out, how are we ever to wash it? Sadie will be most dreadfully angry, and we shall get into such a scrape. We aren't really allowed to borrow each other's things without asking, and if Sadie turns nasty, and tells, and Miss Kaye hears about it, I don't know what may happen."

"Can't we pull it out and take it to the back drive again, and bring a watering can to wash it with?" said Sylvia.

"We might, but it's so hard to get it. When I tug it only seems to flop in deeper."

"Let me try."

"You can if you like, but I think the stones are weighing it down."

"You go a little farther on then, and let me come to where you are, so that I can reach properly."

Linda crawled cautiously along, feeling her way as she went.

"It seems to be a kind of sunk tub," she said. "Look, the edges are made of wood, and it's filled up with water. Oh, do be careful, Sylvia!" she exclaimed as the latter leaned over to grasp the handles.

"I'm all right. I've got them quite firmly. Now I'm going to give one good tug and a shake to get rid of the stones and then I expect it will come."

"Shall I hold your dress?" asked Linda, looking on with a shiver of apprehension.

"No, don't touch me! There, I can feel the stones go. It's coming! It's coming!"

And so it was, but far more suddenly than Sylvia had calculated; the unexpected jerk completely overbalanced her, and before she had time even to clutch at one of the rhododendron boughs she had fallen together with the barrow into the pool. Luckily it was not deep, and she was in no danger of drowning, but the mud was thick and black at the bottom, and as she scrambled hastily out she looked as if she had been dipped into an inkpot.

"Oh! Sylvia!" cried Linda, "What are we to do? We can't possibly help everyone finding out now. What a frightful mess you're in!"

"So I am," said Sylvia, looking ruefully at her spoilt clothes, and trying to wipe off some of the mud with her hands. "I didn't get the barrow up either."

"Oh, never mind the barrow; we can't stop for it now! There's the dressing bell. We shall have to go and tell somebody. You're simply streaming with mud, and we shall both be late for dinner."

Feeling very guilty, the pair crept out from under the bush and tried to dash across towards the side door, on the chance that Sylvia might be able to reach the bathroom and remove at least some of the traces of her dipping before anyone caught her. It was a vain hope, for in turning the corner they ran almost into the arms of Miss Coleman, who had come out to look for a missing member of her small flock.

"Sylvia Lindsay," she cried in horror, "you naughty child! Where have you been? And what have you done to yourself?"

"I don't know," replied Sylvia, dissolving into tears, which made white trickles down her dirty cheeks like little rivers on a map; "I fell in somewhere, and it was all mud, and it's cold, and please may I go in and change my things?"

"Come with me to the bathroom this minute," said Miss Coleman, abandoning her search for Dolly Camden, and hustling Sylvia before her with much indignation. "Linda, go and tidy yourself! Miss Kaye will have to hear of this. It is a very bad beginning, Sylvia, for your first day."

Sylvia was soaked to the skin, and was obliged to take a hot bath and put on a whole fresh set of clothes, while Miss Coleman stood grimly by and asked questions till she had drawn all the facts of the story. They were so late for dinner that they only arrived in the dining-room at the pudding course, and Miss Coleman, after a few quiet words of explanation to Miss Kaye, made Sylvia sit with her at a small side table instead of going to their proper places. Miss Kaye glanced at Sylvia but made no remark, and one of the servants brought their plates of meat and vegetables. They were half-cold, and Sylvia could not enjoy anything when she thought of the scolding that was to follow. She caught Linda's eye from the other side of the room, but did not dare to turn again in that direction, because Miss Coleman was looking at her. She knew so little of school life that she had no idea what punishment would be inflicted for such crimes as borrowing a barrow without leave and tumbling into a tub full of muddy water. In none of the books she had read did the girls do any such things.

"They generally cheat at lessons, or read the examination questions beforehand, or copy each other's essays," thought Sylvia. "And this is quite different. Even Sara Crewe never fell into a tub, nor any of the girls in *Gertrude's Schooldays*. I wonder what Miss Kaye will say!"

Miss Kaye lingered over pudding, evidently with the intention of allowing the latecomers a few extra minutes, then, rising and saying grace, she announced:

"Linda Marshall and Sylvia Lindsay will come to my study at a quarter to two," and left the room.

"We're in for it now," said Linda, clasping Sylvia by the hand as they met in the passage. "Oh, why did we ever get those wretched stones? And we've left the barrow at the bottom of the pool! We shall have to tell about that. Was Miss Coleman very cross?"

"She was rather. She kept hurrying me on, and saying 'Be quick!' all the time. You can't think how terribly the mud stuck. I had even to wash part of my hair. It's not dry yet."

"Let us go into the classroom. I don't want to meet Sadie; I'm afraid she'll ask about it. It's nearly a quarter to two now. I'm beginning to shake in my shoes."

It took a good deal of screwing up of courage before the two culprits ventured to give a faltering tap at the door of the study.

"Come in!" said Miss Kaye's brisk voice.

The children looked at each other and entered with much the same feeling as they would have experienced at a visit to the dentist's. Miss Kaye was seated at her desk, which was covered with papers, and merely glancing up for an instant said: "I am busy, so sit down till I have leisure to attend to you," and, taking no further notice of them, went on with her writing. Linda stole quietly to the sofa, and Sylvia sank on to the nearest chair, where she sat very still, looking with eager eyes round the prettily furnished room. She had a warm appreciation for artistic things and she gazed with delight at the beautiful Burne Jones engravings, the old oak cupboard with its blue china, the silver bowl of roses on the side table, and the bookcase full of richly bound volumes. Miss Kaye herself, she thought, made part of the picture. She liked her brown eyes, her clear, fresh complexion, and her abundant auburn hair.

"She's good-looking," reflected Sylvia. "Not at all horrid and old and sour. I dare say she could be rather stern, yet she looks as if she could laugh too. I like her eyes, they are so dark and quick and shining. They seem to take one all in at once. I wonder if she's going to be very angry."

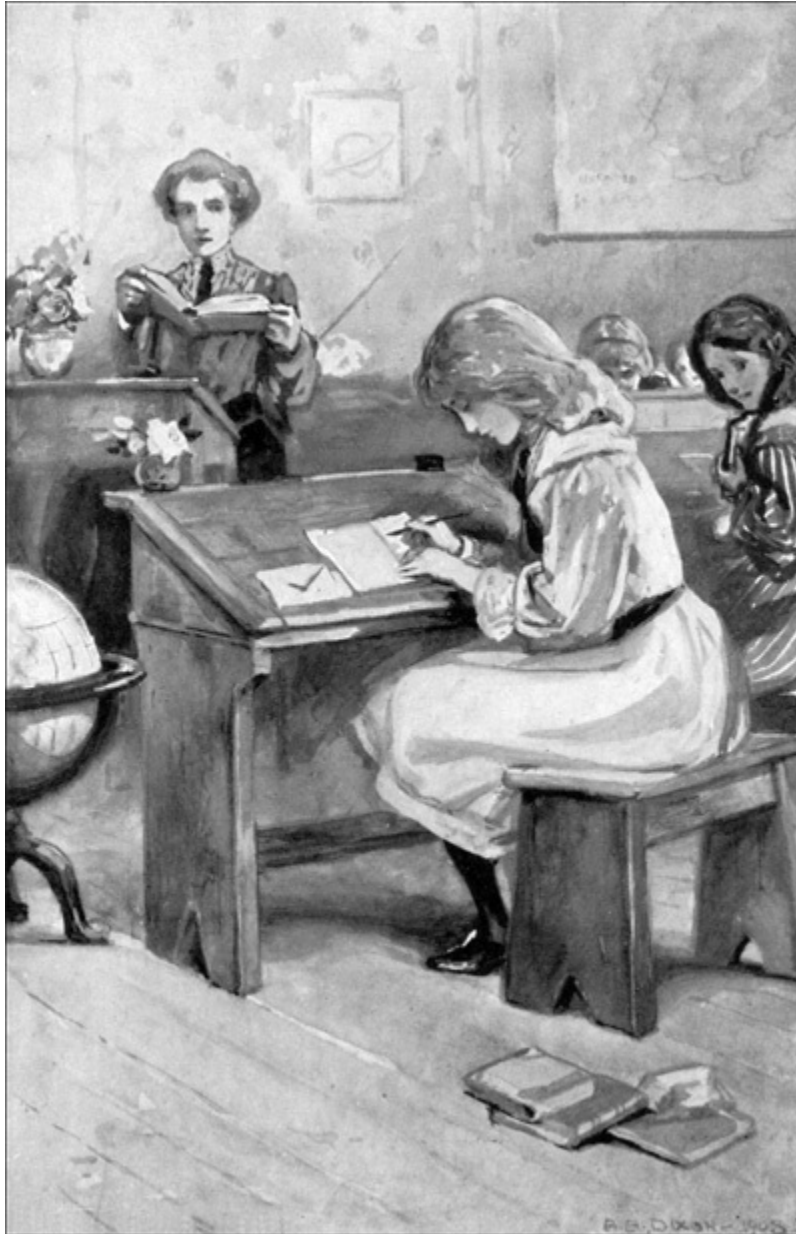
Miss Kaye looked up just at that moment and met Sylvia's gaze with an expression which seemed to say: "Well, what do you think of me?" But, seeing the child flush scarlet, she folded her letter, placed it in the envelope, and stamped it; then, ringing the bell, handed it to a servant and told her to take it at once to the pillar box in time for the afternoon post.

"Now I am ready," she said, turning at last to her little pupils. "Linda and Sylvia, you have been in trouble, and I wish you to tell me yourselves what has occurred."

It was hard to begin, since everyone had a natural awe of the headmistress; but once the plunge was made they found themselves relating their tale fairly connectedly, with the help of a few questions. Miss Kaye listened gravely.

"This is what comes of borrowing without leave and going where you are forbidden," she said. "The tub is used by the gardener for storing water, and no doubt with the rainy days we had in September it has accumulated a good deal of mud as well. I will take care that the wheelbarrow is recovered and washed, and I shall expect you both to apologize to Sadie. It is one of the rules of the school that the girls should respect each other's property. You may go now, but do not let this happen again."

Rejoiced to escape so easily, the children fled, eager to describe their adventure to the rest of the class, who were brimming over with curiosity after the hurried account which had been whispered by Linda at dinner and passed on by the next girl with so many variations that the general version was that Sylvia had taken a ride in the gardener's barrow and fallen down a well. There was scarcely any time before afternoon school, but they managed to give a proper explanation and thoroughly enjoyed the telling and the effect it produced. Marian Woodhouse might turn up her nose and call them babies, but she listened all the same, and, Sylvia could not help thinking, was just a little jealous to find them the centre of so much interest.



"SYLVIA WROTE HER FIRST LETTER HOME THAT EVENING"

Sylvia wrote her first letter home that evening after tea, and found she had such an amount to put in it she hardly knew how to begin. It ran thus:

"HEATHERCLIFFE HOUSE,
"October 5th.

"MY DARLING MOTHER AND FATHER,

"I am much happier than I expected. This morning I fell into a tub full of mud and spoilt all my clothes. Miss Coleman is going to have my new dress washed, but she does not think it will ever look nice again. I am wearing my green merino. I like Linda immensely. She has read the sequel to *Eight Cousins* although it is a love story and she is only eleven. I wish I might. We are going to have a garden together. Will you please send me some bulbs to plant in it. Marian Woodhouse said I did not know how to spell last night, but I only had three mistakes in dictation this morning and she had four. Miss Arkwright says my writing is bad. She has given me a new copybook. Miss Coleman took my box of toffee away and locked it up in a cupboard. She says I may have some on Saturday. I hope Dicky is well. Please do not forget to give him his groundsel. There is a black kitten here with white paws and a white tip to its tail. I send

kisses to everybody.

"Your loving daughter,
"SYLVIA."

CHAPTER V

Rivals

SYLVIA quickly discovered that life at school was a totally different affair from what it had been at home. She had now very little opportunity of ever being alone. The solitary readings and pretendings with which she had been wont to amuse herself were impossible, for every hour of the day seemed so well filled with work, walks, and games, and even in recreation time the other girls constantly claimed her attention. By the end of a week she had already learnt several very necessary facts; that orders had to be promptly obeyed without either dawdling or arguing, that strict punctuality was the rule, and it was a terrible thing to be even a minute late for classes or meals; that she was by no means the only important person in the school, because everybody else thought herself of quite as much consequence, and some rather more so; that schoolgirls had scant sympathy for bumps, bruises, tears, headaches, or any other minor woes, and only said "You baby!" if she complained; and lastly, that, though it seemed most peculiar to have no one to make a special fuss over her, on the whole there was so much fun going on that it was a great deal more interesting than doing lessons by herself with Miss Holt.

The girls of the third class, all of whom could write their ages with two figures, felt themselves very superior and grown-up in comparison with the little ones in the Kindergarten. There were seven of these children, whose ages ranged from six to nine, and as they shared the playroom with the third form it was the fashion to pet them and take notice of them. Dolly Camden, Connie's younger sister, was a merry little soul with the family failing for continually getting into mischief, and was the chief anxiety of Miss Coleman's life, having a capacity for spilling water, inking her fingers, tearing her clothes, and losing her books unequalled by anyone else in her division.

The Camdens were all handfuls, even Rosie, who was sixteen, and might have been chosen a monitress if she had been more sedate, and thirteen-year-old Stella, who enlivened the second class with practical jokes. There was a story in the school that Miss Kaye had once written to Mrs. Camden to say that Rosie was unmanageable, and that Mrs. Camden had written back to say that she was very sorry, but she had never been able to manage any of her daughters herself and would Miss Kaye please try again. Whether this were true or false, Miss Kaye proved capable of keeping the unruly four in order, and was about the only person, except their father, of whom they really stood in awe.

Sadie and Elsie Thompson were two puny, motherless little girls of nine and six. They had been brought up by an aunt who was not at all kind to them, and they found Heathercliffe House such a happy exchange that they almost dreaded the holidays, when they must go back to the home that was so unhomelike. Their father was a sea-captain, who came to visit them about twice a year, when he returned from his voyages, and brought them presents from foreign places. He did not forget them either when he was away, and often sent them postcards of strange countries, which had to travel many thousand miles before they reached England. Margie Wilson was a fat sturdy child with an original mind and a stubborn temper. She had a habit of speaking her thoughts which was apt to be rather disconcerting.

On the first morning after her arrival, May Spencer, who was monitress on her landing, went into her bedroom, and told her it was time to get up. Margie raised herself slowly in bed with the clothes drawn round her neck, and fixed her black eyes on the intruder. "What's your name?" she enquired briefly.

"May Spencer."

"Oh! I don't like you, May Spencer. You've got a snub nose. I shan't get up." And with that she retired under the bedclothes, and absolutely refused to stir until poor May had to fetch Miss Coleman to enforce discipline and uphold her authority.

Edna Lowe was a rather silly little thing, who had been much spoilt at home, and was still surreptitiously petted by her sister Lily in the second class, who occasionally had a battle on her behalf with Miss Coleman, who saw no reason why Edna should be treated differently from the others, and rewarded good behaviour or inflicted punishments with an impartial hand. Nessie Hirst, a nervous child, who had been sent to Aberglyn for the benefit of the sea air, was a favourite with the third class, her pathetic, wistful, grey eyes, long rich-brown hair, and the beautiful and elaborately embroidered frocks which her mother worked for her, gave her a somewhat distinguished appearance, and among the girls she often went by the nickname of "Little Vère de Vère". The prettiest of all, however, was Greta Collins, a small, golden-haired, blue-eyed rascal, who attached herself promptly to Sylvia like a limpet, sitting on her knee, clinging round her neck with kittenish fondness, and making herself very charming with her coaxing manner.

"It's only because you're somebody fresh," said Marian Woodhouse. "She does this to every new girl. You should have seen the fuss she made of me when first I came. She'll have quite got over it in a fortnight, and will hardly look at you."

"You won't; will you, darling?" said Sylvia indignantly, hugging the child closer, for she was much flattered at being the object of so much adoration.

"No, I'll love you always. Better than any of these horrid girls. Tell them to go away! I don't want anybody but you." And she clasped her arms round Sylvia's neck, and kissed her again and again.

"I know you will," declared Sylvia. "So we'll just take no notice of them. You're my special baby, and I mean to keep you."

"All right, you'll soon find out, and then don't say I didn't warn you!" returned Marian, laughing.

In spite of both Sylvia's and Greta's protestations to the contrary, Marian's words proved to be exactly true. For almost a week the little girl's affection kept at red heat; on the seventh day it began to show signs of flagging. It was in vain that Sylvia tempted her with stories, cajoled her with sweets, or even presented her with one of her lovely new paintbrushes; Greta was tired of her fancy, and though she accepted anything that was offered her, she only gave a half-hearted peck of a kiss in return, and ran back promptly to play with Nessie Hirst. Poor Sylvia was terribly distressed. She had been fascinated with Greta's pretty pink-and-white face, and big blue eyes; she liked to curl the long, golden ringlets round her fingers, to fasten the clean pinafores, or do any other small services for her, and especially to feel that the child clung to her in preference to anybody else. To be thus suddenly deserted was a blow, and it was particularly galling to have Marian Woodhouse say "I told you so." All her efforts at winning back her fickle admirer were absolutely useless. Greta refused to be coaxed, and at the end of a fortnight fulfilled Marian's prophecy by pushing away her former friend and even smacking her, which brought matters to such a crisis that Sylvia, after a storm of tears in private, gave up the attempt and resigned herself to the inevitable.

Luckily there were plenty of fresh interests to help to put Greta out of her thoughts. Though she had studied fairly hard with her governess at home she had never before entered into competition with other girls, and it was a new experience to work in class. As Miss Holt had expected, she was forward in some subjects and backward in others; but she was gifted with an excellent memory and found she could learn with little trouble what many of the others found impossible tasks. Except for French with Mademoiselle and nature study with Miss Kaye, all the lessons were taken by Miss Arkwright. Sylvia could never quite make up her mind whether she liked her or not. She was tall and slim, with large teeth, and a nose that moved about like a rabbit's when she spoke, and she wore her hair brushed very plainly back from her high forehead. She was a conscientious teacher but not a very interesting one, and she somehow lacked the charm which attracted the girls so much to their headmistress.

"Miss Kaye seems to like to know each one of us separately, and all about our friends and our homes," said Marian one day, "and I don't believe Miss Arkwright cares in the least about us out of school, so long as we know our lessons in class."

Children are very quick to feel sympathy, and, though Miss Arkwright did her duty thoroughly, most of her pupils respected her more than they loved her, and while she was not disliked she was never popular.

It was a revelation to Sylvia, who in her work with Miss Holt had never troubled whether she did exceedingly or only moderately well, to find that at Heathercliffe House a little extra effort made all the difference. At the end of every week the marks of each girl were balanced up, and on Monday morning at nine o'clock Miss Kaye would march into the classroom to read out the list and add a few comments of praise or blame. The girls sat in school for the week according to the order in which their names occurred on the balancing list, and it had been a point of great pride with Marian Woodhouse to come out top, a position which hitherto no one had troubled to dispute with her.

Sylvia had arrived on a Wednesday, so that the first week she was only able to obtain part marks, though in two days she had gained enough to place her half-way up the class, above Gwennie Woodhouse and Jessie Ellis and even Nina Forster. The second week was a duel between herself and Marian. Both worked hard and steadily and seemed fairly equal, for what Sylvia lost by her bad writing she gained through her more accurate memory, and some of Marian's most venturesome guesses happened to turn out wrong, though she could beat Sylvia at arithmetic. The books in which they wrote their exercises were always looked over on Saturday by Miss Kaye, who marked them both for matter, style, writing, and general neatness; so the girls could not tell until these were returned what was their total for the week. It was very exciting on Sylvia's second Monday morning when Miss Kaye entered bearing the pile of exercises and prepared to read out the list of marks. It was her custom always to begin with the bottom girl, and to-day she proceeded as usual.

"*Jessie Ellis*. 29. Your history is especially weak, and I noticed there were sixteen mistakes in your dictation. If you cannot keep up with the class I shall be obliged to send you down again.

Gwennie Woodhouse. 34. I believe you have tried, Gwennie, as it is more than last week, but there is still much room

for improvement.

Connie Camden. 38. I expect better things from you, Connie. You can learn quite well when you apply yourself properly, and I consider it a disgrace that you should have a bad mark for arithmetic. If I find it again you will have to stay in on Saturday afternoon and learn your tables.

Nina Forster. 39. You have had a bad cold, so I will excuse you this week. Your writing is beautifully neat, though I should like to see higher marks.

Linda Marshall. 45. You have done well in grammar, but failed utterly in geography. Your map is very inaccurate.

Hazel Prestbury. 50. Excellent in spelling and composition, but rather weak in arithmetic.

Marian Woodhouse. 60. Very good and conscientious work. Your exercises show great care and neatness.

Sylvia Lindsay. 63. I am pleased, Sylvia, to find you have done so well, and hope you will continue with such a good record. I should like to see improvement in your writing, and you must make that your chief care. In every other respect your work is highly satisfactory. Girls, take your places!"

It was a proud moment for Sylvia when she stepped above Marian Woodhouse to claim her seat at the top of the class. Marian held her head down and looked as black as thunder; Linda could scarcely conceal her delight; Connie Camden was nudging Nina Forster; and Gwennie's eyes filled with tears at the sight of her sister's humiliation. She had no ambition for herself, but she had always gloried in Marian's success.

"It's a shame!" she whispered to Jessie Ellis. "That new girl has no right to get top. I'm sure Miss Arkwright must have favoured her."

Miss Arkwright looked as surprised as anybody, but her conscience was clear of all favouritism, she was strictly impartial, and Miss Kaye herself had marked the exercises. She made no comment, however, and lessons began as usual.

The eight girls were seated in a row on a form opposite their teacher's desk, and were expected to sit with shoulders erect, hands folded, and feet neatly placed together. Sylvia, who had rather fidgety ways, and was apt to wriggle when answering a question, found it hard to keep this prim position, and, in the agony of recalling the principal tributaries of the Yorkshire Ouse, she almost unconsciously seized a handful of pens from the box which lay on a chair by her side and began to finger them nervously.

"The Swale, the Yore, the Nidd, the Wharfe, the Aire," she said, counting each with a pen.

Marian put out her hand and drew the pens firmly away.

"Two more," suggested Miss Arkwright.

"The Swale, the Yore, the Nidd, the Wharfe, the Aire----" repeated Sylvia desperately, missing the pens and feeling as if she could not go on without them.

"Next!" said Miss Arkwright, who never waited long for anybody.

"Calder and Don," finished Marian promptly, replacing the pens in the box, which she popped on to the desk behind, whispering to Sylvia as she did so: "You're not fit to be top!"

"Marian Woodhouse and Sylvia Lindsay each lose an order mark," said Miss Arkwright, at which they both looked sober, though neither minded very much since the other had the same.

"You needn't have pulled the pens from me just when I was answering," said Sylvia to Marian afterwards. "You put everything straight out of my head."

"If you can't answer without something to play with," retorted Marian, "you'd better go to the baby class and learn kindergarten drawing on a slate. No one would think you were nearly eleven."

It was certainly trying for poor Marian to find a younger girl occupying the position which she had come to regard as her own special property, and she could not yield with a good grace. Fate seemed determined to call her failure into notice. In the afternoon, when singing was over, Miss Denby turned to dismiss the various forms back to their schoolrooms.

"Class Three will go out first," she said. "Balancing order. Now girls be quick! Come, Marian, where are you?" For Marian, with a very red face, had not stepped forward as usual to take her place at the head of the line.

"I'm top!" said Sylvia, who found it impossible to conceal her triumph, and she led the way with the feeling of a rival claimant who has suddenly and unexpectedly been raised to the throne, enjoying Miss Denby's astonishment as much as Marian's confusion.

After that it was a continual struggle between the two children for the coveted seat. Sometimes one gained it and sometimes the other, and one week they were exactly equal, a difficulty which Miss Kaye solved by deciding that Marian was to be head in the mornings and Sylvia in the afternoons. No one else in the class seemed able to dispute it with them, though Hazel Prestbury occasionally won high marks. Linda, a bright enough child to talk to, and fond of reading, had not a very good memory, Connie Camden was incorrigibly lazy, Nina only worked by fits and starts, and both Gwennie Woodhouse and Jessie Ellis were of course out of the question.

Sylvia certainly did not find school life all plain sailing. Among other things Miss Arkwright was a totally different person from her former governess. Miss Holt, anxious to develop her pupil's powers of general intelligence, had allowed her to ask continual questions, and would even argue a point with her in order to encourage her to think clearly upon a subject. Miss Arkwright, on the contrary, did not allow any girl to have opinions in opposition to her own, and Sylvia got into sad trouble if she ventured on original ideas. Once in the geography class she was asked to give the capital of Tuscany.

"Firenze," she replied promptly.

"Next," said Miss Arkwright.

"Florence," answered Marian with a toss of her head.

"Firenze is the proper Italian name for Florence," corrected Sylvia. "Father and Mother were staying there last Easter, and they said everybody called it that, and didn't understand what you meant if you said Florence."

"We are having our geography lesson in English, not Italian, so we will call the places by the English names which are given in the book," said Miss Arkwright, glaring at her; and Sylvia lost a mark, much to her indignation.

Another time the class was reading *Marmion*, and repeating the notes which were given at the end of the cantos. Now Sylvia had revelled in so many historical stories that she understood thoroughly all about a portcullis and a drawbridge and a donjon keep, and instead of simply saying the note she volunteered an explanation of her own. It was what Miss Holt would have encouraged, but Miss Arkwright kept strictly to the lesson.

"I did not ask for your opinion, Sylvia," she said. "The notes given in the book are quite sufficient, and you may confine yourself to them."

On the whole Miss Arkwright was fair, but on one occasion Sylvia felt herself really to be the object of a great injustice. A very difficult grammar lesson was in progress, which most of the girls found extremely hard to understand. Miss Arkwright had asked many questions round the class, and now addressed one to Sylvia, who was top. She missed, and the teacher turned to Marian, who sat next. Just at that moment the bell rang, and, without waiting for Marian's reply, Miss Arkwright closed her book and opened the register. Now that last wrong answer had given Sylvia a bad mark, and she felt it was not just that she should have had one more question than any of the other girls.

"I don't believe one of them knew it," she said to herself, "and if the question had gone on they would all have missed too."

"Oh, Miss Arkwright, it's not fair!" she added aloud, getting up with flaming cheeks at the sting of the thought that half a minute had saved Marian's mark and lost her own. "I oughtn't to count that last miss."

"Sylvia, if you speak to me like that again I shall order you to leave the room," said the mistress, who prided herself on her good discipline. "I think you must have forgotten yourself."

"It was mean of her," said Linda, trying to console her friend afterwards. "When we were in Miss Coleman's form, and the bell rang when a question was only halfway down the class, she always said: 'Don't count the last turn,' because it wasn't fair unless we all had the same chance of missing. But you did say it in such a cheeky way, I think that was why she was so angry. It's no use trying to get her to take it off now; when she's once said a thing she sticks to it and nobody but Miss Kaye could make her alter it; and we shouldn't dare to ask her; and if we did it wouldn't be worth it, because Miss Arkwright would be twice as cross afterwards. You'll just have to grin and bear it."

CHAPTER VI

Squabbles

By the time Sylvia was thoroughly settled in the Third Class another trouble began to distress her. She had formed a great affection for Linda Marshall, and as the two shared a bedroom it seemed only natural that they should be bosom friends. Linda was very willing to consider Sylvia as her special comrade; they were almost the same age, and had so many likes and dislikes in common that there was not the least occasion to quarrel over anything, and they were never so happy as when they were alone together. That, however, Hazel Prestbury was by no means ready to allow. Although she slept with Connie Camden she had hitherto considered Linda her friend, and was very indignant that Sylvia should have stepped between them.

Hazel was a girl about whom Miss Kaye often felt some uneasiness. The eldest in her class, she was also old for her age, and she had brought a good many notions to school with her that were not at all in accordance with the simple ideas which were encouraged at Heathercliffe House. She thought far more of dress and position than she had any business to do, criticized the other girls' clothing, compared the value of her birthday presents with those of her schoolmates, and was apt to boast of her abundant pocket money. She was also not always as open and truthful as might have been wished, and though it could never be exactly defined, she somehow kept up a slight spirit of hostility against the mistresses, and would never respond heartily to any kindness from headquarters. Miss Kaye thought she was not altogether a wise friend for Linda, who, being a whole year younger, was likely to be easily influenced, and it was on this account that she had not allowed the two to share a bedroom.

Linda was an affectionate little girl; she did not notice the faults in Hazel's character, and would have been delighted to include both her companions in a triple friendship. But that did not content either, and though Sylvia had the advantage at morning and evening, Hazel generally triumphed during the day.

Sylvia would watch with jealous eyes as the pair walked arm in arm down the avenue or played draughts together in the recreation hour. She tried to console herself with reading, but somehow the books did not seem nearly so absorbing as they had done at home, and she sat with one ear open to hear what Linda was saying. She did not care to make friends with any of the other girls, though Nina Forster proffered a few advances, and Connie Camden was always "hail fellow well met" with everybody.

One wet afternoon the Third Class and some of the members of the Fourth were sitting round the playroom fire indulging in oranges, which Miss Kaye had given as a special treat.

"I like to suck mine with a lump of sugar," said Gwennie. "If you do it carefully you can get every scrap of orange out without breaking the peel."

"I can't eat orangeth," sighed Sadie Thompson pensively. "They alwayth make me thick."

"Make you thin, I should think," laughed Marian. "You're the skinniest little creature I ever saw."

"I don't mean fat, I mean thick--ill."

"Oh, sick! Then why don't you say so?"

"Becaue the I can't help lithping," replied Sadie, who was rather proud of her accomplishment, and did not make any great effort to overcome it.

"I wish I lisped," said Connie Camden enviously. "I'd have such fun with Miss Arkwright in the reading lesson. She'd stop for five minutes worrying over one word. Don't you remember when I pretended I couldn't say 'meritorious'? I'm going to cut my orange in half if anybody will lend me a penknife."

"Where's your own?"

"Lost it long ago. I never can keep them. I got one in my Christmas stocking and another on my birthday, and I had a new one at the beginning of this term, but they're all gone. My pencil wore down to such a perfect stump yesterday I couldn't finish my sums, and I daren't borrow, because Miss Arkwright said she'd give a bad-conduct mark to the first girl who spoke one word. I tried to signal to Nina, but she wouldn't look. Hazel, lend me yours!"

"No thanks!" replied Hazel. "Not to cut oranges. It's a new one and you'd spoil it."

"Oh, you mean thing! Who'll be generous?"

"You may have this if you like," said Sylvia. "I don't much mind if you keep it; it's only an old one, and I have another in my pencil box."

"You dear, I'd love it! I shall have to give you something in exchange, though, or else it will be unlucky. What will you have?" And Connie turned out the very miscellaneous contents of her pockets, displaying various stumps of lead pencil, a much worn indiarubber, a buttonhook, two or three dominoes, a walnut shell, some acorn cups, a stone with a hole in it, a whistle, a sticky piece of toffee, and a calendar.

"I don't want any of them," said Sylvia, shaking her head.

"But you must. Knives cut love, and we shall quarrel if you don't. The calendar's not much good; it's last year's, and I only kept it for the picture of the dog on the back. But have this," pressing one of the pencils into her hand. "It's the longest piece I have, and rather a nice soft one."

"Let us try putting our pips in the fire," said Nina. "You name one after yourself, and another after someone you like, and then say:

'If you hate me, pop and fly;
If you love me, burn and die,'

and see whether you and the person you have chosen will stick to each other or not. I'm going to try Evelyn Hastings."

"Is she your latest?" enquired Marian.

"I think she's perfectly beautiful. She let me carry her umbrella for her this morning, and said I might do it to-morrow if I wanted. May Spencer never speaks to me now."

"I should think she's tired of you. You must have been such a nuisance always clinging on to her arm. Why can't you let the first class alone? They don't want us."

"They mayn't want you, but they want me," said Nina, whose adoration of the big girls was a perpetual joke in her class. "I held Evelyn's wool yesterday, and pulled off her goloshes, and she never even asked you."

"I shouldn't have done it if she had," declared Marian. "I'd let her wait on herself. I think you're the silliest girl I know. Put your wretched pips in the fire if you're going to."

The result was unfortunate. The one christened 'Nina' popped away promptly, much to its owner's indignation.

"You won't stick to her, you see," laughed Marian, "You'll get tired of her, and throw her over, as you do everybody else."

The amusement proved popular, and all the girls insisted upon trying the fortunes of themselves and their friends.

Connie Camden was faithless to everybody; Jessie Ellis had a solitary failure, but would not divulge the name she had chosen or make another attempt; and Gwennie, to her great disgust, turned traitor to her beloved Marian.

"We must go in together of course," said Hazel, throwing two pips, for herself and Linda, into the flames. They were fat, juicy ones, and it was a little while before they caught fire. Pop, pop, they both went, each shooting to different sides of the grate with such violence that they fell out into the fender.

"They haven't finished. We must try them again," cried Hazel, stooping over the guard to pick them up.

"No! No!" exclaimed the others. "They've flown as hard as any could fly. You've both done with each other entirely. Now someone else. Linda, see if you have better luck with Sylvia!"

It was very foolish, but Sylvia looked on with quite a feeling of anxiety as Linda dropped two carefully chosen pips into a ruddy hollow among the coals. Would they both fly apart, she wondered, or would only one leave the other, and if so which? Or would they linger together until they were burnt to ashes? It seemed to her as though it were an omen of their friendship.

"They're burning," said Nina. "One's just going to pop! No, it isn't. It's changed its mind. They've both rolled down into that hot piece. There they go! They're burnt as black as cinders. You two are friends. You're the only ones who have kept together of all we've tried."

Sylvia squeezed Linda's hand hard with pleasure. To be her friend and stick to her through thick and thin was the height of her ambition, and she was glad that their trial had proved so favourable.

"It's a silly game and doesn't mean anything at all," said Hazel, flushing angrily. "I wonder you're such babies as to believe in it. You'll be counting your fortunes by the holes in your biscuits next. Nina, you were a goose to begin it."

"Well, really! You were ready enough to try," said Nina. "You've no need to be such a crab-stick that I can see."

"You've about as much sense as a sparrow," declared Hazel, "and you'll never have any more if you live to be a hundred. I shan't trouble to play your rubbishy games again!" And she turned away to get out her writing case, and begin a home letter, with such a cross expression on her countenance that the others wisely left her alone.

It was only a few days after this that an incident occurred which unfortunately caused the first shadow of a quarrel between Sylvia and her friend. The dancing classes had commenced and were held weekly in the large schoolroom at half-past two o'clock. Everyone was expected to appear in a light frock and thin shoes, so the afternoon seemed almost more like a party than a lesson. Miss Delaney, the teacher, was immensely popular with the girls, and they looked forward to Friday throughout the whole week.

Linda, who was particularly graceful and light of foot, was considered one of the best dancers in the school, and always included in a tarantella or gavotte, or any figure which required a little more skill than was possessed by most of the beginners. Linda's music lesson happened to be on Friday afternoon at two o'clock and she went straight from Miss Denby and the piano to the dancing class. Now on this particular day she had put on her white dress as usual, but just as she was opening the door of the practising-room she suddenly noticed that she had completely forgotten to change her shoes. What was she to do? There was not time to run back for them now, as Miss Denby had caught sight of her and she dare not beat a retreat; neither could she go after her lesson, because the girls were strictly forbidden upstairs when once the school bell had rung. Hazel, however, happened to be passing down the corridor exactly at that moment, and Linda managed to find time to gasp out: "Ask Sylvia to bring my dancing shoes to the dressing-room," before Miss Denby said: "Come along, Linda! What are you waiting for?" and she was obliged to enter and shut the door.

Hazel was in no hurry to deliver her message. She waited until about twenty-five minutes past two, then, going into the playroom, where most of the others were collected, she strolled leisurely across to Sylvia.

"Here, you," she said insolently, "you've got to go and fetch Linda's dancing shoes. She's forgotten them."

"Who says I've got to go?" asked Sylvia angrily, for Hazel's tone had roused all her worst feelings.

"I do for one!"

"Then I just shan't."

"All right! Shall I tell Linda you said you wouldn't?"

"You can if you like. I'm sure I don't care. I haven't time to race about the school finding other people's things. It's almost half-past now." And Sylvia marched away to the dancing class with her nose in the air, as much out of temper as she had ever felt in her life.

It was not possible for Hazel or anyone else to fetch the shoes, as the rules of the school inflicted dire penalties on any girl who entered another's bedroom; so when Linda hurried into the dressing-room a few minutes afterwards, expecting to be able to put them on, she was much disappointed not to find them there. She hunted about, but they were nowhere to be seen, and, afraid of being late she was forced to go to the lesson in her ordinary, common ankle-band slippers. She was furious, since the whole point of the tarantella lay in the elegant way in which she must point her toes and turn a graceful pirouette, and how was she to do so in these thick, awkward shoes that were only meant for the hard wear and tear of everyday use! Linda was rather proud of her dancing, and it was very annoying to have her best steps spoilt for lack of proper slippers. She could not venture to ask to be allowed to go and change them, because Miss Kaye was sitting in the room, and would be sure to give her a severe scolding for her carelessness; so she would be obliged to manage as best she could and hope that no one in authority would notice her feet.

"Didn't you give Sylvia my message?" she said to Hazel at the first opportunity, when the three girls were able to speak together during a rest.

"Of course I did, but she just flatly said she wouldn't go," replied Hazel, delighted to have this opportunity of making mischief between the friends.

"Did you really, Sylvia?" asked Linda, her eyes full of reproachful enquiry, and leaning upon Hazel's arm.

Now Sylvia was still not at all in an amiable frame of mind, and the sight of Linda's head pressed against Hazel's shoulder heaped coals on to her wrath.

"I hadn't time," she snapped, and, turning away, began to talk to Nina Forster.

At this point the mistress called for the tarantella, and Linda stood up with several elder girls, holding her tambourine and long ribbons gracefully above her head. How she longed for the dainty bronze shoes that were left in the bedroom upstairs! Her steps felt so awkward that she could neither glide nor spring properly, and she was not surprised when at the end of the dance Miss Delaney said: "Hardly so good as usual, my dear." Linda considered she had very good cause to feel offended with Sylvia, and she would not look at her for the rest of the afternoon. She scarcely touched the tips of her fingers when they met in the "grand chain", and kept as far away from her as she possibly could, choosing Hazel for her partner in the waltz and Connie Camden in the Highland schottische.

Sylvia tried to show by her manner that she did not care, but in reality she felt on the verge of tears. She danced with little Sadie Thompson, casting a wistful look every now and then at Linda's back, though she took no notice if they happened to meet face to face. She managed to change places at tea and sit between Gwennie Woodhouse and Jessie Ellis, and at evening recreation she retired to a corner of the playroom with a book.

The great ordeal was when the two children found themselves alone in their bedroom at night. Each considered the other so entirely in the wrong that neither would give way, and they both undressed in stony silence, very different indeed from the confidences which they were accustomed to exchange.

Sylvia peeped at Linda's bed in the morning, wondering whether she would show any signs of relenting. But no, Linda got up without noticing her in the least, and the breach seemed as wide as ever.

It was Saturday, and except for mending and stocking darning the girls might amuse themselves as they wished. The two friends had planned to finish their garden and to plant the delightful collection of snowdrops, crocuses, and tulips which Mrs. Lindsay had sent them. Sylvia carried the box down, and a trowel, and set to work in a half-hearted manner, putting in little groups and rows, though she certainly was not enjoying herself. Linda, who was equally unhappy, waited ten minutes, then, arriving with her spade, began solemnly to dig up her root of hepatica and her clump of primroses.

"Do you want to put them here?" enquired Sylvia anxiously, moving some of her bulbs out of the way.

"No, thank you," replied Linda with cold politeness. "I'm going back to my old garden." And, carrying her treasures in her arms, she stalked away.

Poor Sylvia felt this was the last straw. To be thus deserted was a cruel blow; she would never enjoy her flowers alone, however lovely they might prove. She had written for the bulbs chiefly on Linda's account, and if they were not to share them she did not care to plant them at all. She flung down her trowel, and, walking away to a retired part of the grounds, sat down on a seat under a hawthorn tree and began to cry as if her heart would break.

She had not been there very long before chance, or something better than chance, brought Mercy Ingledew to the same spot with her Latin grammar. As mistress of the upper landing she had the whole of the third class under her care, and, seeing one of her charges in such distress, she came at once to enquire the cause.

"You needn't be at all afraid to tell me, dear," she said. "If you've got yourself into a scrape it's my business to help you. Just tell me everything as you would to your elder sister."

"I haven't got any sister," sobbed Sylvia.

"No more have I, I only wish I had, so I'm going to pretend now that you're mine. What's the trouble? I don't like to see my third class girls crying."

Sylvia never forgot how kind Mercy was. She listened patiently to the whole matter, and then sat thinking for a while, and stroking Sylvia's fluffy hair.

"There seem to have been faults on both sides," she said at last. "Doesn't it strike you, dear, that it's just a little selfish of you to want to keep Linda entirely to yourself?"

"But she's my friend!" said Sylvia in astonishment.

"She was Hazel's first. Why can't you all be jolly together without this continual jealousy? You'd be a great deal happier."

"Ye-es," said Sylvia doubtfully. "What I feel, though, is that I mind so dreadfully, and I'm sure Linda doesn't care half as much, because she has Hazel."

"Perhaps she cares more than you think. If I were you I should go and tell her exactly what happened about the

shoes, and say you're sorry. You'll have done your part at any rate, and if she likes to make it up she can."

Sylvia took Mercy's advice, and, finding Linda mooning aimlessly up and down the avenue, she went straight to the point without any further delay, and explained the whole affair.

"I'm afraid it was I who was cross," said Linda. "I've been feeling perfectly horrid all the morning. I hate being out of friends with anyone, and especially with you. I wish my wretched dancing shoes had been at the bottom of the sea. Have you planted all the bulbs yet? We meant to put the snowdrops in the middle, you know. I don't like my old garden at all. It's no fun doing it alone. Shall I bring back the primroses and the hepatica?"

CHAPTER VII

The Story of Mercy Ingledew

ONE result of the coolness and subsequent reconciliation between Linda and Sylvia was the establishment of a firm friendship between the latter and Mercy Ingledew. Sylvia, who had been more accustomed at home to grown-up people than children, was attracted to Mercy at once, and the elder girl saw so much that was unusual and lovable in the younger one's character that she took a strong interest in getting to know her better. Mercy was a tall, fair girl of sixteen, with a sweet, thoughtful face, and a particularly pleasant open expression. She was a great favourite, both with teachers and pupils, a plodding, conscientious worker, and always ready to give help or sympathy to anyone who stood in need of either. Miss Kaye had made a wise choice in appointing her monitress of the upper landing, as no one could have more fully appreciated the responsibilities of the post. She tried as much as lay in her power to 'mother' all the eight little girls of the third class, looking after them in their bedrooms, reviewing their clothing, helping to brush their hair, settling their disputes, advising them in any question of right and wrong, and keeping them up to the mark in matters of school discipline, and she managed to do it in such a jolly, hearty, affectionate, tactful manner that not one of them resented her interference. Mercy had very soon discovered that Sylvia had far more in her than most girls of her age, the expressive hazel-grey eyes, lost sometimes in a brown study, or shining with excitement over some new pleasure, told a tale of the eager mind behind them; and the child's many quaint remarks, decided opinions, the flashes of humour or flights of fancy in which she occasionally indulged, singled her out as possessing powers far beyond the average.

"She has just twice the brains of Connie Camden or Nina Forster," said Mercy to a fellow monitress; "I shouldn't be at all surprised if she were to be a great credit to the school some day. You should hear the clever games she invents for the babies, and the marvellous stories she makes up for them. She really has a wonderful imagination. She has got through nearly half the Waverley novels already, and I found her reading Tennyson one day. She's rather too fond of airing her ideas, and is a little conceited, but Hazel and Marian sit upon her so hard that she'll soon get over it. She's a most affectionate child, far more so than any of the others. She's the only one who ever seems really grateful for what one does for them. I think she's a dear little thing, and I'm glad she has come here."

If Mercy were disposed to make much of Sylvia, the latter was only too ready to return her kindness with that devotion which a younger girl often feels for one considerably older than herself. With Sylvia it was not a shifting fancy, such as Nina Forster formed nearly every week, and changed as rapidly, but a genuine love, founded on a firm basis of all-round admiration. She thought Mercy the prettiest, cleverest, and best girl she had ever known in her life, and when she discovered her to be the heroine of a most romantic history, her interest in her was increased a thousandfold. She had heard once or twice that Mercy was an orphan, and had no home of her own to go to during the holidays, but it was only by degrees she gathered the various facts of the case, though when they were fitted together they formed a narrative as thrilling as any to be found in the gaily bound volumes over which it had been her delight to pore. As Sylvia got the account mostly in disjointed scraps, first from one girl and then from another, and was obliged to connect them for herself, it will be as well to tell Mercy's story here as she learnt it more fully afterwards, since it had some bearing and influence on various incidents which happened later and led in the end to unforeseen events.

Fifteen years ago there was great uneasiness among the white residents of the city of Tsien-Lou, in a certain inland province of China. There had been rumours of serious riots and outrages against foreigners farther up the country; terrible tales were whispered of houses burnt and families murdered, and both the British Consul and the Commissioner of Trade had warned the little colony of Europeans to keep strictly within its own quarter, and not to trust to any fair promises made by their yellow-skinned, almond-eyed neighbours, who resented their presence in the land with such fierce intolerance. Business for a while was suspended; it was not considered safe for a white face to be seen in the streets, and even the Chinese servants who did their daily duties in the houses were regarded with suspicion. Only the Ingledew Medical Missionary Station, at the outskirts of the town near the old Kia-yu gate, went on with its work as usual, nursing the sick in the hospital, attending to the numerous outpatients who came every day for medicine and treatment, teaching the children in the school, and holding the daily Bible readings which all were still invited to attend. It was an anxious time for both doctors and nurses; they knew that they carried their lives in their hands, and that at some given signal the flame of fanaticism might burst out, and hordes of shrieking, murderous, pigtailed natives might sweep over the mission, leaving nothing but smoking ruins and desolation behind them.

It was with a troubled mind, therefore, that Sister Grace, the head of the nursing staff, went out one evening into the patch of enclosed garden which surrounded the hospital buildings, and, shading her eyes with her hand, looked far along the road that led to the hill country. There was a fierce, fiery sunset; it seemed as if the very sky were stained with blood, and the cross on the top of the little chapel stood out dark and startling against the lurid background. She

passed slowly down the walk to shut the great gate, which, though open by day to every comer, was always safely barred at night, and she was in the act of sliding the bolt and securing the chain, when she paused suddenly and listened. She had heard a moan outside, a distinct, long-drawn, suffering sigh, that quivered a moment and then died away into silence. Someone on the other side of the gate was in distress or pain, and it was clearly her duty to enquire into the cause. With a beating heart she undid the fastening and peeped out. Crouched down on the step, as if she could drag herself no farther, was a Chinese woman bearing a baby fastened on to her back. She was desperately wounded, the blood still flowed from a gash on her head, and stains on the roadside marked the track along which she must have crawled in her agony to reach the friendly shelter of the wooden archway. Life was almost spent, but with an effort of desperation she managed to raise herself into a kneeling posture, and, clasping her hands together, cried out in Chinese: "Mercy! Mercy! The child!" and, with a last glance of supplicating appeal, fell across the threshold at the feet of the trembling nurse. Help was summoned at once, and she was carried into the hospital; but she was already past all human aid. She had accomplished her errand with the last spark of her dying strength, and had gone out into the light beyond the sunset.

Sister Grace took the baby from her and laid the little creature gently on the bed, unfolding some of the curious Chinese clothing in which it was closely wrapped. She had unloosed the wadded coat, and now pulled off the queer double-peaked crimson cap, disclosing as she did so, not the expected shaved head, with its fringe of coarse black hair, but a crop of short, tight, flaxen curls, like rings of floss silk, falling round a pair of flushed cheeks as pink as appleblossom.

She uttered a cry that drew both doctor and nurses to her side. "Look! Look!" she exclaimed, "the child is white!"

Where the poor baby had come from or to whom it belonged no one knew. It was warm and unhurt, though in such a deep sleep that it had evidently been drugged to prevent it from crying. Beyond a small woollen vest it was dressed in Chinese clothes, no doubt with the intention of passing it off as a native, and it wore a carved Chinese charm tied round its neck. It was a little girl of apparently about a year old, so round and pretty and dimpled that, when at last, after many hours, she opened her big blue eyes, she won all hearts in the hospital at once.

It was impossible to institute any enquiries regarding her during the troublous time which followed. The Mission, indeed, escaped attack, but it was many months before communication with the outside world was safely established, and by then every clue seemed to have been lost. The consul did his best, and made the case widely known among the European residents in China, but many families had perished in the uprising, and no one could tell by which of them the child might have been claimed.

The little waif stayed on therefore at the Ingledew hospital, where she grew apace, and was soon the pet and darling of everybody who knew her. It was decided to call her "Mercy", in memory of the last words of the woman who had saved her life, and "Ingledew" was added as a surname for lack of any other.

It was when she was about seven years old that the doctor and his wife, who were returning to England for a year's leave, determined to take her with them and to try to make some arrangements for her education. A philanthropic lady, who happened to join the ship at Ceylon, heard the strange story, and, taking a fancy to the child, offered to send her to school; so it was in this way that Mercy had come to Miss Kaye's, where she had remained ever since.

Last year, however, a great misfortune had occurred. Her kind guardian, who had always taken the warmest interest in her welfare, had died suddenly without making a will; her heirs did not feel themselves bound to continue Mercy's school fees; and again she was left utterly unprovided for. Here Miss Kaye had come to the rescue, and had promised to keep her at Heathercliffe House until she should be old enough to earn her own living as a teacher, and Mercy repaid the kindness bestowed upon her by working her very best and trying to fit herself for the career which she was to follow by and by. Nine years at Aberglyn had blurred her memories of her early life in China, but she still wrote to her friends at the Mission, and said she never forgot that one spot, though other scenes might have faded from her remembrance.

Though Sylvia only heard this account of Mercy's childhood at secondhand, told mostly in whispers by Linda when they were in bed, it appealed immensely to the poetical side of her nature, and invested her schoolfellow with a halo of romance that added greatly to her other charms.

"Suppose she really has a father or a mother," said Sylvia, who loved to let her imagination run riot; "or if they are both dead, perhaps a grandfather, or a grandmother, or an uncle who is searching for her everywhere. She might be the heiress to a big property, and own castles and halls and all kinds of things. Hasn't anybody tried to find out?"

"Oh yes, lots of people!" replied Linda. "But it's no use. There isn't anything to trace her by. Mercy can't bear to hear it spoken of unless she mentions it first, and she scarcely ever does. Miss Kaye said it was much wiser for her not to think about it, because it was such a forlorn hope, and it was better to be content with the friends she has and make the

most of them. I think she feels it though, sometimes, when we're all going back for the holidays and talking about our homes."

"I'm sure she must. Oh, Linda, wouldn't it be lovely if we could find out her relations? Do let us set to work at once."

"How can we?" said Linda, who had a practical mind.

"I don't know quite how at first, but I have a kind of feeling it may be done if we only try. I'm going to leave no stone unturned. It's as interesting as *Hetty Gray*, or *Marjorie's Quest*. Just think that almost every lady whom Mercy meets may be her mother!"

"They couldn't all be," objected Linda.

"Of course not, but she might be talking to some of her own relations, and never know it!"

"I don't see how we can help that. People aren't labelled in families like pots of different kinds of jam, so how could we find out?"

"Oh, don't be stupid! I only mean that we must keep our eyes and our ears open and listen for every opportunity. I'm going to begin to-morrow, and if you like to help you can, and if you don't you needn't."

Greatly fired by her resolution, Sylvia was anxious to solve the secret of her friend's parentage without further delay. Unfortunately she did not know exactly how to start. It was impossible to question Mercy herself, and none of the other girls knew more than Linda had told her. She decided, therefore, that the only chance was to notice if anyone looked as if they were seeking somebody, when perhaps she might be the happy means of bringing about the fortunate meeting, and have the proud satisfaction of saying: "Here is your long-lost daughter!"

"It would be the happiest moment of my life," thought Sylvia, "nicer even than writing a book, though I mean to do that some day. Indeed I think, when it's all turned out properly, I might make it into a story, if Mercy wouldn't mind. I could call it *A Waif from China*, or perhaps *The Little Foundling*, only she's quite big now. *Nobody's Darling*, would sound beautiful, but she's everybody's darling, so that wouldn't do. I believe *The Flower of Heathercliffe House*, would be best, and at any rate I could put 'a true tale' after it. I'd have it bound in red or green, with gilt edges, and a picture of Mercy on the back."

The first step to such a flight of literary ambition was evidently to discover the missing friends; until that was settled the whole point of the volume would be lacking and it was useless to attempt even a beginning. She came home one day after the usual morning walk in a state of great excitement, overflowing with news to tell Linda, who, having a bad cold, had been obliged to stay in the house.

"What do you think?" she cried, as they stood washing their hands together in the bathroom, "I really believe I have found a clue at last!"

"A clue to what?" asked Linda, who had forgotten all about the matter by that time.

"Why, to Mercy Ingledew! Miss Coleman took us to Aberglyn this morning and along the promenade, and we sat down for a rest on one of the benches. Connie Camden and I were quite at the end, next to two ladies, and I could hear everything they were talking about. One of them, the tall, fair one, was most dreadfully sad, and said it had left a blank, and the other, the short, fat one, seemed so sorry for her and was trying to comfort her. 'When did you lose her?' she asked. I couldn't hear the answer, because Connie was whispering to me, but the short lady said: 'Dear me! as long ago as that? I am afraid you can have very little hope of ever finding her now.' Then Connie interrupted again, but I caught something about curly hair and such winning ways. 'You believe she has been traced to this neighbourhood?' the fat lady said; 'you are quite sure you would be able to know her from any other?' 'I couldn't mistake,' the tall lady said; 'her eyes alone would tell me even if she had utterly forgotten me!' It was just growing most interesting when Miss Coleman got up and we had to go, but I'm certain we're on the right track and it's Mercy they're looking for. Don't you think it must be?"

"I don't know," said Linda doubtfully; "it might be somebody else."

"Oh! How could it be? It all exactly fits in with Mercy's story, and the tall, fair lady was in deep mourning too."

"She wouldn't still be in mourning," said Linda; "it's fifteen years since Mercy was lost."

"She might be; perhaps she made up her mind never to wear anything else until she found her. Shall I tell Mercy?"

"No, I'm sure you had better not. Miss Kaye said we were none of us ever to mention it to her."

"Then I must find out a little more, and it will come as a surprise to her in the end. Don't breathe a word to any of the other girls; I want it to be a dead secret. Nobody knows a hint about it except you and me."

Sylvia felt almost bursting with the importance of her quest; her great anxiety now was to meet the lady again and make a few further discoveries. She wished she knew her name, or where she lived, and much regretted that she had not taken the opportunity of saying something about Mercy at the time.

"It would be so dreadful if I didn't get a chance to see her any more," she thought. "Perhaps she's only a visitor at Aberglyn, and she may go home without anything happening after all."

Every day, when they went for their walk, she looked out both for the tall, fair lady and the short, fat one, but she never saw either, though she managed to persuade Miss Coleman to take them twice again to the promenade, an unheard-of indulgence in one week.

"I don't know what we're to do!" she lamented to Linda. "I must see her somehow. I feel as if Mercy's future depends upon it. She looks nice too. I wonder how Mercy will like her for a mother. Just think of having to get to know your own mother when you're sixteen! Wouldn't it seem queer? Perhaps she may be in church on Sunday."

"I don't see how you could speak to her even if she were," said Linda. "We go out by the side door, and you wouldn't be likely to meet her in the churchyard."

"I wish Miss Kaye would take me shopping on Saturday," said Sylvia. "It's Sadie Thompson's turn. I wonder if I could coax her to change with me."

It was Miss Kaye's custom to allow four of the girls to go with her each Saturday morning to Aberglyn and assist with her marketing. They were trusted to make some of the purchases, to teach them the value of money, and were expected to put down a neat account afterwards of what they had spent. It was a privilege to which they greatly looked forward, and it had not yet fallen to Sylvia's share. By dint, however, of a good deal of persuasion, added to the gift of her cedarwood pencil box, she induced Sadie Thompson to let her have the next turn; and, as Miss Kaye made no objection to the exchange, she found herself included among the favoured few.

Nothing could have been more fortunate. The party consisted of Mercy Ingledew, Trissie Knowles, from the second class, herself, and Nessie Hirst, and they started off in brisk spirits.

In every shop and street Sylvia's eyes were busy seeking for the two ladies; but though in the distance she thought she caught a glimpse of the short one, she found out on a nearer view that she was mistaken. They went at last into the markethall, where Miss Kaye was soon busy at a glass and china stall, replenishing some of the school crockery which had been broken.

"You little ones," she said, "may go and buy me a pennyworth of parsley and three lemons. Be sure you choose lemons with nice smooth rinds, and bring back the right change for a shilling."

Sylvia and Nessie ran off together to the fruiterer's, proud of their errand, and were just engaged in calculating the cost of three lemons at three-halfpence each, when Sylvia gave a gasp of astonishment and delight. Round the corner, and actually coming to their stall, appeared the tall, fair lady and the short, fat one. They stopped to enquire the price of pears, and stood so near that the long *crepe* mantle of the former was actually brushing against Sylvia's hat. She trembled all over with excitement. Dare she do it? Could she really pluck up her courage and speak to this unknown stranger? She tried half a dozen times, but the words stuck in her throat. Yet she felt she must make the effort, for perhaps Mercy's happiness might hang upon this one solitary chance.

"If you please," she began in a very small trembling voice, and touching the lady's sleeve with her hand. But the lady was too busy buying pears to notice, and only fumbled in her pocket for her purse.

"If you please," tried Sylvia again, speaking rather louder this time.

"I think this little girl wishes to ask you something," said the short, fat lady, addressing her friend.

The tall, fair one turned suddenly round towards Sylvia.

"What is it, my dear?" she said, somewhat stiffly; "can I tell you anything?"

Sylvia flushed scarlet. The critical moment had arrived.

"Oh, please," she said, "I thought you hadn't found her yet, and I believe I know where she is!"

"Not my Tottie?" exclaimed the lady.

"I don't know her real name, but we call her Mercy," said Sylvia. "I heard you say on the promenade that you'd lost her."

"So I have. I have done everything in my power to recover her. I even put it into the hands of the police. Where did you find her?"

"She's been at school for ever so long," said Sylvia, "at Heathercliffe House," she added, in explanation.

"I never dreamt of asking there," said the lady. "I should have thought Miss Kaye wouldn't have kept her. But no doubt she has been a great favourite amongst the girls."

"She is. We all love her," declared Sylvia, delighted with the success of her boldness.

"But where is she? Have you got her safe at Heathercliffe House?" enquired the lady.

"She's here now in the market," replied Sylvia triumphantly.

"Where? Oh, where?"

"Just in the next row at the pot stall."

"Let us go at once," said the tall lady, hastily paying for her fruit, and hurrying away in as much agitation as Sylvia herself.

"I don't see her!" she continued in a disappointed tone, when they had turned the corner, looking anxiously among the crockery laid on the ground, and even peeping under the stall.

"She's there with Miss Kaye," said Sylvia.

"Where, my dear?"

"Of course you won't recognize her, because she's grown so, but she's that tall, fair girl with the long, light hair. Oh! May I tell her, or would you rather tell her yourself?"

The lady looked first at Sylvia and then at her short friend with a most puzzled expression.

"What is the child talking about?" she asked; "I don't understand."

"You said you'd lost her," faltered Sylvia.

"So I did."

"And there she is--your own daughter!"

"Daughter!" cried the lady, almost dropping her parcel in her surprise. "It was my dear little dog I was speaking of. I thought you said you had found her."

"What is the matter?" said Miss Kaye, coming up at this moment; "I believe I am addressing Mrs. Rushworth? Can I be of any assistance? Oh, no, we have found no dog! If we had I should have sent it at once to the police station. I am sorry there should have been a mistake. Come, Sylvia."

The disappointment was so horrible and tragic, and so different from anything she had expected, that Sylvia burst into a flood of tears. Was this the end of all her plans? Instead of accomplishing anything useful she had only made herself look extremely silly, and she wondered what Miss Kaye would have to say about it. At first the headmistress took no notice; she quietly finished her purchases, then, bidding Nessie Hirst go on with Trissie and Mercy, she gave Sylvia a parcel to carry and told her to walk by her side. She made no remark while they were still in the town, but once they were out on the country road she began to ask questions, and drew a full explanation from her sobbing pupil.

"Don't cry, my dear," she said kindly; "you have done your best. You are not the only one who has tried to find poor Mercy's relations, but the issue is in higher hands than ours. Do not speak to her of what has happened this morning; it is a subject which has caused her such great grief that I always shrink from allowing it to be mentioned. The truest way to prove your friendship is to help her to forget that she is alone in the world. Though we cannot supply the place of her own parents, we can at least show her how much we love her, and make her feel that she has many friends to compensate her for the loss of father and mother."

CHAPTER VIII

All-Hallows Eve and Guy Fawkes

OCTOBER had passed so swiftly that Sylvia could hardly realize that she had now been almost a month at school. In some respects the time appeared short, yet in others it seemed as if she had been settled there for years, and she no longer felt herself to be a new girl. The days, which had been bright and summerlike when first she arrived, were now rapidly closing in; there was no recreation in the garden after four o'clock, as Miss Kaye considered it too damp and cold for them to be out, and they were obliged to amuse themselves in the playroom instead.

The great excitement at present was the near approach of All-Hallows Eve, when it was the custom for the whole school to meet and spend the evening in 'apple bobbing' and other amusements.

"Miss Kaye gets a whole cask," said Linda, "those lovely big American ones, and we have such fun! We all sit up till half-past eight, even the babies, and nobody minds how much noise we make. I don't know which is nicest, Hallowe'en or Guy Fawkes Day."

"Oh, I like the fifth of November!" said Nina Forster. "We don't do Hallowe'en properly here. 'Apple bobbing' is nothing."

"What do you do at home then?" asked Sylvia.

"We have a large party, and put bowls of water in front of the fire, and touch them blindfolded, to see who'll be married first. My big sister once combed her hair before the looking glass at midnight to see if the shadow of her future husband would appear peeping over her shoulder, and my brother Alec crept in and got behind her, and pulled a horrible face, and she shrieked and shrieked. Sometimes, too, we go into the garden, and drag up cabbage stalks, to try our luck."

"Miss Kaye won't let us do any of those things," said Linda; "she says it's silly superstition. She was dreadfully cross one evening with Trissie Knowles and Marjorie Ward because she caught them both curtsying to the new moon. But she lets us have fun with the apples, and that's all I care about."

At seven o'clock, therefore, on October 31st, when evening preparation was finished, the four classes collected for the promised entertainment. Sylvia, whose home life had been a very quiet one, had never been present on such an occasion, and she anticipated it with much delight. As Linda had said, Miss Kaye had been liberal enough to provide a whole barrel of apples, which stood on two chairs placed together near her desk, the ripest, roundest, rosiest ones which could possibly be. Several long strings had been fastened to a beam which ran across the roof, and to the end of each of these an apple was fastened. The girls in turn had their hands tied behind their backs, and had to try to take a bite from an apple as it swung to and fro at the end of its string—a very difficult performance, since it generally bobbed, and wriggled, and slid away just at the critical moment when they were about to put their teeth into it, causing a great deal of mirth and merriment, and much triumph to the lucky one who managed at last to take a successful mouthful, and so secure the coveted treasure.

Three large footbaths had also been brought into the schoolroom, and put on forms, where they were filled with water, and apples. Then the girls were allowed to gather round, and, holding forks in their mouths, to drop them into the water in the hope of spearing an apple; not nearly such an easy feat as it looked, and one which seemed to depend mostly on good fortune. Of course it was great fun, especially when Miss Kaye tried it herself, and her fork just stuck in the largest and juiciest, and then rolled out again, or when Connie Camden, in despair of having any success, dipped her whole head and shoulders into the bath, getting so dreadfully drenched in the process that she was promptly sent upstairs to bed, a sadder and wiser girl; for Miss Kaye had strictly forbidden any wetting of hair under penalty of instant expulsion from the room, and she invariably kept to her word. Sylvia won two apples, both with a fork; she did not prove clever at catching them with her teeth, though Linda carried away four, and Marian Woodhouse six altogether, which, however, she shared with Gwennie, who had had bad luck and gained nothing.

The evening ended with some rousing games of hunt the slipper, dumb crambo, and drop the handkerchief. Even Miss Arkwright ran about and played, and was so pleasant and jolly that Sylvia hardly knew her; and Miss Kaye was the life and soul of it all, managing to include everybody, to see that the little ones got a fair chance, that nobody cheated or took an undue advantage, suppressing quarrels, arranging turns, and directing her flock like the wise shepherd that she always proved herself to be.

It was a quarter to nine before the girls, hot and flushed, and with most untidy hair, said goodnight, and filed upstairs to their rooms, where they were obliged to sober down when the monitresses went their rounds, and go to bed with a

due regard for order and decorum, rules and regulations being strictly enforced even on Hallowe'en.

"I'm dreadfully sorry for Connie," said Linda, as she brushed her hair; "I can't think what made her dip her head right in like that. She's always doing silly things. When we went to Llandudno last summer she sat down in the sea when we were wading, and she tumbled off her donkey and scraped the skin from her nose. And only this term, when they were coming to school, Rosie gave her their tickets to hold, and she dropped them on to the line underneath the train. The guard was so angry, he threatened to make them pay their fares, because no one could get the tickets until the train had gone out of the station, and both they and the guard were going in it; but Dolly cried, so he said he wouldn't this once, only they must be more careful another time. Just think of Connie having to stay in bed and hear the noise we were making downstairs! I should have felt pretty cross if it had happened to me. I've sent her one of my apples, and Hazel said she'd give her one of hers; still, it's hard luck all the same."

It was but a few days now to the fifth of November. The school, having spent its excitement over 'apple-bobbing', began to work it up again harder than ever to celebrate the anniversary of Guy Fawkes. The little ones went about singing:

"Please to remember the fifth of November,
With Gunpowder Treason and plot;
For I see no reason why Gunpowder Treason
Should ever be forgot",

till everybody grew completely tired of the tune and squashed them. Miss Arkwright improved the opportunity by making the third class read up the subject in their history book, and write a special essay upon it, with the date and principal persons concerned. The girls had been allowed to contribute from their pocket money to buy fireworks and materials for a bonfire.

"Miss Kaye gets old worn-out hampers and barrels from the greengrocer," said Linda. "Some paraffin is poured over them and they make the most glorious blaze, and then when the fire has burnt down a little we roast potatoes in the red-hot ashes, and they taste most delicious. Mr. Cameron always comes to let off the fireworks. He's Miss Kaye's cousin, and he's so jolly. He keeps making jokes the whole time, though he won't let any of us stand very near for fear of sparks catching our dresses. Then we have heaps and heaps of toffee; it's put on great plates and handed round, and there are big slices of parkin too."

"I heard Emmie Hall say she believed there was going to be a Guy Fawkes this year," said Sylvia.

"No! Is there? Oh, that would be fun! How did she get to know?"

"Edna Lowe had to go to Miss Kaye's room to take a dose of Gregory's powder, and she saw a big mask on the table, and an old jacket hanging over a chair. Miss Kaye whisked them away in a moment, but she had quite time to notice what they were, and, of course, she told Lily afterwards, and Lily told Emmie."

"We haven't had a guy since I was here," said Linda; "and we've never had one at home either. Oh, I do want to see it so much! I hope Miss Kaye's really going to make one. It will be the most delicious, glorious fun that ever was! I wish Wednesday would hurry up and come."

The girls had raised a general subscription to provide the fireworks, which were ordered to be sent from a large shop in the town, but no one was allowed to buy anything privately, Miss Kaye naturally thinking that squibs and crackers were dangerous in young and unpractised hands, and that it was better not to run the risk of accidents.

"We mayn't even get a box of coloured matches," grumbled a few of the third class, as they gathered in the playroom on Monday at half-past four, "and I'm sure there could be no harm in that, for you've only to strike them and hold them in your fingers."

"Miss Kaye makes as much children of us as if we were all in the Kindergarten," declared Hazel crossly. "I wish we had some chestnuts at any rate; it would be so jolly to roast them on the bars."

"You'll have some on Wednesday to roast in the bonfire."

"Yes, but I'd rather have them now. There'll be plenty of things on Wednesday, and it's so slow to-day, there's nothing to do but hang about till teatime. I say, I have an idea!" And she stooped down and whispered something in Linda's ear.

"Oh no, Hazel, we daren't!" cried Linda, her eyes wide with delighted horror; "you don't really mean it?"

"Of course I do."

"Mean what?" asked Nina, full of curiosity.

"I don't think I'll let you know. It's a secret."

"Yes, do. I'll never tell. Truly and honestly I won't."

"Well, why shouldn't we slip out of the side door, and run down the road to that little shop at the corner of Valley Lane; we could buy some chestnuts there, and perhaps some fireworks as well. I have sixpence here in my pocket."

"Oh, we should be caught!"

"No, we shouldn't. If we manage well, nobody will see us, and it won't take ten minutes. There's plenty of time before tea. Who'll come?"

No one spoke. The adventure was so serious that each girl felt rather doubtful about undertaking it, and shook her head.

"Well, you are a set of cowards," said Hazel. "I wish Connie Camden wasn't having her music lesson; she'd go in a second. Linda, you might."

"Don't, Linda," pleaded Sylvia. "It really isn't worth it. I shan't."

"Linda isn't bound to ask your leave," said Hazel sharply. "She can do as she likes, I suppose. Come, Linda. It would be such a joke!"

"I'm sure Marian wouldn't let me go," said Gwennie, "or go herself either. She's at her practising now."

"All right! I don't want either of you, nor Jessie Ellis. But, Nina, you like a little fun, I know. Come with Linda and me."

"I didn't say I would," faltered Linda.

"Yes, you will, and Nina too. We three are the only ones in the class with an ounce of courage."

Nina hesitated a moment and was lost. She was very easily led, and it flattered her so much to have Hazel Prestbury actually begging for her company that she had not the strength of character to refuse. Linda looked first at one of her friends and then at the other; they were almost equally balanced in her affections, but on this occasion Hazel, the elder, the more important, and the more persuasive, slightly turned the scale.

"I don't know whether I'll really go," she said; "but I'll come as far as the gate, and watch you start. There can't be much harm in that."

"Miss Coleman said we mustn't go into the garden to-day. It's raining," volunteered Gwennie.

"Oh, bother! We don't mind the rain. By the way, you girls must all promise faithfully you won't be so mean as to tell," said Hazel.

"You needn't be in the least afraid," replied Sylvia, rising, and going over to the bookcase; "we're none of us telltales, at any rate, whatever other names you may call us."

The naughty trio crept quietly from the playroom into the dressing-room, where their garden hats and jackets were kept; then, quite forgetting either to change their shoes or put on goloshes, they ran into the drizzling rain, and, keeping well behind the bushes, soon reached the front gate and peeped cautiously out. Nobody was in sight, the road looked perfectly clear, and it would hardly take five minutes to gain the small shop in Valley Lane and buy what they wanted.

"Come along!" said Hazel, holding out her hand to Linda.

But Linda stopped. The remembrance of a look she had seen in Sylvia's eyes rose up before her, again her friends seemed to be pulling in two different ways, and her own better judgment told her which was the right one.

"I think I won't," she said. "I only came to see you off, you know. I'm going back to play draughts with Sylvia."

"Very well," replied Hazel, much offended. "Nina and I will go by ourselves. Don't expect any of the chestnuts or fireworks, for you shan't have them."

Linda managed to return through the garden unobserved, and finding Sylvia in the classroom, the two sat chatting quietly until the teabell rang. Nina and Hazel came in to tea rather out of breath, and with very red cheeks.

"We've got them," they whispered. "A whole bag of lovely chestnuts, and two boxes of coloured matches, and a

magic snake's egg. We ran all the way back, and didn't see anybody but a policeman."

"We're going to have such a jubilee to-night! Nina's coming into our bedroom to let off the snake with Connie and me," said Hazel.

"It's no fun with only Jessie Ellis," said Nina.

When tea was over, and the girls were just leaving the room, Miss Kaye called to Hazel, Nina, and Linda, saying she wished to speak to them for a moment. She held Elsie Thompson by the hand, and motioned the children into her study.

"Now, girls," she said gravely, "I wish to ask you something. Elsie tells me that she was looking out of the top landing window before tea, and she saw you all three go through the garden to the gate, and run down the road towards Aberglyn. Is this true?"

"No, Miss Kaye," replied Hazel promptly. "We didn't go out anywhere; did we, Nina?"

"No," said Nina, though with less assurance.

It was a bold step of Hazel's to deny what they had done, but Elsie Thompson's habit of making up stories was well known, and on this account she hoped they might escape. Linda gave no reply. She was in a terrible difficulty. To tell the truth would of course implicate the other two; yet she was not prepared with such a deliberate falsehood.

"Did you go down the Aberglyn road, Linda?" asked the headmistress.

"No, Miss Kaye," said Linda, feeling that her truth was only half a truth after all, and more ashamed of herself than she liked to think.

"I am very glad to hear it," said Miss Kaye, looking relieved. "Elsie is such a little girl that I believe she hardly knows yet how naughty it is to tell such wrong tales. I shall have to be very cross with you, Elsie, if you do so again." And, shaking her head at the small six-year-old, she dismissed the four.

Hazel waited till they were safely down the passage, then, seizing Elsie by the arm, she gave her a hard smack.

"You nasty little thing!" she cried; "what do you mean by telling tales about us to Miss Kaye?"

"But I really saw you," wailed Elsie.

"You didn't. And if you say a word about this to Sadie, or May Spencer, or anybody else, a big black boggy will come to your bed to-night and eat you up. Yes, he will," she said, as poor little Elsie fled in terror to the playroom; "he told me so himself."

"I never thought Elsie would see us," said Hazel. "It was most unfortunate. We got out of it better than I expected, though. We shall have to hide away those chestnuts; it won't be safe to roast them, or to let off the snake either."

"Oh, Hazel, I wish you hadn't done it!" said Linda. "We've told the most dreadful stories."

"Well, you haven't, at any rate. Miss Kaye asked if you had been down the Aberglyn road, and you didn't go, so you only said what was quite true."

"Yes, but----"

"Oh, what's the use of 'buts'? We can't help it now! There's the prep. bell, and we shall have to go along. I hope none of the other girls will say anything. I don't suppose they will."

Linda went into preparation with a very uneasy mind. She was a truthful child, and could not bear to be mixed up with any deceit; but on the other hand she did not like to get her classmates into trouble. She was astonished that Hazel should behave so; it spoilt her faith in her friend, and recalled to her memory several other incidents which she had not noticed much at the time, but were nevertheless occasions on which Hazel had not acted in a strictly honourable manner.

"There was the Punch and Judy on the beach," thought Linda, "when she asked the man to begin, and promised we would give him some pennies, and then said she hadn't any money with her. And once she found Winnie Ingham's penknife, and kept it in her pocket for a week without telling her. And it was she who told Greta Collins to call 'stingy' after Nellie Parker, because she only put down threepence for the fireworks; and it was too bad, for Nellie hardly has any pocket money, and she had given all she had. Oh, dear! I wish Hazel wouldn't do such things. She's so nice in every other way. I like her immensely. But what I think is horrid she only laughs at and calls fun. Sylvia never does." And with that last comparison between her two friends, Linda put her elbows on her desk, and her fingers in her ears,

and tried to settle herself to the stern task of learning the subjunctive mood of the verb *rendre*, having a lively horror of Mademoiselle's wrath on the morrow if she went to the French class with an ill-prepared lesson.

CHAPTER IX

What Miss Kaye Thought of It

TUESDAY passed just as usual, and no casual observer would have noticed that anything was amiss with the members of the third class. Elsie Thompson had evidently been frightened into silence by Hazel's threat, no one else mentioned the subject, and beyond the fact that Nina looked pale, and Linda rather distressed, the matter seemed likely to sink into oblivion. At about a quarter to four, however, when Miss Arkwright was in the very middle of explaining the difference between a nominative of address and a nominative in apposition, the door opened suddenly, and Miss Kaye made her appearance. She so seldom came into a class during the afternoon that the hearts of three of her pupils began to thump, their guilty consciences telling them beforehand that her errand must surely concern them and no others. Nor were they mistaken. After apologizing to Miss Arkwright for interrupting the lesson, Miss Kaye turned towards the girls with that stern look in her eyes which they knew and dreaded to meet.

"Hazel Prestbury, Linda Marshall, and Nina Forster," she said in a voice that though quiet was full of emotion, "I am deeply grieved to find that you have been deceiving me. Elsie Thompson told me yesterday that she had seen you run through the gate and down the road towards Aberglyn. I asked you if this were so, and you all three denied it. Knowing that Elsie is not always very truthful I believed your word in preference to hers. This afternoon I happened to meet Miss Newman, a lady who lives near Valley Lane, and she told me that she noticed some of my girls coming out of Mrs. Price's shop yesterday at about ten minutes to five, and hurrying back towards Heathercliffe. I am more pained than I can tell you, not only to think that you should have broken the rules, but that you should have stooped to utter such deliberate falsehoods. You allowed me to accuse Elsie of the very fault you were committing yourselves, and meanly left her to bear the blame. I am thoroughly ashamed of you, and hope you are equally ashamed of yourselves. Go at once to your bedrooms. Your tea will be sent to you later. I feel that, until you have fully realized what you have done, you are not fit to mingle with the rest of the class. You will, of course, take no part in our fifth-of-November party to-morrow."

Poor Linda! She left the room feeling as if her trouble were almost greater than she could bear. It was impossible now to explain that she had only gone as far as the gate. Miss Kaye would probably not believe her, and in any case would think that she was trying to shirk her part of the blame, and cast it on Hazel and Nina. She was beginning to experience the truth of the old proverb that you cannot touch pitch and keep your hands clean; she had never intended to do anything in the least dishonourable, but having taken a first step it had been very difficult to act in such a sudden emergency. Friendship had seemed to demand that she should not betray her companions, though their conduct certainly did not justify any great consideration on their behalf.

"If I'd only never left the house," she thought, "or if I had told Miss Kaye I had gone into the garden! But then she would have known the others must have been there too. Oh, it's all a horrid puzzle, and I'm simply miserable! I shan't see Guy Fawkes to-morrow, and I hate everybody and everything, and I wish I were at home."

She went to bed in tears, which increased when Miss Coleman brought her her tea, and, after collecting Sylvia's nightclothes, informed her that her roommate, together with Connie Camden and Jessie Ellis, were to sleep in a large bedroom generally called "The Hospital", and no one would be allowed even to come in and speak to her. The prospect of sleeping alone without Sylvia made her feel wretched, and it was not till then that she began to realize how much her friend was to her, and what a terrible loss it would be if they were separated.

"Perhaps Miss Kaye won't let us have a bedroom together again," she said to herself. "I wonder whom she'll put me with! Suppose she sent one of the big girls to sleep here, Bessie Cunningham, or Marjorie Moreton. How hateful it would be! There'd never be any fun or talks in bed in the mornings. Or perhaps I shall be just alone, as I was before Sylvia came. I didn't care then, but I mind it dreadfully now I'm so accustomed to her."

In the meantime Sylvia was feeling as dejected as Linda at the course which events had taken. She knew her friend was not so much to blame as the others, and it was terrible to find her mixed up in such an unpleasant business.

"Hazel often tells stories," she reflected, "and I never thought much of Nina. But I'm sure Linda wouldn't do such a thing. There must be some mistake. If I could only see her, and get her to explain it all."

That, however, was impossible. She was strictly forbidden to go into her bedroom, and neither Miss Coleman nor Miss Arkwright would give any news of the three banished offenders.

It was a very dismal evening in the playroom for the remaining members of the third class. It cast quite a gloom over their spirits. Connie Camden did not tease and play tricks as usual, and Jessie Ellis had to retire to a corner occasionally

and wipe her eyes.

"You shouldn't have let them go," said Marian to Sylvia. "You were there and heard their plans."

"How could I stop them?" cried Sylvia indignantly. "I said I wouldn't go myself. Hazel is more than a year older than I am, and she never listens to anything I say. She was as rude as she could be, and persuaded the others to go with her. Did you want me to go telling tales to Miss Arkwright?"

"No, but you might have said more. I don't believe they would have gone if I had been there. I should have thought of so many reasons to stop them. It was a great pity I was at my practising," said Marian, who was always wise after an event.

"Well, why didn't Gwennie say it all?" demanded Sylvia. "She was there."

"Gwennie is much younger, and isn't expected to tell people what they ought to do. It's quite enough for her to do as she's told herself."

"I'm only four months older than Gwennie, so I don't see why you should throw the blame on me as if it were my fault that they went," said Sylvia. "You'll be scolding Jessie next."

"No, I shan't. She's so stupid no one takes any notice of her. You're different and ought to make people care," said Marian, getting her book and beginning to read, while Sylvia, doubtful whether the last remark was intended for a compliment or a reproof, took out her writing case and consoled herself by beginning a long letter home.

It seemed very peculiar and gloomy not to be allowed to go to bed in her own room; she and Connie and Jessie undressed with many grumbles in the Hospital, and hoped they would not be compelled to stay there for the rest of the term.

"They ought to have sent the others here instead of us," said Connie. "We're being punished for something we haven't done."

"Yes, but the others would have been together, and that's what Miss Kaye doesn't want," replied Sylvia. "They're each of them quite alone, and I'm sure they must be having a wretched time. I wonder if they will be in school to-morrow!"

Evidently Miss Kaye did not consider them yet fit to take their places among the others, for they did not appear at breakfast, nor afterwards in the classroom. The headmistress had been greatly distressed by the whole affair, which showed such a sad lack of the moral courage and high standard she had tried to impress upon all her girls that she could not but feel a sense of failure. She decided that it was better to leave them for some little time to themselves, that they might have leisure to consider what they had done, and she did not mean to let them return to their places until after the fireworks were over, knowing that to prevent them from seeing the bonfire was the greatest punishment she could inflict.

Nina Forster in any case would not have been able to be present. The run down the wet garden and road in her house shoes, which she had not afterwards changed, had brought on a feverish cold and sore throat, and she was tossing about in bed with a splitting head, too poorly to think of anything but her aches and pains.

The day dragged slowly along. Lessons seemed very strange in a class of only five, and even Marian missed the others. The girls went out into the courtyard at four o'clock to look at the great bonfire which the gardener had been busy piling up, inspected the tub of newly washed potatoes which the cook had placed outside the back-kitchen door, and tried to cajole some pieces of toffee from Cook.

"I gave it all to Miss Kaye," she assured them, "and it's locked up in the dining-room cupboard. It's not a single piece you'll get till to-night, so don't come bothering me. Parkin, did you say? It's safe in the storeroom, and it will stay there till seven o'clock."

In spite of a slight mist it promised to be a fine evening, and the children looked anxiously up at the sky, hoping it would be clear enough to show off the rockets to advantage. The fireworks were to begin after six o'clock, at which hour Mr. Cameron was expected to arrive, and with the gardener's aid to set a light to the bonfire.

"It's no fun in the least without Linda," thought Sylvia, wandering round to the front of the house to see if she could catch a glimpse of her friend at the window. "She'll be so unhappy all alone! I wonder if----." And she ran back to the side door as quickly as she could, for a new idea had suddenly struck her.

"Mercy," she cried, meeting the monitress in the passage, "there's something I want to do if I dare. Do you think

Miss Kaye would be very angry with me?"

"I can't tell you till I know what it is," said Mercy, smiling. "What do you wish to ask her?"

"Linda will be so miserable by herself this evening. Do you think Miss Kaye would let me stay with her? You see, it wasn't her fault half as much as the others', because she didn't really go with them."

"How do you know she didn't?" asked Mercy.

"Because she came back at once and said she had only been to the gate. She and I sat in the classroom talking till teatime."

"My dear child, if you knew this you ought to have told Miss Kaye about it before!"

"Ought I? I didn't dare. She looked so angry. I thought perhaps Linda had told her."

"I don't believe she did. At any rate I think we ought to make sure. If you like I'll go with you to Miss Kaye now; she's in her study."

"Oh, if you only would!" cried Sylvia, clasping Mercy in one of her affectionate hugs; "I shouldn't mind a scrap if you were there, but I'm frightened out of my wits to go alone."

Sylvia clutched Mercy's arm very tightly as they tapped at the door of the study, and entered in response to Miss Kaye's 'Come in!' She was thankful the elder girl was there to explain her errand, as she felt so shy herself, she was sure she would not have known how to begin.

"You are quite certain, Sylvia, that Linda did not accompany the others to Mrs. Price's shop?" asked Miss Kaye, when Mercy had finished her account.

"Quite, Miss Kaye," replied Sylvia. "She never said she would. Hazel tried very hard to persuade her, and she promised to go with them just as far as the gate. She couldn't have gone farther, because she was back in a few minutes. I know she came in the moment Marian Woodhouse stopped practising, and Marian always has the piano till exactly a quarter to five. Then she was with me all the rest of the time until tea."

"Miss Newman certainly said she saw two girls, both with light hair," said Miss Kaye; "I supposed the third must have escaped her notice. I am glad to find Linda is not quite so naughty as I thought. I will go to her at once and see if she is able to explain what happened afterwards."

"And please, Miss Kaye----" said Sylvia eagerly, as the mistress rose.

"Well, my dear?"

"Would you let me stay with her to-night instead of going to the bonfire?"

"We'll see," replied Miss Kaye; and without committing herself any further she went upstairs.

Sylvia looked at Miss Kaye many times during tea, trying to read the answer in her face, but the latter did not glance in her direction, and seemed fully occupied in a conversation with Mademoiselle. When the meal was over, however, she called to her to remain after the other girls had left the room.

"I have seen Linda," she said, "and find her thoroughly sorry for any part she has played which has not been perfectly honourable and straightforward. I am sure she will be more careful in future to avoid even the shadow of an untruth. As I think she was trying to shield Nina and Hazel I have decided not to punish her any more, and she is once again free. Did you say that you would be willing to give up your share of the fun outside and spend the evening with her?"

"Yes, oh yes!" exclaimed Sylvia.

"And miss the fireworks?"

"I don't mind."

"You are a good little friend, but it is not necessary. Linda may come to the bonfire, and you shall have the pleasure of running upstairs at once and telling her so yourself."

You may be sure that Sylvia flew like an arrow to her bedroom to announce the delightful news, and that it did not take Linda long to put on her outdoor clothes and join the crowd which was already assembling in the courtyard.

Mr. Cameron had just arrived. He was a tall, jolly, rather elderly gentleman, with a grey moustache and an endless stock of jokes, which he fired off like crackers among the girls. They all knew him well, as he often came to Heathercliffe House. His daughter Doris had been educated there, and though she was now nineteen, she was fond of her old school, and had accompanied her father this evening to watch the fireworks.

"Out of my way!" shouted Mr. Cameron; "make room for the principal figure, the leading actor on the stage, we may call him, and if you don't admire him, it's your own bad taste!"

He was staggering from the house as he spoke, carrying in his arms a huge guy, stuffed with straw, whose comical red face, dangling arms, and helpless legs roused shouts of laughter all round.

"There," said Mr. Cameron, seating him on a convenient barrel in the midst of the bonfire, "anyone can change places with him who likes; he mayn't look clever, but at any rate I can guarantee he'll get a warm reception before he even takes the trouble to open his mouth. Now then, stand back, children; we're going to begin."



"IN A FEW MINUTES A GRAND BLAZE WAS FLARING UP"

The gardener had brought out a large torch, which he applied to some loose shavings, and in a few minutes a grand blaze was flaring up, catching the boxes, hampers, and brushwood of which the pile was composed. Mr. Cameron fastened a match to the end of a pole, and, lighting it, approached within a few feet of the guy.

"Now look," he said; "watch very carefully, and you'll see him roll his eyes."

He applied the match to the mask where two small pin-wheels had been fitted in front of the empty sockets. They went off immediately, and gave exactly the appearance of two horrible, flaming eyes whirling round and round in the big head. The younger children screamed and clung delightedly to the elder ones, and even Miss Kaye was quite startled at the effect.

"Now he's going to talk," declared Mr. Cameron; "he's like the girl in the fairy tale who dropped diamonds and pearls whenever she opened her lips."

He held his lighted pole to the guy's mouth, where a Roman candle was hidden inside, and out came balls of red and blue and green, shooting into the air one after another with great brilliance. By this time the flames had reached his arms and legs, which, being stuffed with squibs and crackers, exploded with much noise, and the luckless conspirator disappeared with a crash into the midst of the burning barrels, to the accompaniment of a storm of clapping and a lusty cheer. When the blaze had somewhat subsided, the tub of potatoes was carried out, and each girl was allowed to place one in the hot ashes, together with several chestnuts, which could be roasting while they ate the toffee and parkin.

"You wouldn't think of eating sweet things just before you had potatoes at any other time," said Linda, "but everything tastes so delicious when it's from the bonfire."

Mr. Cameron was getting ready to let off the more important fireworks, which had been kept till the end, and the girls arranged themselves in a half-circle to look at the golden rain, the Catherine wheels, and the rockets which were to finish the festivities. He had prepared a surprise for them by writing "Heathercliffe House" in gunpowder on the ground, which, when it was set alight, stood out in letters of flame, and had a fine effect. "I always said Heathercliffe House ought to set the world on fire," he laughed, "and we've done it to-night."

As Linda stood watching the last rocket tearing across the sky, she put her arm round Sylvia's shoulder. "I shouldn't have been here at all this evening except for you," she whispered. "It was lovely of you to go to Miss Kaye. She was so nice about it when I said I was sorry. I don't think I shall ever be frightened of her again."

"Three cheers for Miss Kaye!" called Mr. Cameron. "Those who feel they have had a jolly time may join me, and those who don't had better go to bed. Hip! Hip! Hooray!"

And among all the laughing, clapping girls there were none who responded more heartily than Linda and Sylvia.

CHAPTER X

Sylvia's Birthday

NINA FORSTER was obliged to remain in bed for several days, but Hazel Prestbury came into school on the following morning, rather red about the eyes, and a little sulky. She was sorry, not so much for her fault, as for being found out, and she blamed herself for her own stupidity.

"I might have known some tiresome person would see us out of a window," she thought. "Miss Kaye always manages to get to hear everything."

She felt that the other girls disapproved of her. Marian spoke her mind freely on the subject, and even gentle Gwennie did not appear too anxious to sit next to her. Linda avoided her as much as possible, keeping strictly to Sylvia's company, and, though Connie Camden, who never thought about anything, was as friendly as ever, it did not quite make up for the general coldness of the rest. The girls were too kind to send her to Coventry, but Hazel felt she had lost her former position in the class. It was a severe wound to her pride, for she had liked to be considered a leader, and had always been pleased to see how easily the others had accepted her opinions and suggestions; as the eldest she had possessed a good deal of influence, and her greatest punishment was to find it gone.

November crept on fast, and the days seemed to grow rapidly shorter and shorter. It was chilly now in the mornings, and those whose hard fate it was to be obliged to practise before breakfast grumbled at stiff fingers and cold toes.

"I never know whether I like it or not," said Sylvia. "I hate it when I'm in bed, and feel I'd give all the world not to have to get up so early; but when it's done it's so nice to think you won't have to do it at four o'clock. I wish one could learn music without practising."

"And French without verbs," groaned Linda, looking at her exercise, nearly every line of which showed red-ink corrections in Mademoiselle's neat foreign handwriting. "I think some people are born bad at languages, and I'm one of them. I never can understand properly what Mademoiselle is saying, and then she gets cross and says I don't attend."

French was a serious trouble to Sylvia also. She had learnt very little with her governess at home, and found it most difficult to keep up with Marian, who had rather a pretty accent, and was good at translation. To encourage her pupils, Mademoiselle had offered a prize to whichever could write the best letter home in the French language. Each was to be the unaided work of the competitor, though grammars and dictionaries might be freely consulted. It was a difficult task to all the girls, and to some an almost impossible one, but Mademoiselle insisted upon everybody at least making an attempt, and laughed in private over the funny efforts which followed.

If the prize had been given for the queerest instead of the best letter Connie Camden would have gained it. She grew so tired of looking up words that she wrote anything she thought sounded like French, and the result would have puzzled a native to decipher. It ran thus:--

"Heathercliffe Maison.

"Novembre la onzieme.

"Mon cher mere

"Mamzelle a tolde moi que je mustai wriiter une lettre en francais. Je le findai tres difficile et je ne likai pas du tout. Mamzelle a offre une prize mais je suis sure que je ne shallai pas le getter. Je begge que vous excusez moi parce que je ne canne pas thinker de rien encore a sayer.

"Vôtre aimant fille,

"CONNIE."

This, however, was the worst of the set, some of the others having managed to express themselves quite nicely. Rather to everybody's astonishment Hazel Prestbury won the prize. She was not industrious enough to gain the highest marks in class, but on this occasion she had set her best energies to work, and her letter, both as regards composition and grammar, was far in advance of all competitors. She felt a thrill of triumph as Mademoiselle presented her with a charming Parisian basket full of choice chocolates, accompanied by a speech in French, which nobody understood in the least. She handed it round amongst the girls with a sense that she had at last somewhat regained her lost standing, and when the basket was empty had the satisfaction of overhearing Marian remark that she was generous with her sweets, and Gwennie wish that she knew French only half as well.

Nina Forster returned to class after a week's absence, looking pale and thin, and with a white knitted shawl wrapped ostentatiously round her shoulders. She was a girl who thoroughly enjoyed being delicate, and liked the importance of having a fuss made over her. There was always a large bottle of tonic on the sideboard, which Nina gloried in being obliged to swallow, and she was rather pleased than otherwise if Miss Kaye decided that it was too damp a day for her to venture out.

"I can't stand much, you know," she would explain complacently to the others in languid tones. "Every winter I have been laid up, with the doctor listening at my bronchial tube and taking my temperature night and morning. It makes Mother most unhappy, and I'm sure Miss Kaye's quite worried about me too."

As most of the girls did not know the exact meaning of either a bronchial tube or a temperature, they were a good deal impressed, and allowed Nina to take the warmest seat and the biggest piece of toffee "for the sake of her throat", a state of affairs which was just what she wanted, and of which she did not fail to take advantage to the uttermost.

With the colder weather eider-down quilts had made their appearance in the bedrooms, and now supplied the places of the pretty pink coverlets which were only used in summer. It felt very warm and comfortable to snuggle down under them at night, when the wind was howling outside and the rain beating fast against the windows, and very hard to throw them back and get up in the dark, chilly mornings, when the dressing bell was ringing in the passage outside.

Sylvia's eider-down quilt once caused her an experience which gave her a greater fright than she had ever had in her life before. She had been to sleep for what seemed to her several hours, and woke suddenly with a curious sense that someone besides herself and Linda was in the room. It seemed to her as if her quilt were being very gently but surely pulled from her bed. Wide awake in an instant, she pulled it back and lay listening with strained ears. There was nothing to be heard but Linda's placid breathing and the drip of the rain from the spout outside the window. Again the quilt slowly began to move, and this time she was certain she caught a slight sound. Could it be possible that a burglar was concealed under her bed? The idea was too dreadful, and a cold shiver ran through her. What was she to do? She did not dare to call to Linda; she felt as if her tongue would refuse to utter a cry, and perhaps if she did the man would at once crawl out. The room was not quite dark, as a fitful moon shone in through the blind between the storm clouds, and to poor Sylvia it made the horror almost worse to know that she would be able to see somebody rise up suddenly by her bedside.

"I'd give him anything and everything he wants to steal," she thought, "if only he wouldn't frighten me so. Oh, I wonder whether he's really there or not!"

She held the edge of the quilt in her hand. Was it slipping once more? Yes, it was most undoubtedly being pulled from her grasp, and, as her hair nearly stood on end with fear, she heard an unmistakable sneeze from somewhere just underneath her bed. She gave a little agonized gasp of terror, and at the same moment something sprang up and plumped on to her chest. Nearly dead with fright, she yet managed to look, and to her astonishment beheld only the waving tail and round green eyes of Toby, the school cat, which, settling himself comfortably, began to claw the quilt with his paws, purring his loudest the while as if quite proud and pleased with himself. Sylvia sat up in bed and laughed heartily at her burglar.

"Toby, you wretch," she cried, stroking his soft fur, "how did you manage to get in here? I suppose it was you that was trying to tug my quilt from me. No doubt you wanted to make yourself a nice bed on the floor. And then you sneezed! What shall I do with you? I can't take you to the kitchen in the middle of the night. You'll have to cuddle down with me; you're beautifully warm at any rate. Here, come inside, you'll be as good as a hot bottle." And, clasping the purring cat close in her arms, she was soon back in the land of dreams.

It was quite a little adventure to relate to Linda next morning, and the latter wondered how she had been able to sleep so stolidly through it.

"You always say I shouldn't hear either a burglar or an earthquake," she declared, "and Toby was very nearly as bad. You naughty, precious puss! What do you mean by coming and scaring my Sylvia? There, you didn't do it on purpose, did you? Come into my bed for a minute before I get up. You're the sweetest, softest darling that ever was."

Sylvia's birthday was on the nineteenth of November, and to her great delight it happened this year on a Saturday. Miss Kaye, who tried to make school seem as much like home as possible, was indulgent regarding such anniversaries, and permitted many small privileges to the fortunate owner of a birthday. Sylvia was allowed to choose the dinner, an important decision, over which she lingered so long that the mistress nearly lost patience.

"Of course you must not order turkey and ice cream," said Miss Kaye; "it must be two of our ordinary dishes, only you may have which you like. Be quick, for Cook is waiting to know."

After some hesitation Sylvia decided on hotpot and fig pudding.

"I like the potatoes on the top of the hotpot," she explained to Linda, "especially when they're crisp and brown, and the fig pudding always has delicious sweet sauce, and Miss Kaye lets one take plenty of sugar with it. Jessie Ellis chose boiled mutton and corn-flour blancmange with jam on her birthday. I don't think that was nice at all."

The girls in her class subscribed, and gave Sylvia a birthday book as their joint present, containing poetical quotations from Shakespeare for each day, and one or two pretty illustrations of Perdita, Portia, and other heroines. She was charmed with such a remembrance and asked them all to write their names in it.

"We chose a fawn cover," said Nina, "because topaz is the birthday stone for November. Marian wanted a green one, but I said that wouldn't do. It's a funny thing, but people always say your month stone matches your eyes. I never can quite decide whether yours are brown or dark grey, but I'm sure a necklace of topaz would suit you beautifully, and you'll have to wear one when you're grown up. By the by, on which day of the week were you born?"

"On a Friday," said Sylvia; "but why do you want to know?"

"Then you're loving and giving."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't you know the old rhyme?"

Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is a child of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child is loving and giving,
Saturday's child must work for its living,
But the child that is born on the Sabbath day
Is good and truthful and happy and gay."

"Where do you learn all these things?" asked Sylvia.

"From our old cook. She's a daleswoman, and she can tell what it means when the candle gutters or the clock stops, or a swarm of bees comes, or you see magpies, or your ear burns, or you sneeze, and what's lucky to do and what's unlucky."

"You are the greatest goose!" said Marian scornfully. "You don't mean to say you believe that silly rubbish? We shouldn't be allowed to talk to our cook at home if she told us such nonsense. You'd better not let Miss Kaye see you throwing salt over your shoulder, or crossing the water when you wash with anybody."

"You always make fun of everything I do," exclaimed Nina plaintively.

"Then you should have more sense," snapped Marian, who prided herself upon being strong-minded.

"Sylvia has a pretty name at any rate," continued Nina, "and so have I. I shouldn't like to be called Marian; it's just like Mary Ann."

But as Marian wisely took no notice, and walked away, the shot fell rather flat.

The parcel post came in at half-past ten, and brought several bulky-looking packages addressed to "Miss S. Lindsay". Sylvia bore them off to the playroom and untied the strings before an audience of sympathetic girls, each of whom was almost as interested as if the birthday had been her own.

"Which shall I open first?" she said. "This one feels nice, and it's in Mother's writing, too. Lend me your scissors, Marian, that's a dear. I can't unfasten this knot. Oh, look! Exactly what I wanted."

And she drew from a cardboard box a charming little Brownie camera with several rolls of films quite ready to use.

"How delightful!" she cried. "Now I can take snapshots of you all, and the house, and Miss Kaye, and everything. I'll send them home to Father to develop; he's very clever at photos."

"You won't be able to take snaps in this dark weather," said Hazel. "I don't expect you can do much with it until spring. I took some last autumn, and they were so faint you couldn't tell what they were meant for."

"Well, she can try, at any rate," said Linda. "Perhaps she can manage a time exposure if she puts the camera on

something steady, and get a group of the whole class in the garden. What's in the next parcel?"

It proved to be a copy of the *Talisman*, with "Sylvia Lindsay, from her loving Father", written inside--a welcome present, as Sylvia was collecting Scott, and was glad to have an addition to her number of volumes.

"This is a child's writing," said Marian, taking up a small packet, addressed in a round, rather shaky-looking hand. "Shall I cut the string for you?"

"Really, Marian! Let her open her own parcels. They're her presents," said Linda.

"And my scissors," returned Marian. "I only wanted to help her. Oh! That's pretty!" she exclaimed as Sylvia unwrapped a purse made of mother-of-pearl with a gilt clasp and lined with crimson silk. On a half-sheet of notepaper was written: "With best wishes for your birthday from Effie and May".

"How kind of them to send me anything!" said Sylvia. "They never have done before. I suppose it's because I'm at school. I really am in luck this time."

The next parcel was from Aunt Louisa and Cousin Cuthbert. It was an upright wooden box, containing a set of table croquet, eight little mallets and balls, with hoops and sticks, arranged on a polished wood stand, and sandbags to place round the table to prevent the balls from rolling off on to the floor.

"I think this is the nicest of all," cried Linda. "There are just eight mallets, so that the whole class can play, and it will be such fun on wet days when we can't go out."

"I never expected another present from Aunt Louisa," said Sylvia. "She gave me that writing case when I came, and Cuthbert the pencil box, the one I gave to Sadie Thompson, you know."

"I wish she were my aunt," said Marian; "I should think she's nice."

"She is generally, but it was she who made Father and Mother send me here, and I didn't want to come in the least."

"Why, but you're glad now, aren't you? Everybody likes being at Miss Kaye's."

"Yes, I'm very glad, though I'm looking forward immensely to Christmas and going home. I wonder what's inside this smallest parcel. Oh, a brooch from Aunt Mabel and Uncle Herbert! Such a pretty one, like little silver daisies. It will go beautifully with my best dress."

Miss Holt had sent a writing album, Granny a bottle of scent, and Uncle Wallace a box of chocolates, so there was quite a show of gifts arranged upon the table.

"You haven't opened this one yet," said Linda, pointing to the largest parcel, which had been left till the last.

"No, because I knew what it was," said Sylvia. "It's my birthday cake, and mother said it was to be a present for the whole school."

It was so carefully packed in a wooden box that the children were not able to open it themselves, and were obliged to fetch Miss Coleman, who prised up the lid with a screwdriver and lifted out such a wonderful cake that, as she laid it on a plate, everybody gave a gasping "Oh!" of admiration. It was beautifully iced, with ornaments of pink and white sugar, and Sylvia's name in sugary letters on the top, and it was of such a large and substantial size that it looked as if even thirty-four girls would be able to cut and come again.

"Mother says there's a sixpence inside," said Sylvia, "so it will be very exciting to see who gets it at tea. I hope it will be right in the middle of a slice, and not tumble out just when it's being cut."

"You're a very fortunate girl," said Miss Coleman. "You'll have to be quite busy the rest of the day writing letters to thank all these kind friends. I'm going to take the cake to the storeroom, but you may keep the box of chocolates."

Tea was a festive meal. The cake looked most imposing, placed on one of Miss Kaye's largest dessert dishes in the centre of the table. Sylvia was allowed to cut it herself, and handed generous slices round to everybody, and she was particularly glad when little Elsie Thompson got the coveted sixpence.

"They never have a cake of their own," whispered Linda; "their aunt doesn't think of making one for them, and their father is too far away. Sadie had only one present on her birthday besides what we gave her."

Before bedtime came, Sylvia took her handsome bottle of scent, and, wrapping it in a parcel, wrote on a piece of paper: "Will you please accept this from me. I shall feel very hurt if you don't". Then in defiance of rules she ran into Mercy's room, and laid it on her pillow, where she would find it when she went to bed.

"I'm sure Granny wouldn't mind," she said to herself. "No one knows exactly which day is Mercy's birthday, and, though they keep it on the one when she was found, it might perhaps be to-day, and I couldn't bear to think that I've had all these lovely presents and she should have got nothing at all."

CHAPTER XI

The Christmas Holidays

"STIR-UP SUNDAY" seemed to come almost directly after Sylvia's birthday, and the girls began to count the weeks eagerly until the holidays. There were many ingenious devices for marking the passage of time. Hazel Prestbury cut notches on her ruler, Connie Camden put twenty-two stones on her mantelpiece and threw one out of the window every morning, and Nina Forster scored the calendar hanging in her bedroom each evening with a very black lead pencil.

"I live only ten miles away," said Linda, "so I haven't a long journey, have I? The first term I used to go home for weekends, but Miss Kaye said it unsettled me, and she asked Mother to let me stay at school like the other girls. I don't mind it now; it's rather nice here on Saturdays and Sundays."

There still seemed a good deal to be done before the end of the term arrived. All the girls had been working in the evenings at dressing dolls and making other presents for a Christmas tree that was to be given to the poor children attending a ragged school at Aberglyn. They liked the employment, especially as Miss Kaye would come sometimes and read aloud to them while they sewed.

"And there isn't anybody in the world who can read so beautifully as Miss Kaye," said Linda.

"When I was at Mrs. Harper's school," said Hazel, "we were helped to make Christmas presents to take home, instead of doing things for ragged schools. I worked a most lovely afternoon-tea cloth; Mother's quite proud of it still. I wish we did that here."

"I don't," said Marian. "I suppose you only like doing things for yourself."

"It wasn't for myself. It was for my mother. How nasty you always are, Marian!"

"It was for home, at any rate," retorted Marian. "Miss Kaye says we can be quite as selfish for our families as for ourselves, and we ought to remember outside people at Christmas, who don't get any presents, and who won't give us nice things back."

"Well, really!" said Hazel; "do you mean to tell me I'm not to make presents for my mother and my aunts?"

"I didn't say anything of the sort. You can give those too, but Miss Kaye said they oughtn't to be the only ones. Even heathens are fond of their own families, and it's not particularly generous just for all to give things round in a circle."

"Well, we've done plenty for the ragged schools this year," said Nina, reviewing the row of dolls in their pretty bright frocks, the wool balls, the knitted reins, and the scrapbooks which formed the contribution of the class. "They'll look splendid hanging on the tree."

"I wish we could go and see the treat," said Sylvia.

"Miss Kaye won't let us do that," replied Linda. "She's afraid we might catch measles or chicken-pox."

"I always go to our treats at home," said Jessie Ellis.

"Your father's a clergyman, so you're sure to," said Marian. "We do sometimes, to the Scholars' Tea or the Congregational Teaparty. Gwennie and I help to pass cups and hand the cake, while Mother pours out."

"Let us tell what we're each going to do in the holidays," said Hazel. "You go on, Marian, as you've begun. Don't you have anything but school treats?"

"Of course we do," answered Marian. "We go on New Year's Eve to our grandfather's, and have a big family party with all our cousins. Everybody has to play a piece, or recite poetry, or do something, and it's ever so jolly. We sit up till midnight, and bring in the New Year. And we go skating with our brothers, and slide on the pond, and if there's any snow we toboggan down the hill on teatrays and have snowball fights with some boys who live near. It's great fun."

"Yes, lovely fun!" echoed Gwennie.

"I go to so many parties!" said Hazel. "I always have three or four a week, and we give a dance ourselves too. Last year I went to the Mayor's Children's Fancy Ball. I was dressed as a Dresden china shepherdess, with a flowered skirt and a laced bodice and paniers, and a big hat, and a crook in my hand. It's only to be a plain ball this Christmas. Then

there are the pantomimes; we generally go to two and sometimes to the circus as well, and any concerts or entertainments that may happen to be on. Now, Connie, it's your turn to say."

"There are so many of us," began Connie, "Mother says it's like a party to see us all sitting round the table. We play games amongst ourselves, and get up acts and charades. We have a huge room at the top of the house, where we may make as much noise and mess as we like. Sometimes the boys give a magic-lantern show up there, or make shadow pictures. And Bertie has a lathe, and turns all kinds of jolly things in it out of pieces of wood; and he helps us to build boats; and we sail them across the reservoir; and we go long walks on the moors; and we've a little hut at the end of the garden, with a stove in it where we cook things. We make the most glorious toffee! I wouldn't change my holidays for anybody else's!"

"They do sound nice," said Nina. "I go about with my sisters. They're quite grown up, and they take me to pay calls. Then my brother's at home as well, and he and I have fun together. I'm asked to plenty of parties, but Mother is so terribly afraid of my catching cold that I miss quite half of them. I don't always go to the pantomime, because of draughts. I like the summer holidays best, when we stay at the seaside. Jessie, you haven't said yet."

"I don't know what to tell," said Jessie, who was not gifted with great powers of description.

"Oh, but you must say something! I don't suppose you spend the holidays in bed."

"Well, no!" said Jessie, laughing. "Though I did once, when I had scarlet fever. I go walks with my brother, and we help to decorate the church, and people ask us to tea. I think that's all."

"I still think mine are the nicest," said Hazel. "Linda, we want yours."

"We live quite in the country," said Linda. "The carol singers come on Christmas Eve, and we ask them in and give them hot coffee. There's a big pond, where we skate if it freezes hard enough, and once, when there was very deep snow, we had out our sledge. Sometimes we stay with Granny in London, and then we go to the pantomime and the circus, and have a lovely time. We've got a new puppy, and I want to teach him some tricks these holidays. Now, Sylvia, you're the last."

"I've nobody to do anything with," said Sylvia rather wistfully, almost forgetting, in listening to the glowing accounts of the others, how she had once said she did not wish for young companions. "Not at home at any rate; but of course there are parties, and we have people to tea. I just read and paint, and do things by myself."

The girls appeared to consider this must be very slow, and pitied Sylvia to such an extent that she was quite surprised.

"I'm perfectly happy," she remonstrated.

"But it can't be so nice as having brothers and sisters," said Marian in her decisive manner. "I should miss our little ones most dreadfully, and Fred and Larry too. Holidays wouldn't be holidays without seeing them. I think it must be wretched to be an only child."

Talking of the holidays did not make them come any the faster, and there was plenty of hard work to be gone through before the end of the term arrived. For the first time in her life Sylvia had real examinations. She rather enjoyed the solemnity of the occasion, the typed questions, the large sheets of lined paper with margins ruled in red ink, the clean blotting paper, the new pens, and even the awesome silence of the room, with Miss Arkwright sitting at her desk reading instead of teaching as usual. She came out top in history, grammar, and geography, but Marian beat her easily in French, writing, and arithmetic, and in the end their marks were so exactly even that they were bracketed together.

Then there was an agitating afternoon when everybody had to recite poetry to Miss Kaye, each being expected to choose a different piece. Sylvia selected "John Gilpin", which she had learnt with Miss Holt, but unfortunately grew nervous and got so mixed that she was obliged to sit down in confusion, and hear Marian sail glibly through "The Little Quaker Maiden", a poem which she rendered with great effect. Connie Camden and Jessie Ellis had a furious quarrel as to which should say "Hohenlinden", that being the shortest on the list of both; but in the end Jessie gave way and took "The May Queen" instead.

Miss Denby did not allow the music to be neglected, and made each pupil learn a grand Christmas piece which seemed to need much more practising than any other, and had the added ordeal that it must be played on the last day before an audience of the whole school.

The party which was always held on the Saturday before breaking-up was also a new experience to Sylvia. The first class acted a short French play, under the excited direction of Mademoiselle, who had spent much time in coaching them for their parts. The second class took a scene from *The Midsummer-Night's Dream*. Trissie Knowles made a pretty

Titania, and Stella Camden such a mischievous Puck that everybody clapped heartily, though Miss Barrett said she was only acting her natural character, and of course it came easily to her. Connie Camden climbed up and sat on the window sill in order to see better, and fell down with a terrible crash, grazing her knee on a form and making a big bump on her forehead, and Dolly managed to upset a bottle of ink which Miss Coleman thought she had put most securely away.

When the plays were over, the girls had dancing and games in the large classroom, and finished with a dainty supper of fruit, cake, and jellies, which fully justified Linda's remark that "Heathercliffe House seemed almost as much parties as school".

Then came the exciting afternoon when the boxes were carried down from the boxroom and everybody set to work to pack, with the help of the monitresses and Miss Coleman. It was a most delightful, noisy, blissful time, when there were no forfeits if one ran into anybody else's room, or even jumped on the bed, when nobody had to practise or learn lessons, and one could shout and sing in the schoolroom. Connie Camden flung her history up to the ceiling, and did not mind in the least when it lost its back in its descent.

"Miss Arkwright will be dreadfully cross about it when we begin history again," said Marian.

"I don't care! That's a whole month off, and we've all the holidays first. No school for four weeks, and going home to-morrow! Hooray!" shouted Connie at the pitch of her lungs, waltzing among the desks with such vigour that she knocked over the blackboard, and got a scolding after all from Miss Arkwright, who happened at that moment to enter the room.

"You must control yourself, Connie. I can't have such wild behaviour even if it is the last day," she said firmly.

"Oh, Miss Arkwright," cried Connie, "you can't want to go home half as badly as I do!"

"Indeed I do," said the mistress. "I shall enjoy my holidays quite as much as anybody, though I have learnt not to dance round the desks to show my pleasure."

The girls laughed. The idea of Miss Arkwright executing a Highland fling or a jig between the forms tickled their fancy.

"I could imagine Miss Kaye doing it easier than Miss Arkwright," whispered Linda. "She did dance a reel, you know, at the party."

Everybody got into bed that night with the happy feeling that boxes were packed and ready, and that to-morrow morning, when the last necessities were popped in, they would only need to be strapped and labelled, and then the joyful opening would be at home. Most of the girls were too excited to eat much breakfast, but Miss Kaye, knowing a reaction would probably take place in the train, had provided packets of sandwiches and biscuits, and did not scold for once at the half-finished plates of porridge.

At ten o'clock cabs began to drive up to the door, and parties of chattering, laughing girls departed to the railway station under the care of Miss Barrett.

Sylvia had enquired anxiously some time ago if Mercy were to stay at school, having a secret hope that she might persuade her mother to ask her friend home with her, but May Spencer had already given an invitation which Miss Kaye had allowed Mercy to accept.

Linda's parents drove over to fetch her, so Sylvia had the pleasure of making their acquaintance. There was not time to do much more than shake hands, still it was nice to see the father and mother of whom Linda had spoken so often, and hear them express a wish that she should some day pay a visit to Craigwen.

Sylvia was to travel with Miss Coleman, who would pass through Crewe, where Mrs. Lindsay had arranged to meet her, and she had the four Camdens and Sadie and Elsie Thompson as companions for part of the way. The Camdens were welcomed at a wayside station by a jolly crew of brothers, who appeared to have reached home first, and the Thompsons were handed over at Chester to a gloomy-faced aunt, who did not look particularly pleased to receive them, and remarked at once how fast they had worn out their clothes.

"I wish I could have taken them home with me, poor little dears," said Miss Coleman afterwards in the train, "but my sister is ill, and could not do with any noise. Perhaps their aunt may brighten up more at Christmas, and remember that she too was once a child, and then we must see what can be managed for them at Easter."

At last came the longed-for arrival at Crewe, the anxious search among the crowd in the station, and the joyful sight of not only Sylvia's mother but her father also, hurrying along the platform. She hugged them both as if she had not seen them for years instead of eleven weeks.

"My precious child," exclaimed Mrs. Lindsay, "I declare you have grown, and are ever so much fatter, and you've quite a colour too!"

"School evidently agrees with you, Sylvia," said her father. "It's a good thing you went, isn't it?"

"It was quite different from what I thought it would be," Sylvia confided to her mother when they sat in the drawing-room together for a long talk after tea. "Miss Kaye isn't cross, she's lovely and kind; and even Miss Arkwright isn't bad, and I like Marian better than I did, and I just love Linda and Mercy. I tried to explain about Mercy in my letters, but I'm afraid you didn't exactly understand, so I'll have to tell it you over again. And Marian and I were both bracketed together top, and Miss Arkwright said we must be friends and not rivals, and I quite forgot the middle of "John Gilpin", and made a horrible mistake in my Christmas piece; but Miss Kaye said I might tell you that she thought I had done very well, but my report will come in a day or two, so then you can see everything for yourself."

Sylvia had a particularly happy holiday, and thought she enjoyed home twice as much with having been away from it for a whole term. Her father found time to label the specimens in her museum, and to show her how to develop her photographs and print them afterwards, and her mother gave up the afternoons specially to be with her. All her friends came to her New Year's party, and to her astonishment she found she got on perfectly well with the once-detested Fergusson boys, who now seemed hardly more lively than Connie or Stella Camden, and who did not tease her, since, as they described it, "she had left off putting on airs". Her experiences with the little ones at school made her quite motherly with Bab and Daisy Carson, and she enjoyed the games with Effie and May as much as they did.

"You said you wouldn't care to run about when you came back," they reminded her, "but you play more with us now than you did before."

"I believe Sylvia has learnt it as part of her lessons," said Aunt Louisa, who looked on with much approval, adding quietly to Mrs. Lindsay: "The child is immensely improved. She is brighter and stronger and better in every way. I was sure Miss Kaye would soon work a change, and I think we may feel that so far our experiment has been a complete success."

CHAPTER XII

The Secret Society

SCHOOL re-opened on January 18, and Sylvia found herself driving up to the well-known door with very different feelings from those she had experienced on her first arrival there. On the whole she was quite pleased to be back again, to meet all her friends, and compare notes about the holidays. There was one change in the third class which, however it might affect others, seemed to Sylvia a decided improvement. Hazel Prestbury had left. An aunt residing in Paris had offered to take her for a time to give her the opportunity of special study in French and music, and her parents had arranged for her to go at once, sending Brenda, a younger sister, to Heathercliffe House in her place. Brenda was a very different child from Hazel, and had soon sworn eternal friendship with Connie Camden, so that at last Sylvia felt she had her dear Linda absolutely and entirely to herself.

"I don't know how it is," said Nina one chilly February evening when the members of the third class were gathered round the high fireguard in the playroom, "there never seems half so much fun going on in the spring term. In the autumn we have Hallowe'en and the fifth of November and the Christmas party, and in the summer there are picnics and the shore, and the sports, and the prize-giving; but unless Miss Kaye takes us a long walk there isn't anything to look forward to now until Easter."

"And that's eleven whole weeks off," groaned Connie. "I wish it had come early this year."

"It wouldn't make any difference if it did," said Marian; "Miss Kaye keeps to the term. We should only have to spend Easter at school, and go home as usual in the middle of April."

"That would be horrid. Why should she?"

"Because it would make too long a summer term, and because she likes our holidays to be the same as those of the boys' schools."

"I hadn't thought of that. Of course it would be no fun to go home if Percy and Frank and Bertie and Godfrey weren't there. Still, I wish terms were a little shorter, or that something nice would happen." And Connie ruffled up her hair with both hands as an expression of her discontent.

"Couldn't we do something just amongst ourselves?" said Sylvia. "Not the whole school, but our class."

"There isn't anything new," said Brenda, "unless someone can invent a fresh game. We're getting tired of table croquet."

"I don't mean exactly a game. Suppose we were each to write a story, and then have a meeting to read them all out."

"Start a kind of magazine?" said Marian. "That's a good idea. We could put our tales together into an old exercise book, and perhaps paste pictures in for illustrations, and make up puzzles and competitions for the end."

"Oh yes, that would be lovely!" cried the others. "Like *Little Folks* or *The Girl's Realm*."

"But look here," said Linda. "The second class mustn't hear a word about it. They'd only make dreadful fun of us, and it will be ever so much nicer if we keep it a secret."

"Let us form a secret society, then," suggested Sylvia. "We'll pinch each others' little fingers, and vow we won't tell a soul in the school."

"How horridly inquisitive they'll be!" said Nina.

"All the more fun. We'll let them know that we're doing something, enough to make them wildly curious, but they shan't have a hint of what it is, and they'll imagine the most ridiculous things, and then we can just laugh at them and say they're quite wrong."

The girls agreed cordially with Sylvia's scheme, and the society was formed on the spot. There was a good deal of discussion as to a suitable name. Linda thought of "The Heathercliffe Magaziners", but Nina said that was tame, and that, moreover, "Magaziners" was not to be found in the dictionary of the English language. Connie considered "The 'Wouldn't you like to know?' Club" might be appropriate, but nobody approved of her title. At last Marian, who was fond of long, grand-sounding names, suggested "The Secret Society of Literary Undertakings", which was carried unanimously by the others. Marian was elected President and Sylvia Secretary, and the latter at once devoted a new notebook to writing the names of the members and the rules of the association.

"We must have rules," said Marian, "even if we don't always quite keep them. You'll have to hide the book away most carefully, Sylvia, for fear any of the second class get hold of it."

It took a long time to think of sufficiently strict and binding regulations, but at length they decided upon the following:--

1. This Society is to be called "The Secret Society of Literary Undertakings", and it can be known for short as the S.S.L.U.
2. Each member pledges herself that she will never tell a word of what goes on in it.
3. Any member who tells anything will never be spoken to again by the rest of the class.
4. There is to be a weekly magazine.
5. Every member must write something for it.
6. Even if a member says she cannot write anything, she will have to try.
7. If she does not try, she will be expelled from the society.
8. The meetings are to be held in the playroom after the fourth class has gone to bed.
9. Any member who is expelled will have to stay outside in the passage during the meetings.
10. All members are requested to write as clearly as they can.
11. The Secretary is to arrange the magazine.
12. The President is to read it out at the weekly meeting.

As Nina had prophesied, the S.S.L.U. aroused a good deal of curiosity among the second class, which, while it affected to look down upon the third, was nevertheless rather interested in what was going on there. Being permitted to know the initials, though not the full name, the elder girls promptly added a G, and christened the members "The Slugs", a title which stuck to them long after the society was abandoned. It was most difficult to preserve the secret from the little ones, who shared the playroom, but by instituting a series of private signs and signals they managed to keep up the mystery and obtain a great amount of enjoyment out of the matter. Brenda Prestbury covered herself with glory by recalling the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, the various letters of which she had learnt at home, and now taught to the others, who were soon able to talk on their fingers, a rather slow method of conversation, but delightful when they felt that nobody but a member could understand. Unfortunately they carried their accomplishment somewhat too far one day. Connie, seated at her drawing board in the studio, began signalling an interesting remark to Linda, who was at the opposite side of the table, and Linda was in the middle of her reply when Mr. Dawson, the visiting master, suddenly cleared his throat.

"I think I ought to tell you, young ladies," he said nervously, "that I am very well acquainted with the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, having taught the subject for several years at an institution for deaf-mutes."

Connie went extremely red, as well she might, for she had asked Linda where Mr. Dawson got the flower in his buttonhole, and if Miss Coleman had given it to him? The girls never ventured after that to try talking in the drawing class, though they did a little surreptitiously during dancing.

The first grand meeting of the society was felt to be an occasion of great importance. The playroom door was carefully shut, after ascertaining that no one was in the passage, and Brenda even peeped under the table and behind the window curtains to make quite sure that none of the second class were concealed there. At last, considering themselves secure, the magazine was produced by the Secretary, and handed to the President, who, according to the rules, was to read it aloud from beginning to end. It was written on sheets of paper torn from exercise books, stitched together inside an old arithmetic cover, the back of which had been adorned with scraps and transfers and S.S.L.U. printed on a school label and gummed in the middle. The idea of illustrations had to be abandoned, because nobody had any magazines which they would spare to be cut up, neither did anybody's talent rise to the pitch of original drawings; but on the whole that did not much matter.

"It's stories we want, not pictures," said Marian, settling herself on the seat of honour with a piece of toffee handy, in case her throat grew troublesome through her arduous duties.

"The first on the list," she began, "is--

THE KNIGHT'S VENGEANCE

A Story in Two Parts

By Nina Millicent Forster

Author of 'The Baron's Secret'; 'The Mystery of the Castle'; &c. &c.

PART I

The forest was dark and gloomy as Sir Brian de Fotheringay rode along on his superb white charger, carrying his shield in one hand and his sword in the other."

"How did he manage to hold the reins?" enquired Connie Camden.

"You musn't interrupt," said Marian. "Perhaps he held them bunched up with the sword. No, that would be the wrong hand, wouldn't it?"

"The horse knew its own way," explained Nina. "But if Connie's going to find fault with everything one puts----"

"She shan't!" said Marian hastily. "Nobody's to make any remarks till the end of the story. Now I'm going on.

His undaunted spirit heeded little the perils of his path, and as the moonlight flashed on his steel helmet he bade defiance to all his foes. In front of him stood the Castle, its tall towers strongly guarded by a force of armed men. The drawbridge was up, and the portcullis was down. But dangers were welcome to Sir Brian de Fotheringay, for they did but prove how much he could accomplish for the sake of his lady love. She stood at the turret window, the beautiful Lady Guinevere de Montmorency, the greatest heiress in the land. Leaving his charger on the bank, he swam the moat, and, flinging a rope ladder up to her window, he begged her to fly with him.

'Knight, for thee would I dare all!' she replied, but before she could say more, a stern figure in armour appeared in the turret behind her and seized her by her flowing golden locks. It was her angry father.

'Hence!' he cried. 'Hence, Sir Brian, ere I kill thee. You, lady, will be immured in the dungeon until you have promised to wed Lord Vivian de Fitz Bracy, the suitor of my choice.'

With a shriek she disappeared from the view of her despairing knight.

PART II

Determined to save his lady love from so terrible a fate, Sir Brian de Fotheringay collected all his retainers, together with a band of outlaws to whom he had rendered some services, and who had promised to assist him in time of need. Uttering his warcry, they rushed at the Castle, the portcullis gave way before their furious attack, and the archers were slain at their posts.

'Yield thee, Sir Guy de Montmorency!' cried Sir Brian, waving his invincible sword.

'Never!' shouted the Baron, but it was his last word, for Sir Brian stabbed him to the heart.

He had soon forced open the dungeon and released the beautiful Lady Guinevere. The Castle was now hers, so they were married without delay, and the King and Queen themselves came to the wedding."

"It's perfectly splendid!" cried the girls, when Marian had finished reading. "Nina, how did you manage to think of it?"

"Oh, I don't know; it just came!" said Nina, modestly. "I'm rather fond of making up tales."

"There's only one thing," said Connie. "Wasn't the lady rather sorry when her father was stabbed to the heart, even if he had shut her up in a dungeon? I should be."

"I don't think people minded in the Middle Ages," said Nina. "You see, somebody had to get killed, and she liked the knight best."

"But her own father!" objected Connie.

"I'm going to read the next one now," said Marian, who, as President, felt bound to keep the peace. "I think Nina's story's very good, and makes a capital beginning. This one seems much shorter. It's called:

MOST HASTE, LEAST SPEED

By GWENDOLEN WOODHOUSE

Matilda Jane was a girl who was always in a hurry. One day her grandmother told her to take the bucket and fetch some water from the well, but to be sure to tie her boot lace first. Now Matilda Jane wanted to be very quick, so that she might go and play, and she did not stop to tie her boot lace. As she ran out of the door, she tripped over it and fell. The bucket rolled from her hand and hit the dog; the dog howled and made the geese cackle; the geese cackling made the pigs grunt; the pigs grunting frightened the hens into the field; the hens frightened the cow, which began to run; when the horse saw the cow running, it ran too, and they both jumped over the hedge into the road; then the hens flew after the horse and the cow, and the pigs went after the hens, and the geese followed the pigs, and the dog chased the geese, and it took Matilda Jane and her grandmother the whole afternoon to drive them back, and all because she had been in too great a hurry to tie her boot lace. The moral of this tale is 'Most haste, least speed!'"

The girls laughed.

"I don't generally like stories with a moral," said Brenda, "but I don't mind this one at any rate. Go on, Marian!"

"The next is a piece of poetry," said Marian.

THE KITTENS' CHORUS

By SYLVIA LINDSAY

Miew! Miew! Miew! Miew!
We want to catch mice, we do, we do!
But our mother, the old white cat,
Says we are rather too young for that.

Miew! Miew! Miew! Miew!
We want to catch flies, we do, we do!
But our mother says that if we do it
We'll grow so thin that we soon shall rue it!

Miew! Miew! Miew! Miew!
We want to catch mother's tail we do!
But she says she is not such a common cat
As to let her kits be so pert as that.

Miew! Miew! Miew! Miew!
We want to be good, we do, we do!
But that's much harder to do than to say,
So we'll think about that another day.

The poem proved so popular that Marian had to read it over again. It was the first time that the class had heard any of Sylvia's effusions, and they were quite impressed.

"I'm afraid mine will seem very stupid after it," said Brenda. "I couldn't think of anything to write, but I was obliged to put something."

"The title sounds interesting," said Marian.

MY VISIT TO FRANCE

By BRENDA G. PRESTBURY

Last summer Mother took Hazel and me with her to France, to visit Aunt Cecily, who was staying near Rouen. The first thing we saw was a funny old woman in a big white cap, like a large poke bonnet, and wooden shoes on her feet. The porters all wore baggy blue blouses something like pinafores. We were obliged to go through the Customs. A man in a uniform was looking to see if anybody had brought any tea. He took a little girl's doll away from her, and felt it to see if it had any tea inside it; then he took a lady's cushion, and because she got angry, he stuck his sword through it, and all the feathers came out over his grand coat. We were so glad! There were no carpets in the house where Aunt Cecily was living; the floors were of polished wood, and so slippery. Jean, the servant, used to rub them with beeswax every morning, but he was very cross in French when Hazel and I made slides on them. We used to have coffee and lovely little rolls at seven in the morning, and then proper breakfast at eleven, and we had quite different things to eat from what you get in England. One day Hazel and I went such a long walk that we got lost, and we couldn't remember enough French to ask our way home. A woman came along with a donkey and two big baskets on it, and when she saw us crying she gave us each an apple, and took us to the cure of the village, who could speak English. He was very kind; he showed us round his garden, and then he borrowed a cart from the farmer, and drove us home to Aunt Cecily's. This is all I can tell you about my visit to France.

"I know it's horrid!" said Brenda. "But I really can't write well, and make up tales like Nina. I don't know how she does it!"

"It's jolly!" said Marian. "We've none of us been to France, so we like to hear about it. I wish you had written more. The next one's very short indeed."

THE LADY AND THE SNAKE

By JESSIE ELLIS

A lady who lived in Australia one day put a great log of wood on to the fire. In a little while she was going to poke it, and she stooped to pick up what she thought was the poker, but it was really a horrible black snake, which coiled at once round her arm. She had the presence of mind not to move, but remained very still, and in a few moments it slid down on to the ground. A gentleman who was in the room killed it, and taking the log from the fire he carried it into the yard, where seven more snakes dropped out of it. The wood was hollow, and they had made a nest inside it, and gone to sleep, and the warmth of the fire had wakened them up."

"It's quite true," said Jessie. "The lady was my aunt. She told us about it in a letter."

"What a horrid thing to happen!" cried the girls.

"A nice tale, but too short," commented the President. "I'm afraid Linda hasn't written a long one either."

THE STORY OF A DOG

By LINDA ACTON MARSHALL

I have a little dog called Scamp, that follows me wherever I go. He can sit up and beg, and catch biscuits on his nose, and do all kinds of tricks. One day I was in bed with a bad cold, and Scamp came upstairs to my room. I told him I was ill, and he gave a sharp bark, and ran out. I could hear him trot up to the attic, and soon he returned with a biscuit in his mouth, and laid it on my pillow, wagging his tail, and looking very sorry for me, and very pleased at himself. He must have kept a store of biscuits in the attic. I think he is just the cleverest little dog in the world."

"My tale's true, too," said Linda. "No, I didn't make it up, Nina; he really did. There are only two stories left now, Connie's and Marian's. I wonder which comes next."

"Connie's," said Marian. "And it's in poetry, too. It's called:

THE S.S.L.U.

By CONSTANCE MARY CAMDEN

Said the girls of the third class 'All we
A Secret Society will be.
Though the second may hover
Our words to discover,
It's nothing they'll hear or they'll see.

They may listen at doors in the hall,
Or round by the keyhole may crawl,
They may search through the schools,
But they won't find our rules,
And they'll never know nothing at all."

The girls clapped, both at the sentiments expressed, and at the poetical setting.

"I know they'd listen if they could," said Connie. "They're mean enough for anything. What's that noise?"

"Why, nothing."

"I thought I heard a kind of snorting."

"I expect it was only my cold," said Nina. "Do go on, Marian; we want your story."

"But I did hear something," persisted Connie. "I believe it was outside the door, too, and I'm going to look."

She rose hastily, and, creeping softly to the door, opened it suddenly, disclosing the laughing faces of half a dozen of the second class, who had been taking it in turns to listen at the keyhole, and who jumped up in a hurry and fled from the outburst of wrath which greeted them.

"Oh! Oh!" shouted Sybil Lake. "Won't they hear or see anything? Don't make too sure!"

"I have a little dog that swallows me wherever I go!" called Eileen Butler. "I think he's just the cleverest little dog in the world!"

"The slugs are crawling fast!" cried Lucy Martin. The injured third had risen in a body and pursued the intruders along the passage even to the door of their own sitting-room; but, seeing Miss Barrett coming downstairs, they did not dare to carry the fight into the enemy's camp, and were obliged to return to the playroom, and hold an indignation meeting over the glasses of milk and biscuits which arrived at that moment for supper.

"We must read Marian's story to-morrow," said Sylvia. "Wasn't it horrid of them? I wonder how much they really heard? Next time we shall have to stuff up the keyhole, and keep opening the door every few minutes to see that the coast is clear. There's one good thing; they didn't discover our signs, or the password, and they'll have hard work to find the rules, because the book's hidden under the oilcloth in the corner by the piano; only be sure and don't let the little ones know, because I don't believe there's one of them that can keep a secret!"

CHAPTER XIII

A Spring Picnic

THE beginning of March brought such delightful, mild, balmy weather that winter seemed to have gathered her chilly garments together and said good-bye. The month came in like a lamb, and, though it would probably justify the old proverb by going out like a lion, in the meantime the sunshine was pleasant, and everyone enjoyed the foretaste of spring. Miss Kaye, never slow to take advantage of the bright days, announced one Saturday at breakfast-time that the girls might put on their thickest boots, and prepare for a ramble up the hills.

"We will start at once," she said, "to get the best of the morning, and carry sandwiches in our pockets. Then we can return here for tea at four o'clock."

The expedition was considered too far for the little ones, but the third class was of course included, and all its eight members set off in wild spirits. Though Sylvia was in her second term at Heathercliffe House, she had not seen much of the beautiful country in the neighbourhood; the weather in the autumn had been too damp for picnics, and they had only gone walks on the outskirts of the town, or occasionally on to the beach or along the promenade.

Miss Kaye had made a wise choice when she decided to establish her school at Aberglyn. It had the advantage of both mountain and sea air, and was within easy reach of a number of interesting places. The goal of to-day's walk was a Druids' circle which lay high up on a steep mountainside overlooking the sea, and to reach it would require a climb of several hours. Their way, after leading at first along a suburban road, lined with pretty houses and gardens, began to grow more countrified, and at last they climbed over a stile into a romantic-looking wood. It was the foot of a gorge through which flowed a splendid torrent, dashing its way over great boulders, and the glen was so sheltered that ferns were growing even on the trunks and branches of the trees, and the moss was like a green carpet under foot.

The girls of course rushed down to the edge of the stream, scrambling over the rocks, flinging stones into the water, and trying to make pebbles skim on the smooth pools. Luckily nobody fell in, though both Connie and Brenda had such a narrow escape that Miss Kaye called her flock to order, and bade them march on once more up the proper path.

The trees gradually began to give way to grassy banks which were already spangled with celandine, coltsfoot, and actually a few early primroses; the hazel bushes were covered with catkins that sent showers of golden pollen over the children when they gathered them, and in a cosy sheltered spot in the hedge they found a thrush's nest with three blue eggs in it.

"How sweet of her to build just here!" said Sylvia, looking with deep interest at the clay-lined structure so cunningly hidden behind a long spray of ivy, "I can't think how she did it all with her beak. Isn't she clever? Oh, Connie, please don't lift out the eggs! I'm sure you'll break them. She won't come back while we're here, so let us go away, or else they'll get quite cold, and won't hatch out."

"Look what I've found!" cried Marian, climbing up the bank with a small white starlike flower in her hand. "Isn't it early? It's a piece of saxifrage."

"No, that's stitchwort," said Sylvia, who had learnt a little botany at home, and liked to air her knowledge.

"It's saxifrage," said Marian decidedly. "My mother told me so once herself."

"And my mother told me it was stitchwort."

"My mother's always right. She knows everything!"

"And so does mine! She couldn't make a mistake!"

"You'd better ask Miss Kaye," laughed Linda, "and then she can decide between you. I've heard it called Star of Bethlehem, so that makes a third name."

Miss Kaye agreed at once with Sylvia, much to Marian's chagrin; she did not like to be put in the wrong, and indeed kept obstinately to her own opinion, and still insisted upon calling the flower saxifrage, though Miss Kaye told her she would show her a picture of it with the name underneath in her botany book when they returned.

"You must notice all the things you see or find to-day," said Miss Kaye. "I shall expect everybody to write a composition next week on the excursion."

There were certainly plenty of items for the girls to put down on their lists. A squirrel with a splendid bushy tail ran

across the path, and scrambled hastily up a fir tree, peeping at them from the safety of the top branches before he made a mighty spring into an adjoining ash. A heron sailed majestically overhead, its long legs hanging like those of a stork, and its grey plumage dark against the sky. A whole flight of lapwings rose, screaming "peewit", from a field where they were feeding in company with a flock of seagulls, following the plough that a labourer was driving through the rich red earth. On a sheltered wall a lizard lay basking in the sunshine; and Linda very nearly caught him, but he whisked away in a moment, and was gone down a hole among the stones before half the class had seen him. There were lambs frisking about in the meadows, and as the girls passed through a farmyard they found a woman sitting on a doorstep feeding one from a bottle, like a baby. It had lost its mother, so she told them, and had readily accepted her as its nurse, becoming so tame that it followed her everywhere about the house, and slept in a corner of the kitchen.

"We had to feed one of our puppies at home like that," said Linda. "We used a tiny doll's bottle, and it was such fun to mix the milk and warm water, and taste it first to see if it was sweet enough. I always loved Jill much the best, but we couldn't rear her. Oswald was silly enough to give her a bath when she was too young; I don't think he dried her properly, and she took cold and died. That's generally the way with one's pets," she added with a sigh.

"So it is," said Marian. "A most dreadful thing happened to Gwennie and me. We had a lovely black rabbit, and Mother said we had better not keep it when we went to school, because the little ones couldn't look after it properly, and she wouldn't have time herself. A man in the village asked if he might buy it from us, and we thought he wanted it as a pet for his children, so we sold it to him. Then one day I met him on the road, and he said: 'Oh, Missie, that rabbit of yours was a good one! It made us two whole dinners, and a basin of broth as well.' We had never dreamt he meant to kill it, and we were so horribly sorry."

"Canaries are the worst," said Connie. "I've had three. I hung the first outside the nursery window, and the nail gave way, and the poor little fellow tumbled right to the ground and was killed. He was such a good singer, too. The cat got the second. Then I had a third, called 'Tweetie'. I let him out of his cage one day when Bertie was filing the keel of his boat, and we suppose he must have picked up some of the bits of lead, because he grew quite ill and died. I buried him under the rosebush in my garden, and Granny offered a prize to whoever could write the best piece of poetry about him, an epitaph, she called it."

"Who won the prize?"

"Bertie himself. I can't quite remember it, but it began:

'Under this rose tree's fragrant shade
Our little favourite is laid'.

It was quite the best of all. Frank was very indignant because he didn't win, but we none of us liked his poetry. He'd put:

'Poor Tweetie is dead.
He ate up some lead
Which was lying about on the floor:
It stuck in his gizzard,
And as I'm no wizard,
He'll never eat lead any more'.

He said it was true, at any rate, but Granny decided that gizzard wasn't as romantic as a rose tree, even if it did rhyme with wizard."

"We have a cat that stole a kitten," said Jessie Ellis. "She had two kittens of her own, and our cook drowned them both. Poor Puss was so miserable; she went about all day looking for them, mewing and wailing till we felt quite wretched to hear her. Then she disappeared for nearly a week, and came back one afternoon carrying a tiny kitten in her mouth. She was so pleased with it, and kept licking it, and purring all the time. Mother said she must have adopted it, and she would let her keep it, and it's grown such a beautiful cat, a real Persian with a ruff and a bushy tail. We often wonder where she took it from."

While the children were talking they had been climbing steadily uphill, and now left the glen by a path which led them directly on to the open moor. It was glorious up there. In one direction rose the mountains, peak beyond peak, till in the distance they could just catch a glimpse of the rugged outline of Snowdon, half-hidden by a wreath of cloud. Below them lay a vast expanse of sea, with Anglesey stretched out like a map, and little Puffin Island close by.

"We ought almost to see Ireland to-day," said Mercy, straining her eyes to discover whether any faint speck of blue outline were visible on the distant horizon. "People say they've seen the Isle of Man, too, but it has never been clear

enough when I've been up here. Look at the steamers out on the water; I wonder if one of them's going to China. I can just remember coming home in a big vessel, and passing the Stack Lighthouse at Holyhead, and then landing at Liverpool."

"It's splendid to be able to look miles whichever way you turn," said Sylvia.

She liked the solitude of the moors, which were covered only with short grass and low whinberry bushes; there was no sound except the occasional bleat of a sheep or the cry of a curlew, and no human being in sight but themselves, though one or two small whitewashed farms, at long distances apart, gave evidence of life by their smoking chimneys. Not very far away they came upon the Druids' circle, a ring of tall upright stones, so ancient that all tradition of them had long been lost, though Miss Kaye explained to the girls that they had probably been used as a kind of temple for sun worship by the early tribes who lived there, long before the Romans discovered Britain.

"I wish they could speak and tell us their story," she said. "They would have strange tales about the rough skinclad men who reared them, and the priests who stood watching amongst them for the first glimpse of the sun on Midsummer morning. Who knows but that they may have witnessed human sacrifices, and at any rate there must have been wolves, and cave bears, and hyenas, and many wild animals prowling about which are extinct in Wales now. We can tell that, because the bones and teeth of these creatures have been found in a cave at Llandudno. Some day I may perhaps take you to see it. The skeletons of a man and a woman were found there embedded in the rock, and round their throats were necklaces made of bears' teeth. We can hardly imagine what life was like in those early times."

The girls always found Miss Kaye's talks interesting, but the healthy mountain air had so sharpened their appetites that they turned readily from ancient stones to modern lunch, and, sitting down inside the famous circle, drew out the packets of sandwiches and oranges which they had brought with them. Everything seemed to taste particularly good, and everybody could have eaten a little more, but the very last crumb of biscuit had been consumed, and they were obliged to remain content until teatime. Miss Kaye made the girls gather up their pieces of orange peel, wrap them in their sandwich papers, and poke them away under a boulder.

"Nothing is so horrible," she declared, "as to leave traces of one's picnic about to spoil the place for the next people who come. If everyone would do the same, there would be few complaints that tourists ruin the scenery."

After lunch the girls were allowed to ramble on the moors as they liked, with an injunction not to go too far, and to return to the Druids' circle when Miss Kaye blew a whistle. It was hardly possible to get lost, because, as Linda said, they could see all round for miles, and unless you hid yourself under a bush, someone would be sure to find you. The members of the third class went off together, racing over the springy grass with as much agility as the small Welsh sheep that seemed capable of climbing the stones like goats, to judge by the achievement of an old ewe, which ran up a loose-built wall as easily as a kitten, and led its lamb after it.

In a hollow at the farther side of the circle the children found a sheet of shallow water evidently formed by the February rains and melting snow. At one end was a rough raft and a long pole, with which some boy had no doubt been amusing himself. The temptation was too great to be resisted. In three seconds Connie, Brenda, and Sylvia were making a trial trip, the last two squatting close together in the middle to balance the raft, while Connie pushed off with the pole, and punted them out into the middle of the pond. It was a most delightful sensation. The water was clear, and they could see down several feet where there were green weeds growing at the bottom, and great floating masses of some jellylike substance, that Connie declared was frog spawn.

"I'm going to get a lump of it," she cried, "and take it back to school and put it in a basin; then we can watch the tadpoles hatch out and grow into little frogs. I'll run the raft against this island. There seems to be a heap of it here."

Though the trio nearly upset their craft in their efforts, they found it very difficult to get hold of any of the spawn; it was as transparent and slimy as the white of an egg, and kept slipping through their fingers as fast as they touched it. Connie managed at last to secure a small piece by holding her handkerchief under it in the water; then she tied the four corners tightly together, and put the wet messy bundle into her pocket.

"Ugh! How can you!" exclaimed Sylvia. "Suppose they hatch on the way?"

"That's not very likely," replied Connie; "but I don't mind if they do. I'm fond of tadpoles."

The other girls, who had been clamouring for some time from the bank, demanding a turn at the raft, now grew so indignant at the delay that Connie punted back and tried to pacify their wrath.

"It's not fair to keep it all the time!" said Marian. "Some of us want to try it just as much as you. And you don't know how to work that pole properly. If you give it to me I'll soon show you!"

"All right, Miss Clever!" said Brenda. "You always do things better than everybody else, don't you? Go on!"

Marian jumped on to the raft, and seized the pole with an exceedingly high and mighty air; she gave a push off as an example of the graceful manner in which it ought to be done, but alas! she had not taken into account the fact that the raft was not balanced with the weight of the other children, and, stepping too much to one side, she found it suddenly tilted over, and deposited her in the pond. The water was only a foot deep so close to the edge, but by the time she had scrambled out her boots and stockings were wet through, and covered with mud. The rest of the girls subsided on to the bank in peals of laughter.

"If that's your way, I'd rather not try it, thank you!" said Nina.

"And you've broken the pole, too!" said Connie.

"Oh, catch the raft, somebody!" exclaimed Linda. "Look! It's drifting right away, and we shan't be able to go on it."

Unluckily the raft was by this time well out of reach, and nobody was able to fetch it back, much to the disappointment of those who had not yet had a chance to try it. Marian was very offended at what she considered the ill-timed mirth of her companions.

"You're most unkind!" she said angrily, walking away by herself and trying to wipe her boots clean on the grass.

Feeling that they had had the best of the joke, the girls bore no malice, and, after leaving her for a few minutes to get over her sulks, they made overtures of friendship.

"I'll tell you what," said Linda; "I found a box of wax matches in the road on the way up, and put them in my pocket. Suppose we set a light to this little gorse bush; it's all withered, and will make quite a bonfire. Then Marian can dry her boots."

The bush caught fire with the greatest ease, and blazed away at once. Marian pulled off her boots and stockings, and, standing barefoot on the grass, held them up to the flame, while the others collected round, wishing they had some chestnuts or potatoes with them, or a kettle which could be boiled for tea.

"I believe the grass is beginning to burn too!" said Nina. "Stand back, Connie! Why, it's caught the next bush as well!"

The children looked at each other with horrified faces. The fire was spreading rapidly along the ground, and two large bushes were soon in a blaze. Their modest beginning was evidently leading to more than they had ever imagined. Fortunately the white column of smoke suddenly rising up through the clear air attracted Miss Kaye's attention, and brought her hurrying over the crest of the hill to discover the cause. She was much surprised to find the members of the third class, one of them with bare feet, apparently dancing like wild Indians round a fire, and lost no time in running to the spot.

"You naughty girls!" she exclaimed. "What have you been doing? Marian, where are your boots? I am astonished at you! Who lighted this fire?"

"We're trying to stamp it out," said Brenda. "It was catching all the grass."

"But who lighted it?"

"We did, Miss Kaye," replied Linda, rather shamefacedly, "to dry Marian's boots."

"People often set fire to the moors," added Connie. "I've seen whole hillsides burning sometimes, so I don't suppose it matters. We're helping the farmer."

"The farmer may like to set his own furze alight, but he wouldn't thank any chance strangers for doing so for him. If we don't mind he'll be claiming damages from us," said Miss Kaye. "We must not leave here until these bushes have burnt themselves safely out, and we must stamp on any sparks which fall from them on to the grass. This is the way that a great prairie fire is often started in America; the flames will grow in strength, and sweep over miles of country, destroying farms and villages, and carrying desolation and destruction before them. I didn't think you would have been in such mischief directly my back was turned."

Miss Kaye looked so grave and annoyed that the girls felt their grand idea had fallen rather flat; and the moment the fire was out she told Marian to put on her stockings and boots at once, and gave the signal to return home. It was a very unpleasant walk to Marian, as her boots had dried stiff, and felt much too tight for her, while the stockings were still rather moist and muddy. Everyone was tired, and the second class made teasing remarks about the Slugs being fond of slimy ponds, and announced that they were looking forward to hearing a sentimental account of the adventure

through the keyhole on the occasion of the next meeting of the S.S.L.U.

"You won't do anything of the sort. You know nothing, really, about the society, and it's horribly mean to listen. You may be in the upper school, but I can't say much for your manners. I'm glad I'm not in the second class!" retorted Marian, adding privately to Gwennie, however: "I'm afraid they do know a good deal; and it's just spoilt the S.S.L.U. I don't think I shall trouble to write for it again. Doesn't it seem twice as far coming back as going, although it's all downhill? And oh! aren't you dreadfully, cruelly, desperately hungry, and absolutely starving for your tea?"

CHAPTER XIV

Whitweek with Linda

THE Easter holidays were short and sweet. The brief fortnight seemed to be over almost before Sylvia had realized she was at home, and both she and her mother found it harder than ever to part when the last day arrived. There was one compensation, however, which consoled Sylvia for saying goodbye. Mercy Ingledew had spent the vacation with Miss Coleman, and on her way back to Aberglyn was allowed to accept Mrs. Lindsay's invitation to stay a couple of days with Sylvia and travel with her to school, while Miss Coleman went to see a relation at Llangollen. The visit was a great success. Mr. and Mrs. Lindsay were delighted with Mercy and glad that their little daughter should have made so charming a friend among the elder girls, while Sylvia thoroughly enjoyed both acting hostess and the return journey together to Heathercliffe House.

It was now the summer term, which most of the girls considered the pleasantest time of the year. Every available moment was spent out-of-doors. Tennis and croquet were in full swing, and the younger ones amused themselves with rounders and hide-and-seek. Sylvia, who a year ago had affected to dislike running about, might now be seen racing round the garden as enthusiastically as anybody at a game of "follow my leader" or "I spy", and she would have been utterly astonished if anyone had reminded her of her former tastes.

The school was granted a brief holiday at Whitsuntide, and as it seemed hardly worth while to make the long journey home for so short a period, Sylvia was very delighted when she was allowed to accept Mrs. Marshall's invitation to return with Linda and spend the few days at Garth Avon. Both little girls looked forward to the event with keen pleasure. It was the first time that Sylvia had ever paid a visit by herself, and she felt quite grown-up when she thought about it.

They were to go by train as far as Conway, where Mr. Marshall was to meet them and drive them home in the dogcart to Craigwen, the place where his house was situated. Miss Coleman saw them off at Aberglyn, giving many last injunctions not to lean against the carriage door, or hang out of the window, or otherwise misbehave themselves, and to be sure not to get out at a wrong station, which did not seem a very probable mistake, as Linda knew the line so well. She added a word to the guard which caused him to come and peep at them with a smiling face, and assure them that he would see them safely to Conway, and they need not be in the least afraid. Linda and Sylvia were rather insulted.

"He needn't treat us like babies!" said Linda. "I've come alone more than once. It's all Miss Coleman's fussiness. We might be going to London, instead of only to Conway. There, we're off at last!"

The guard had put the children in a first-class compartment and locked the door, so that they had it all to themselves. They leaned back luxuriously, each in a corner, admiring the photographs which adorned the partitions or the view of the sea from the windows. They were in the highest spirits, and to travel thus seemed a very good beginning to a journey which was all too short. They were quite loath to get out when the train reached Conway, but the stop was of the briefest, and the friendly guard whisked both them and their bags from the carriage in a hurry, and, blowing his whistle, jumped into his van as it passed him.

"There's Daddy!" cried Linda, running to meet her father, who was waiting for them on the platform, and seizing his hand. "Oh, Daddy dear, did you let Scamp come with you? And have you brought Bess or Beauty in the trap?"

"Bess," said Mr. Marshall, when he had welcomed Sylvia. "And Scamp is tied up outside. I didn't dare to let him into the station. Are these two bags all you've brought with you? Give them both to me."

Scamp was a lively little fox terrier, which seemed so pleased to see Linda again that he nearly overwhelmed her with his affection, and ran round and round, barking like a mad creature, till Mr. Marshall picked him up and put him in the back of the trap.

"He ran the whole way here," he said, "so I think it would be too far for him to trot home as well, though he never appears to be the least tired."

There was just room on the front seat for Linda and Sylvia side by side, Sylvia in the middle, and Linda at the end, because she was less likely to fall out. Mr. Marshall touched Bess with his whip, and they started off through the old streets, past the castle, under the arched gateway, and away towards the mountains that rose up before them in the distance. It was all new country to Sylvia, who much admired the view when they had climbed the great hill out of the town, and could see the beautiful expanse of the Vale of Conway stretched below them, with the silvery river winding through its midst. She thoroughly enjoyed the drive. Bess, the brown cob, went along at a good fast pace, and so soon covered the ground that by four o'clock they had passed under the tall avenue of beeches that shaded the road, and

drawn up at the hospitable doorway of Garth Avon. It was a pretty, oldfashioned house, overgrown with creepers, and at present the walls were a mass of beautiful pink and white roses, which scented the air with their fragrance. In front was a lawn, where garden seats, basket chairs, and a table spread with a white cloth and cups and saucers had a very inviting appearance.

"I knew you would like to have tea out-of-doors," said Mrs. Marshall, kissing both the children. "Ellen has made an iced spongecake on purpose, and baked some scones, and when Mrs. M'Allister heard you were coming home, she sent over a box of real Scotch shortbread. Linda, take Sylvia upstairs, and then you can bring her into the garden again when you have washed your hands. Lizzie has carried up your bags."

Sylvia was to sleep with Linda in the spare bedroom, a pleasant room with an oriel window, and a large bed hung with blue curtains, that looked big enough to hold four little girls instead of two.

"My own room is over the porch," said Linda, "but it only has one very small bed in it, and Mother thought you'd feel lonely if you slept here quite by yourself. It's much nicer to be together as we are at school, isn't it?" To this Sylvia cordially agreed.

"The boys are coming home too, this evening," continued Linda. "They're going to bicycle all the way from Rhyl. Their school doesn't break up until afternoon, so they couldn't start until four. I expect they'll have a nice ride, if Artie's tyre keeps up. He was afraid he had a puncture. Hilda hasn't any holiday at Whitweek in London. She's not so well off as when she was at Miss Kaye's, but she'd got beyond even the first class, you know. She's seventeen, and she's to leave altogether soon. I wish you'd seen her!"

It was very pleasant sitting at tea in the dear old garden. The beds were a blaze of flowers, and so were the tall vases which ornamented the flight of steps leading down to the tennis lawn. Scamp joined the party, and also a large white Persian cat, which astonished Sylvia by sitting up and begging as cleverly as her canine companion, with whom she seemed on excellent terms.

"Scamp is very fond of Snowball," said Linda, "but he hates all other cats, and he'd kill them if he could catch them. One day, in Conway, he saw a white puss rather like ours, and it was so funny to watch him, because he couldn't make up his mind whether he ought to lick it or chase it."

"How beautifully clean she is!" said Sylvia, taking the pretty soft creature on her lap, and stroking the long, silky fur. "Do you wash her?"

"We do sometimes," replied Linda. "But she doesn't like it at all, poor dear. It takes three of us to manage it, two to hold her, and the other to soap and rinse her. I never try it without the boys. Once I thought I had such a splendid idea. I was going to try dry cleaning. I rubbed her fur thoroughly well with flour, and I was just brushing it out again when she screwed herself from my arms and jumped through the open window. It was pouring with rain, and when she came back she was simply a pudding. I didn't know what to do, and the boys were away; so I let out the parrot, and put her inside the cage, and then watered her with the watering can till I got the paste off her."

"Poor Pussie, what a shame!" said Sylvia.

"So it was, but I really couldn't help it that time. She should keep herself clean, and then she wouldn't need to go through such troubles. Would you like to come and see the hens and my bantams?"

There was a stableyard at the back of the house which led into a field where the fowls were kept. They were a pet hobby with Mrs. Marshall, who spent many hours among her poultry, and had a particularly good strain of white Leghorns which she greatly valued. There were a number of neat wire runs, each with its small wooden henhouse, and in several of these were interesting families of chickens, varying in size from sweet fluffy atoms, as yellow as canaries, to long-legged creatures which Sylvia thought were not pretty at all.

"They haven't grown their full feathers yet," said Linda. "They're ugly ducklings still, but they'll be very handsome by and by. Look at this fussy old hen. I set her myself during the Easter holidays. She was so broody that she actually insisted on sitting on a Liebig pot. I suppose she took it for an egg. She'd have wondered why it didn't hatch, I expect, if I hadn't given her some real eggs instead."

"You seem to know all about keeping hens," said Sylvia.

"I know a little more now, but I made a most dreadful mistake once. Mother told me to go to the henhouse, and see if there were any eggs to send to Aunt Edith. I knew that sometimes the hens laid in the barn, so I thought I would go there instead. I hunted about and found a nest with ten lovely brown eggs in it. They were quite warm, so I was sure they must be perfectly fresh, and I put them in my basket and carried them to the house. Mother was in a hurry for the

post; she didn't ask where I had got them, but only said I had been quick, and packed them up in a box at once. Next morning she went to the barn to feed a broody hen that was sitting there on some very particular eggs that she had bought specially, and to her horror she found them all gone! They would have hatched in a few days, so you can imagine how angry she felt, and what a scolding she gave me for not going to the henhouse as I was told. I think it was even worse, though, for Aunt Edith. She had meant to make a Simnel cake with the eggs Mother sent her, and she broke one after another, and each had a little chicken inside it!"

"How dreadful!" laughed Sylvia; "I should think she didn't made her cake."

"Not with our eggs at any rate, and she's always teased me dreadfully about it since. Now I want to show you the bantams. I like them best, because they're my own."

The bantams had a special wired run to themselves. They were extremely neat little birds, with prettily marked plumage, so tame that they flew readily on to their mistress's outstretched arm to eat the bread she had brought for them. Linda showed Sylvia their small house with much pride, and was particularly pleased to find two tiny eggs in the nesting box.

"We can each have one for breakfast to-morrow morning," she declared; "they must have laid them on purpose for us. I only got my bantams at Easter, and these are their first eggs. I'm hoping so much that one of the little hens will sit. Wouldn't it be lovely to have some wee chicks about as big as tomtits?"

Sylvia had not much experience with pets, but she was deeply interested in Linda's possessions: the starling that lived in a cage in the kitchen, and had learnt to say: "Come kiss me!" and "Who's at the door?"; the dormouse that was kept in a cosy box lined with hay, and would scamper round the table in the evenings and eat the nuts which were given him like a miniature squirrel; and Bute, the rough, bouncing yard dog, that slept in the big kennel, and was not allowed to come into the house at all.

"There's something else I'd like you to see," said Linda, taking Sylvia's arm, and leading her on to the lawn again, then through a small door into the kitchen garden, a delightful walled enclosure, full of currant and gooseberry bushes, young apple trees, early vegetables, and pot herbs, with patches of pinks, pansies, and forget-me-nots growing in between, and great fragrant bushes of rosemary, lavender, and southernwood, which smelled most delicious when the children rubbed them between their hands. In a corner under a blossoming syringa was a little grave, with a small tombstone at its head, on which was roughly carved the following inscription:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
JOCK
THE BEST AND MOST FAITHFUL DOG THAT EVER LIVED
Died February 27, 1907
Aged 8 Years.

"It needs cleaning up and weeding," said Linda. "We always keep it very tidy when we're at home, but of course, when the boys are away too, there's nobody to look after it. It's rather nicely done, isn't it?"

"Very," said Sylvia. "Who did it?"

"Oswald. He's clever with his hands, and he chipped it out with a chisel. It took him a frightfully long time, but he said Jock deserved it. We couldn't let him be forgotten."

"What kind of a dog was he?"

"I'm afraid he was only a mongrel; he was big, and grey, and shaggy, but we thought him lovely. There never was another so nice."

"Not even Scamp?"

"No, not quite. Jock was such a friend, and so obedient and gentle. We got him from a farm when he was a tiny puppy; the farmer was just going to drown him, but Oswald begged so hard to be allowed to keep him instead, that Mother said he might. Our nurse was quite angry at first; she said he'd be as much trouble as another child to look after, but he was so good, she soon grew fond of him, and he used to live in the nursery. Artie was a baby then, and Jock would keep guard over his cradle, or watch him when he was put to roll on a rug in the garden, and no matter how much Artie pulled his hair, he never dreamt of biting. He used to sleep on the mat at the door of our bedroom, and the first thing in the morning he'd come running in, wagging his tail.

"One summer we went to stay at Llandudno, and Mother said we musn't take Jock with us, because the people at the

lodgings wouldn't care to have him. We were dreadfully sorry to leave him behind, and I'm sure he knew we were going without him, for he cried so. Father said he must be tied up in the stable to prevent him from following the trap, and we all went to say goodbye to him; even Nellie, our nurse, kissed him on the nose. We missed him so much that evening when we got to Llandudno, but next morning, when we were sitting at breakfast, we heard a whining and scratching at the door, and in rushed Jock, with about half a yard of rope dangling at his neck. He must have gnawed it through, and set off after us. But wasn't it clever of him to know where we'd gone, and to find out the very house where we were staying? Father said he must have heard us talking about Llandudno, and have asked all the other dogs he met on the road which was the right way! Mother was afraid we should have to send him home again, but when the landlady heard what he'd done, she allowed him to stay, and he went everywhere with us, and was no trouble to anybody.

"One day Nellie took us a long walk on the Great Orme's Head. We had baskets with us, and we wandered about picking blackberries the whole afternoon. Artie was quite a little fellow then, not more than three years old; he hadn't even been put into knickerbockers. I suppose we were so busy filling our baskets that nobody noticed him; at any rate he managed to run away from Nellie, and go close to the edge of the cliff where there were some blackberries growing. We think he must have been trying to lean down to gather them, and have overbalanced himself, because we suddenly heard him shrieking at the pitch of his voice, and when we rushed to see what was the matter, there was our baby hanging over the cliffside, just caught by the brambles, and Jock holding on to his kilt like grim death. Artie was howling, and Jock was making the queerest noise; he couldn't bark properly, because he daren't open his mouth for fear of letting go Artie's clothes. Nellie pulled them both back together, and sat down on the grass and cried, and we all hugged Jock and kissed him. Mother said afterwards she thought he must have been allowed to find his way to Llandudno on purpose to save Artie's life.

"After that, of course, he was a greater pet even than he'd been before, and we never went away from home without taking him. Granny used to put in a special invitation to Jock when she asked us, and she made him a little cake once on his birthday, and sent it to him by post. He ate it in three gulps.

"We were so dreadfully sorry when he died. Hilda said she'd like to go into mourning, and Artie and I inked black edges to some sheets of tiny notepaper, and wrote on them to tell Granny and Aunt Edith. We had a beautiful funeral for him, and made wreaths to lay on his grave, and planted the prettiest flowers we could dig up out of our gardens on it. It was Oswald who thought of the stone during the Easter holidays. It wasn't finished until Hilda had gone back to London, so she hasn't seen it yet. I'm sure she'll like it."

There seemed so many interesting things to see and hear at Garth Avon that the two girls amused themselves out-of-doors until after seven o'clock, when they heard a brisk ringing of bells, and, running to the gate, were just in time to open it for Linda's brothers, who came riding up on their bicycles. Oswald was a few years older than Linda, and Artie a little younger; both were nice hearty boys, who seemed ready to make friends at once with their sister's visitor.

"We've heard such a jolly lot about you, you know," said Oswald, shaking hands. "Lin can talk of nobody else. We always say the school must be made up of Sylvia and Miss Kaye."

"You're late, aren't you?" asked Linda. "We thought you'd have been here an hour ago."

"We may well be late. Artie's tyre punctured on the road between Abergele and Llandulas, and we had to walk our machines to Colwyn Bay before we could get anyone to mend it. We tried to patch it up ourselves, but I hadn't a big enough piece of rubber to cover it. Then the fellow at the bicycle shop was such a slow chap, I thought he was going to be all night fiddling over it, and we didn't dare to pump it till it had dried a little. Luckily we got some tea before we left school, but we're hungry enough now. Isn't supper ready?"

"Ready and spoiling," said Linda. "It's sausages, and I could smell them cooking through the kitchen window half an hour ago. Sylvia and I have been watching in the garden for you ever so long. Be quick and come down; I want to tell you about a most delightful plan I've thought of for to-morrow."

CHAPTER XV

An Excursion with a Donkey

LINDA'S plan proved such a promising one that both the boys and Sylvia fell in readily with her ideas. She suggested that they should all four make an excursion to the top of Pen y Gaer, a mountain in the neighbourhood, where were the remains of a very fine British camp, and from which they could obtain an excellent view over the whole of the Conway valley. As it was rather a long walk from Craigwen, she thought they might borrow a donkey and take it in turns to ride, and also carry their lunch on its back. They could no doubt buy milk, and get hot water at a farm, so that they would be able to make tea before they returned, and thus enjoy a whole day on the moors. Mrs. Marshall willingly gave her consent. Her children were fond of picnics, and steady enough to look after themselves without any grown-up person being with them; she had always encouraged the boys at any rate to be self-reliant, and though Artie was apt to fall occasionally into mischief, she knew Oswald would take care of the little girls and bring them home safely in the evening.

Sylvia looked forward so much to the expedition that she could scarcely sleep for excitement when she got into the large spare bed with Linda and the candle was blown out. She lay awake for quite a long time, listening to an owl hooting in the trees, and the soft rippling sound of a stream which flowed at the bottom of the garden; then at last they both merged into a confused dream, and she remembered nothing more till she woke with the sun pouring in through the window, and Linda's voice proclaiming that it was a particularly fine, warm morning, and the very day in all the year which she would have chosen to scale the heights of Pen y Gaer.

Directly breakfast was over, the children started off first to a neighbouring farm to borrow the donkey, a shaggy little creature called Teddie, which was chiefly used by his owner to fetch sacks of flour from the mill. He was not accustomed to either saddle or bridle, but the boys led him home by a halter, and tied a cushion on to his back with a piece of rope. They slung their lunch baskets and two enamelled tin mugs on either side, like saddle-bags, then, giving Sylvia the first ride, they helped her to mount, and set off towards the mountains with Scamp and Bute racing in wild excitement around them.

It was a very hot day, so it was pleasant to think that they would soon be out of the close woods, and away on the breezy moors. The country was at its best; the fields were blue with wild hyacinths, and the hedgerows yellow with gorse and broom, while everywhere the tender shoots of the young bracken were unfolding, and showing delicate golden-green fronds. It was a little late for birds'-nesting, yet Oswald and Artie, boylike, could not resist hunting in each likely-looking spot, though a blackbird's second brood, a deserted linnet's nest, and a last year's yellow-hammer's were the sole result of their search.

"I wish we could make the donkey trot!" said Sylvia, who had dismounted to spare poor Teddie's legs for the hardest part of the hill, but had taken her seat again on reaching a level piece of road.

"We'll try what we can do," said Artie, producing his penknife and cutting a stick carefully from a hazel tree. "I'll give him a switch, but I advise you to hold on tight, in case he kicks."



"HE ENTANGLED BOTH HER HAT AND HAIR IN A WILD-ROSE BUSH"

It was not a very hard blow, but Teddie seemed to resent it extremely. He was a donkey with a character, and instead of galloping on, as Sylvia had hoped, he ran straight into the hedge, where he entangled both her hat and hair so successfully in a wild-rose bush, that she had to scream to be released.

"Perhaps you hit him on the wrong side," she suggested, when the donkey's nose had been pulled out into the lane again.

"Then we'll try the other," said Artie, who, having dropped his stick, administered a sounding smack on the thick, shaggy coat.

Teddie, however, evidently did not intend to be coerced; he made at once for the opposite hedge, and Sylvia found herself in equal difficulties with a long spray of bramble.

"He's the most obstinate little beast I've ever known," said Linda. "We'll try him just once more. Oswald, you hold his head exactly in the middle of the road, then Artie and I'll each give him a thump at the same second, one on each side. Are you ready, Artie! One, two, three, off!"

This time it was really off and away. The donkey took to his heels, and cantered along the road in fine style, with the boys and Linda racing after him, encouraging Sylvia, who was laughing and trying to hold on her hat and to keep the lunch from falling, while Scamp and Bute barked themselves hoarse. The enamelled mugs bumped against poor Teddie's sides, and alarmed him so much that perhaps he thought somebody was switching him in front, and intended him to run backwards, for he stopped quite suddenly, and lowered his head, with the result that Sylvia shot over his neck, and found herself sitting in the dusty road.

"It serves me right!" she laughed. "No, I'm not hurt in the least. It's too bad to make him trot when he's carrying both me and the lunch. I'll walk now, and give him a rest, and then it will be Linda's turn to ride him."

The road, after winding uphill for several miles between woods and high banks, led at last on to the moors, where there was a kind of tableland flanked on two sides by chains of mountains.

"We're not such a very long way from the Druids' circle," said Linda. "It's only over that peak, I believe."

"It's farther than you'd imagine," said Oswald. "Hilda and I went to it once, and we thought we should never get there. It's a much easier way from Aberglyn. Things look so very plain in this clear air that you often think you're quite close when really you're several miles off, and you walk and walk, and never seem to get any nearer."

"I hope that won't happen with Pen y Gaer; we can see it so well now," said Linda, gazing at the round green top that did not show its full height from the plateau, though it looked imposing enough from the valley below.

"It's quite far enough to make me want lunch before I go any farther," said Oswald. "There's a stream down here where we can get some water to drink. Suppose we fasten Teddie to the gate, and camp out on the stones."

The others agreed. The donkey had already satisfied its thirst at a brooklet that crossed the road, so they tied it to the rail of the gate with a piece of rope long enough to allow it to crop the grass at the edge of the path, and, descending themselves to the bed of the river, spread out their lunch on a large flat boulder. Mrs. Marshall had experience in the matter of picnics. First there were ham sandwiches, sufficiently thick to take the keen edge off their appetites, but not enough to spoil the hard-boiled eggs and bread and butter which followed; then came marmalade sandwiches and seed cake; and last of all some delicious little turnovers, made with tops like mince pies, and with strawberry jam inside. Everybody was hungry, and everybody did such ample justice to the good fare that there was nothing but a solitary turnover left, which they decided to divide between the dogs, which had already had their share of the meal.

"It's not enough to keep for tea," said Oswald. "I expect we can get some bread and butter at the farm, as well as the milk and hot water. Look! there are trout in this stream. I saw a big fellow just then swimming across the pool."

"So did I," said Artie. "He went under that rock. I'm going to wade and see if I can get him out."

Both boys pulled off their shoes and stockings, and, plunging into the river, began to engage in the very unsportsmanlike pastime of tickling trout. They paddled cautiously upstream, putting their hands under every likely stone till they felt a fish, then, very gently moving their fingers along until they had him by the gills, would manage with a quick jerk to toss him out of the water on to the bank. Linda and Sylvia followed along the side, much excited at this new form of fishing, and gathering up the trout placed them in one of the lunch baskets. The boys had succeeded in catching five or six, which lay shining and silvery, gasping their last, and they were both trying for a particularly big one which they could see lying in the cranny of a rock.

"He'll be a tough subject," said Oswald. "I'll do my best, but you be ready to make a grab if I miss him!"

Oswald stealthily put forward his hand, but the trout was on the alert, and long before he could reach its gills it had darted into the pool, escaping Artie also, who nearly fell into the water in his efforts to secure it.

"Missed him! What a shame! And he was such a beauty!" cried the disconsolate boys.

"Now then, what are you doing there, you young poachers?" shouted a voice from the opposite bank, and, looking up, the children saw a tall man, in a corduroy velveteen suit and a soft round hat, frowning at them with a most unamiable expression of countenance.

They were so astonished that none of them knew what to say.

"Come out of that stream this minute!" he commanded the boys, who obeyed, but naturally on the side where Linda and Sylvia were standing looking rather frightened at such an unexpected and angry visitor. The man, who had the appearance of a gamekeeper, crossed the river easily by jumping from stone to stone, and striding up to the little girls, peeped inside their basket.

"As I thought!" he remarked. "Now, you young rascals, do you know that I can take you all up and send you to prison for poaching?"

"Why," gasped Oswald, "we were only catching some trout!"

"Only catching some trout! He says he was only catching some trout!" echoed the man, as if he were appealing to an imaginary companion. "I suppose he wouldn't call that poaching? Oh, no!"

"We get them like this in our own stream at home," said Artie.

"That's quite a different matter. Because you get bread and butter at home's no reason why you should walk into my house and take mine, is it? This fishing happens to be preserved, and I've got the care of it. It's a very serious offence is poaching. I've caught you red-handed. There's the trout in that basket to prove my words."

The boys looked at each other in much consternation.

"We didn't know we were doing any harm," said Oswald at last.

"That's just what folks always tell me in a little affair of this kind," said the man, producing a pencil and a notebook. "I'm getting rather tired of the story. I'll trouble you for your names and addresses, if you please."

"Why do you want them?" asked Artie cautiously.

"You'll know why when you find yourselves charged at the Llanrwst County Court," replied the man with a grin, "or your father will, to the tune of five pounds and costs, I reckon, or pretty near. It'll take all your pocket money or more."

"I'll go to prison first," said Oswald stoutly.

"And so will I," declared Artie.

"Oh, no, no!" cried Linda, thoroughly frightened, and dissolving into tears. "Please don't send them to prison! Look, I'll put the fish back into the water. We didn't know it was wrong to take them; we didn't indeed!"

The man coughed softly behind his hand.

"I wouldn't like to disoblige the young lady," he said; "but it's no use putting dead fish back into the stream. There," as Linda's tears flowed faster, "I won't be too hard on you this time. Give me the trout, and we'll say no more about it. But don't let me catch any of you poaching here again, or I can't let you go so easy. I've my orders from headquarters. Now be off with you all!"

Much relieved that the boys should escape fine or imprisonment, Linda emptied the fish from the basket on to the grass, and, seizing Sylvia's hand, ran as fast as she could up the bank to where they had left the donkey tied to the gate, followed by Oswald and Artie, who only stopped to pick up their shoes and stockings by the way. They were glad to place the stone wall between themselves and the angry gamekeeper, and as soon as the boys had put on their footgear, they loosed Teddie, and started off once more on the road towards Pen y Gaer.

"What a horrid cross man!" said Sylvia. "I peeped over the wall just now, and he was still standing there, and shook his fist at me."

"I didn't know any of the water was preserved," said Oswald, who felt sore at the remembrance. "Well, he needn't think we want to go there again after his old fish; they aren't such treasures as he supposes."

"Sour grapes!" laughed Artie.

"Oh, shut up! It was you who suggested tickling them first!" said Oswald, who was thoroughly out of temper, and ready to quarrel with anybody.

Artie, however, was a good-natured little fellow, and had the tact simply to whistle, and leave his brother to get over his ill humour. As nobody was riding the donkey, he mounted it himself, and, persuading Linda and Sylvia to try what he called "the double-smack method", indulged in a splendid gallop, which did not meet with so disastrous a termination as the last one.

They had almost reached the goal of their walk, and, taking Teddie to a farm which stood near, they asked the woman to allow them to leave him there while they scaled the summit of Pen y Gaer, and to have her kettle boiling by the time they came back. Their path now led away from the road, and over a stile on to the heather. It was a stiff climb, and made more difficult by the thick gorse through which they were obliged to push their way, but the view from the top was sufficient compensation for any trouble they had in arriving there. On one hand they could see the whole extent of the

valley from Bettws y Coed to Conway, and even the houses on the promenade at Llandudno fully ten miles away; while on the other stretched the beautiful moors leading to the gloomy hollow of Lake Dulyn, behind which the mountain ridges showed purple and jagged against the sky. All around they could trace the ruins of the old British fort, great piles of stones that must have been rolled there with incredible labour, perhaps by the very tribe which had reared the Druids' circle on the slope of Tal y fan.

"Some of the Welsh people say a giant put them here," said Oswald, who had recovered his spirits; "or I'm not sure if it wasn't King Arthur himself. At any rate he took a tremendous jump down the hillside, and left his footprint on a rock in the stream below there. He must have worn a No. 15 shoe, to judge by the size."

"Uncle Frank made up a ridiculous story once," said Linda. "It was all about the black bull of Llyn Dulyn, and how it came one night to Garth Avon, and tapped at Mother's window with its horns, and said that one of the little bulls had met with an accident to its eye, and he'd heard that she had a whole bottle of bulls'-eyes, so would she please bring some, and come at once with him and cure it. The village people are always fetching Mother like that to see their children, and she's simply terrified of bulls, so he told it just on purpose to tease her."

"Talking of bulls'-eyes makes me think of tea," said Artie. "I'm sure that old woman's kettle must be boiling now. I vote we go down and see. Let us try this other part of the hill; it'll be far quicker than scrambling through the gorse again."

One side of the summit was almost as steep as the roof of a house, and covered with very short, fine grass, at present so dry and slippery that the children sat down and slid almost as if it were winter, and they were tobogganing on the snow. It was great fun, especially when Artie caught against a stone, and rolled over and over like a ball, till a convenient gorse bush made a prickly impediment in his career, and Linda left both hat and hair ribbon behind, and was obliged to scramble up the slope again to fetch them. It was certainly a much faster way back to the little whitewashed cottage.

The farmer's wife could not speak much English, but she said a great deal in Welsh which they took to be an invitation to come inside, where they found she had set a round table by the fire, nicely spread with cups and saucers and a clean cloth. The chimney was so big and wide that as they sat on the old-fashioned settle they could look right up and see a patch of sky at the top. From a large smoke-stained beam hung a chain supporting the kettle, which was boiling over on a fire of peat and dried heather that gave out a very fragrant aromatic smell, almost recalling Guy Fawkes Day, especially when it was blown by the bellows. For tea there was a large loaf of home-baked brown barley bread, and, notwithstanding the ample lunch which they had eaten by the stream, they were all hungry enough to enjoy it thoroughly, in spite of the saltiness of the butter. It was so pleasant sitting in the quaint little mountain cottage, with its dim light and peaty atmosphere, and there were so many jokes to make and stories to tell, that they lingered until the tall grandfather's clock striking five reminded them that they were still a good many miles away from Craigwen, and that it was time to be taking the donkey and setting out once more on their homeward walk.

"We've had a jolly day," said Oswald, as, tired but in excellent spirits, the four at last reached the gate of Garth Avon. "Teddie's done splendidly. I'll give him a first-class report, even for galloping, and he deserves a good feed of oats. You girls go in; Artie and I'll take him back to the farm. Are you coming, Scamp? Why, I really believe it's the first time in my life I've ever seen a dog look dead beat!"

CHAPTER XVI

The Chinese Charm

"WHAT are we going to do to-day?" asked Oswald after breakfast next morning. "We've an uncommonly short holiday, so we must spin it out as well as we can. Who votes for Llangelynnin?"

"Too far and too hot," replied Artie, stretching himself comfortably in his father's armchair. "I feel more inclined to lie on the lawn and laze than go climbing hills again."

"It's too far for you all after your long walk yesterday," said Mrs. Marshall. "You boys may do what you like this morning, but Linda and Sylvia are to stay quietly in the garden until dinner-time. There's an invitation for you to have tea at Dr. Severn's, which of course I have accepted. I was sure you would all like to go."

"Rather!" said Oswald. "He's the jolliest chap I know, and that's saying a good deal. Artie, suppose we take ourselves off to the marsh and have a dip in the pool; it's about the coolest thing I can suggest for a day like this, and we shall both enjoy a swim."

"Who is Dr. Severn?" said Sylvia to Linda, when the boys had started for their bathe, and the two little girls were sitting in a cool, shady place under the trees, with their books on their knees.

"He's a gentleman who came last summer to live at a house not very far away," answered Linda. "We only got to know him lately; but he's so nice, and the boys simply adore him!"

"Hasn't he any children of his own?"

"No. We heard they were dead, and his wife too, but he's never spoken about them even to Father and Mother. He lives quite alone, with a housekeeper to look after him. He's been in all kinds of foreign places, and his rooms are so full of funny things, it's just like going to a museum. There's a stuffed crocodile, and a mummied cat, and a horrid lizard in a bottle, and some snake skins, and a locust, and a scorpion, and a whole case of lovely butterflies. He tells us about them sometimes, and where he found them."

"I hope he'll show them to us to-day," said Sylvia, who thought the collection sounded interesting.

"I'm sure he will if we ask him," said Linda. "I should like to see them again myself, especially the crocodile. He has a big cabinet full of little drawers, and he keeps curiosities in them from every place he's been to. There's one with nothing but shells, and another for corals, and a third for coins, and the rest are each for a separate country. He's very careful over them; he won't let us take anything out ourselves, or even handle some of them, he's so afraid they might get broken. Still, it's fun to look, even if we mayn't touch."

"I expect it's a thousand times nicer than my museum at home," said Sylvia, "though I have a cabinet in the schoolroom."

"I haven't seen your museum yet, so I can't say, but I'm sure you'll enjoy Dr. Severn's. We've been to tea twice before, and each time we've had raspberry sandwich and plumcake and little crisp cocoanut biscuits. I hope the housekeeper will make them to-day. There's always the most delicious apricot jam, too, and he hands round a big jug of cream, and tells us to help ourselves. Then there's a horizontal bar in the garden that the boys love; they do some of the things on it that they learn in the gymnasium at school; and there's a tank with pink water lilies growing in it, only I don't think they'll be out just yet. I'm so glad he's asked us to-day, because I want you to go and see it all."

"What a good thing Miss Coleman managed to put that clean dress in my bag!" said Sylvia. "What should I have done without it? I got this in quite a mess yesterday."

"I should have had to lend you one of my white muslins, and I'm sure they'll be too short for me this year, so they would be far too small for you; you're an inch taller than I am, though you're so much thinner. We're both to wear our sailor hats. Mother said I couldn't put on my last year's Sunday summer one if you hadn't your best with you, and of course it isn't a party."

The invitation was for four o'clock, and by half-past three Mrs. Marshall had succeeded in getting the prospective guests into what she considered a sufficient state of tidiness for the occasion.

It was about twenty minutes' walk to Dale Side, a pretty modern bungalow which had been built by an English gentleman with a leaning towards the picturesque, and who had therefore chosen the site to secure the most beautiful views, and had made the interior as artistic as his excellent taste could devise. After living there a few years, the owner,

on account of his wife's health, had gone to reside in Italy, and the little property had been on sale until the preceding summer, when it had been purchased, together with a few acres of land, by Dr. Severn, who was a newcomer to the neighbourhood. Though he was therefore only a comparative stranger, the young Marshalls already regarded the kindly doctor as a friend, and it was with very smiling faces that they rang his bell that afternoon.

"I saw you arriving," cried their host, hastening to the door himself to meet them. "I was just looking out for you, and hoping you would come soon to interrupt a tiresome letter I felt obliged to write. Now I'm justified in putting it off for an hour or two at any rate. Linda's quite shocked at me! But I didn't say I wouldn't finish it afterwards, did I? Shall we go straight through to the pine wood? I've had the table carried out there for tea. It's the coolest place we can find on a hot day."

By the time she had known him ten minutes, Sylvia had decided that she liked Dr. Severn immensely. He was a tall, rather gaunt man, with a thin, pale, clean-shaven face that bore traces of ill health or suffering in the hollow cheeks and the lines around the mouth; his hair was iron grey, rather long, and combed straight back from his broad forehead, and he had the brightest, keenest, pleasantest blue eyes that it was possible to imagine. His manner was so winning and jolly that he made everybody feel at home immediately. He seemed to know exactly the subjects about which boys and girls liked to talk, and to be able to enter into everything almost as if he were a boy himself. The four visitors soon found themselves chatting to him perfectly freely, telling him of school scrapes and adventures, of plans for the summer holidays, and asking his opinion on various disputed points, while he, in turn, was full of jokes and reminiscences of his own far-off schooldays.

"Never save the best till last!" he declared, handing round the cake long before the plates of bread and butter were finished. "I've kept to that motto ever since I was a small boy, and I had very good reason for adopting it. Once, when I was a little fellow of about seven years old, I was taken to pay a visit to an old lady who lived in the country. Children were brought up on the plainest fare in those days--porridge, and bread and milk, roast beef or mutton with potatoes, rice pudding or suet dumpling, with jam roly-poly, as a special treat on your birthday, was all that was considered good for us; so you can imagine I felt pleased when I saw a large pudding full of currants come on to the table at dinner-time. The old lady gave me a generous serving, and told me to help myself to as much sugar as I liked with it, assuring my mother that sweet things were necessary for children, a sentiment with which I cordially agreed then, whatever opinions my elders might hold. There were a great many currants in my slice of pudding, and it struck me how much nicer they would taste if I could eat them all together as a titbit at the last; so I picked them carefully out one by one, and put them to the side of my plate. I suppose it must have taken me rather a long time, or perhaps the others had smaller helpings; at any rate they had finished first, and all laid down their spoons and forks except myself. I gulped my last piece of pudding in a hurry, and was just going to enjoy my saved-up fruit, when the old lady, who had been watching me, said: 'Poor boy! Isn't he fond of currants? Leave them, my dear; I would never force a child to eat what it doesn't like,' adding a direction to the servant to take my plate away. I had had tremendous warnings before I came about behaving myself properly, and also I was much too shy to protest, so I was obliged to watch my cherished currants being whisked from the table before I had been able to taste a single one of them. If I had ever been inclined to be miserly, I think this incident would have cured me of hoarding up riches."

"What a shame! Didn't you get anything instead?" asked Artie.

"Not at dinner, but afterwards the old lady, who was a very kind soul, took me into her kitchen garden, and told me to eat as many ripe gooseberries as I liked. There were various sorts, big red ones, hairy yellow ones, and smooth green ones, and I'm sure I ate enough to make up amply for what I missed at pudding time. As far as I recollect I never stopped picking the whole afternoon. Small boys can accommodate a great deal."

"I don't think gooseberries do one any harm," said Artie. "We eat simply loads. We each sit down beside a bush, and try who can make the biggest pile of skins. Mother says the blackbirds would take them if we didn't."

"I'm glad she doesn't make a fuss about it, as some people do," said Linda. "I was so angry last summer. A lady came one afternoon to see us, and brought a horrid little girl with her called Mona. Mother told me to take this child into the kitchen garden and give her some fruit, so I marched her off, and, just as we were leaving the drawing-room, her mother called out: 'You may have eight strawberries and twelve gooseberries, darling, but no more.' She was very stupid, and wouldn't talk to me, so I kept picking the ripest and biggest strawberries and gooseberries I could find, and handing them to her. I never thought of counting them, but she suddenly went quite red, and said she wouldn't have any more. She'd hardly look at the chickens or the rabbits or anything I tried to show her, and I was very glad indeed when it was time for her to go home. Her mother came to fetch her from the garden, and said: 'Did you eat more than I told you, dear?' and Mona said: 'No I didn't. This little girl tried very hard to make me, but I wouldn't take even one strawberry more. Wasn't I good?'"

"The lady looked at me as if she thought I deserved smacking, but I couldn't explain, because she was just shaking

hands with Mother and saying goodbye. I've felt cross about it ever since, and if she brings Mona again, I declare I'll run away and hide, and not take her into the garden at all. Don't you think it was too bad?"

"Much too bad!" said Dr. Severn. "I think Mona was what is called a prig. Please go on with the cocoanut biscuits. I assure you I'm not counting them!"

"I really couldn't eat another," said Linda, "though they're very delicious. Aren't you going to show us any of your curiosities in the house? You promised you would, and Sylvia does so want to see them."

"A promise is a promise," replied Dr. Severn, rising from his basket chair. "But in the meantime I think I see Mr. Richards coming through the garden in search of us. I wonder if he's had any tea."

Mr. Richards was the curate, and a great favourite with Oswald and Artie; he was an athletic young fellow, fresh from College, and always ready to go skating or boating, or to play a game of cricket with them, or carry them off with him to the golf links. He declared now that he had already had tea, but was longing for a little exercise on Dr. Severn's horizontal bar, where he thought he could show the boys a feat or two which perhaps they had not yet learnt at school. Oswald and Artie rushed away with him at once, and, flinging off their coats, were soon vying with each other in swinging, circling, hanging by their legs or feet, and various other acrobatic performances that looked exceedingly warm work for a hot day, but which seemed to afford them the most immense satisfaction. Dr. Severn stood by and encouraged them to do their best, then, after watching for a short time, left them with Mr. Richards, and took Linda and Sylvia into the house.

"You'll be getting tired of circus and would rather have museum for a change, I expect," he said. "I'll show you all my curios, and then you shall each choose something for me to tell you about."

The study was a delightful little room, with a French window opening into the garden. One side was quite filled by a large Japanese cabinet with many sliding cupboards and drawers. Linda certainly had not exaggerated the number of wonderful things which it contained. There were treasures from Egypt, from Palestine, from India, from China, and from Japan. Wherever the doctor had travelled he seemed to have picked up some object of interest, and to examine the various drawers was like taking a peep into far countries. He allowed Linda and Sylvia to dress themselves up in some of the gorgeous silk scarves and sashes, to slip on the Japanese kimonos, and put their feet into the Turkish slippers.

"I think I like the Indian things best; they smell the nicest," said Linda, snuffing at a sandalwood box, and trying the effect of some filagree ornaments on her own hair and Sylvia's. "How grand the women must look in these! No, I shouldn't like to wear the nose ring, thank you, nor the earrings, though I'd love the bangles. They must have tiny wrists. I can only just push these over my hands. Aren't they meant for a child?"

"No," replied Dr. Severn, "they are really for a grown-up woman, but the people of all Eastern nations have very small hands compared with us Westerns. If you like the scent of sandalwood, what do you think of this? It comes from the vale of Kashmir." He drew the stopper from a bottle of attar of roses as he spoke.

The odour was so deliciously sweet and overpowering that it filled the whole room.

"It's the true stuff," said the doctor, "not the wretched imitation which is often sold over here. Now if I put a drop on each of your pocket handkerchiefs it will scent all your clothes for a twelve-month. Where are they?"

"It's lucky they're clean ones," said Sylvia, rummaging in her pocket. "I shall keep mine in my drawer after this, and not send it to the wash, ever. It's lovelier even than lavender water or eau de Cologne."

"I believe it takes a thousand roses to make one drop of this," said Dr. Severn, "so you have a great deal of concentrated sweetness there. This round box comes from Damascus, and I don't think it's quite empty yet. If you have smelled true attar you ought also to taste genuine Turkish delight. Open your mouths and shut your eyes, and you'll find a surprise."

Dressed in the wonderful embroidered garments, with silver ornaments in their hair, scented with roses, and their mouths full of lumps of delight, the two little girls felt as if they had wandered into the land of the Arabian Nights, had been transformed into Eastern princesses, and had only to command a slave of the lamp to come forward and carry out their slightest desire.

"It's simply lovely," said Linda. "I never tasted anything so nice in my life before. I think you're a magician, and can carry us off to Persia, or India, or anywhere with a wave of your wand. But please, you promised to tell us each a story about something, and you haven't done so yet."

"Because you haven't chosen a 'something'," said Dr. Severn; "say what you'd like, and I'll try to wave my magic wand."

"Then I'll have this funny little tassel of blue beads."

"That's a charm against the evil eye," said the doctor. "I got it in Cairo. The Mohammedan mothers believe many people, especially strangers, to be possessed of most uncanny powers, and think that if they look very hard at their babies they can bewitch them, and cause them to catch various diseases, and even to die. To avert the evil they put charms on the children, and you may see a tiny boy with his head shaved, all except a long lock which hangs over his eyes with one of these bead talismans dangling at the end. The charms are always blue, because that is considered the magical colour. The people are very dark themselves, so they are terrified at the sight of an Englishman with eyes of the dreaded shade; they are quite sure he must be a desperately bad character, and it is safer to keep out of his path. When I have been in the East, I have often seen mothers turn their babies away lest my glance should fall on them. It is considered very unlucky also to praise a child, and its parents, even though they may be extremely rich, will sometimes let it look dirty and neglected for fear anyone might happen to admire it."

"You can't bewitch me!" cried Linda. "I've got the talisman safe in my hand!"

"I didn't say I was admiring you, did I?" laughed the doctor. "Though these gorgeous robes are certainly very becoming."

"You're a true magician. I shall be frightened of you now. Is that all you can tell me about my 'something'?"

"I'm afraid I know no more."

"Then, Sylvia, it's your turn."

"May I choose exactly what I want?" asked Sylvia.

"Certainly you may," replied Dr. Severn.

"Then I'd like to hear the story of that little carved ivory locket that's hanging on your watch-chain. It looks like a charm too."

A spasm of pain crossed the doctor's face at Sylvia's words, but he recovered himself in a moment.

"That would not interest you, dear child," he said gravely. "It is not a curiosity such as the other things I have shown you."

"It's a charm, though, isn't it?" asked Sylvia. "I've been noticing it all the afternoon. It's so exactly like another I've seen."

"That could hardly be," said Dr. Severn. "This carving has no duplicate."

"But I know one that's its own twin," persisted Sylvia. "It's the same size and shape, and has the same carving on it, these little three-cornered kind of leaves round the edge, and these marks like queer letters in the middle. I couldn't possibly forget it."

"Where did you see it?" enquired Linda.

"It's the Chinese charm that they found tied round Mercy's neck when she was brought to the hospital. She showed it me one Sunday evening, and I held it in my hand and looked at it so carefully."

"Where did your friend get her charm?" asked Dr. Severn quickly.

"It was fastened round her neck when she was a baby. A Chinese woman crawled with her to the hospital, because she was so wounded she was dying. Not Mercy, I mean, but the poor woman. Mercy wasn't hurt at all. They adopted her at the hospital, and then she was brought to England, and came to Miss Kaye's, but nobody's ever found out yet who she is. Isn't it just like a storybook?" said Sylvia, who loved to bring forward the romantic side of her friend's history.

"How long ago is it since this happened?" enquired Dr. Severn with a curious strained tone in his voice which neither of the children noticed.

"About sixteen years. Mercy is nearly seventeen."

"Is that her true name?"

"No. Nobody knew her real name, so they called her Mercy Ingledew. She had on Chinese clothes, and the nurse thought the locket must be a Chinese charm too. She hadn't a single English thing that anyone could tell her by. Wasn't

it a pity?"

"A great pity, if her friends are alive to claim her."

"We don't know whether they are or not," said Sylvia. "I'm always trying to find them, but Miss Kaye says I'm not to talk to Mercy about it, because it's no use to keep raising false hopes, and we must all be very kind to her, to make up for her not having a father and mother of her own. It's funny her little charm should be just the same as yours, though, isn't it? Did this one come from China too? I should have liked a story about it."

"Some other day, perhaps," said Dr. Severn, rising hastily and walking to the window. "Let us go out and find the boys. The sky looks so threatening, I'm afraid there's a thunderstorm brewing, and I had better send you home before it begins."

"We must take off our wonderful clothes, then," said Linda, beginning to untwist the scarves and put away the Turkish slippers. "Goodbye, dear sandalwood box! How I love the smell of you!"

"Keep the box if you like," said Dr. Severn briefly, "and you, Sylvia, the bottle of attar. I don't want either. Come, children, I'm sorry to hurry you, but I don't want you to be caught in the rain. Get your hats, and Mr. Richards will see you home on his way to Craigwen."

CHAPTER XVII

The Sketching Class

LINDA and Sylvia had a great many experiences to relate to the other girls when they returned to Heathercliffe House, and as they were the only ones in the class who had been away for the few days, they were able to enjoy a position of much importance until their adventures were all told. Nothing particular seemed to have happened during their absence. Brenda had broken her bedroom jug, Connie had fallen against the mowing machine and her forehead was ornamented with large strips of sticking plaster which did not improve her personal appearance, and Dolly had locked the door of the book cupboard in the Kindergarten room and lost the key, much to Miss Coleman's wrath. Otherwise there were no events worth chronicling.

"Unless you'd like to hear that I've made a fresh copy of my Greek history notes," said Marian. "They're most beautifully neat, and underlined with red ink. I'm sure Miss Kaye'll say they're better than anybody else's."

But as both Linda and Sylvia declared that did not interest them in the least, Marian's piece of information fell rather flat.

All the girls seemed to find it a little difficult to settle into harness again after the short holiday. The weather was warm, and in spite of open windows the schoolrooms were apt to feel close and stuffy. Miss Arkwright tried the plan of holding her class under the big hawthorn in the garden, but she found that a bird singing in the tree, a bumble bee settling on a flower, or a butterfly flitting across the lawn was enough to put dates and rivers completely out of her pupils' minds, and to wipe even their best-known facts from their memories, so she did not repeat her experiment.

"In our grandmothers' days schools always had their holidays in June," said Sylvia, yawning, as she idly picked the heads off the daisies on the lawn one afternoon. "They broke up just when the hot weather begins, and then they had all the lovely time when the evenings are so long and you can be out-of-doors until bedtime, and the strawberries are ripe, and they're cutting the hay. I think it was far nicer. We don't break up till the 31st of July."

"Yes, but remember they'd have the whole of August at school," said Marian. "Think of having to come back just at the time when everyone's going away now to the seaside. And what an enormous term it would make till Christmas!"

"They had quarters then," said Sylvia, "and a little holiday at Michaelmas, like the Easter one."

"I don't believe children went home from boarding-schools for it though. If you read old-fashioned books you will notice that the boys always talk of 'a half' as if they stayed from Midsummer to Christmas, and from Christmas to Midsummer again. It must have seemed such a long while."

"I think it must have been perfectly horrible to go to school then," said Nina Forster. "My grandmother tells me stories about when she was a little girl, and I should have hated it. They had to learn their lessons off by heart, and stand with their hands behind their backs and say them just like parrots, and if they forgot or made a mistake the governess rapped them on the head with her thimble. She called it 'thimble pie'. It used to make them too nervous to remember things."

"How nasty of her! What else did they do?" asked the girls, who liked to be told tales while they lounged.

"They had to use backboards every day, and chest expanders. Then they had much plainer food than we have, and they were obliged to finish up every morsel upon their plates; they mightn't leave anything. They always had brown bread except on Sundays, and rice puddings nearly every day. They hardly ever went picnics or excursions; they only used to go for stupid walks along the roads, two and two, with a mistress at each end. The music teacher had a silver pencil with a heavy knob at the end, and if a girl played a wrong note she used to bring it down with a thump upon her hand. Granny says it made her hate music. Then they mightn't send letters home without the headmistress seeing them, and she used to make them write the most absurd rubbish, so that they weren't their own letters at all. Granny had her twelfth birthday at school, and when she wrote to thank her father for his present the governess insisted on her putting: 'Now that I have attained to my twelfth year I feel I am no longer a child, and must put away childish things'. Wasn't it stupid? They used to write the most beautiful hand, though, far, far neater than ours, but they took a fearfully long time over it. They'd spend a week at an exercise that we do in a day. The teachers were very strict and very cross, and there seemed to be so many punishments--being sent to bed, and being kept in, and learning long columns of spelling. Granny says girls are spoilt now, but I know I'd rather go to Miss Kaye's than to the school she was at."

"I should think so," said the others; "I don't believe any other could be really nicer than this."

"I sometimes wish I'd gone to a different one, though," said Jessie Ellis.

"Why?"

"Because my three cousins were here, and they're so tremendously clever. It's rather hard when you're not very bright yourself, and the teachers keep saying: 'You mean to tell me you can't learn this, and you an Ellis!' I think they must have taken my share of the brains in the family. At any rate it's not quite fair to blame me because I can't do everything they did. Ethel won a scholarship for Newnham, and I never even scrape through the easiest class exam as a rule. I don't care much. Mother says I must be a home girl and like sewing. I'm glad I don't get my pocket money by my marks."

"Oh, but does anybody?"

"Yes, I knew a girl who did. Her father gave her sixpence every week she was top, and nothing at all if she was lower than halfway in the class. He said it was to make her work."

"Before I came to school I used to get my pocket money for doing things," said Brenda. "I had a penny for every hour I practised, so if I wanted to save up I used to do a little extra at the piano; then there was a penny a week for wearing my gloves, and another penny for using the back stairs, and a halfpenny for eating salt, and another halfpenny if I remembered to wipe my boots. I rather liked it."

"I don't think it was nice at all," declared Marian. "It was bribing you to do what you ought to have done in any case."

"Yes, so it was," echoed Gwennie. "We always wipe our boots."

"Oh, you two are perfect, of course!" said Brenda. "You never do anything wrong! What about that French book which was lost last week?"

"It wasn't my fault or Gwennie's either," said Marian, rising and putting an end to a conversation which threatened to become too personal. "Somebody must have borrowed it without asking us. I'm going in now to learn my verbs." And she departed, leaving the others laughing, for poor Marian did not always succeed in living entirely according to her excellent precepts and "Practice what you preach" is a motto held in high estimation by schoolgirls.

Though ordinary lessons in the garden had proved a failure, Miss Kaye made a new departure by arranging that Mr. Dawson, the drawing master, should organize a sketching class, to include those of his pupils whom he considered sufficiently advanced to benefit by outdoor instruction. It was mostly composed of girls from the first and second classes, but Marian, Linda, and Sylvia had done such good work in the studio that Mr. Dawson decided he would allow them to commence drawing from nature, and to their great delight they were permitted to join the party. They felt almost like artists as they set off with camp stools, sketching blocks, pencils, indiarubbers, paintboxes and water tins, and were installed under their master's direction beneath the shade of a hedge to make a valiant attempt at reproducing a picturesque gate and a gnarled oak tree which overhung it. It was a great deal more difficult than they had at first imagined. The bars of the gate were puzzling, and the oak tree somehow refused to turn out a tree at all, and was inclined to bear more resemblance to a lamp-post or a telegraph pole.

"It may be better when we get some colour on," said Sylvia hopefully. "Everyone will know the brown part is meant for the trunk and the green part for leaves."

"My gate looks as if I'd been playing naughts and crosses on my paper," sighed Linda. "I've rubbed it out seven times, and I'm afraid it's not straight now. The paper's quite spoilt. It'll be horrid when I begin to paint."

"We can't expect to do very much the first time, I suppose," said Marian. "My tree looks like a cabbage on a broomstick. I can lend you my indiarubber if you want it to clean up with. It's a softer one than yours. I want to get to the painting part and yet I'm afraid to begin."

"So am I," said Linda. "I don't know what Mr. Dawson will say when he sees the muddle I've made of this gate. Here he comes now."

The master must certainly have found the little girl's work far from talented, but, taking her seat, he made a patient effort to correct the mistakes in her drawing, adding a clever line or two of his own to show her how it ought to be done, then with a word of encouragement to Marian and Sylvia he passed on to some of his elder pupils.

The painting did not prove such a redeeming feature as Sylvia had anticipated. Her sky refused to go on smoothly, and, as she was in too great a hurry to let it dry properly before she commenced her tree, the edges ran into each other hopelessly, producing an effect that was perhaps too impressionistic for most tastes. The trunk of the tree would not

appear round, and the branches had an uncomfortable suggestion of signposts, and she could not get the right colour for the grass, and found the shadows absolutely baffling.

"It's a perfect daub," she cried, flinging down her brush as Mercy came round presently to see how they were getting on.

"So's mine, I'm afraid," said Mercy. "You may see it if you like, but it's hardly worth looking at. I'm letting it dry before I touch it any more. It was getting into such a dreadful mess. Sketching from nature isn't at all easy. I think Mr. Dawson's extremely clever to paint such lovely things. You should see the sweet little bit he put in for Trissie Knowles. It seems no trouble to him."

"I wish you'd do a piece for me, Mercy," said Linda.

"Oh, I daren't! Mr. Dawson would find it out directly, and perhaps he mightn't like it. May Spencer's sketch is far the best of anybody's. She just dashed it off, and it looks so nice. Helen Ward let her sky dry in patches, and Mr. Dawson had to take her board to the stream and dip it in the water to wash it off again. We're doing the cottage, you know, round the corner, and when Sybil Lake had painted all the front of hers she discovered she'd left out one of the windows."

"Who's this coming along the road?" interrupted Marian. "He's smiling at one of us, I'm sure. I don't know him. Do you?"

"Dr. Severn!" cried Linda and Sylvia, and, springing up, they put their sketching materials on the grass and hurried to meet him.

"Good afternoon! This is quite a surprise to me," said the doctor. "I didn't expect to find my two little friends suddenly blossoming into full-blown artists. I hope I'm not interrupting a lesson."

"Oh, no! We're all waiting for Mr. Dawson to come round and tell us what to do next," said Linda. "Where are you going, Doctor? Won't you sit down and talk for a minute? Please have my camp stool."

"It's a big surprise to us," added Sylvia. "We didn't know you ever came to Aberglyn."

"I find myself here to-day," said Dr. Severn. "Thank you, Linda, but I'm afraid I should break down your little seat if I were to put my weight on it. There's a convenient stump here which will do very well. Now you can imagine I'm an art critic, and show me some of the masterpieces. I see both your friends are painting, also," he continued, smiling at Mercy and Marian. "Will they let me look at their pictures too?"

Dr. Severn was always at his ease with young people; his pleasant blue eyes and genial manner seemed to attract them at once; and he had soon added Mercy and Marian to the list of his admirers.

"I used to do a little sketching myself once," he said when he had duly inspected the four studies and sympathized with their owners' difficulties, "so I know how much harder it is than it looks, particularly when one's a beginner. I found many quaint corners to paint when I was abroad, especially in China and Japan."

"China! Were you ever in China?" asked Mercy with some eagerness.

"I was stationed in Szu-chwan for more than twenty years," replied Dr. Severn.

"Do you know the Ingledew Hospital at Tsien-Lou?"

"I have heard of it, but I've never been there. I was in a different district, and the distances were great and travelling often dangerous."

"I wish you'd seen it," said Mercy wistfully. "I lived there for six years, and I still write to Dr. and Mrs. Harrison and to Sister Grace."

"Their names are well known, though I have not had the good fortune to meet them personally," answered Dr. Severn, gazing steadily at Mercy with a strange look in his blue eyes. "Can you remember much of your life in China?"

"Not a great deal. I was only seven when I left and there has been nobody to talk to me about it and remind me. I haven't forgotten the narrow streets and the crowds of people in strange dresses who used to be walking about in them, nor our garden at the hospital with the camellias, and the high wall round it. I remember the little mission church, too, where we had service on Sundays. It was all in Chinese, but I could speak it then quite easily. I couldn't understand a single word now."

"Do you know Chinese, Doctor?" asked Linda.

"Very well," replied Dr. Severn, "though it took me many years of hard study to learn it. It's the most difficult language in the world."

"Worse than French?"

"Fifty times worse!"

"I shouldn't think it was worth the trouble."

"There were reasons which made me consider it worth any amount of trouble. I wished to talk to the people, and as they couldn't understand my speech I was forced to learn theirs."

"Were they pleased?"

"Some of them were grateful, some of them didn't care, and some were very angry with me. I was like the man who sowed the seed. I had to fling it everywhere, no matter what ground it fell on."

"And can you write Chinese characters too?" asked Marian.

"A little, but not so well as I can talk. Here comes your drawing teacher. I'm afraid he'll think I'm encouraging you to be idle. Goodbye for the present! You may very likely see me again before the day is over."

"I wonder what Dr. Severn talked to the people about in China!" said Sylvia, as she watched his retreating figure walking briskly away down the road. "It must have been something very important to make him take so much trouble."

"I think I can guess," said Mercy softly, as she picked up her half-finished sketch and ran back to her easel in time for the master's criticism.

CHAPTER XVIII

Dr. Severn Explains

LINDA and Sylvia had been much delighted at their unexpected meeting with the owner of Dale Side, and could talk of nothing else during tea. You may judge, therefore, Sylvia's astonishment and interest when, on passing the drawing-room shortly before preparation hour, she caught a glimpse of Dr. Severn seated there engaged in earnest conversation with Miss Kaye. The drawing-room was forbidden ground to the girls, so, after one hasty glance, Sylvia was on the point of hurrying away, and had already reached the bottom of the stairs when Miss Kaye called to her.

"Come in, my dear," said the mistress, as Sylvia timidly presented herself, not certain whether she had done anything wrong or not, "come in, and close the door after you."

Dr. Severn smiled and held out his hand, and Sylvia went and stood by his side, feeling sure now that whatever was the matter she was not going to be scolded.

"It was Sylvia and not Linda who spoke of it?" enquired Miss Kaye; "I believe you said Sylvia?"

"I did," replied Dr. Severn. "She mentioned that her schoolfellow had shown it to her. It may, of course, be merely a coincidence, but it seems worth investigating, and I should greatly like to see it."

"What are they talking about?" Sylvia wondered, glancing from one to another to try and read the answer in their faces. She could not understand the conversation at all, nor connect it with anything that had occurred. Miss Kaye, however, soon enlightened her.

"You told Dr. Severn, Sylvia, that Mercy Ingledew had shown you a carved ivory locket which was tied round her neck when she was found at the hospital in China. I was not aware that Mercy possessed it, and I have never seen it myself. Can you describe it?"

"It was just the same as the one Dr. Severn has," answered Sylvia. "It was seeing his that made me think of Mercy's. They are both exactly alike."

"You are absolutely sure?"

"Quite! It was small and beautifully carved, with little leaves round the edge and funny letters in the middle. I thought it must be meant for a locket, only it won't open."

"As you say, it is certainly a remarkable coincidence," said Miss Kaye, turning to Dr. Severn. "I am very anxious not to distress the poor girl needlessly, but I think we are justified in looking into the matter. Sylvia, will you go and find Mercy, and tell her quietly that I wish to speak to her in the drawing-room, and ask her to bring this locket with her. Do not try to explain anything, and do not let any of the other girls hear you. I would rather they did not know about it."

Sylvia left the room in a whirl of excitement. Something was going to happen. Of that she was sure. Did Dr. Severn, who had been in China himself, know anything about Mercy's relations? The idea was so overwhelming and so delightful that it almost took her breath away. Ever since she had first heard Mercy's story she had been hoping that some clue might be found to her parentage, and that at last they were on a right track seemed absolutely too good to be true. She found her friend reading in the garden, and was able to give her message as briefly and quietly as Miss Kaye had desired. Mercy rose at once, and, asking no questions, went to her bedroom to fetch the locket, then, rejoining Sylvia, who had waited for her at the foot of the stairs, she took the child's hand and walked into the drawing-room. It was a moment of intense anxiety for all.

"Mercy dear," began Miss Kaye, after a moment's pause, as if she hardly knew how to open the subject, "we had agreed that it was wiser not to speak about the events which occurred in the first year of your life, but I am going to break through my rule to-day. Dr. Severn, whom you met this afternoon, believes that he can throw some light upon your early history, and even solve the mystery of your birth. From what he tells me a very strange chain of circumstances has led him to make enquiries, and it seems more than probable that you may learn something at last. Try and calm yourself, my dear child, and let Dr. Severn look at the locket which you have brought."

Poor Mercy was trembling with agitation. Was her long-deferred hope at length to be realized? Ever since she had been old enough to notice the difference between herself and other girls, she had looked forward to this, at first with eager expectation, but latterly as a dream never likely to be fulfilled and only leading to perpetual disappointment. All the cherished castles in the air which she had striven so bravely to put away from her, all the longing and yearning which she had so often felt for those unknown parents of her infancy, all the grief, the solitude, and the shrinking sense

of her lonely position rose up in renewed force as, with shaking fingers, she laid her Chinese charm in the doctor's outstretched hand.

Dr. Severn had removed his own locket from his watch chain, and he now placed the two side by side on the table.

"You observe, Miss Kaye," he said, "that they are so exactly alike that it would be impossible to tell them apart, but when they are together you may notice that there is a slight difference in the characters which form the centre. To one unacquainted with Chinese it is perhaps hardly perceptible, but if you had any knowledge of the written language it could not fail to strike you. This, however, is only one of the minor points. I have still to make the great test."

He took his own locket in his hand and pressed a secret spring. It opened, disclosing inside a small coloured photograph of a lady with a sweet face and fair hair, at which he asked both Miss Kaye and Mercy to look carefully. He then lifted the other locket from the table.

"If, as I believe, this is the true duplicate," he said, "the spring will be here, and it will open like its fellow."

The three spectators held their breath. Sylvia was white as a ghost, and Miss Kaye put her arm round Mercy to prevent her from falling. One swift pressure of the doctor's thumb, and the charm had flown open, revealing an exact facsimile of the former portrait. Dr. Severn placed the pair side by side again upon the table and turned to Mercy.

"You did not know its secret?" he asked. "How could you when there was no one to show you the tiny catch? You have seen that the pictures in the two lockets are of the same person? In mine it is of my beloved wife, and in yours it is the portrait of your mother. Yes, Mercy, you are indeed my daughter, given back, as it seems to me, from the dead, and after all these years of our separation I claim you thus through the memory of one by whom we were both held equally dear!"

"So you're really Dr. Severn's own daughter! It's almost too nice to believe!" exclaimed Sylvia a few minutes later, when Mercy, with an April face, half-smiles and half-tears, kissed her and thanked her for her share in bringing about her new-found happiness.

"It is true nevertheless," replied Dr. Severn. "The locket has removed every shadow of doubt. There is still, however, a great deal to be explained, and with Miss Kaye's permission I will relate both how I lost my child and why I had apparently made no effort to recover her. It is a long story, but for a full understanding of the facts of the case it is necessary for me to begin at the beginning.

"It is now more than twenty years ago that, having obtained my degree as a doctor of medicine, and held appointments at various hospitals in London and the provinces, I determined to devote myself to the mission field, and sailed for China. I was appointed head of the medical mission at Tsi-chin in the canton of Szu-chwan, and on arrival there I bade goodbye to Western civilization. In those days the people of China were even more ignorant and fanatical than they are now. The prejudice against Europeans was intense, and for a long time our best efforts seemed thrown away. I should have been very disappointed and down-hearted if it had not been for the cheery hopeful courage of my wife, who had given up an easy life in England to help the cause, and whose work among the Chinese women was the beginning of the ultimate success which attended our mission.

"The very first to become a Christian was a woman named Lao-ya, and through her we found access to numerous houses, the doors of which had been formerly closed against us. Our small church began to grow. Many who came to the hospital as patients would listen to our story of the Great Physician, and tell it again in their own homes.

"I wish I could describe to you our life in that strange inland Chinese city. We were hundreds of miles from Hong-Kong, which was the nearest British settlement, and travelling was so difficult and so slow that it took many weeks to reach the coast, and was both fatiguing and dangerous. We made ourselves as comfortable as we could in the house, half-Chinese, half-European, which had been built under my directions, and we tried to grow English seeds in our garden to remind us of the home we had left.

"Three children were born to us, a boy named Edmund, and twin girls whom we christened Mary and Una, and, though we were so far away from our own native land, we managed to be a very happy little household. The woman Lao-ya was our nurse, and as devoted to the babies as if they had been her own. She would never leave them for an instant, and no trouble seemed too great for her to take on their behalf.

"Among the more earnest members of our church was a man called Kan-Sou, who was a very clever carver of ivories, an art in which the Chinese excel. I had been able to cure his wife of a painful disease, and he was anxious to give me a present of some of his own work. One day, therefore, he brought me two small lockets which he had made specially for my two little girls. The exquisite threefold tracery of the border was intended, so he said, as a symbol of the doctrine of the Trinity; on one side was the Chinese equivalent for 'Good Luck', and on the other, also in Chinese characters, the

names Mary and Una. He had contrived a secret spring by which the lockets would open, and had carved inside the date of the children's baptism, the entire Western part of the idea being copied from a trinket we possessed in the house, which Lao-ya had once shown him, though his rendering of it was wholly Eastern. As I found there was sufficient space in each to contain a portrait, I inserted two small photographs of my wife which I had taken myself, and coloured, and, to show our appreciation of his kindness, we tied his gifts round the babies' necks with pieces of ribbon. I believe poor Lao-ya must have considered them to be some kind of Christian charm, for she would never allow them to be taken off, and always treated them as if they were objects of veneration.

"All this time the people of Tsi-chin, though regarding us with extreme suspicion, had never yet proved themselves to be absolutely hostile. When the twins were nearly a year old, however, we began to notice a marked change in the demeanour of the townsfolk, both towards us and the Mission. Ugly rumours reached us of riots in other cities, and cruelties the very mention of which was enough to fill one with horror. There was an epidemic of disease among the natives, caused by their own dirt and ignorance of the common laws of health, and many of their priests had spread the report that it had been introduced by the foreigners for the purpose of reducing their numbers, and thus enabling the British to conquer their country, and that all true patriots must rise and destroy the source of the evil. This dangerous doctrine spread rapidly, and the news filled me with the greatest uneasiness. I hesitated long whether I ought to take my wife and children to the coast, but I decided that the danger among the strangers whom we should be forced to encounter on our long journey was even greater than that of remaining in the place where we had cured many sick people and could certainly count upon obtaining help from at least a few of them.

"I shall never forget one spring morning, now sixteen years ago. The town seemed quiet, and our fears had been somewhat lulled to rest. I had finished my work in the hospital, and went into our garden, where my wife was sitting sewing beside our three little ones as they played with their nurse under a blossoming tree. I stood for a moment watching the pretty picture they made, the three little rosy English faces in contrast to Lao-ya's almond eyes and smooth black tresses, the gay background of flowers, the pagodas of the temple in the city beyond standing out against the brilliant blue sky, and the bright sunshine which shone on my wife's fair hair and the children's flaxen heads and turned them all to gold. Well might the scene live in my memory; it was the last time I was ever to see them thus!

"I had just received an urgent message to attend a mandarin who lived many miles up in the hills, and who now lay seriously ill and had expressed a wish to see me. Everything appeared so tranquil that I thought I might safely leave the Mission for a short period, and I made preparations to set off at once, taking a few necessary instruments and drugs with me.

"I was able to relieve my patient, and was about to start for home when to my anger and surprise I found that I was practically a prisoner. No violence was offered me, but for several days I was confined in a room from which there was no possibility of escape, and in spite of my earnest entreaties my jailer would give me no reason for this seemingly poor return for my services. At the end of the fifth day, however, the mandarin sent for me, and, after professing himself on the road to recovery, informed me that a terrible massacre of Christians had been taking place, and if he had not afforded me the safe shelter of his house I must certainly have perished among the rest. As a mark of his gratitude for my skilled attendance he was now sending me to the coast with a strong escort which had his orders to convey me as speedily as they could to Hong-Kong.

"You can imagine my wild alarm at this terrible news, and my anxiety to reach Tsi-chin to ascertain the fate of the mission and of my family. The soldiers on the whole were sympathetic fellows, and they consented to march by the hospital, though they assured me it would be better for me if I could refrain from doing so.

"I will not attempt to describe to you the scene of desolation which greeted me. My house was looted and wrecked, both church and schools were a pile of charred ashes, and all my workers were dead. Not one seemed to have escaped the general catastrophe. In the ruins of what had once been my beautiful garden I found my wife lying with our little Una in her arms and our boy close to her side; they had evidently been trying to make their escape when they were followed and murdered by the furious mob. Mary, I had no doubt, had also perished, together with poor faithful Lao-ya and our other servant, but I could not search further, as the soldiers, obedient to their master's orders, tore me away from the terrible scene, and carried me, more dead than alive, to the coast. There for many months I lay stricken down with brain fever, and it was not until after more than a year's rest, spent mostly in Japan, that I was able to take up my work again in China.

"One of the soldiers, with kindly thoughtfulness, had cut the locket from little Una's neck and placed it amongst my possessions. Perhaps he was a father himself, and I think that my grief had touched him. It contained the only portrait which I now possessed of my wife, and for this reason I have worn it always upon my watch chain.

"From this account you will readily understand why I made no enquiries for my other child, believing as I did that it was impossible for her to have lived. My long illness and subsequent absence prevented my hearing the story of the

foundling at the Ingledew hospital. Perhaps the news never reached my remote district; at any rate, by the time I returned it had been forgotten among the many heartrending incidents of that dreadful uprising. It was no doubt Lao-ya who had managed to flee with her nursling, though I still cannot understand why she should have travelled the immense distance from Tsi-chin to Tsien-Lou, unless she were trying to reach the home of her parents, who, I understood, came from a different province. Where she was wounded, or what horrors and cruelties she encountered, we shall never know, since she paid for her devotion with her life.

"For fourteen years more I remained in the canton of Szu-chwan, then, owing to my broken health, I was obliged reluctantly to give up my work there and return to England. The death of an uncle had left me in easy circumstances, and, finding the climate of North Wales suited me, I bought Dale Side and settled down there with the intention of writing a book on the many modern problems of China and its future development, a subject on which I thought I was competent to express an opinion.

"It was not until Sylvia spoke of the facsimile of my locket owned by her schoolfellow, and until she had told me the story of how Mercy was left at the Ingledew hospital, that it ever occurred to me that it was possible for my little Mary to have survived the general massacre, and even then I put the idea aside as romantic and absurd. It haunted me, however, to such an extent that I determined to go over to Aberglyn and make a few private enquiries from Miss Kaye on the subject. When I first saw Mercy I was struck at once by her likeness to my dead wife, and the locket soon proved to my entire satisfaction that I was not mistaken in my conjectures. All the dates exactly correspond, and I think there will now be no difficulty in convincing everybody of her identity."

"It is indeed a very strange and happy ending to a sad story," said Miss Kaye, wiping her eyes. "Mercy on her part has gone through a time of trial which I am sure has done its work in helping to form her character. She has been much to us in the school, and I could not hand over a sweeter daughter to a more worthy father."

"Then she is Mary Severn now, instead of Mercy Ingledew!" exclaimed Sylvia.

"She was baptized Mary," said Dr. Severn. "But we will call her Mercy still. No fitter name could have been chosen. It was mercy that saved her life, mercy that preserved her during all the years we were apart, mercy that brought about our marvellous meeting, and it is mercy that has given her back to me at last."

CHAPTER XIX

The Prize Giving

ALL the school was delighted at Mercy's good fortune, but no one more so than Sylvia. To feel that Dr. Severn's discovery was indirectly due to herself was an unbounded satisfaction.

"I always wanted so much to discover Mercy's friends," she said to Linda. "And isn't it strange that when I believed I'd found her mother it was just a silly mistake, and when I'd really found her father, I didn't suspect it in the least. I never dreamt of Dr. Severn being a relation, even when I saw his locket was the same as Mercy's. You see, Mercy said it was a Chinese charm, so I thought perhaps they were quite common, like the blue-bead tassel he'd been showing you, and anybody who'd been in China might have one. Suppose I hadn't come to stay with you at Whitsuntide, or we hadn't gone to tea that afternoon, you wouldn't have noticed that locket, because Mercy hadn't shown hers to you; and if you'd told Dr. Severn about her being found, he'd never have guessed it was his own Mary. I don't think anything you could have offered me in the whole world would have made me gladder than this!"

There was only one flaw in Sylvia's happiness. Mercy, who was now seventeen, was to leave Heathercliffe House to be mistress of Dale Side. Both Miss Kaye and Dr. Severn thought her right place was with her father, and that her schooldays might fitly come to a close.

"I couldn't part from her again," said the doctor, "not even to send her to so short a distance as Aberglyn. We've still to learn to know each other, and the more we're in each other's company the better. I can arrange for visiting masters to give her lessons in painting and music, but she's such a tall girl, I feel she's almost a woman, and will soon begin to take care of me, instead of allowing me to take care of her."

To Sylvia, Mercy's absence would leave a great blank, but she was consoled when Dr. Severn promised that she should be their first visitor, and that he would ask her mother to allow her to spend part of the August holidays with them at Craigwen, where Linda and her brothers would be able to join them constantly for walks and excursions. There was little more of the summer term left for anyone at Heathercliffe House. The few remaining weeks passed quickly by, and brought the annual garden party and prize giving, with which Miss Kaye always celebrated the breaking up. It was the great occasion of the school year, and many of the girls' parents came over to Aberglyn on purpose to be present. The day fortunately proved fine, and all the thirty-four pupils found themselves in such effervescent spirits that the mistresses had a hard task to keep their attention during the morning classes.

"Connie Camden, sit up straight and place your feet together," said Miss Arkwright. "I cannot allow you to have your arm round Brenda's waist, even if it is the last day. Linda, put that lozenge in your pocket; if I see it again, I will take it from you. Marian, tie your hair ribbon. Gwennie, you have lost your place three times; I'm astonished at you! Sylvia, don't fidget; I told you not to touch Nina's ruler. Nina, shut your pencil box at once. Now, Jessie, begin again, and parse more carefully; antelope is not an abstract noun."

It was certainly difficult to recall the rules of grammar when the girls remembered that this was actually the very last lesson, and that for seven whole weeks their books would be lying idle, the schoolrooms would be deserted, the blackboard and maps put away, and they themselves would be enjoying the country or seaside in company with their respective families. Even Marian answered at random, and poor Miss Arkwright was getting into despair, when fortunately for all the bell rang, and they were at liberty to disperse. There was still enough discipline left to cause the class to walk decorously through the door, but once outside in the passage they danced about like a little crew of savages, and, tearing downstairs, ran into the garden to work off their excitement, leaving their teacher standing with a sigh of relief at her open desk to put the last marks to their now finished exercise books.

"We're going to Whitby for the holidays," said Connie. "We've taken a furnished house, and our cousins are coming to stay next door. There are eight of them and eleven of us, so shan't we just have a jolly time? Hurrah!"

"We're off to Scotland," said Nina. "And Mother's promised I may take all the coach rides that the others do. I haven't had a cold now since Easter."

"Don't boast," cried Brenda, "or you'll be sure to catch one this afternoon, and Miss Kaye'll put you to bed, and say you aren't well enough to travel to-morrow."

"She shan't!" declared Nina indignantly. "I wouldn't stay there. I'd get up and go home if I were coughing and sneezing till I couldn't see out of my eyes."

"Then they'll roll you up in a blanket," said Connie, who loved to tease, "with a shawl tied over your head, and carry

you down to a cab as they did with Rosie when she began with chicken pox and was sent to the fever hospital. You'll have to travel in the luggage van, because everybody'll think you're infectious, and won't have you in their carriage. The doctor'll go with you, and keep taking your temperature and feeling your pulse, and telling you to put out your tongue, and listening at your bronchial tube all the time. He won't be able to hear much, though, because of the rattling of the train. Perhaps he'll take it for the rattling of your breath, and think you're very bad! It'll be a most exciting journey for you."

"You horrid girl! I haven't caught the cold yet, and I don't mean to!" said Nina, pursuing Connie, who dodged away round the summer house, calling out as a parting shot:

"Be sure to let us know how many bottles of medicine you take!"

"I travelled in the guard's van once," said Jessie Ellis. "Mother couldn't bring me to school herself, and nobody we knew was going to Wales either, so the guard took me with him. I rather liked it. There was such a lovely big window, and he let me look at a kitten that somebody was sending in a basket, and when we stopped at Chester he got me a glass of milk from the refreshment room. I'm going straight to Llandudno to-morrow; we're to stay there for three weeks. My brother's school broke up yesterday, and he's coming here with Father and Mother this afternoon."

"What are you going to do, Marian?" asked Linda.

"I'm not quite sure. We wanted the Isle of Man, but it's such a trouble to take the little ones on the steamer. We have to choose a nice safe place where there's sand for them to dig, and the tide doesn't come in too fast. Gwennie was nearly drowned at Arnside when she was five, and it's made Mother so nervous ever since."

"I'm going to learn the bicycle," said Brenda. "My eldest sister's promised to lend me hers, and lower the saddle. If I can manage well enough to ride on the road I'm to go with Ada and Willie to Ashmere, and that's eight miles off. But father's dreadfully afraid of motor cars. Hazel isn't coming home this summer; Aunt Cicely's taking her a tour in Switzerland. Isn't she lucky?"

All the members of the third class had promised faithfully to correspond with one another, and Sylvia suggested that they should each keep a diary of their adventures, to be read aloud at the next meeting of the S.S.L.U., which had languished during the summer, but which they intended to take up with renewed vigour when the days began to close in once more.

"Everybody must agree to send everybody else at least two picture postcards," said Linda, "and then we can compare them when we come back to school."

"Yes, if one's mother will pay for them," said Connie, who had returned to the lawn. "Mine struck last holidays, and said eleven children all wanting stamps continually was ruining her, and we must buy our own. Postcards are a penny each, and they need halfpenny stamps, so it'll cost exactly one and ninepence to send two to every one of you. I can't possibly afford it! Not if I want any donkey rides or chocolates."

The others laughed. The comfortable assurance that "Mother will pay", held by most boys and girls, had not caused them to think of the expense, and Connie's calculations were startling.

"Well, of course, if you can't, you can't," said Linda, "and we shan't expect them. You may write a kind of round-robin letter and send it to me, and I'll send it to somebody else, who'll pass it on to the next. That'll only take you one stamp, and you must go without a pennyworth of chocolates."

The guests were to arrive at half-past three o'clock, and the moment dinner was over, the girls hurried to their bedrooms for the very important ceremony of changing their dresses. Linda's thick, straight, brown locks had been wetted and plaited in the tightest possible braids the night before, to give it the required wave. Nina Forster had even tried the experiment of screwing hers up in curl papers; but the hard, round knobs had stuck into her head, and made her too uncomfortable to sleep, so, after tossing about uneasily for an hour, she could bear it no longer, and had pulled them out with a solemn vow to relinquish the idea of ringlets in the future. Marian, whose long beautiful auburn hair was generally brushed stiffly back from her face and worn in a neat pigtail, left it loose for once, and allowed Gwennie to tie it with two large bows of light-blue ribbon to match her sash; an alteration much appreciated by the girls, who declared they scarcely recognized her. Connie had little vanity, and, being arrayed the first of anybody, she flitted about among the various bedrooms like a small moth, giving free criticisms of the others' costumes.

"Yes, that's a very pretty dress, Linda," she remarked. "White muslin over a pink slip suits you, though it rather reminds me of a dressing-table or a baby's cradle, all the same; I want to hang a pin cushion on to you! Sylvia, if you'd grown another half-inch they'd have had to let down a tuck. I like the little daisy pattern and the rows of narrow lace; they're rather sweet. You must wear the daisy brooch you got on your birthday. You should see Brenda! Her dress was

so stiffly starched I couldn't fasten it for her; I had to fetch Mercy, and she opened the buttonholes with a pair of scissors. Jessie Ellis has on a pale-green silk, and she's almost afraid to sit down for fear of soiling it. I hate things that won't wash. Ta, ta! I'm going to see Marian. Gwennie spilled a whole bottle of scent over her clean muslin, but luckily her other had just come back from the laundry. She's sewing the buttons on it now."

The girls were allowed to go into the garden to await their friends, and kept up an excited commentary on the list of arrivals.

"There's Marian's mother! and she's brought a little one with her, such a darling, the image of Gwennie, only far prettier. That must be Mrs. Ellis and Jessie's brother. How terribly shy he looks! I don't wonder; the only boy in a girl's school! That's Sybil Lake's eldest sister; she used to come here herself once. There's Mr. Cameron; I thought he wouldn't stay away. And there are Mr. and Mrs. Fenwick and Miss Winnie. I wish Mr. Cecil had come too. Who are these who've just got out of a cab?"

"Father and Mother," replied Sylvia, jumping to her feet. "And why, surely, they've brought Aunt Louisa with them!"

It was actually Aunt Louisa herself, who was shaking hands cordially with Miss Kaye, and gazing about her with a complacent expression, as if she were remembering that it was all due to her persuasions that her niece was a pupil at Heathercliffe House, and congratulating herself still upon the wisdom of her plan.

She greeted Sylvia most affectionately, asked which were Linda and Mercy, had quite a pleasant chat with Miss Arkwright on the subject of Education, and seemed altogether to be enjoying herself immensely. Sylvia was delighted to have the opportunity of introducing her father and mother to Mr. and Mrs. Marshall and Dr. Severn, who were among the guests, and she was not satisfied till she had taken them the entire round of the house and garden, that they might see for themselves the places she had so often described.

Tea was served in the garden, the girls helping to pass cups and hand plates, luckily without any mishaps, though Connie Camden nearly upset the cream, which was only saved through the quickness of May Spencer; and little Greta Collins, who had been told to carry round a sugar basin, offered it to Mr. Cameron, and, as he was too busy talking to notice her, dropped three lumps into his cup and went away, an unpleasant surprise for him when he discovered it, as he did not take sugar. Sadie and Elsie Thompson were supremely happy in the possession of their father, whose ship had arrived at Liverpool just in time to allow him to come to the prize giving. It was quite pathetic to see how they clung to his hands, and would scarcely let him out of their sight the whole afternoon, and the girls were glad to hear that he was going to take the two children away for a short holiday without the guardianship of the stern aunt.

"We're to go to Liverpool first," said Elsie gleefully to Sylvia. "And Daddy'll show us all over his big ship. We'll see the engines, and the compass, and his cabin, and we're to have tea on the upper deck. He says we may talk through his speaking trumpet, and sound the foghorn, and turn the wheel just a tiny piece. Then we're going a long way in the train to stay at a farm in the country, quite alone with Daddy. Won't it be fun? He's going to send you an Indian necklace, because we told him you'd been so kind to us, and your mother'd sent us such a lovely cake on Sadie's birthday. He's got it locked up in his cabin on the ship, but I don't think I ought to have told you, 'cause it's to be a surprise."

Miss Kaye had allowed a full hour for tea and talk, and at the end of that time the guests were asked to assemble in the large schoolroom for the distribution of prizes, which were to be given away by the Rector of Aberglyn. The room was prettily decorated with flowers, and on a table at one end lay a number of handsomely bound books. The children were obliged reluctantly to be separated from their parents, as it was necessary for them to sit in classes, and once more the members of the third form found themselves side by side. Mr. Edwards, the rector, made a short opening speech, complimenting both teachers and pupils on a year of industrious work, and said what pleasure it gave him to see the rows of bright happy young faces before him, and to know how much they had learnt at Heathercliffe House. He reminded them of the high standard in right and honour as well as knowledge which it was Miss Kaye's object to maintain there, and begged them to make the best possible use of their schooldays, upon which, he declared, they would often look back as the happiest time in their lives.

There were no competitive prizes among the little ones, each of whom was called up to receive a small present for good conduct, and when the rector had made some kindly remarks, he turned to the third class. The prizes were awarded according to the result of the examination, and of all the weekly marks gained during the year, the totals being added together. It was therefore a test both of correct memory and of steady application, and would show that the winner had worked hard for her laurels. The class knew that it must lie between Marian and Sylvia; no one else had the slightest chance; and the girls gazed eagerly at Mr. Edwards, waiting for the important announcement. He held a beautifully illustrated edition of *British Ballads* in his hand.

"This is the prize for English," he said, "and I have much pleasure in presenting it to Sylvia Lindsay, who, I am sure, must have worked with the greatest industry to gain it, and thoroughly deserves her success."

Everybody clapped as Sylvia walked up the room to receive her book, and she herself could scarcely believe her good fortune. She had never really expected to win, and for the moment her triumph was sweet. Poor Marian, whose face had fallen at the news, joined nevertheless in the applause, and Sylvia in her turn was able to give her a hearty clap as the rector declared her to be the best French scholar, and awarded her a copy of Lafontaine's *Fables*. Nina took the music prize, and Gwennie the one for neatness, punctuality, and general orderliness, which completed the list for the third class, and Mr. Edwards went on to the second class, ending with the first, where Mercy very appropriately came out head of the school.

Sylvia felt as if her brain were in a whirl. It was all as she had wished; she held her reward in her hand, and her father and mother had been there to see her claim it. Surely life could contain no greater joy! But who was standing up now, to make the closing speech? It was Dr. Severn, and everyone who knew his story and Mercy's was anxious to hear him. He said only a few quiet words, but they were so concise and to the point that they lived for many years in the memories of some of those who listened to them. After congratulating the girls who had taken prizes, and urging all to fresh efforts, he spoke to those who had tried and had been unsuccessful.

"The greatest deeds in the world," he said, "have often been done by people who have failed not only once, but many times, yet have never let themselves be discouraged. Don't stop trying, but, on the other hand, don't look at the prize as the chief end of your striving. It's a poor thing, after all, compared with the gain to your character that every honest endeavour will bring you. Remember, too, that we can't all have the post of honour; somebody has to stand aside and take second best, and the one who can do it the most bravely and generously is winning what is far more worth having than a prettily bound book. You learn many lessons at Heathercliffe House, but believe me the greatest of them is the power to give up your own way sometimes, and to be happy in the pleasure and success of others. It mayn't seem easy just at first, but I can assure you it brings the best and most lasting happiness in the end. I read a few lines a day or two ago that explain just what I mean, so I'm going to say them to you:

'Our chieftest duty here below
Is not the seeming great to do,
That the vain world may pause to see;
But in steadfast humility
To walk the common walk, and bear
The thousand things, the trifling care,
In love, with wisdom, patiently.
Thus each one in his narrow groove
The great world nearer God may move.'

As Sylvia listened, her small triumph seemed to fade away into something higher and better, and almost unconsciously she and Marian clasped hands, their rivalry forgotten in a nobler ideal. All the events of the school year passed rapidly through her memory: she was changed greatly from the rather selfish little girl who had given so cold a welcome to her guests at that wet-day party, and as her mother afterwards kissed her and praised her for her success, it was with a heartfelt meaning in her words that she said:

"I did try hard the whole time, just to please you and Father. I didn't want to come to school at all, but I'm glad you made me. I like it now most immensely, and I simply can't tell you how very extremely glad I am that you didn't choose anywhere else, but sent me here to Miss Kaye's!"