The Bravest Girl in the School

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“The three went off to the hockey-ground as gaily as though moods and mysteries had never been!” (See page 134.)

The Bravest Girl in the School

By
ETHEL TALBOT

With Four Illustrations
in
Colour and Black-and-White

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To
HILDA SKAE

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The Bravest Girl in the School

CHAPTER I

A SECRET

"HOW soon will you know it, Sybil?"

The speaker turned anxious eyes in the direction of her younger sister, who sat kicking her heels on the faded carpet, and tilting her chair backwards and forwards as she chanted a French verb in a sing-song voice.

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Sybil, throwing down her book and speaking in an aggrieved tone. "You've given me too much to learn, I'm sure, Gretta. I can't possibly get it done by tea-time. Oh—*bother!*" She was interrupted by the entrance of a dishevelled, slatternly-looking maid who, capless and excited, burst into the untidy room.

"And what am I to do now, Miss Gretta, I'd like to know? Here's master bringing in a visitor, and if she stays to tea there's not a scrap of butter in the house. I tell you plainly I'm not going to stand it, and——"

"Perhaps it's only a patient——" began Gretta timidly.

"Patient? Not likely!" snorted the maid. "Why, she's in the drawing-room at this instant, and, what's more, she's your auntie, and you'd best be going straight up to see her!"

At the sound of this extraordinarily unexpected announcement both little girls opened their eyes in

amazement and stared. Sybil, after an instant's pause of incredulity, recovered herself first.

"Why, whatever do you mean, Ann?" she asked excitedly. "Dad didn't say anyone was coming. Oh!" and here she turned in amazement to her sister. "Gretta, can it be Auntie Tib from Australia? And can she have brought Margot, too? Oh, hurrah! hurrah!" and she began to dance wildly round the room.

"Oh, Sybil, do stop and come and help," cried Gretta distractedly. "If it is Auntie Tib she *must* be coming to tea, and everything's so untidy! Here, come and help me, *do*!"

But Sybil still danced on regardless of entreaties. "Put away your things yourself," she shouted. "You spend all your time playing your precious fiddle, instead of housekeeping; now you can just clear up alone!"

"Here, for goodness' sake don't be so selfish, Miss Sybil," said Ann, her good temper suddenly returning. "Look, now, my dears, you pop up and talk to your auntie while I'm off down to the grocer's for a pound of Best Fresh. I'll make buttered toast in no time. Maybe she won't have tasted any for years, if she's just back from foreign wilds!"

Her words were interrupted by the sound of the opening drawing-room door, and then came their father's footsteps along the passage. "Gretta! Sybil! Where are you?" he began in an irritated voice, then stopped as the two little girls nearly fell into his arms.

"Didn't you get my message?" he continued fretfully. "Can't you children come any quicker when I specially send for you? Here's your aunt who has been travelling thousands of miles to see you, and——"

"We didn't——" Sybil was beginning, but the sound of rapid, flying footsteps cut her short. "My darlings!" said a voice; a "perfectly new voice," as Sybil said afterwards. "Come and let me see both of you! Why, John, this one is the living image of Margaret!"

Gretta found herself hugged by two motherly arms, and, as her aunt kissed her, found tears on her cheeks in memory of the mother who had died a year ago, and who had been Auntie Tib's only sister; then, recovering a little from the shock of the unexpected embrace, she had time to survey the new relation, who had now turned all her attention to Sybil.

She was a tall woman, dressed in rich furs. She had removed her gloves already, and Gretta noticed the bracelets and rings that she wore, and wondered. Truly, it was ages since such magnificence had come to the doctor's house!

But the new-comer did not seem at all concerned with her own grandeur. She sat down in the little drawing-room, and did not appear to notice that not only was there no fire in the grate, but that Ann had neglected to remove the ashes since last Sunday. She drew the children to her again, kissed her namesake, Sybil, and carried on a flow of conversation with her, at once sympathetic and gay. Sybil, a host in herself, made up for the shyness and consequent shortcomings of the rest of her family by her excited chatter.

"But we never knew you were coming, auntie," she said, snuggling herself nearer to her new-found relation. "And, oh! where *is* Margot?"

"Oh, Margot's coming presently; and, darling, I sent a telegram," exclaimed her aunt. "Have you not had it?"

The doctor wheeled round suddenly at the sound of her last words. "Telegram!" he ejaculated; "but when?"

Gretta slipped out of the room, and returned, looking rather perturbed, with a yellow envelope. “Here it is, dad!” she said timidly. “I didn’t know that——”

“Tut—tut!” said the doctor irritably. “You *should* know when things come. You’ve nothing else to do, child.” He tore open the envelope, while Auntie Tib’s eyes turned towards Gretta, into whose cheeks a sudden flush had risen. She noticed the girl’s shabby outgrown frock, her patched slippers, and the clumsy darns on her stockings. Then she drew her little niece towards her and kissed her again. “So you’re the housekeeper, are you, Gretta?” she said tenderly.

“Oh, isn’t she lovely!” said Sybil half an hour later, as the two girls made their way back towards the drawing-room again, after tidying themselves for tea. “I never could have *thought* she would be such a lovely auntie. Do you know, Gretta, I thought she would perhaps be quite brown, or talk a different language, or something, as she was coming from Australia. Oh, I do wonder if Margot will come in time for tea. Auntie said she’d be here in about three-quarters of an hour!” A loud ring at the front door interrupted her, and the chuff-chuff of a departing motor was suddenly heard outside.

“It’s Margot! It’s Margot!” exclaimed Sybil in the wildest excitement, racing into the drawing-room with the news, while her older sister followed almost as quickly. The two grown-ups within stopped in the midst of a very earnest conversation and turned to listen, as the opening of the front door by Ann was followed by the sound of an eager voice outside.

“I’ll go right in, thank you,” said a very assured voice, and then someone opened the drawing-room door very firmly, and entered.

Sybil, and even Gretta, too, rose to their feet and gazed open-mouthed at the visitor as she embraced her mother, talking in an animated voice all the time. “Oh, mother,” she said, “I guessed, somehow, that this would be the room, and I couldn’t wait, so I just didn’t. Dad’s driven on with the car to the hotel garage, and I told him to put me down here because I wanted to see the cousins just at the very earliest minute, and——” She turned towards Gretta and Sybil with a friendly expression of countenance, and held out her hand.

This must be Margot, their cousin, of course; but, dressed as she was in a plain leather topcoat and motoring goggles, she was—to say the least of it—quite unlike the cousin of the children’s imaginings. However, when, at the suggestion of her mother, these impedimenta had been removed, the real Cousin Margot emerged.

She was taller than Sybil, whose senior she was by six months, and weedier. Her mouse-coloured hair was thick and rather short, cut straight across her forehead and tucked away behind her ears; her grey eyes looked out very straight and clear at the world from under dark eye-lashes, and her mouth was a good-humoured and a capable one. Add to this a determined, rather self-willed little chin, and you have a fairly good picture of the Australian cousin, to the making of whose acquaintance the children had been so greatly looking forward.

Both of them fell in love with her at once in their own respective ways. Sybil, talking sixteen to the dozen in no time, asking questions that needed no answers, making comments, and compelling attention; and Gretta, content to sit and watch and listen, making up her mind, nevertheless, very firmly the while.

Tea followed almost at once, and with the tea Uncle Bob arrived. It was during the course of the unusually cheery meal that the new uncle made his very unexpected announcement.

"Margot thought we'd better come over to fetch her mother back in the car after her conversation with you," he said, addressing the doctor, "and take the chance of seeing you all at the same time. There's plenty of room for the children, if you like to spare them to us for a day or two. We could pack them both into the back seat, and take them with us. Margot wants to have them."

"And we'd like to have you, too, of course, you know," remarked that damsel cheerfully, turning to her uncle with a friendly smile and nod, "only, mother says that you can't take a holiday."

"No, I can't easily do that, young lady," said the doctor, surprised and rather amused by the assured ways of his Australian niece. "But if your parents like to shoulder the responsibility, there's no reason why your cousins shouldn't take advantage of the offer."

"Oh!" Sybil was almost inarticulate in her entreaties. Never could she have imagined that such good fortune would come her way. "Oh, it would be too, *too* lovely! Auntie, darling, *do* take us!"

"And what about you, Gretta?" said Mrs. Fleming, turning to the older girl; "will you come, too?"

"No, thank you," said Gretta steadily. "I think I'd rather stay with dad."

There was a moment's silence, and the doctor got up from his seat. "Well, I must be off. Sorry, but there's a patient who can't be left. Settle it with your aunt, children. She'll do what's right."

“Think it over, Gretta,” said her uncle when the doctor had left the room; “your father will be safe enough.”

“I think I’ll stay, thank you,” said Gretta hesitatingly. Margot slipped her hand under the table and pressed her cousin’s fingers in a friendly way for a minute. Evidently she understood what was passing in Gretta’s mind.

After tea there was a tremendous bustle and hurry. Sybil’s little bag had to be packed, and soon she was standing, pink-faced and tremendously excited, waiting for the reappearance of the car that was to take her away.

“Good-bye, Gretta darling. I understand why you want to stay,” said Auntie Tib, hugging the rather lonely looking little figure that stood on the step to see them start. “But I shall see you again very soon, because——” She bent down and whispered: “Ask your father, to-night, when he comes home, to tell you the secret that he has for you. Don’t forget. And I do hope that it will please you!”

“Good-bye! Good-bye!” The car was starting. With waving of hands, and kisses from Sybil, it turned the corner and was lost to sight. Gretta was free to go into the house again, and went, but with a feeling as though somehow everything was changed.

She went into the lonely drawing-room, from which Ann was removing the remains of the meal, and sat down to wait for her father’s return, while Auntie Tib’s last words rang in her ears. What, oh, what could be the secret that she was to hear?

CHAPTER II

GOING TO SCHOOL

"YOUR aunt wishes to send you both to the school where she has arranged to send Margot."

It was the doctor who was speaking, and Gretta clutched the coffee-pot and stared with amazement at his surprising announcement.

To go to school! She, Gretta! So this was auntie's secret! At first the shock of surprise at the unexpected news held her speechless, almost breathless; then the shock was followed by an overwhelming wave of delight. The great wish of her life, that she had never voiced to anyone before, was really to come to pass: she was to go to school—to school! She sat silent, almost stunned with excitement and joy.

"You would like to go, of course?" said her father. At the sound of his voice she glanced up, and a whole set of new feelings took the place of the delighted ones that had filled her mind a moment before.

"How selfish I am!" she said to herself. "I'd quite forgotten that I'm dad's housekeeper. Oh, I can't go and leave him all alone with Ann! How lonely he'd be! And he might even get ill. Sybil can go, but I don't see how I can!"

"Well! Well!" said her father irritably. "Have you nothing to say? Your aunt has been most generous; wants you both to get the advantage of good teaching—even suggests that she will pay for violin lessons for you——"

"Oh!" Gretta's face crimsoned with pleasure at the idea. "Dad," she ventured, "but could you spare me?"

"Spare you! Why not?" said her father. "It'll be the making of you. I could never have afforded the school she has chosen, and the best thanks you can give her is to make the most of her offer. It is generous in the extreme."

"But, dad," ventured Gretta. "What would *you* do? Wouldn't you miss us?"

"Well, yes," said her father. "But we can't get good things for nothing in this world, and it'll be worth while to be lonely at times if I know that you and Sybil are being turned out as your mother would have liked." He opened his paper again, and Gretta said no more. So seldom did he speak of her mother that the child knew by his last remark that the arrangement was settled, and that he did not wish to say any more about it.

"But talk it over with your aunt when she brings back Sybil to-morrow," he remarked, as he brushed his hat in the passage preparatory to starting on his rounds. "Good-bye, child; you mustn't turn into a woman too soon, you know."

He kissed her and banged the front door, and Gretta was left to a maze of excited thoughts: she *was* to go to school; the decision had been taken out of her hands!

How much she longed to go she believed that no one in the whole world knew. No one? Well, perhaps her fiddle did, the child thought to herself; for Gretta, since her mother's death, had been thrown very much upon her own resources, and she would have felt even more solitary and companionless had it not been for the hours she spent with her beloved violin.

Could auntie have discovered all this, Gretta wondered—she was lovely enough for anything! For, as she had offered the violin lessons, too, she surely must have guessed how her elder niece had longed and longed for proper ones! Gretta's

mother had played and had taught her, herself, but when mother died, a year ago, there had been no one to help the child with her music, and she had been forced to muddle along alone.

"How did Auntie Tib know about my violin?" she inquired of the doctor at dinnertime that day.

"I don't know, my dear. Probably your mother wrote to her about your music," said the doctor, who could not distinguish one note of music from another. "She seems to wish you to keep it up at school."

"Where is it? The school, I mean?" ventured Gretta timidly.

"Oh, a most healthy, bracing spot; sea-air and fine views, I believe. The house is built on a sandy soil, and there is every modern convenience conducive to health; sanitary arrangements splendid; you're a pair of lucky children!"

Gretta was used to streams of eloquence that she only half understood. She waited patiently until this one was over. Evidently none of the details dear to the hearts of children were to be elicited through conversation with the doctor; she was thrown back upon her own imaginings, and waited patiently for the advent of her aunt and Sybil on the following day.

It was with a face of unusual excitement that she rushed to open the front door to them when the time arrived, and the first glance at the child's eager face reassured Mrs. Fleming, who had feared that Gretta might have demurred against the arrangement for her father's sake.

"You're looking forward to school, then, Gretta?" she inquired, when Sybil had flown to acquaint Ann with the details of her visit.

"Dad says we're to go, and he seems to think he can manage without me, and thank you very much," said Gretta, unwontedly demonstrative in the excitement that she was feeling. "Auntie, darling, do you really mean it?—about violin lessons, too?"

"Why, of course, my dear," said Mrs. Fleming. "Your mother told me in her letters, as you know, that you had quite a special gift in that direction. She played so beautifully herself that I should like you to have the advantages she had. Perhaps, too, Gretta, you know, you might use it in years to come. It means hard work, but—the practising, I mean."

"Practice!" repeated Sybil, entering the room in high feather. "Is that what you're talking about? What a stupid thing! Aren't you telling Gretta about the hotel breakfast, auntie, and all the lots of different things the waiters brought! But she's sure to talk about that old violin if anyone'll listen; she's just half-crazy about it. She twangs it from morning to night when dad's out, and last month she gave up sugar in her tea because she'd no pocket-money and she wanted to buy a new string, and——" The child paused, breathless.

Gretta blushed crimson, but as much with pleasure at what the future held, as with annoyance at Sybil's speech. Everything in her world seemed changed; school, music-lessons, were to come her way; she was feeling that she already had as much pleasure in prospect as a princess in a fairy-tale, when Mrs. Fleming's next speech made her gasp.

"And we've got all your clothes to get, you know."

Clothes! Gretta hadn't given them a thought; but evidently Sybil had. "I'm to have some jumper dresses just like Margot's," she announced grandly. "We've both been measured! And brown stockings, Gretta—*brown!*"

Evidently with brown stockings the summit of Sybil's happiness had been reached. Gretta could only turn her eyes wonderingly towards her aunt.

"Oh, auntie, how lovely! But—ought she to have them? She has some quite good black ones, only, of course, they're darned."

"Oh, Gretta, you spoil-sport! But you can't change it, for they're bought, aren't they, Auntie Tib?" and she danced a jig round Mrs. Fleming's chair.

"I spoke to your father, Gretta," said that lady, when Sybil's excitement had subsided, "and asked him if I might think of you three little girls as sisters while you were at school. He agreed, and understood why I wanted it, and I think *you* are old enough to understand, too."

Gretta said no more after that; she did not find it so easy as Sybil did to express herself in words, but Mrs. Fleming could read the feelings in her face and felt well repaid for all that she was doing for the children. When she left again that afternoon it was with the promise that, during the fortnight that remained before the new term at the Cliff School commenced, she would undertake the buying of the children's wardrobes, and see that all things were in readiness for the twenty-first of January.

That fortnight went by in a whirl of delight. Ann worked with a will, excited with the idea that she was to be the doctor's housekeeper and factotum and "see if she could manage to make him really comfortable," as Mrs. Fleming put it. The doctor forgot his worries and fell in with all the plans. Auntie came and went like a good fairy, cheerful and kind, and Sybil was in such a state of wild delight at the

pleasures that school must hold for her that she could hardly wait patiently until the eventful day should arrive.

"But you'll be as glad to get home for the holidays as you are to get away, Miss Sybil, and that's a fact," quoth Ann sententiously, on the last evening. "You'll have to behave yourself where you're going; see if you don't!"

"That's all *you* know about it!" said Sybil grandly.

But when the day had dawned at last—the twenty-first of January, and the first day of school—the throb that the little girl's heart gave as she woke from her dreams somehow or other did not feel as though it was quite due to joyful excitement, and even Gretta was conscious of very mixed feelings, the most pronounced of which seemed to be a positive disinclination to saying good-bye to the doctor.

The children's father appeared to be the most cheery member of the group that met at the breakfast-table. Sybil found herself for once quite unable to eat, and if it had not been for Ann's I-told-you-so expression of countenance when she entered the room with hot plates, the child would probably have dissolved into tears before the end of the meal. Her older sister was fully occupied with her own thoughts; turning and re-turning over in her mind every possible dreadful thing that might happen! Suppose Ann should not make dad comfortable; suppose he should get ill! Suppose—suppose! It was a relief to all when the postman's knock sounded and Sybil raced to the letter-box, taking the opportunity to mop her eyes in the loneliness of the passage as she went.

The only letter proved to be from auntie, and was merely a repetition of the plans already decided upon for the comfort of the children on their journey. "Margot and I will meet you

both for lunch at York," she wrote. "Then I will see you into the Cliffland train, and you three will travel down together." The words came like the welcome sound of Mrs. Fleming's cheery voice; somehow things began to feel different, and by ten o'clock, when the children were ready to start for the station with their father, Sybil's tongue, at least, was loosed once more.

"Good-bye, Ann. When I come back I'll tell you all about school." Sybil was dressed in her new navy-blue suit and sported the cherished brown stockings. Her hair was plaited and tied with a ribbon bow. She felt an experienced schoolgirl already.

"Good-bye, Miss Sybil, and if they treat you badly, you just come straight back 'ome; I 'ates them schools!" and Ann, whose knowledge was altogether derived from sensational and impossible story-books, wiped her eyes with her apron in anticipation of the troubles her pets were to endure.

"Pooh!" said Sybil; "school's not like that! Just you *wait*! I may come back with heaps of prizes, and even *medals* for all you know!"

Upstairs Gretta was clinging to her father, and wishing very hard indeed that she needn't go. "Dad, if you want me, you'll *promise* to send for me?"

"I'll promise," said the doctor, with a trace of a smile at her words.

"And you'll really change your boots when they're wet, and not catch cold! I've told Ann always to warm your slippers, but she's certain to forget after the first day; and you *will* say if she makes the tea properly hot when you write, won't you?"

Her last injunctions were broken in upon by Sybil, who burst upstairs in a frenzy of excitement. “The cab’s coming, and my elastic’s off my perfectly new hat! And it’s all pussy’s fault; she would play with me when I was saying good-bye to her, and I *had* to snap it at her!”

In the excitement of putting the finishing touches to Sybil’s wardrobe the last few minutes quickly passed, and before they could realize that they were actually off, the children found themselves kissing their hands frantically to their father, who was standing on the fast receding platform waving his handkerchief. Really and truly they were off to school!

CHAPTER III

NEW ARRIVALS

"OH, I'm so glad we're off," said Sybil. She settled herself more comfortably into a corner of the carriage, then turned to see with amazement that her elder sister was *crying*—crying as though she were twelve years old instead of being fourteen, and a housekeeper at that!

"Why, Gretta!" exclaimed the surprised child in horror. Then the corners of her own mouth turned down, her eyes opened wider and wider, and in another moment they would certainly have overflowed in sympathy had not the older girl, with a mighty effort, pulled herself together.

"It's all right, Sybil, don't take any notice of me. I was only so afraid that dad would miss us."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't look like that," half sobbed Sybil. "I hope school isn't going to be horrid, after all. Ann said it would be, and now you're crying about it. It's unkind of you to frighten me, and if the girls are going to be nasty I shan't stay. I shall write and ask auntie to take me away!"

It was rather a miserable little couple who peered out of the carriage window at York station and looked anxiously for their aunt and cousin, who were standing on the platform awaiting the incoming train. Margot herself, the self-reliant Margot, was looking a little forlorn, too, though she would not have owned to it for worlds, and even Auntie Tib had a lonely feeling at the bottom of her heart at the idea that she and Margot were to be parted for the first time. But she did not show it. That was not Mrs. Fleming's way. All was

laughter and bustle, and under her genial influence the children's spirits began to reassert themselves.

"Have you got everything, dears? Gretta, where's that fiddle? Now, Sybil, Uncle Bob has sent you these chocolates for the journey, but don't make yourself ill, you know, for that would be such a bad beginning——"

"Oh, auntie, how lovely!" Sybil grasped at the box. "And don't our clothes look nice! It's the first time we've worn them, you know. Do you think the girls at school will like them?"

"They'll have far too many other interests to think about your clothes, you may be sure," said auntie. "We must hurry; it wouldn't do to miss the train."

Only a very few minutes after that they were bustled into the Cliffland carriage, and Margot, looking very serious, was hanging out of the window and exchanging last words with her mother. "I'm going to write to-night, mother, so look out for a letter to-morrow morning. Give father my love, and don't let him miss me."

"All right, darling." Mrs. Fleming kissed Margot again, but her last words were for Gretta, and it was almost as though she could read the thoughts that were passing in the child's mind.

"Uncle Bob and I are going to take the car over to Redgate to-morrow, dear," she said, just as the guard was lifting his whistle to his lips. "I shall have a talk with Ann, and will write and tell you how your father gets on."

There was no time for the child to express her thanks, the train was off. Sybil and Margot were both hanging out of the window, waving their handkerchiefs, and Gretta could only assure herself that auntie would *know* how grateful she was.

“And now we’re really going to school!” announced Sybil in a conversational tone of voice, settling herself comfortably with the chocolates and looking admiringly at her own brown legs. “Do you think all the girls will come and meet us?”

“Very likely they won’t be there yet,” answered Margot, looking perhaps a little pale-faced, but trying to talk unconcernedly; “or there may even be some of them in this train. I wonder if we shall like them. I always used to long to go to school in Australia, but, of course, we lived too far out.”

“Who taught you?” asked Gretta, admiring her cousin’s pluck, and proceeding to imitate her by entering herself into the conversation. “Was it auntie?”

“Well, she did when I was little, but she was very busy, you know. When I was nine she stopped, because Long Jake taught me then.”

“Long Jake!” exclaimed Sybil, looking up from her chocolates. “Whoever was that?”

“Oh, it wasn’t *really* his name, of course,” laughed Margot. “He is called Mr. Courtney in England, and he was at Oxford University before he came to Australia. He came out and did farming, you know; and he was champion sheep-shearer afterwards. Oh, I can tell you it was wonderful to watch him. In three minutes he could shear a sheep all over, and he never made a single slip with his shears. People came from all parts to watch him.”

“But how did *you* know him?” asked Gretta.

“Oh, he was one of father’s men at first, and they were great friends too. He taught me in the evenings, just for fun. He was awfully clever. When dad went to the diggings he looked after mother and me.”

"I'd like to see Long Jake," said Sybil "What's he like?"

"He's very big; that was why they gave him his name, of course; and he's coming to England soon, I know. He'll be sure to come and see me when he does, so perhaps you'll see him, too. When we lived in the Bush he and I used to ride together for miles. He taught me lots of things."

"What kind of things?" Gretta was beginning, but Sybil broke in animatedly: "Oh, look! There's the sea and the cliffs! Is it Cliffland? And what a funny, tiny house! Can it be the school?"

The other children followed her pointing finger with their eyes. There, in the distance, stood a little one-storied bungalow-like habitation in the shadow of the cliffs.

"What a strange place!" said Gretta. "Why, Margot, look! It hasn't any windows, has it?"

"Not that I can see," began her cousin, peering out, but even while they watched the house was lost to view as the train took a sudden curve.

"There! It's gone!" said Sybil petulantly. "How stupid!"

"It couldn't have been the school, anyway," laughed Margot, "it's too small. Never mind, we'll go and have a look at it some day. Here, the train's stopping. I believe this *is* Cliffland!"

The appearance of a lady at the door of the carriage, who looked in and nodded at them and then proceeded, as the train drew up, to open the door, confirmed their suspicions. "You're for the Cliff School, aren't you?" she said cheerfully. "Jump out, and be quick! The porter will see to all your things, so leave them behind—the pony will be waiting!"

Gretta obediently advanced to the stranger's side, leaving all but her beloved fiddle. Sybil followed her sister, feeling friendly disposed, but shy. Margot, with alacrity, jumped on to the seat, and began pulling down her leather suit-cases from the rack.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" remarked the new-comer pleasantly. "Leave your bags. The porter has his orders, and this is a terminus." She looked up and down the platform as she spoke and then, with a parting "Wait a minute, girls!" made her way to the other end of the train.

"Whatever did she mean?" said Margot, standing by her bags on the platform and addressing Gretta in mystified tones. "I'd far rather see after these myself."

"Oh, it's just school ways," said Gretta comfortingly. She turned her eyes as she spoke in the direction of the cheery lady, and watched her as she received into her keeping a small girl about Sybil's size, who was being handed over by an anxious mother, evidently obliged to catch the next train back.

"It must be another new girl," said Sybil excitedly. "I like that lady. I suppose she's a teacher; and she smiled at me!"

"I'm Miss Read," said that capable person, returning with the small girl in tow. "Come along, girls, the trap is outside. We have an hour's drive to the Cliff. This is Adela Greaves; you will soon know each other quite well."

Sybil, bent on making friends with all and sundry, advanced to the side of the child. "I like the name of Adela," she said. "I had a doll called that once. I named her after a queen in history," she added, with a side glance at Miss Read, vaguely hoping that she might gain favour by such a display of learning.

She was doomed to disappointment, however. “Come along quickly,” said the lady, who, if she heard the speech, was evidently quite unimpressed by it. “I don’t want to keep the pony standing.”

It was a very tight squeeze in the trap. Margot, who, loaded with her suit-cases, was the last to try to climb in, found entrance difficult. “I believe I see what you meant,” she said, after a few struggles, as Miss Read took the reins from a boy at the pony’s head. “*That* was why you told us to leave the bags.”

“Yes, and you’ve given yourself two journeys, I’m afraid,” said the lady with a smile, “for you’ll have to take them back, now, won’t you? The porter always brings all luggage to the school, for everything’s labelled, you know.”

Without a word, Margot, the independent, did as she was told—there wasn’t anything else to do—but, as she made her way back to the waiting trap, after handing over her goods to the station-master, she wondered to herself whether she liked Miss Read or whether she didn’t.

Sybil, very much on the alert, was certainly conscious that here was a power that must be conciliated. She tried her most ingratiating smiles, and even ventured on a congratulatory speech. “*How* nicely you drive!” she said. “*We’ve* never had the chance of learning, but Margot——” Here her well-meant effort was balked by Miss Read herself, who pointed energetically with her whip.

“Look, girls! There’s the sea. You can just catch a glimpse of it through that break in the cliff!”

“And, why, there’s that little house we saw from the train!” exclaimed Margot, brightening considerably. “Look, Gretta!”

Yes, there it was, right on the cliff, not a quarter of a mile away.

"Oh, yes, you'd see that from the train, of course," said Miss Read. "But we shall lose sight of it again almost at once. It's a lonely little place."

"I wonder who lives there," said Margot. "It seems very strange. For one thing, we couldn't see any windows. I thought when we passed it in the train that I would go there one day."

"I'm afraid you won't do *that*!" said Miss Read briskly. "It's altogether too far for the school walks, but it's an interesting little place—very!"

"Have *you* ever been inside, Miss Read?" inquired Sybil, in a friendly tone.

"No, indeed," said that lady, "and I know very little about the house. It was built by an eccentric old man who lives there still, or so I believe. It wouldn't do at all to call upon him. To say the least of it, it would be a most unwise proceeding."

The pony had carried them out of sight of the little house, and they were soon on the high road. "We're not far from the school now," said Miss Read. "In five minutes we shall be there. You will all be glad of your tea."

Gretta experienced an uncomfortable feeling as she realized how soon they were to be ushered into the new and unknown world. She looked first at Sybil and then at Margot, and wondered. And, *as* she wondered, the road took a turn. A huge red house, standing on the cliff in the midst of a large garden, came into view. Here, at last, was the Cliff School!

CHAPTER IV

SCRAMBLED EGGS

THE sound of the wheels on the drive brought a gardener from the lawn, who took charge of the pony and led it away, while Miss Read ushered the four new children through the front door, and up the stairs that led to the dormitories. Here, on the top step, was standing an imposing person in a stiffly-starched uniform, who surveyed the approaching group with an interested air.

"How are you, nurse?" said the house-mistress. She advanced with an outstretched hand. "Yes, we've got here, you see. I arrived ten minutes before these girls' train came in, so I've brought them all up. Will you——"

"Just leave them to me," said nurse. "They'll be glad to get their coats off. Come along, all of you. You'll like to see your cubicles. You won't be upstairs in your boots again, of course, after you've once unpacked, but it can't be helped for once. Keep off the polish as much as you can."

Thus adjured, and as much awed by the astonishingly high cap of this personage as by her commanding manner, the four new girls stepped warily behind her. "*Nurse!*" whispered Sybil—the only one of the quartette who cared to open her lips—"Gretta, is she a *nurse*? We're not *babies*!"

"Sssh!" said her sister urgently, as the uniformed personage drew up at one of the doors. "Two of you will have your cubicles here," she said. "Margot Fleming—oh, that's *you*, is it?"—as Margot took a step forward—"and Margaret Grey. The other two are over there," and she pointed to an

opposite door, through which might be seen a row of white beds.

"Aren't I going to sleep with Gretta, please?" inquired Sybil.

"No, you and Adela Greaves will sleep here. Make haste, girls; it is getting late, and Miss Slater will see you all before tea."

Gretta presently, therefore, found herself at the side of a small, white bed looking at Margot, who was tearing off her gloves.

"Glad to get these off, anyway," she said cheerfully. "I say, how do you think you'll like it, Gretta?"

"It's awfully strange, of course," replied her cousin, "but somehow I believe it's going to be most awfully nice."

It did not take long to remove their outdoor garments, and by the time they were ready, nurse had disappeared. It was not very plain to either of them whether they were to descend to regions unknown or to wait for a guide.

"Come along, Gretta," said Margot. "We can't stay here for ever. I believe that nurse-person took the others down; let's go too."

"Suppose they mean us to wait?" suggested Gretta, feeling somehow that the best thing, at first, would be to walk warily.

"*Wait*—how silly!" exclaimed her surprised cousin. "We're ready, you see." So, feeling dreadfully ill at ease, Gretta followed the independent Margot and, as neither of them was very sure whither they were bound, it was small wonder that in a very short time they were quite lost amidst the passages.

"Let's try any door," said Margot cheerily, "then, if anyone's inside, we can ask them where we have to go! Fun,

isn't it?"

Gretta didn't think so. She stood nervously by while her cousin turned the handle of the first door. It opened into a dormitory lined with white beds. So did the next, and the next. "Oh, come on," said Margot, "we'll be late for tea, and I'm hungry. Let's go downstairs, and explore there."

"But suppose there's rules, or something?" objected Gretta.

"There couldn't be a rule about such a stupid thing," said her young cousin complacently. "How *could* there; this isn't a prison!"

She had reached the bottom of the stairs by this time, and Gretta was behind her. The first door leading from the passage was shut.

"We'll try this first," said Margot. "It can't be a bedroom, so we needn't knock." She turned the handle firmly as she spoke, and entered. A lady, who was engaged in writing busily at a table, looked up in surprise.

"Oh, we're so sorry. I beg——" Gretta began in alarm as the stranger gazed up at them; but Margot burst cheerily in. "Oh, I'm glad we've found someone at last!" she exclaimed. "There was no one in the bedroom they took us to, and so we've come down to explore. If you're one of the governesses, please where is the dining-room?"

During this well-meant speech Gretta had time to study the features of the lady whose work they had so abruptly interrupted. Her face was "young and yet old," as the child said to herself; for the expression in the grey eyes was full of humour as well as determination, and, while the mouth and chin were strongly moulded, there were few lines or wrinkles in the forehead of the stranger. She would have passed in the opinion of many as a woman of less than middle-age had it

not been for the crown of white hair that surmounted her well-shaped head.

Her words, when she spoke, were hardly a surprise to the older girl. “You made a mistake, my dear,” she said, laying down her pen and holding out her hand to Margot, “in not knocking at the door. I am Miss Slater. I had quite intended to send for you, for I am very anxious to make the acquaintance of my new girls.” She rose as she spoke and advanced towards Gretta. “I expect you are Margaret Grey,” she said, “for I have already spoken to your little sister. I hope, my dear, that you will be happy at school.”

“Thank you,” replied Gretta shyly, “and I’m so sorry we ____”

“So am I,” declared Margot, “for I suppose you’re awfully busy. But, you see, we couldn’t know where to go, could we?”

Miss Slater volunteered no direct answer to the question. “I think there’s no doubt that you are Margot Fleming—the little girl from Australia,” she said with a smile.

“Why, however can you guess that!” exclaimed Margot in mystification, then stopped to listen as the head mistress opened the heavy door that separated her rooms from the boarders’ quarters, and the sound of laughter and cheerful conversation met the children’s ears.

“I think you should have no difficulty in finding your way, now,” she said, smiling at the two girls. “But I will take you myself and introduce you; then you will feel at home very soon.”

She turned the handle as she spoke, and instantly, as though by magic, the noisy babel of conversation ceased, there was a scrambling as the girls jumped up hurriedly from

their seats, and a whisper, deferential, yet delighted, ran round the room. “It’s *Miss Slater*!”

“I have brought two new girls, Helen,” said the head mistress, smiling at the group, and then turning to a tall and responsible-looking damsel with merry eyes and a thick plait of hair, who advanced as she was addressed. “Margaret Grey and her cousin, Margot Fleming; they will sleep in Dormitory 3, with Stella and Josy. Look after them, please, and do what you can to make them feel at home.”

“Yes, Miss Slater,” said the head girl. Then a scrap of a child, who seemed all pigtail, ran forward to hold the door, and to shut it as the head mistress withdrew. As it closed the uproar of merry voices broke out again with redoubled vigour.

“And she’s been practising strokes all the hols.,” announced someone from the fireplace.

“We went to the meet on our bicycles *twice*,” screamed a shrill voice from the corner.

“I say, has anyone read ‘The Trail’? It’s the most *ripping* book. It’s simply thrilling, and my brother says——” declared someone else in piercing tones that broke off suddenly as the speaker flew to answer some question addressed to her by the head girl.

Gretta almost gasped. The room seemed full of voices and swinging legs, and pigtails that varied only in length and thickness. She wondered what was going to happen next.

“Do you like scrambled eggs?” said a voice in her ear solicitously.

She turned suddenly, and almost jumped at the unexpectedness of the question. Beside her was a short girl of

about her own age, whose curly hair was strained back into the inevitable plait, and whose face would have looked exceedingly demure had it not been for the expression in the eyes which was suggestive of hidden depths of mischief.

"I'm Josy," said the new-comer, "or Josephine Mary Pope, if you like that better. Isn't it a name to have! Helen's taken your cousin over to Stella, and I thought you looked a bit bored, so I just came. Are you awfully clever? You look it. But for goodness' sake don't tell me that you'll want to bring lesson-books up to our dormer. For one thing I'm head this term, and it's not allowed; and, for another, it's such silly swank!"

Gretta's breath was fairly taken away. She had understood enough of the speech, however, to realize that she mustn't be branded for ever as "clever," when she knew herself unable to live up to the character. "I'm not a bit clever; I'm perfectly stupid," she hastened to reply as emphatically as she could. "Margot is, I expect, though. And I don't really know about Sybil—you see, she's my sister."

"Is that funny new kid, Sybil, your *sister*!" inquired the stranger in an amused tone. "I must say she's not like you. She's not *shy*, whatever she is. Look at her!"

Gretta turned her eyes towards a far corner of the room, and there, in the centre of a laughing group of girls, stood her little sister, flushed, excited, and evidently enjoying herself hugely.

"I've never had brown stockings before, but auntie said ——" The words, uttered in Sybil's shrill treble, floated above the babel.

"Oh, how can she?" said Gretta, aghast. "*Sybil!*" She took an ineffectual step forward.

"It's no good, she wouldn't hear you in this racket," said Josy, who was evidently exceedingly amused; "and, if she did, she doesn't look as though she'd take much notice. Not bad for a new kid, is it? But she'll shake down. Now, *do* you like scrambled eggs?"

Gretta turned from the vision of Sybil, who was still supplying a fund of amusement to a delighted group, and faced the question for its second time of asking.

"What a funny thing to say," she remarked shyly. "It's like 'Alice in Wonderland' somehow, isn't it? Yes, I think so"—here visions of Ann's inferior cookery rose before her—"that is, if they're not burnt or cooked all wrong, or cold, or something."

Her new friend gave a shout of merriment. "There, didn't I *say* you were clever! Excuse me laughing, and I'll tell you why. We always have scrambled eggs for tea on the first night of term, so we always ask new boarders that question. It makes a kind of beginning to conversation, and somehow or other you can find out by the way they answer what kind of girls they'll be. It's really rather fun, but I've never heard anyone answer like *you*! How do you know when they're cooked wrong? You *must* be clever; I said so, remember, to begin with, and I always knew I was good at character reading!"

Gretta blushed to the roots of her hair. She had hoped so much that she wouldn't be different from other girls, and here she was on the very first evening at school—yes, even in the very first hour!—convicted of being old-fashioned, and of knowing things that other girls didn't know. Her discomfiture would have been complete had not a look of contrition in Josy's face served to reassure her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said her new friend. "You didn't mind, did you?"

Gretta made an effort, and tried to smile. "Have you asked Sybil?" she said.

"Oh, *rather*! at least someone else did, and she was killing. 'I simply *love* them!' she said, and looked all round as though a big helping would at once appear! I say, she's a jolly little thing, isn't she? And with those legs she should be a good runner, too. I wonder how she'll shape for hockey."

"Do you play hockey here?" ventured Gretta. "I mean, shall *we*?"

"Rath-*er*!" declared her friend. "We'd a ripping match here on our ground, last day of last term. Top-hole! Pity you couldn't have seen some of Helen's strokes. And all the team played well, Miss Carter said. We beat the Lees girls hollow. But it's hockey this term, too, of course, so——"

The last sentence was interrupted by the ringing of a deep-toned tea-bell, at the first sound of which, as if by magic again, silence fell on the entire group, and, in an orderly file, they marched quietly along the passage into a large room at its farthest end.

Here two long tables were spread. At the head of one of them stood Miss Read, and nurse, still resplendent in cap and apron, was busy pouring out cups of tea at the second.

Then, in less time and with less noise than Gretta would have imagined possible, the girls seated themselves in their respective places, and the meal began; she, herself, at Miss Read's direction, having found a place between Margot and Josy. Sybil was at nurse's table, seated on the left-hand side of that dignitary, of whom she seemed very much in awe. Conversation, spirited enough, if not so loud as that carried

on in the sitting-room, began again at once, and Gretta, after several plates had passed rapidly on their way up the table, found herself in possession of a liberal helping of the said scrambled eggs, and—a very good appetite!

CHAPTER V

RULES

"ARE they 'cooked all wrong, or cold, or anything?' " asked Josy mischievously from Gretta's right-hand side.

"No, they're very nice," said her table-companion, determined not to show she minded being teased. "Margot"—turning to her cousin, who sat eating bread-and-butter, and wearing an unusually solemn expression—"how do you like everything? What girls have you talked to?"

"I'm not so sure that I like it at all," said Margot decidedly, looking very pink, and setting her chin rather obstinately. "I've been talking to a girl called Stella, and it seems as though we're simply going to be cooped up! Sitting in lines, you know, and doing everything at the proper time! It doesn't seem——"

"Oh, but Margot!" exclaimed Gretta, thankful that the buzz of talk was rendering it impossible for their conversation to be overheard; "it's only school ways, you know. Everyone else likes it. If you look at them you can see they do, and there's such a nice girl next me. Her name's Josy, and——"

"Yes, do tell your cousin to look at me," declared the said Josy, stretching a friendly fist across, and firmly shaking Margot by the hand. "I'm head of your dormer, you know, and you'll have to do as you're told. Has anyone asked you if you like scrambled eggs?"

"I've eaten them, so it's pretty plain," replied Margot, a little huffily perhaps, for the first part of Josy's speech had not served to smooth her ruffled feathers. "I can make better

ones myself, though; not so squashy, and with more butter on the toast!"

Josy gave a squeak of joy. "I say!" she said delightedly; "I wish you'd teach *me*! Where did you learn?"

"I learned in Australia, of course," answered Margot. "My mother taught me; it's perfectly easy. Look here, if you don't mind, when does the post go? I've finished my tea, and it's frightfully important that I should send a letter home. It must reach York by——"

"Oh, but you can't write this evening," said Josy, rather taken aback by Margot's decisive tones; "you've nothing unpacked, have you? Besides, we write our letters on Sunday; it's the day for it."

"But that's not the same," persisted Margot. "My mother will expect to hear from me, and——" Her speech was cut short by the sudden rising of the house-mistress. Nurse and the girls at both tables followed suit, and when grace was said those nearest the door commenced to file out of the room in the same orderly and silent way as they had entered.

"Ask Miss Read, Margot!" suggested Gretta. "She'll tell you if you may!"

"I'm not going to 'ask' about such a thing," said Margot in high dudgeon; "as though I can't write a letter to my mother, indeed! I'm going straight to that dormitory-place to see if my boxes have gone up. Anyhow, I've a post card in my bag; that'll be better than nothing!" She turned on her heel as she spoke, and ran up the stairs while Gretta looked uneasily after her.

"Come back, you new child!—Margot Fleming, isn't it?" called the head girl from the tail of the procession, as she

caught sight of the flying figure. “It’s against the rules to go to the dormitories now!”

“I don’t believe in rules,” said Margot, turning and speaking emphatically from the top stair, “about silly things like that, I mean. I’m going for a post card, and I’ve simply got to have it.” She turned again, and resumed her upward journey.

“But you don’t mean to say you won’t let me write to mother!” she exclaimed three minutes later—standing with flaming cheeks, a post card clutched in her hand—to Miss Read, who had followed her upstairs, and now gazed at the independent twelve-year-old with a face of undisguised surprise; “because, if so——”

“The school rule is that letters are written home on Sundays,” said the house-mistress. “You have come here to obey the rules, haven’t you? But, unfortunately, you have broken several of them already—mostly without knowing it, of course—and now you want to break *this* one.”

“I don’t want to break rules,” said Margot passionately, “but I want to keep my promise.”

“And that was——?” asked Miss Read slowly.

“I said to mother as the train was starting, ‘I’m going to write to-night,’ so I must do it. What’s the *sense* of making a rule like this one of yours; there doesn’t seem any reason!”

“I can quite see that you don’t understand the reason,” said Miss Read, speaking very quietly, “but I’ll try to explain things if you will listen. There are twenty-four boarders here, and if I gave leave to *one* of them to write a letter, I must naturally give leave to *all*, which means that twenty-four girls would need writing material from boxes that are not yet unpacked. Writing materials are very often at the bottom of

people's trunks, of course, and if twenty-four girls were allowed upstairs to turn over their boxes, and then to leave their trunks again and go down to write letters, what would be the state of the dormitories, and when would the rest of the unpacking and arranging get done?"

"I suppose things *would* be in a muddle," said Margot frankly; "but," with her chin still held high, "mother will expect——"

"I don't think so," remarked Miss Read, forestalling her; "because Miss Slater understands very well indeed how the girls' mothers feel, and she has made arrangements that they should not be anxious. A post card has been sent already to your mother—as to the parents of every one of the girls—to say that you have arrived safely, and that you will all write yourselves on Sunday."

"Then she *will* understand!" broke in Margot. "Oh, that's all right then, but I'd have liked to have written myself."

"Well"—Miss Read frankly showed her amusement now —"it's a very good thing, Margot, that the post card was *not* left to you to send, for the last post went before tea, and any letter sent now would not arrive in York before to-morrow evening."

"I'm sorry," said Margot, smiling too. "You don't mind me not understanding, do you? I'm not used to schools, you see."

"I don't see how you *can* understand the rules all at once, as you're only twelve, you know," remarked Miss Read cheerfully, "but we'll be quite satisfied if you'll just obey them, and make up your mind that they'll have to be understood gradually. You'll find that's the best way to set to work."

"All right, I'll try," Margot sighed. "How many have I broken already? I'll do my best; really, I will."

"Then please remember that in my absence the head girl's orders must be obeyed—she takes my place, you see—also, one of nurse's rules is that the dormitories are not to be visited by girls without leave except at certain times. Helen told you that, you'll remember. It will be to your own interest, you know, to remember these things; a number of people can't live together without making certain arrangements so that the wheels run smoothly. In schools these arrangements are called 'rules.' You'll get used to things very soon."

"I feel more used to them now, I think," said Margot, smiling bravely. "I suppose I'd better go down now, hadn't I? I hope the girls won't laugh at me."

"Well, I don't think they're a bit likely to do *that*," said the house-mistress.

Her words proved true. On Margot's entry into the sitting-room she found everyone so busy and intent on arranging their valuables from upstairs, where unpacking was in progress, that her reappearance was noticed by no one but Gretta, who, busily leaning over a small drawer, called to her cousin with delight.

"Margot, this is yours; just next mine. We've to line them with paper, Helen says, and then when we unpack—our dormitory's going to begin next—we can bring down anything we like."

Margot, glad of employment, threw herself into the task with great enthusiasm, and by bedtime, when the unpacking and arranging of her belongings was completed, she had begun to feel her old cheerful self again, and to settle into the

ways of the other girls, who seemed so very much at home. When nurse came in, announcing firmly that in another five minutes lights would be turned out and that undressing would then have to be completed in the dark, Gretta trembled lest her cousin should lift a voice in vigorous protest; but Margot merely scrambled busily into bed behind her curtains.

"Oh, may we talk in bed to-night, nurse?" asked the head of the dormitory urgently; "just for a quarter of an hour, because it's the first night of term! Do, *do* let us!"

"Well," said nurse, who, martial though she might be, was not always proof against Josy's wheedling, "but not a minute longer!" She closed the door as she spoke, and fifteen minutes' bliss began!

"Let's take each of the minutes separately!" suggested Stella, a trifle unscrupulously, from her corner of the room.

"No, we won't; it isn't fair; you're wasting a minute by talking about it. I want to ask the new girls all sorts of things while we're alone, and it's so ripping talking in bed," announced Josy. "Do you like feasts, and have you any pocket-money? This is a ripping dormer to be in, you know," she added ingenuously, "because I'm oldest in it, and there isn't any really big girl here to order us about!"

"We're more under *nurse*, though, down here," corrected Stella, "and the babies are just opposite, so we can't make much noise."

"But nurse is a perfect *brick* at week-ends!" Josy spoke with unction. "She gave us ten minutes to talk in, every Saturday night last term, and didn't mind the dormer feast a scrap!"

"Do you have feasts? What fun!" exclaimed Margot, sitting up in bed and peeping through her curtains into the

darkness. “We’ve got money, haven’t we, Gretta? Shall we have one this term, Stella?”

“Don’t ask *me*!” replied that young woman dejectedly. “*I* go home for week-ends; we only live five miles away. I’m out of nearly all the fun. I’d rather be an out-and-out boarder; you and Josy and Gretta will have it all your own way. I come in for matches, of course, when we have them, but that’s all. It’s not fair to talk about feasts when I’m here, Josy, when I can’t eat them. Talk about the prize instead.”

“All right,” replied Josy with alacrity.

“What’s *that*?” chorused Gretta and Margot.

“It’s a mystery, so far,” explained the dormitory head with enthusiasm, “but it’s sure to be most awfully thrilling. Mrs. Hope-Scott, a great friend of Miss Slater’s, you know, has offered it—the prize, I mean—to the school.”

“But what for?” inquired Margot eagerly.

“Well, that’s what we don’t know. On the last day of last term Miss Slater told us there *was* to be one; but she is to tell us more about it on the first day of *this* term—that’s to-morrow, you know—and we’re all just longing to hear.”

“If it’s for lessons, there’s no chance for *me*,” groaned Stella.

“But if it’s for music, perhaps *Gretta* might get it,” burst in Margot excitedly. “Mother says——”

“Oh, it won’t be for anything like that, I should think,” said Josy. “It’s a prize, Miss Slater said, that anyone could get; ‘from the oldest to the youngest; age will make no difference, nor intellectual ability,’ that’s exactly what she said. I didn’t know what it meant, and Miss Read told me afterwards—for

I asked her—that it means that you needn't be so awfully clever."

"New girls might have a chance, then?" ventured Gretta.

"Oh, *rather*," replied Josy. "That won't make any difference. Mrs. Hope-Scott had a girl at school here once; Hilda her name was, and she was head girl before I came. She went and trained to be a nurse, and then she died—nursing some poor people with fever, you know—and her mother is giving the prize in remembrance of her. Miss Slater told us all that on the last day of last term, and——"

"Now, not another word in here," said nurse, opening the door and speaking very emphatically; "off you go to sleep this very instant!"

She shut it again decisively as she uttered the words, and it spoke well for the impression that Miss Read's speech had left on Margot's mind that, with a question on the very tip of her tongue, she yet refrained from asking it, and turned on her side to fall asleep almost before the sound of nurse's footsteps had died away.

The other girls turned and twisted a little and finally fell asleep too; Gretta was the last, and her first dream was of her father, sitting alone with his pipe in the cheerless dining-room at home.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOPE-SCOTT PRIZE

"ARE you going to try for the prize, Gretta? And isn't it a funny one?"

So spoke Sybil, who, trotting by the side of her sister in the middle rank of the long crocodile of girls that was being marshalled by Miss Read for the first walk of the term, looked jolly enough certainly, and anything but home-sick.

"I suppose everybody'll *try* for it," said Gretta slowly, "but I shouldn't think there's any chance for *us*; you see we've never thought much about being brave, and it seems such a new kind of thing. Did you understand what Miss Slater said about it at Prayers, Sybil?"

"About its being for the girl who did the bravest thing this term?" replied her younger sister. "Why, yes, of course, that much I did. But when she talked about different kinds of brave things, I really didn't listen much; I was so longing to hear what the prize was going to be. But—a golden *shield*, Gretta—I'd never guessed it would be a thing like that, and with those funny words. And who was Brito—— I've forgotten the rest; I wasn't listening very much just then."

"Britomart, you mean," said Gretta. "I hadn't heard about her before, either. She was a Knight, Sybil, but not quite the same as the ones we know about. She was a Maiden-Knight, you know, of very long ago, and very brave. That's what the words mean: 'NE EVILL THING SHE FEARD.' They were true about her, Miss Slater said, and they're going to be printed on the bravery-shield."

"She must have been awfully brave, then. I suppose she didn't mind the—the dark, or anything, Gretta; but, I say, it was funny spelling, though," remarked Sybil wisely. "D'you know, when we got back to the class-room, Gretta, Miss Taylor wrote it up on the blackboard—those words, I mean—and she talked about it a lot. But *I* thought—though I didn't say it, of course——"

"And a jolly good thing too, Mistress Sybil!" remarked Josy from behind, where she was walking with Stella, and listening to the child's high-pitched voice.

"Be *quiet*!" flashed Sybil angrily. "I wasn't talking to *you*, and you don't even *know me*!"

There was a burst of laughter from the couples immediately before and behind at this retort, and Miss Read called out warningly from the rear. "Girls! Girls! Not so much noise! Sybil, keep in line; you're continually turning round!"

"It's not my fault, it's this girl!" began Sybil plaintively, but as no notice at all was taken of the remark by the mistress-in-charge, and as Gretta, instead of acting comforter, simply jogged her elbow and begged her to "Shut up!" the child relapsed into silence for a time, and walked sulkily along by her sister's side.

"What kind of lessons did you have to-day, Sybil?" inquired her older sister presently, to change the subject and to relieve the atmosphere a little.

"Oh, ripping!" exclaimed Sybil, at once alert and good-humoured again. "They're not very easy, though, *although* I'm in the bottom class. That other new girl, Adela, who's in my Form, is frightfully clever. She's had a governess, and she can do fractions like *anything*! Miss Taylor said that I should

have to work hard because I was behind the others, but I just said that *you'd* been teaching me, so it wasn't *my* fault at all!"

"And what did she say when you said that?" inquired Gretta, swallowing a feeling of mortification.

"Oh, nothing. Something about not talking so much, I expect. She's most frightfully strict. You have to sit still the whole lessons through. There's no chance of my winning a lesson-prize in *that* class *I* know, Gretta, so it's no use trying for one. And as I told Ann that I should bring one back with me, I think I shall just try for that other one for being the bravest; it's much more interesting, and might even be fun."

"You mean the Hope-Scott prize!" questioned Gretta in amazement. "Oh, Sybil, do you think you're brave enough? Whatever could you do? You're only twelve."

"Well, Miss Slater said, for I heard that much, that perhaps even the youngest in the school could get it, and I'm not as young as *that*. Joan Curtis is younger; she's eleven and a quarter, though she *has* been here a year. And Margot's only just a little older than me, and you always say *she's* brave."

"Well, yes," agreed Gretta, "but then she's been in Australia, and she's done brave things there, somehow. Think of riding a horse bareback; and then, that time, you know, when she was lost in the Bush for a whole day. Auntie told us how brave she was in finding her way home and everything. *I* couldn't do those things, and I'm fourteen."

"I think I'd rather *like* adventures and being brave," said Sybil carelessly. "I've got a thing already that I think of doing, but if I tell you, you won't let anyone else know, will you?"

"Oh, tell me! *Do!*" called Josy, in mock excitement from behind.

"You're a silly, horrid, teasing thing," cried Sybil, whipping round, and addressing the advancing couple; "and I won't tell anyone—so there!"

"Gretta, bring Sybil to walk in the last rank," called Miss Read's voice from behind. "She really *must* learn to behave in a more orderly way while we're out."

"It's my fault, Miss Read," exclaimed Josy, in a contrite voice; "I was teasing her."

"Then you ought to know better, Josy," said the housemistress severely. "Talk to your own partner, and don't be silly."

The procession moved on again, and the discussion was over for a time, but it came up again in the dormitory that night while the girls were undressing for bed. Everyone in Dormitory 3, as in every other room in the school, was keen on the Hope-Scott prize, and every tongue was wagging over the possibilities of being the winner.

"One thing is, I suppose," announced Josy, "to think out the very bravest thing you can think of, and then to set to work to do it, however hard it is; but d'you know, I can't think of anything to do, though I've thought and thought. Lessons and things like that bother me most, and, of course, *they* couldn't count as braveness, could they? Now, if we were only in King Arthur's time—we had it in Literature last term, and it was ripping!—things to do would come hopping up every half-hour—questing beasts, and fair maidens in distress, and wounded knights! *Then* you just had to nip in with a sword and there you were! There was no wondering what to do; adventures just came naturally!"

"Miss Slater said that if we waited and looked out we would be sure to find something brave to do, but we were to

be careful not to miss it if it looked small," said Gretta, who had been bothering over the matter all day. "Of course, I don't know *school*, but I've never done a single brave thing at home, I'm sure."

"And I've been at school for two years and a term, and I'm sure *I*'ve never done anything brave," added Josy.

"I know a brave *man*," came in decided tones from Margot's cubicle. "I'm sure the motto on the shield is true of *him*!"

"What sort of things does he do?" begged everybody, eager for a recipe for bravery.

"Well, for one thing, he met three robbers—bushrangers, you know, and murderers they were really—when he was on horseback all alone, and before they had time to whip out their pistols he held them up with *his*, and made them all walk into the nearest town; ten miles it was, and he knew all the time that his pistol wasn't loaded."

"And did *they*?" inquired the others breathlessly.

"Of course not, or they'd have shot him in a minute; they were a desperate gang!"

"What else did he do?" inquired Stella with interest. "That's not much use to us, I'm afraid, but let's hear; it might give us ideas."

"For one thing he spent a night in a cave that was supposed to be haunted—no one would go near it, even in the daytime, because of the stories there were about—and it was while he was in there he found out that the robbers used it as a hiding-place at night. He listened, and heard them say where they had taken some horses that had been stolen from one of the farms. He headed a band next day, and went after the horses,

too, and he got them. They were awfully valuable ones; one of them was worth nearly a hundred pounds!"

"I say, what a lark to know such a man," broke in Josy. "Who is he? Do tell us."

"He's a friend of dad's," said Margot simply. "When we were out in the Bush he helped with the farms. He was champion sheep-shearer. I told you about him, didn't I, Gretta?" And she turned to her cousin.

"Is it Long Jake, that you were talking about in the train?" asked Gretta with interest; "that man who gave you lessons in Australia?"

" 'Long Jake!' " echoed the other listeners. "What a funny name, and *how* ripping he must be to know!"

"If he were in this school," added Josy, breathing deeply, "wouldn't I get ideas from him for the prize!"

"He'd win it himself, I should imagine," corrected the superior Stella. "There wouldn't be much chance for any of *us*! I'm going to ask dad for ideas at the week-end. If he knows any good ones, I'll tell you on Monday."

"Why, it's the week-end to-morrow," exclaimed Margot. "Where do you live, Stella? Shall you walk home, or how do you get there?"

"No, the trap comes," said Stella. "We live off the road that goes to the station. It's nearly five miles away; you must have passed it as you came, only you wouldn't see the house, perhaps; it's behind trees."

"We saw *one* house," broke in Gretta excitedly—"a little house with no windows."

"Did you notice *that*?" exclaimed Stella with animation. "The 'Little House'! Oh, what do you think of it?"

“I thought it was the rummiest place I’d ever seen,” declared Margot. “I’ve been longing to ask someone about it ever since we got here. We saw it first from the train, and then we saw it from the trap, and we asked Miss Read about it. Somehow or other she didn’t tell us much: something about an old man, but I thought—didn’t you, Gretta?—that she seemed to try and shut us up rather.”

“*No wonder!*” said Stella, in a hollow tone of mystery.

CHAPTER VII

HERMITS AND HORSES

"OH, do go on!" begged the Dormitory, intrigued by Stella's mysterious accents.

"Not that I know much, but it's so *queer*!" Stella, however, was evidently only too willing to oblige, so far as was possible. "All alone he lives! Looking out on the sea. All the windows that face the moorland are barred up. Of course, he's mad!"

"Who? The old man?" inquired Gretta.

"Yes, or why ever would he live there like that?"

"He might be a—hermit." Margot spoke rather slowly. "There was one that we knew, living in the Bush. He'd made a clearing-place there—just because he wanted to, and because he loved the Bush. He wasn't mad at all. He'd come to us for food, sometimes. And sometimes I'd ride out and take him some."

"Ride!" The Dormitory forgot the "Little House" and its inmate. "Did you ride in the Bush?"

"Yes, of course I rode. Why not? Dad and mother did. We all did. I helped in a sheep round-up once; I was always riding. Once I had to swim my horse over a river that was in flood. The horse was frightened, then; and so would I have been, only Long Jake was there to tell me what to do. He and dad had to do it often—swim their horses, I mean; because they were always riding for miles round the cattle-station."

"And how did you swim your horse?" inquired Josy excitedly. "I wonder you weren't drowned."

"That was what I thought, just at first. I think the horse thought so, too. But Long Jake told me just to take my legs out of the stirrups and hold the pommel tight. To give him plenty of rein, too, and to let myself sort of float over the saddle. The horse did the rest. Boko, it was—my own horse." Margot gave a little sigh as she suddenly came to earth in the Cliff School dormitory again, and found herself brushing her hair. "I say, Stella, I didn't mean to interrupt about your old man. How do you take him food?"

"Food! And he isn't *mine*!" Stella tossed a shiny head. "I've never even seen him," continued the old man's next neighbour. "He simply never comes out; and if he did I'd be terrified. I suppose he's got some arrangement with the village shop; and the farm sends him milk, I think. Perhaps dad keeps an eye on things, being rector, you see. But I know that not even *he's* been inside! He's called heaps of times, though, and never got any answer to his knocks. As for the gipsies...."

"The *gipsies*!" repeated everyone.

"Oh, we've got heaps of gipsies on the moor. It's common land, or something; and they may pitch their tents there, dad says, by law, so long as they behave themselves. They're there most of the year, too, because they're horse-dealing gipsies, who go from fair to fair buying horses and selling them again. Well, mother says there's one good point about the old man—he *does* keep the gipsies away from our stretch of moor. They won't camp within a mile of his little house. They say he's a witch, or something of that sort."

"He can't be a witch; they're women," put in Josy. "Whatever does he do?"

"Well, a wizard then. Oh, it's nothing, really. Once a horse strayed round his house and hurt itself and had to be destroyed, and the gipsies lost money. At least, that's what they said; they came and begged because of it, but dad sent them away. Gipsies tell awful lies."

"They do." Gretta, the housekeeper, spoke up. "I remember buying a fern from a gipsy woman. For dad's surgery it was; for his birthday. And it hadn't a single bit of root—just fern leaves stuck into a pot. It cost a shilling, too." Gretta sighed again at the remembrance of her feelings at the time. It was almost a relief when Margot's clear-cut tones broke in.

"Gretta, not always, though. Gipsies don't always tell lies."

There was a queer tone in Margot's voice; half-shy and half-eager, and the Dormitory turned to look at her. "I mean, they *do* know true things, just because they live out-of-doors; things that other people don't know. Long Jake said so. Not only gipsies, of course; but anyone who's lived in the open. Long Jake learned horse language from the men in the Bush."

"Horse language!" repeated Stella, in a superior tone. "Why, there's not such a thing!"

"Isn't there, indeed? There *is*!" Margot suddenly dropped her brush and her shy tone of voice at the same time, and flared up like a rocket. "Didn't I tell you that Long Jake said so. And he could speak it, too—talk to horses and understand them." Margot turned her back to the company and pressed her lips together.

"Oh, Margot, *do* go on!" begged Josy, almost weeping in eagerness. "Gretta and I believe everything Long Jake says. And Stella, you must, too!"

"Oh, well, come to that, I do; without all that fuss, though," said Stella, flushing.

"Well, that's all right, then." Margot, evidently realizing that here was as much of an apology as anyone had ever extracted from Stella, and being quite incapable of bearing any grudge, turned. "Only, if you're going to say that it's gipsy lies, you needn't listen; because it's not. Mother was there, and she saw it." Margot swallowed before she went on.

"It was in the Bush once," she said. "We were driving along one of those 'corduroy roads,' you know; that's what they call them, because they're made of logs laid side by side. Awfully jolty; we were in one of dad's buggies. And we came upon"—Margot brushed her hair vigorously—"a horse, you know. It had got its master with it, of course; but it had fallen down. It was done-up and down-and-out; and oh!... I can't tell you." Margot's voice shook.

"Go on," begged Josy.

"Well, then, even dad and Long Jake couldn't do anything. And its master said it had been lying there for hours. They were a long way from a water-hole, so he couldn't get it a drink; but it wasn't a drink it wanted, really, for we'd got water, and we gave it some. Its master was just a 'sundowner' man—travelling on to the next farm for work; it was shearing-time. And he'd picked up the horse cheap at a sale. Its previous owner had died, you see. And this man said there was nothing to do but just to leave it there, and mother said, 'Oh, no!' And I...." Margot stopped. "Well, it simply couldn't be left; and it wouldn't get up. And dad and Long Jake did everything they could, and then...."

"Oh, hurry, do! Did it recover, after all?" begged Josy, half in tears herself.

"Listen! It simply couldn't move; I don't really think it *could*, until.... Suddenly, what do you think Long Jake did?

The horse was lying, you know, right across the road, and Long Jake knelt down beside it. And he put both his arms round its neck." Margot's voice was shaky. "And ... just held it. The sort of way mother might have held *me*, you know, if I were to cry—only, of course, I never do. And then he put his lips to its ears and just whispered. And, after a few minutes, the horse—*Oh!*" Margot gave a little, gaspy laugh. "It was like a fairy tale, only better. The horse twitched its ears and opened its shut eyes, and it gave a little whinnying sound. It understood. Long Jake went on whispering and stroking its head; yes, and *kissing* it. And then, suddenly"—a tear rolled down Margot's cheek, though she did not know it—"it gave a kind of shake and tried to get up. They all helped it, and it struggled up and stood there, and—it sort of smiled!—mother said she saw that, too—and it threw up its darling head and started again."

No one in the dormitory said a word for a few minutes, and Margot began to brush her hair steadily.

"I'd have ... bought that horse," said Josy. "I bet its owner had been unkind to it."

"He hadn't. No, he hadn't. He was quite kind, but he didn't understand—that's what Long Jake said afterwards—that the horse was missing its old master who had died, and that it was feeling unhappy because of that," said Margot. "I dare say the horse has grown fond of him by now."

"But however did Long Jake find it out?" burst in Stella doubtfully.

"The horse told him, I suppose." Margot spoke quietly. "You see, it's all very well to say that gipsies tell lies. Perhaps they do. But it was one of the old Bush people—the 'blacks,' they call them out there—who taught Long Jake how to

whisper to the horses. Long Jake said that, compared to *them*, he knew nothing about it, really. It was ... because they loved horses that they could do it, Long Jake said; and it was only, I suppose, because he felt so horribly sorry for the horse that he simply had to try to see what he could do. The 'blacks' know much more than that, too. They know all sorts of woodcraft secrets about tracking and trailing, things you wouldn't understand here in schools." Margot broke off.

"Well, did Long Jake learn about them?" inquired Stella.

"Yes, the 'blacks' taught him a lot. He beat out a fire once, that had got started in the scrub in the hot weather and might have meant awful damage—you see, the Bush was so near. He had some method that the 'blacks' had taught him. And he knew a way of *making* fires, too, that he'd learned from them. A big cane, pointed at one end, and with its point placed inside a hole made in another cane. Then he twirled the point round and round inside the hole; and smoke came, and then fire. He did that while we were camping, and it quite dazzled me—his quickness, I mean. But he said the 'blacks' could do it ten times quicker. Oh, and that time I was lost in the Bush. I'd have been fifty times more frightened if I hadn't remembered something he'd told me. 'Always bear to the left; and think of that and nothing else,' he'd said. Well, I did; and I found my way back to the water-hole where we'd been camping. Only, of course, they'd left it to look for me. It was lovely to see them coming back!"

"What was it like—being lost?" inquired Josy.

"Oh, it was only for two hours, you know; but it seemed far, far longer. There wasn't anything, exactly, to be afraid of. What made you feel so dreadfully queer was the 'great hush' in the Bush; that's what they call it. The feeling of the

bigness, you know, and the dreadful quietness all round you. But you can grow to love it, too; the ‘hush’ of the Bush, I mean—not being lost, of course. People like that old hermit just can’t go away. ‘The Bush takes them’—that’s what Long Jake said.”

CHAPTER VIII

PLANS FOR BEING BRAVE

MARGOT had felt very much subdued during her first days at the Cliff School; there was no doubt about it.

The events of the first evening and her interview with Miss Read had had their effect, and the new idea that had dawned upon her then—that it would be necessary to consider herself one of many and a small one at that, instead of being the one and only prime mover at home—had not been an easy one. The independent little girl from Australia had felt shy and rather sensitive in her new surroundings. Until her recital of the doings of Long Jake, Margot's voice had hardly been heard, even in the dormitory. On that occasion, however, she had thrown all selfconsciousness to the winds, and had burst into the conversation with her old fervour.

Gretta had understood Margot's mood pretty well, and had refrained from showing her sympathy, knowing that her cousin would "feel all right in the end." She herself was living more intensely than she had ever lived before through every minute of this very new kind of life, and—but for the home-sick feeling that voiced itself in her first letter to the doctor, when she "wished he could be here too!"—there was no fly in the ointment to spoil her enjoyment of school.

As for Sybil, *she* had begun to settle in easily enough; already she had made and broken and re-made various friendships with other small girls; already she had been snubbed and smiled at alternately by the older girls, and had sulked or smiled back engagingly in return. She had already,

although this was only the fourth day of term, experienced her first "returned lesson," and—after the thrill of pride in such a distinction had passed into a feeling of self-pity at having to re-write such a "perfectly-good" exercise—she had then forgotten all about the matter; that is, until it was brought to her notice again somewhat forcibly by the mistress who had set, but had not received, the said imposition. She was adopting, however, along with the school slang, some of the orderly manners and ways of the Cliff School girls; Gretta wondered at this Sybil, so carefully pigtailed, so well brushed and neat after a week of nurse's stern regime, and felt that now only one thing remained to come before her happiness should be complete; she had not yet had the first of the promised violin lessons!

These would be, said Miss Slater—who had spoken to the child herself about the music arrangements desired by Mrs. Fleming—on every Monday evening, and the first of the course would be given in the following week. "Your aunt says that she hopes much for your music, Gretta," explained the head mistress, "and so I am to see whether Monsieur Villon, our French master, will think it worth his while to give lessons to so young a girl as you are." Miss Slater had heard a good deal from Mrs. Fleming about the home life of the little Greys, and she felt a particular interest in the children for that reason. "Are you fond of playing?" she asked kindly.

Gretta's "Yes," spoken eagerly, while her heart beat high, and her eyes glowed like stars, showed the head mistress how keenly the girl felt on the subject; Miss Slater was, for that reason, not so surprised as otherwise she might have been when, on meeting Monsieur Villon, after the first lesson, he

gave utterance to volumes of praise. “Mais, it ees magnificent! Such playing I ’ave never heard at zee Cliff School!”

“Oh, Monsieur Villon, this child is only fourteen! Don’t you remember Maud Adams who left a year ago?”

“Mees Adams! But not to compare with little Mees Grey.” The professor held his hands expressively.

“But she has had so few lessons, Monsieur Villon,” pursued Miss Slater.

“That does not signify. Bien, I can give ’er lessons. Mais oui, but—music, eet ees in ’er.”

The professor departed, still chattering volubly; Miss Slater wrote rather more guardedly to Mrs. Fleming, and Gretta, knowing nothing but that her first lesson had been like the realization of her most happy dreams, and already longing impatiently for the next one, went about her work like a girl transformed, her eyes bright and joyous.

“There’s something in Margaret Grey, after all,” announced her form mistress, who had been more than a little distressed at the appearance of such a very backward fourteen-year-old on the first day of term. “I thought she was stupid, but I don’t think she’s exactly that.”

“If you’d been listening to that child’s practising,” remarked Miss Read, the house-mistress, who “understood music,” as the other mistresses said, “you’d use a very different word; there’s going to be a surprise for Gretta’s people over her violin-playing; of that I’m quite sure.”

Auntie wrote telling her older niece that Miss Slater thought it wise for her to continue the lessons with Monsieur Villon, and adding that on her visit to Redgate she had found

the doctor very busy and looking well, and that although, of course, he missed the two little girls, he seemed to be managing as well as could be expected under the care of Ann, who was turning out "quite capable!"

"If she'll only *keep on* being like that," said Gretta with a sigh at the remembrance of the varying moods of the maid, "then I shall be the happiest person in the whole world."

This was to Margot, who, being form-companion as well as room-mate of her cousin, had easily slipped into being prime confidante as well; and who proved quite as companionable and understanding in her ways as any girl of Gretta's own age could have been.

"Oh, she's sure to," she now broke in. "Mother'll manage it. She can manage everyone."

"I should just think she can," agreed Gretta whole-heartedly. "I think she's just the most wonderful person in the world."

"That's just what Long Jake used to say," remarked Margot, nodding sagely. "She did a lot for him, you know."

"What! That brave man!" questioned Gretta. "What could she do for *him*?"

"Well, he wasn't brave before he met her; that's what he used to say. I couldn't understand it quite, but he used to say it."

"I wonder what he meant?" said her cousin.

"Well, he came out to Australia from England, you know. He had been to college, and he'd been 'sent down' from Oxford. I don't exactly understand, but I know he was in some kind of disgrace. And then his people wouldn't speak to him, or something, for some reason that mother didn't tell me

about, and he didn't either. Of course, he'd been travelling round some time before he struck us; but the *first* time I saw him he was just a sundowner, in quite torn clothes, and he hadn't had anything to eat for ages, and——"

"Oh, poor thing!" exclaimed Gretta sympathetically.

"You wouldn't call him that now," laughed Margot. "We wanted a new hand then, though, and dad was away selling sheep, and mother took him on. He looked *dreadful*, but mother says she always knows about people. Anyhow, he grew to be dad's great chum, and when dad went to the diggings he stayed behind and worked the farm with mother and me, and the rest of the men. He *loves* mother, and he says she made a man of him again. Oh, *what* a height he is, and *so* broad!"

"Is he in Australia still?" inquired Gretta, with interest.

"Oh, yes, but he's coming home when he's got a certain sum of money. I forget how much, but he said he wouldn't come home with less. He's got something he has to do in England, he said. I'll show him to you, Gretta, for, of *course*, he'll come to see me. It's really because of him that I'm up in your form, isn't it? He taught me Latin and arithmetic very well; though I must say he wasn't much good at history and geography. Miss Tate says I'm awfully bad at those. When he comes perhaps he'll tell us some stories of the things he's done, and we might get ideas for the bravery prize. Have you thought of anything yet?"

It was Friday afternoon and the usual walk was in progress; Gretta thought for a minute before she answered. "I *know* I haven't any chance of it, Margot; I'm not like you. You were born brave, I believe, and Josy's the same kind. Now, I'm almost afraid of anything happening that people

have to be brave about, like mad bulls and rescuing, and things of that kind. If they came along I'd have to *try* to do them, of course, but it somehow seems to me that if I look out for big brave things to do all the time, then I shan't do my music properly, and I shall forget the rules, and I shall make a muddle of everything. I'm not clever, you see. So I'm just going to go on and do my best at lessons; it's my first term and I'm so backward, and I'm not going to think much about winning the prize, because I *know* I couldn't."

"Well, *I* don't know," said Margot, who had listened patiently through the long speech; "I'd just love to capture burglars, or discover—— Oh, Gretta," she broke off, "I meant to tell you. Has Sybil been telling you what she means to do?"

"Sybil! No. What?" inquired Gretta uneasily.

"Well, it's the prize, I think, that she's after, and I believe we ought to stop her. She wants to do something brave, and she said——"

"Well?" inquired Gretta apprehensively.

"Well, I suppose it's not telling tales to tell you! She was talking quite loud to Adela about it, and she said that I had said—and I *did*, you know—that it would be a brave thing to go and find out about that little house with no windows on the cliff, and she said that she meant to go."

CHAPTER IX

MAINLY ABOUT HOCKEY

"WHAT, *Sybil*!" Gretta laughed outright. "She'd be *far* too frightened; she's even terrified of the dark; and think what Stella told us about it! I'd be afraid to go there, myself."

"You mean that night when she told us about the miser that lives there, whom no one sees, and whom everyone thinks is mad? You see, Sybil doesn't know all that; she only saw the house from the train with us, and we all talked about it then —don't you remember? It would be a jolly adventure, of course, but she's too small to go alone. Would it be all right, do you think, if *I* went with her?"

"Why, *Margot*!" exclaimed Gretta, surveying her cousin with wide-open eyes.

"If she's set on it, I mean; for the prize, you know; she asked me to come, and I said I'd think it over."

"But Miss Read said we weren't to, and it's out of bounds, and—and——" Gretta was beginning to realize that Margot's independent spirit had only been sleeping, and that now it was about to reassert itself. "The *rules*, you know," she ventured as staunchly as she could.

"Oh—*rules*!" exclaimed Margot, tossing her short pigtail. "Gretta, I'm sick of rules. Can't we *ever* break them? There's nothing to do but keep different kinds of them all day long. How are we *ever* to do a brave thing if we're kept in so!"

"There's hockey," said Gretta; "that's not keeping us in. You know Helen says you'll make a good player, and I know

you will."

"Yes, there *is* hockey," agreed Margot. During the three weeks that had elapsed since the beginning of term the school games had appealed more and more strongly to the athletic out-of-door little Australian girl; she had hitherto, of course, been unused to anything like this organized playing with other girls, and had found it difficult, at first, to conform to the hockey regulations enforced so carefully by the games-mistress and by Helen, the captain. Before long, however, she was as keen on strokes, goals and matches as any of the Cliff School girls, and would soon, so the captain said, be a jolly good player.

The fact of keeping the rules at hockey, though she didn't realize it, was helping her to understand and keep the school rules also, and Margot unconsciously enough was shaking down into the ordinary school-girl life with far less difficulty than Miss Slater had at first deemed possible. The thought of hockey now changed the current of her thoughts, and she turned a very interested face in Gretta's direction.

"You like games, too, don't you? Of course I shall miss hockey to-morrow, as I'm going home with Stella, but there's that match next Saturday week against the Redford School. I'm longing to watch it. Oh, I wonder if I shall ever be in the team!"

"Of course you will," replied her cousin in all good faith. "I love games, too, of course, but I know I'll never be much good. I'm not half so fast a runner as you are, Margot; and then your wrists are so strong and you're so much quicker in every sort of way than I am."

"Well, you've got your fiddle; that's your sort of thing, I suppose. No, I dare say it wouldn't do, Gretta, to go to the

‘Little House’; I’ll tell Sybil I can’t go, and she’s not to, either. Just for a minute I thought what fun it would be, as well as being a most ripping way of trying for that prize. But I suppose we can’t; I’d forgotten we were at school. There she is. I’ll tell her now. Sybil! Sybil!”

The damsel addressed, who was emerging from the cloak-room door that opened on to the playground, came running up.

“Have you seen Adela?” she inquired in rather a fretful voice. “She’s simply *got* to tell me what the French preparation is; I didn’t write it down.”

“No, I haven’t. Why didn’t you take it down yourself?” replied her cousin, who had no sympathy with Sybil’s lazy ways. “And look here, why aren’t you at hockey? Helen’s coaching all the little ones, and Adela’s sure to be there. Hurry up; you’ll be late.”

“I *hate* hockey,” said the child, shrugging her shoulders; “it’s a most stupid game!”

“Stupid! Well, I like *that*,” rejoined Margot; “if there’s anything it’s *not*, it’s that! It’s just the most ripping fun.”

“Well, perhaps at first. When I hit the ball the first day Miss Carter said ‘Bravo!’ and Helen said I’d be in the team some day, and *now*—why, they don’t even smile at me!”

“You juggins!” laughed Margot. “Why, you couldn’t see them if they did.”

“I could, because I look to see—*always*,” complained Sybil, “and everybody’s always looking at the ball; and once, yesterday, when I’d nearly got a goal, Helen said I oughtn’t to have hit the ball so hard, but that I ought to have passed it to

someone else. They can just hit their old ball themselves; I'm tired of hockey!"

"That's because you always want to be top," said Margot sagely; "and you can't in hockey; you have to play for your side. And look here, Sybil, I've talked to Gretta about the 'Little House,' and I'm not going; it's not allowed, you know, and I'd somehow forgotten it was term-time. We'll do something else instead; and I'm not sure that it would be exactly brave after all, as it's against the rules, you see."

"Well, then, I'm going, anyway," declared Sybil, growing crimson and turning angrily in her cousin's direction; "and Gretta's a horrid grandmother to have made you break your promise. You said you'd come; you know you did, Margot; and I'm going, anyway. I've simply got to win that prize to show to dad and Ann."

"Well—go then," said Margot, equally angrily; "and see how you like it."

"I'm going, and you're both sneaks," was Sybil's parting shaft; "and see how *you* like it when I get the shield, and wear it every day."

She hastened towards the hockey field as she spoke, in desperate fear, for all her assertions to the contrary, of being late at the practice. The others stood and looked after her.

"She won't go to the 'Little House,' will she?" asked Margot rather anxiously. "It's partly my fault, because at first I thought it would be all right."

"Oh, *she* won't go," said Gretta confidently; "she's just angry; that's why she says it." They dismissed the subject from their minds, and did not think of it again for some time, as during supper that evening a fresh interest arose, and that a most absorbing one.

"What are the prospects of winning the Redford School match, Helen?" inquired the house-mistress, as she served out liberal helpings of pudding to the rows of waiting girls.

"Well, we didn't manage to last year, Miss Read, but we mean to this year, if we can. It'll take all our strength, though; they're most awfully strong." The head girl surveyed the members of her team as she spoke. "I'm not sure that we oughtn't to give up sugar and some of the puddings till then; it makes such a difference."

"Why?" inquired Gretta of Josy. "What does she mean?"

"The Redford School match nearly always falls on half-term, and it's our biggest match," replied her friend, with her mouth full. "The team always goes into special training the last week for it. It's only *them* who stop puddings and things, of course. I'm glad *we* don't have to; though it would be jolly well worth it a thousand times over to be going to play, wouldn't it? That's the reason, partly, why the dormer feasts always come that night."

"Why?" asked Margot. "That night! Saturday week! Is there really going to be one then!"

"Oh, rather!" returned Josy. "It's partly to make up for the puddings that the team have missed, nurse says; and, besides, it's an awfully ripping finish to the day, if we win; and it's rather decent and comforting if we don't. So Miss Slater always lets us have it; all but the little ones—they don't have one now."

"How about the dormitory lists this time, Helen?" inquired the house-mistress.

"Well, there's more than a week left, Miss Read; if I collect them and give them in to you by the Wednesday before, will that do?"

"*What!*" Sybil's shrill voice was heard from the other table; "a *feast*! How perfectly *lovely*!"

"You'll have to wait till you're a bit older, Sybil," replied nurse briskly. "No feasts in the babies' dormitory, you know. Next year, perhaps."

"I'm *not* a baby," began Sybil, as crossly as she dared; "and I don't see why other girls should be greedier than me just because they're bigger." Her protests died away unheeded into a rather sulky mumble.

Gretta turned to Josy, feeling sorry for her little sister, who had been endowed with such a very sweet tooth. "Why don't the little ones have a feast, too?"

"Well, they *did* until one year when three of them out of that dormer were all sick the next day. But they always have something else just as ripping before the end of term. Nurse arranges it, so it's sure to be decent. None of them is in the team, of course."

The combined excitement of the prospective match and the dormitory feast provided plenty of material for conversation during the ensuing three weeks. As they undressed in their cubicles the girls of Dormitory 3 found much to say on these topics; and one and all combined in pitying Stella, who was to be absent from the second of the entertainments.

"That's the worst of being a weekly boarder," moaned the martyred one; "but you may be sure I'm coming up to watch the match. Dad's coming, too, if he can. If not, the boy'll bring me in the trap. I wouldn't miss the Redford School match for anything."

"I say," Margot said suddenly to Gretta, "I wonder if *mother* would come?"

CHAPTER X

A HOLIDAY ADVENTURE

"AND we might get a chance, you know," remarked Stella, "of doing something to win the shield; though I don't know if it would count, on a holiday!"

Margot shook her head. It was difficult to know. "Of course, I suppose there's much more chance to find something exciting out of school," said she. "So, perhaps, that way, it wouldn't be fair to the rest."

"Oh, I didn't mean that way, exactly," began Stella, as they walked up the little drive to the rectory front-door. "*Mo—ther!*"

They had driven down together in the ponycart which had been brought up to the Cliff School by the rector's boy, Jim, to fetch Stella home. It had been ripping to jingle along the hard high road, even although the stolid Jim had kept hold of the reins all the way without realizing how Margot's fingers were itching to handle them herself. Now she was watching, with envy in her eyes, as he led Jerry stablewards.

"I say, I'd love to go and—unharness the pony," burst from Margot's lips.

"*What!*" Stella stood still on the drive and stared.

"It's only"—the visitor grew rather pink—"that I do so simply adore horses. Only having a car, now—oh, of course, dad's is a ripping one, and he likes it; but it's so un-alive after Australia."

"I must say I'd swap Jerry for even a two-seater," Stella sniffed. "Where *is* mother! Talking of horses, I know exactly

what we'll do. It's a million times better than seeing Jerry unharnessed. That's tame! *Mother!*"

An exceedingly obedient and indulgent mother appeared suddenly on the rectory terrace at the sound of the second call.

"Stella! Here you are!"

"I say, mother, here's Margot. And, mother, she's got to be back by six! And it gets dark so soon; so we want to go along the Cliff road before tea." Stella permitted herself to be embraced while Margot stood rather awkwardly by.

"So here is the little girl from the Bush!" exclaimed Mrs. Hill kindly. "I am so glad that Miss Slater allowed you to come to tea."

But Margot had not come from the Bush. Her shyness disappeared instantly, as she rectified the mistake. "The Bush! Oh, no. Nobody lives in the Bush, you know. We've gone through. Once we camped there. But nobody, except kangaroos and...."

"Oh, mother; talking of kangaroos," the impatient Stella burst in, "Margot's most awfully interested in horses, and she told us all kinds of things in the dorm. She even likes Jerry. And I want to take her straightaway, before tea, to see those horses on the gipsies' camping-ground. There were a dozen, quite, last week-end, and...."

"But, my dear Stella!" Her mother, though certainly anxious to fall in with the arrangements of her returned daughter, looked quite aghast at the suggestion. "I don't think you could go there alone. The horses might be dangerous. And dad's out. Besides——" Mrs. Hill gave quite a gasp of relief as remembrance came to her.

“Besides, they’re gone. There was a fair at Rowsley this morning, and I heard the horses going by before we were up, with the gipsies in charge.”

“Oh, *bother*!” Stella looked as disgusted as she felt. “Well, if they’re gone, of course we can’t! But how could horses possibly be dangerous? Margot says....”

But Margot, appealed to by this very headstrong daughter, looked thoughtful. “They *can* be fierce, even. Horses! why, of course. I don’t know about *these*, but we once had a stampede. Mother and I didn’t see anything of it, but dad told us that if it hadn’t been for Long Jake....”

Even Stella appeared to knuckle under to the general opinion, since Long Jake, the dormitory hero, evidently shared it. “Still *these* horses wouldn’t be,” she added. “They’re mostly old and half worn out. The gipsies buy them at fairs and sell them again. Well, I don’t know what we can do at all, then.”

Margot, however, had a suggestion to make.

“Look here. The horses would have been frightfully jolly, but there’s another thing. I thought of it as we were driving here. Aren’t you somewhere near the ‘Little House,’ where the old man lives? Couldn’t we—go and just look at it. We saw it from the train coming down, but I’d love to tell Gretta more about it to-night in the dorm.”

“Oh, if you like,” returned her hostess, in rather a bored tone of voice. “It’s only about a half-mile away.”

But if an excursion to the outside of the “Little House” was a very everyday affair to Stella, to Margot, who had been shut up for weeks within school bounds, the mere fact of being outside walls and gates, and walking in the wide, open spaces of the moor, with the huge expanse of the blue sea ahead, and

all the winds of Heaven let loose around her—to Margot this was a thrilling joy in itself.

"Oh, I say, this *is* jolly," said she. "I wish Gretta were here."

But Stella was still deep in disappointment that the thrill of the afternoon was missing. "If only you had been here last week, dad would have taken us. Then you could have tried that 'whispering' on some of the horses. The gipsies would have let you. Dad knows some of them, and he says they're quite decent sorts, though all gipsies aren't. They camp here, you know. See!"

She pointed across an expanse of moor.

"If we cut over this ridge and then down by the next, we'll be able to see the 'Little House,' " said Stella.

A view of the "Little House," though certainly very secondary in excitement compared with a visit to the gipsy horse-dealers, had certainly points of interest all its own, to Margot, anyhow.

"I say...." She stood perfectly still and stared. "It must be lonely for him."

"Lonely! I should rather think so. In winter there's snow all round. I suppose he shuts himself up there, and, of course, nobody ever goes to see him; so it doesn't matter for *them*! All the windows look out over the sea, you know. He evidently likes being lonely because he's mad, I suppose."

But, to be lonely *and* mad seemed a piteous combination of horrors to Margot. She stood staring through grey eyes at the quiet, unhappy-looking little house, until Stella shivered at her side. "I say,—let's go back. You've seen it now, and I wouldn't dare go too near. I'd hate it, too, if he came out

suddenly. He's told some of the village children, before now, that he'll throw them over the cliff, if he catches them staring."

"I'm not staring—not in that way. I don't believe he'd mind," said Margot slowly.

But it was with a little shiver, too, that she herself turned away. There was something distinctly eerie and mysterious and—sad about the silent little dwelling-place perched up on the side of the cliff. "Doesn't anyone go near him, then?" she inquired.

"Well, anyhow, the gipsies don't. They think he's uncanny. They say he bewitches their horses; and you'll never find a horse grazing over here. Oh, I say,—why, Margot, *look*!"

They had been retracing their steps, but Stella suddenly stood still and pointed.

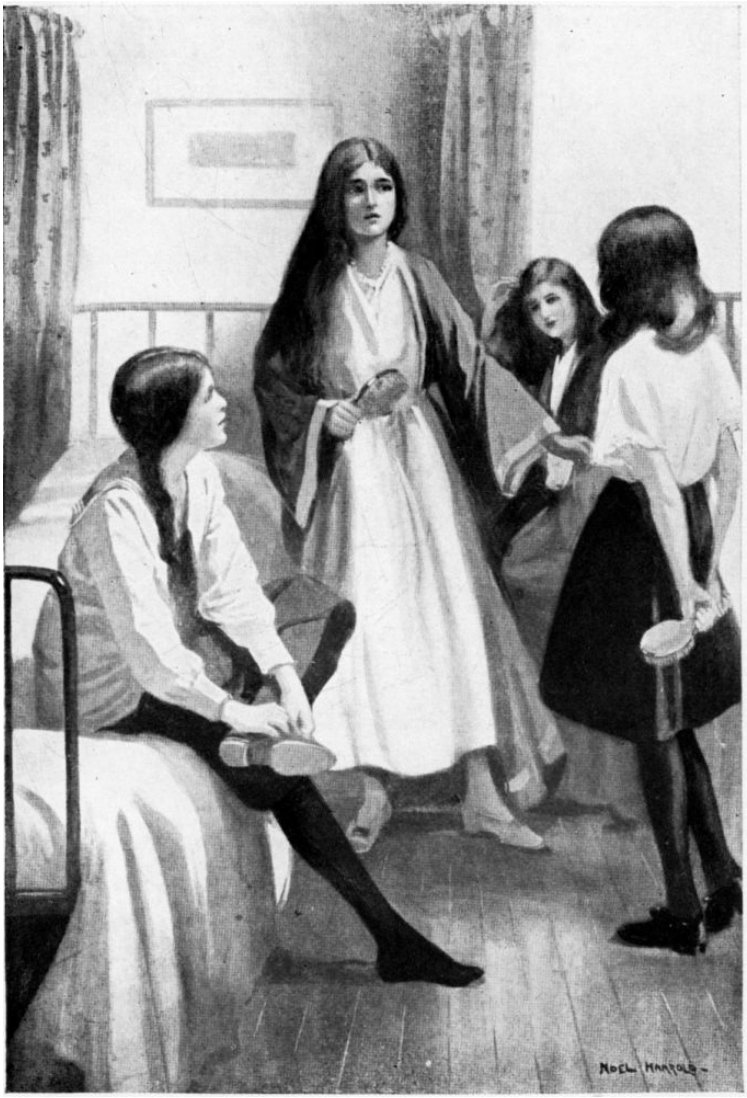
"Well, I never!" exclaimed Margot, with interest.

"It's one of the tents. Then the gipsies *haven't* all gone. Look, there are two horses as well!"

"What a queer thing!" said Margot.

"Isn't it!" Stella was as keen as mustard, instantly. "Perhaps they're not our gipsies after all! Generally, all of *them* travel together; I've never seen one tent left behind. I say, Margot, let's go nearer. Mother didn't exactly say we weren't to look at them."

"No. It's all right, I should think," agreed Margot, "so long as we don't talk to them. I say...." She had forgotten the "Little House" entirely in her excitement. "Stella, I've got an idea. Let's pretend we're in the



“ ‘I’m coming to that,’ declared Stella, ‘if only you’ll listen.’ ”
(See page 120.)

Bush. Let’s lie low and wriggle along through the heather like the ‘blacks’ do. They know all the woodcraft ways, and Long Jake’s taught me some. We’ll....”

“Oh, *do* let’s,” begged her hostess with delight.

"Here, keep behind me." Margot's eyes were dancing. "Oh, isn't it jolly to be away from rules for a bit?—though school is topping, of course. Still, keep down; don't raise your head, and we'll slither through the heather. There don't seem to be any gipsies about; only the two horses, and they're awfully tired-out looking ones. If you want to warn me, click with your tongue! *That* sound hardly carries at all; and it's what the natives used to do."

"*Clic-c-ck!*" came suddenly from behind her, after about ten minutes' stealthy wriggling.

It was quite certain, too, what the "click" was intended to convey. Margot had been just about to sound the warning herself. Out through the tent flap had emerged two gipsy men.

"I say, do they know we're here!" whispered the excited Tenderfoot to her guide.

"I don't think so. Better keep to 'clicking' though. The horses will see us first; you may be sure of that."

Margot was right. One of the weary-looking animals stopped grazing and looked across, as the sudden snap of a twig proclaimed to him that some kind of life was stirring close at hand. "Here," whispered Margot, "let's roll into this clump of scrub. We can't turn and slither back till the men have gone; and we may as well have a good look at the horses."

The points of the horses, however, did not seem exactly worth the stealthy journey. They were a couple of rather dispirited creatures, evidently picked up cheap at the last fair. Ill-kempt and shaggy of mane and tail; tethered up, too, just across the next ridge, where they cropped the moorland grass.

“I say, I hope the men won’t notice us,” remarked Stella, when they were safely hidden in their bushes. “They’d never understand a tracking practice; they’d think we were spying on them, and they might be furious.”

The gipsies, however, were evidently in no way aware that they had been secretly tracked, *à la* Australian aborigine, over their own bit of common land! The pair of them, still standing outside the tent flap which they had carefully pulled to after them, turned interested eyes on the horses.

“The far un hed ought to bring in a matter of ten quid at Rowsley Fair,” remarked one.

“He hed ought. If these here troubles blow over....” The second man cast a half-fearful look behind him at the tent flap against which they were standing. “But we doesn’t want to bring the police down on us. There’s no knowing now, how-some-ever, whether we’ll not be turned back, and all....”

There was plainly some mystery hanging over them. Their words hinted at such a fact; their looks made it positive.

“I say, Stella.” Margot was lying flat on the turf. “I simply can’t help hearing, so we may as well hear properly while we’re about it. The ‘blacks’ say that if they press their ears to the ground they can hear much better, and so....”

The ears of both girls were pressed close to cold Mother Earth. Were these horse-stealers? Margot’s overseas experience came back to her mind with zest. There was something on foot, certainly, and it was a relief to her pent-up feelings of excitement when, suddenly, both men, after a whispered colloquy, turned back and re-entered the tent.

“Stella, now we can *really* talk. Have you been hearing?”

“Yes, *and* noticing. Isn’t it queer? Margot, let’s go back. They’ve gone now. And I’m sure....”

Stella, with relief in her tones as she spoke, prepared to slither back in the direction from which they had come.

“You don’t think—for the bravery prize—?” suggested Margot tentatively. “Suppose.... Bushrangers, you know....”

But suddenly she stopped speaking. The blood of both the Saturday adventurers turned cold. For screams rang through the air. They came from the tent; so much was certain. The cries were evidently those of a child; and just as evidently those of a child in pain.

CHAPTER XI

TO THE RESCUE

"OH!" Margot sprang to her feet. Indignation and fury were in her eyes and in her voice. "Stella, they are hurting it!"

"What?" Stella, already half-turning in the direction of home, gave reluctant ear.

"What, indeed! It's a child, of course. Oh, I knew quite well there was something up. Didn't you hear those men mention the police? They've stolen it, or something. Anyhow, it's unhappy. *Listen!*"

"Well, we can't do anything. Not against two great men. And some of the gipsies are horrid. Margot, come on!"

"Come on, indeed!" said Margot, listening with might and main to the pitiful sobs.

"Let's go back home, then, and we'll fetch father," suggested Stella.

"Why, you said your own self that he would be out to tea!" returned the downright Margot, quivering with rage. "*You* can go home, if you like, but I'm not coming. Why, before anyone gets back to help they might——"

Margot took a step in the direction of the tent.

"Oh, don't be so stupid, Margot!" Stella seized her skirts. "They might do—anything to you! Oh, I wish you wouldn't be so—so Australian! It's not even sensible. One girl against two great gipsies! Even if you *did* go inside, what would you do?"

“I’d not be—one girl, if you came too,” Margot informed her. “Here, you’re right in one thing; we’d better get the men out of the tent, first, and then go in! Only, how....”

“There’s no way. How could there be? I’m going home,” said Stella.

“Of all the *cowards*! That’s what *you* are! I’d rather be—Australian, as you call it, than a coward and leave a baby crying!” Stella’s guest of the afternoon turned upon her hostess with flashing eyes. “And after talking of winning the bravery shield!”

The mention of the shield certainly seemed to revive, to a slight extent, Stella’s departing nerve.

“I’m not a coward, and if it’s for the shield——” She stopped. “Only, how——? We’ll never get the shield if the gipsies kill us.”

“*Kill* us! It’s better than killing the baby, anyhow. And they won’t kill us. Look here!” Margot had been thinking rapidly. “There’s two of us, and there’s two things to do. (Oh dear, *do* listen to that baby!) Stella, if I get the men out, will you go in? If they’re not there—only the baby, you know—you couldn’t possibly be frightened, could you? And you could rescue it while they are both away.”

“I wouldn’t mind rescuing a baby,” admitted Stella, with her mental eye on the bravery shield, “so long as—I mean, so long as you’ll do something to keep the men away from me all the time.”

“Leave that to me, then. You lie here—till I’ve done it. You absolutely needn’t move till you see the gipsy men come out of the tent. Then, well, they’ll not be back, I promise you, till you’ve had time to get hold of the child. It sounds like a

small one, anyway. I'm sure you can carry it until I meet you."

"But——" faltered Stella.

But, as the child's cries broke out again, Margot darted from her side. As she went, she tugged violently at the leather girdle of her out-to-tea jumper frock.

"Stella, you remember that you've promised. Be sure——" panted Margot as she ran.

Then she fled across the ridge to the grazing quarters of the two seedy-looking steeds.

"Margot! Margot! Come back! Where *are* you going?" screamed her hostess after her.

But there was no recalling Margot, now. Having armed herself with the leather girdle she proceeded, first of all, to untether the horses with practised fingers, and then, emitting surprising yells, to whip the pair of them into a canter which led away across the moor. Possibly, as she herself hoped, the horses understood that she had no ill-feeling whatever towards them, and that her banshee-like cries were not meant to terrify them, but their masters, who had recently returned into the tent. The said owners, whether attracted by the sound of galloping hoofs or by the startling yells, were certainly not long before they issued pell-mell and post-haste through the tent flap.

"Oh!" the amazed Stella gasped. "Oh! Isn't she frightful! Oh, I suppose I'll simply *have* to hurry up and go in before they get back."

But Margot, true to her word, had certainly arranged that her companion should have ample time for her part of the rescue, as well as the easiest share of the enterprise. By this

time the horses had been urged into a gallop, and their owners' voices were sounding but faintly over the moor. Stella, though shaking in every limb, approached the flap of the tent.

As she entered, the cries sounded louder than ever. There was certainly a child in trouble there.

A little child, too; scarcely more than a baby, as its would-be rescuer could faintly see. Stella prepared to perform her share of the act of bravery as expeditiously as she could.

"Here, come along. Stop crying, do!" she remarked, picking up the baby from the bed on which it lay, "or they'll be back. You're all right now; they won't hurt you any more. Or, at least, I suppose you are. I do hope and trust you really *are* a stolen baby, because, if not——"

Her remarks, as she held the child in her arms and proceeded to retrace her steps through the semi-gloom to the entrance of the tent, were suddenly interrupted.

Not by the arrival of a panting Margot, however, but by the entry of a hastening gipsy woman.

"What's this! And where's 'er dada, eh? What! You 'ere; and what be *you* doing, whoever you be, in honest folkses homes?"

"It's——" Stella turned, with shaking knees, to face the speaker.

"Speak up, now! How did you get in, I'd like to know; with me on'y away at doctor's to arsk 'im to step up. An' leaving the baby's dada in charge, an' all. And now—what's this? 'Ere, give the baby to me!"

"I didn't want to, I'm sure! And—I'm the rector's daughter, if you want to know," added Stella grandly. "And

the baby was crying horribly. We just.... Is it crying because it's *ill*?" she suddenly inquired.

"Rector's daughter, eh? I'm sure I begs yer pardon, miss." The gipsy was evidently impressed. "An' if so be as you stopped to quieten the baby, I'm sure you're kindly welcome. But what with these 'ere spots coming out all over it, an' it being so fretful, and the police being that keerful on account of all the scarling fever what's about—coming round the camp, they did, an' tellin' us as we was to notify 'em if it starts—well, we dursn't go on to Rowsley Fair, we dursn't, without the doctor said we might. An' there's three times this blessed day as I've bin down to doctor's. An' now he's on his way up, an' he ses that sure as fate it's the scarling fever. What with the 'orspital for the baby; and the men 'aving lorsted Rowsley Fair with it all——"

The woman began to weep.

"What!" yelled Stella.

It was the last word that she uttered within the gipsy tent. The next was addressed to Margot, whom she met returning speedily over the moor in the direction of the camp.

"The men have got the horses back all right," she shouted. "I say—*What!* d'you mean to say you haven't got the baby?" she finished up angrily.

Her questions were interrupted by the torrents of Stella's wrath.

"It's your fault! I'm sure I didn't want to go in! I tried to make you go home. You can't say I didn't. If you hadn't kept talking about the shield, I would never——"

Stella burst into furious crying.

“And now, scarlet fever! And I lifted it up and carried it. And it’s got spots. And that stuffy tent! And ... I’ve never had scarlet fever!”

“Do you mean to say that the baby wasn’t—being hurt, or anything?” inquired Margot slowly.

“Oh!” Stella was sobbing outright. She could answer no question with regard to the baby. “And I’ll miss the match, even if I don’t get fever. For I’m sure I’ll have to be in quarantine for ages. Oh, come home to mother quick! Oh!” finished up Stella, too miserable to remember points of etiquette, “I *wish* I hadn’t asked you to tea!”

Margot, also, wished the same wish, as, miserably conscious of her shortcomings, she faced a scandalized Mrs. Hill and listened to Stella’s sobbing account of the recent escapade, while she mentally agreed with Stella that it certainly was all her own (Margot’s) fault. She wished the same wish all the way back to school, whither she was instantly dispatched. “For you had better not stay here, and not come near Stella, since she’s probably caught it already, you see. What? You’ve had it? Well, of course, that is very fortunate for you; but for poor Stella there will certainly be ten days’ quarantine at *least*! Go straight to Miss Slater,” continued the harassed Mrs. Hill, “and tell her—everything. What it must be to be a head mistress when even a beautiful thing like a prize for bravery can put such dreadful mischief into children’s heads, I *don’t* know!” concluded the rector’s wife.

“It wasn’t—because of the bravery prize that I did it. I’d have done it—if there hadn’t ever been a bravery prize,” blurted out Margot; “and I’m most dreadfully sorry. And if there’s anything I can do?”

Do! She had done enough already. Mrs. Hill hurried indoors without delay to find carbolic, and hardly heard the last strains of Margot's fervent apologies.

There was carbolic, too, for Margot, when she reached the Cliff School with her confession. Also a week-end of nights spent in the fastness of the San. But first of all an interview with Miss Slater.

"You, yourself, Margot, have not run any risk whatever, I think and hope; under the circumstances, though, we will take certain precautions. But Stella certainly must not return for ten days; though I hope she will *not* miss the match." The head mistress looked at Margot's flushed and unhappy face.

"Poor Mrs. Hill, and poor Stella!" said the head mistress quietly. "Margot, you must really try to conform to English ways."

That was all.

"Only——" as Margot confided to Gretta later on, "Gretta, what else could I have done? You see, I truly thought the baby *was* unhappy, so what else *could* I do?"

CHAPTER XII

THE HOUSE ON THE CLIFF

STELLA'S quarantine was over at last.

"And what do you think!" exclaimed the returned prodigal. "I've got the most exciting thing to tell you. Just wait till to-night—all of you! You *will* open your eyes!"

The girls addressed, being her three dormitory partners, opened their eyes instantly and widely; and with one accord, although the place was the cloak-room, and the time just five minutes before prayers on Monday morning, begged for instant disclosures.

"But I can't!" urged Stella. "I've only just come, though I'm sure I begged the boy to drive quickly! And if the bell rings before I'm undressed I'll be late." She pulled feverishly at her coat, and tried to kick off one of her shoes at the same moment, just as Miss Read's voice sounded urgently from the door.

"No more talking, and all the girls who are ready will go straight to their class-rooms. The prayer-bell will ring almost at once."

With a sigh that the command should have come at such a tantalizing moment, the friends dispersed, Josy to seek the Fourth Form room, Gretta and Margot to make their way to the Upper Third, while Stella continued to undress in frantic haste in the empty cloak-room.

"What is it, do you think?" asked Margot, when she and Gretta had reached their respective desks, and were seated

side by side. “She seemed awfully excited. Oh, and isn’t it a blessing that she didn’t get scarlet fever after all!”

“It’s something about the Hope-Scott Shield, I expect,” answered her cousin. “It’s sure to be, isn’t it? Her father’s told her something. Perhaps——” The clanging of the prayer-bell made further conversation impossible, and the expectant girls had to contain their souls in patience until the evening.

“And *now*, what is it?” demanded Josy, waving her comb and addressing the returned exile excitedly. Half-past eight had struck; the four were in their respective cubicles with the curtains drawn back, and in half an hour the light would be extinguished. “Let’s hear what you said you’d tell us.”

“You remember the ‘Little House’?” asked Stella, her eyes glistening. “Well, it’s about *that*!”

“Go on!” cried everybody in unison, and Margot’s eagerness was such that her brush flew from her hand to the opposite side of the dormitory. Since the beginning of the quarantine, and her view of the outside of the “Little House” ten days ago, she had felt the most intense desire to know more about the strange inmate whom Stella had already described as being a “miser, and quite alone, and most likely mad!” Quixotic plans had formed themselves over and over again in her mind, only to be laid aside one after another as she had realized that it would be impossible to carry out any of them, and at the same time to keep the Cliff School rules.

“All right,” and Stella’s voice grew lower in the intensity of her interest in the story she had to tell. “You know I told you that I’d never seen him—the old man, I mean. Well, on Saturday I was out driving with Jim, the boy; we were coming back from the station where we’d taken dad—he’d gone away for the Sunday to preach somewhere, you know—

and suddenly, in the dark, the pony gave a kind of shy, and when Jim pulled him up and spoke to him, there was an old, old man standing in the road!"

"I say—was it *him*?" inquired Josy. "What on earth did he want, and how did you know him if you'd never seen him before?"

"I'm coming to that," declared Stella, "if only you'll listen. When Jim pulled the pony up the old, old man came straight to me and put his hand on my arm."

An excited shiver shook all the three listening girls.

"And he said in quite a quiet, respectful kind of voice, you know: 'Excuse me, miss, but I thought the parson might be driving, and I'd be glad of a word with him.' "

"What did he mean? asked Margot breathlessly.

"Well, of course, dad's the rector, and I suppose he wanted to see him. I felt a most awfully frightened feeling, especially as I could see by the light of the carriage-lamp that his eyes looked frightfully queer; but he seemed so very old and ill that you couldn't *help* feeling sorry for him."

"And what did you say?" asked Josy excitedly.

"I said that dad had just gone away for a week, and asked if he would like to see the curate?"

"And then——?" Everyone's eyes were fixed on Stella, all brushes were suspended from their operations, and undressing was forgotten.

"Then he just turned and muttered as he went, and I could have sworn I heard him say something about a 'confession'! He went off across the moor towards the 'Little House.' "

"Oh, and *what* did you do then?" urged Margot almost in a frenzy. "You didn't leave him like that? So miserable and

old!”

“I had to,” declared Stella. “I told mother, of course, and she told the curate, and he went on Sunday afternoon and knocked ever so many times at the door of the house; but he couldn’t get any answer, though he thought he heard sounds inside, and in the end he had to come away.”

“And then——?” Margot’s voice was quite harsh in its eagerness.

“Oh, well, that’s *all*, I suppose,” announced Stella; “only I thought as you and Gretta are so keen about the ‘Little House’ that you’d like to know.”

“And you didn’t do anything else?” pursued Margot.

“Well, what else could I do?” inquired Stella impatiently. “I’ve had enough of too *much* doing, I can tell you, Margot. Mother’ll tell dad, of course, when he gets home, and he’s sure to go. What would you have done yourself, Margot, as far as that goes?”

“I don’t know,” said Margot slowly, staring at her own reflection in the glass with unseeing eyes; “but I’d have *had* to do something!”

“I think it was jolly brave of Stella not to be frightened when the pony shied and all that,” interposed the head of the dormitory, tactfully; “and I say, talking about bravery, has anyone thought of anything?”

But nothing in the way of conversation on any topic was to be got from Margot and Gretta, and if nurse had been told how long it was before the former fell asleep that night she would certainly not have believed it. Truth to tell, the impression made on Margot’s mind by Stella’s story had been such as to call up all her strongest sympathies, and she lay

awake weaving plan after plan that might be tried to relieve the imagined sufferings of the inhabitant of the "Little House," only to throw each one aside as she realized that it would be quite impossible to work from school. "Oh, those rules!" she murmured to herself; and just before she fell asleep: "Oh, if Long Jake was only here!"

Temporary relief appeared in the morning, however, in the shape of little scraps of paper, which were handed round to all the older girls in the sitting-room directly after breakfast.

"They're for your lists, you know," said Helen, who was officiating. "Write down how much you want to spend, and what you'd like for the feast, and then give them in to me, and I'll give them to Miss Read. She'll see that the things are all right, and that they're bought. It'll be best if you do it according to dormitories, and then you won't all write the same things!"

Accordingly, four pigtailed heads from Dormitory 3 met in solemn conclave in one corner of the sitting-room, and, as a result, evolved a menu that would have caused the most hardened gourmand to gasp and gasp again.

"Sardines!"—this from Margot; "and French rolls, *new* ones, to eat with them."

"Meringues—large ones with lots of cream"—this Josy's choice; "and if they have those éclairs with yellow custard in them, three of those!"

"Sausage-rolls and bath-buns"—these were decided upon by Stella and Gretta together; the former acting as adviser-in-chief in a most unselfish manner considering that no bite of the feast was to pass her lips; "and half a pound of mixed cream sweets, and some Velma chocolate."

"But we've forgotten drinks!" said the head of the dormitory gravely; "and really with all those things we shall need them."

"A good dose of Gregory's Powder'll be enough," remarked the grim voice of nurse, who had entered the room unnoticed, and now stood looking over Josy's shoulder. "If I had *my* way there'd be an end of these feasts, as you call them—a lot of silly rubbish!"

But nurse's words were laughed to scorn, for this was a privileged occasion. "Two bottles of ginger champagne and one of raspberry syrup," were added to the list; "and some apples," wrote Josy, "so long as they're nice and green; if not, then Brazil nuts!"

This completed the list, and the hearts of that dormitory were at rest on the subject of the feast, at least. "You'll be lucky if Miss Read lets you have a quarter of this!" laughed Helen, reading the list aloud. "Everybody—listen! Sausage-rolls, meringues, sardines, Brazil nuts!"

She was interrupted by a howl of misery from Sybil—poor Sybil of the sweet tooth!

"I think it's just hateful for everyone to have a dormitory feast but us; and such lovely, lovely things! And I've got such lots of pocket-money that auntie gave me!"

"Do be quiet, Sybil," adjured Gretta, feeling very sorry for her little sister, but knowing from old experience that sympathetic treatment was of little use at such a time. "Perhaps Miss Read will let me keep something for you; I'll ask her, if you'll stop crying."

"She won't, she won't," sobbed Sybil. "They're all just the hor——!"

“Cheero, Sybil!” interposed Josy; “there’s the match to watch on Saturday, anyway!”

“Yes, that’s the *best* part of the day,” agreed Margot.

“It isn’t, it isn’t,” sobbed Sybil, quite given over to her grief and temper; “and I’ll not go near the old match, and I’ll pay you out, everyone of you—just see if I don’t!”

But not one of the listening girls guessed how she would keep her word.

CHAPTER XIII

A REBELLIOUS PLAN

TO say that Sybil was angry would be using too mild a word to express the state of feelings that filled her troubled breast. She was just as furious as any little girl could be, and truly to outward appearance her lot at present was a hard one.

To be denied any participation in the dormitory feast (and to such a sweet-toothed little damsel the magnitude of the treat was tremendous), and to be expected to take comfort—forsooth!—from the fact that she would be allowed to watch the hockey-match was, according to Sybil's present state of ideas, to add insult to injury.

A week ago, before the feast had been mooted, no one had been more excited and delighted at the prospective match than the child herself, but now the complexion of the case was altered. The feast which she was not to enjoy loomed largely and lusciously before her, while the hitherto alluring match had fallen in her opinion to the position of an irritating event without interest or excitement. And now here was Margot—Margot, only six months her senior, and yet included in the band of fortunate older ones!—suggesting that this match was the "best part" of the day's entertainment. Sybil flounced angrily out of the sitting-room and, leaving a group of amused and half-sympathetic bigger girls, betook herself in tears to the playground, to be found there presently by her chum and slave, Adela, in a very great temper indeed.

"I'll just pay them all out!" she exclaimed for the twentieth time, feeling very glad of a sympathetic listener and waxing

proportionately eloquent.

"But how?" inquired Adela, who was not very original-minded, and who considered her friend to be a monument of wisdom.

"I'll not go *near* their old hockey match," bragged Sybil; "and I'll have—yes, I *will* have a dormitory feast!"

"Oh, *how*?" Adela's eyes opened wide, and her mouth wider. "In *our* dormitory, do you mean? Oh, could we really have one?"

"It's easy enough," said Sybil, drying her tears, and wondering how on earth it was to be done; "only—I'm not going to tell anyone—not even you!"

Repeated entreaties from her excited friend only served to render Sybil's silence more profound. Truth to tell, she was feeling quite concerned as to how she was to carry the affair through and thus maintain a reputation for daring with Adela. She, therefore, with the courage born of despair, made up her mind recklessly that it would be "all right in the end," and implicated herself still further by acquainting her remaining dormitory companion with the fact of her intentions.

"*We're* going to have a feast on Saturday, *too*!" she announced that night from behind her cubicle curtains; "and if either of you say one single word about it you shan't have one tiny crumb of anything!"

"Does nurse know?" inquired Joan Curtis, aged eleven-and-three-quarters, and previously mentioned in these pages as being the youngest of the Cliff School girls.

"No, she doesn't," snapped Sybil; "but if we don't ask her about it she can't say we're not to, and so it'll be all right."

This logical remark seemed to appear unanswerable to the other two, probably because the prospect of a feast of their own was such an alluring one, and there the matter rested—for *them*; while for Sybil began a time of wild and exciting imaginings and brain-rackings as she wondered however she could procure enough materials for the longed-for festivity!

It was small wonder, then, that during the following days she went about her duties and played her games with a somewhat pensive expression of face; and sympathetic Margot, guessing—wrongly—what was the matter with her little cousin, cast about in her mind for some way to mitigate the dreadful disappointment. Her ideas voiced themselves in a letter written with Miss Slater's express permission and received by Mrs. Fleming during the middle of the week.

"DARLING MOTHER," wrote Margot. "You haven't answered about whether you're coming to the match, and *do* come if you can, because Josy and Stella want to see you, and Stella's coming on purpose. Gretta and I didn't tell Sybil we'd asked you so that she should have a ripping surprise, and please bring some of those chocolates she liked so much at York, because her dormer isn't going to have a feast and ours is, and she minds much more than we should, because she's not so keen on hockey yet. Your loving MARGOT."

The letter received in answer proved that Mrs. Fleming had understood the somewhat rambling contents of her daughter's note; it arrived on Friday morning, the day before that settled upon for the eventful match, and both Margot and Gretta, walking arm-in-arm round the hockey-field after breakfast, read and re-read the missive, at each time of reading commenting wonderingly on one particular sentence:

"I shall love to come on Saturday, and shall drive over in the car," wrote Mrs. Fleming, in the large, generous-looking handwriting that her daughter declared "looked just like mother," "but I expect you will be surprised to hear that it is the last time I shall be able to use it. Tell Gretta that I have something very important to talk to her about, and I hope she and I will be able to get a little quiet time together."

"Why, whatever can it be?" asked Margot for the twentieth time.

Gretta's mind flew, as it almost always did, musicwards. "Could it be about my fiddle?" she asked. "I mean, could Monsieur Villon have complained or anything?"

"Now, Gretta, you *know* he couldn't," laughed her cousin; "Miss Slater's just as pleased about your music as she can be, and you know that day Miss Read said to nurse, when you cut your finger at supper, that sometime you'd be insuring your right hand for thousands of pounds, like—what's his name?—Kreisler, isn't it? Well, that's the very thing it *couldn't* be!"

Gretta gave a sigh of relief. "Oh, I *did* hope not, of course. It couldn't be dad, could it?"

"Oh, no, I'm sure it couldn't be that, either. He wrote to you himself, yesterday, you know—that letter where he said that everything was going on well, and that Ann had learned to cook bacon properly. Depend upon it, Gretta, *that's* nothing to be frightened about! But why, oh, *why*, is it the last time that they're using the car? I can't believe that dad wants a new one already! It's one of those new Daimlers, you know, and he said that its running was perfect—'mounts a hill like a bird!'—that's what he said in his very last letter, and it wasn't so long ago."

"Well, let's wait, anyhow; it's only till to-morrow," said Gretta, "and won't it be too simply lovely to see auntie again!"

It was difficult to "keep" the surprise from Sybil for even one day; particularly as she was looking so grave just now, Margot thought, and after consultation with Gretta, she decided on dealing out a tiny piece of excitement to her younger cousin as a kind of tonic.

"Hallo, Sybil!" she said, meeting the damsel alone in the cloak-room that afternoon; "I've hardly spoken to you for days."

"I don't *want* to talk to you," said Sybil, head-in-air, and very distant and grown-up in manner; "you're not half as nice as I used to think you were, Margot, before you came back from Australia. First you won't keep your promise and go to the 'Little House' with me; and, now, you just put on airs and eat feasts in your old dormitory, although you're only six months older than me!"

"It isn't *my* fault that I'm in that dormer," began Margot, still good-humouredly. "Nurse put me in it; and I *didn't* promise to go to the 'Little House' with you, Sybil. I only said I'd think about it. You'd much better be glad you didn't go, instead of being so cross about it, because you might have been most awfully frightened, I know."

"Who says I'm *not* going?" inquired Sybil, flouncing round angrily. "And who says we're not going to have a feast? You and Gretta can walk about talking secrets, but I've got a secret, too."

"Well, I'd meant to tell you part of ours," Margot flared up at her irritating small cousin; "and now I've a good mind not to! Gretta!" she called, as her elder cousin opened the cloak-

room door. “Here’s Sybil being a perfect baby! I can’t *help* being cross with her!”

“What! With auntie coming to-morrow!” The joyous sound in Gretta’s voice showed that her words were true.

“Oh, if *that’s* your secret!” Even the head-in-air Sybil unbent at the news. She pranced round the cloak-room in joy, hockey-stick in hand. Such, indeed, was the magic of Mrs. Fleming’s name that in five minutes, everything forgotten except that to-morrow would bring Auntie Tib, the three were off to the hockey-ground as gaily as though moods and mysteries had never been!

“ ‘*Long Jake*—why, it *is* you!’ cried Margot.” (See page 150.)

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOCKEY MATCH

THE eventful day on which the Cliff School was to play the Redford School girls dawned clear and cloudless.

"It's perfectly ripping weather for the match," announced the captain from the bottom of the breakfast-table. "I've been shaking with nervousness all the week for fear it should be wet, and we should have to scratch it; but now there's no fear of *that*, and the best thing we can do is to go out and have a look at the field. Who'll help to roll the pitch?"

Almost everyone at the long table clamoured aloud for the privilege.

"But you must all remember," said Miss Read from her place, "that this isn't a holiday exactly; although, of course, you're all free to watch the match in the afternoon, and there *is* the feast to-night! This morning's preparation must be done just as thoroughly as though to-day were the most ordinary Saturday of the term, and it will be best to leave the field to look after itself until all your school-work is finished."

A few pigtailed heads shook themselves despairingly at these words of wisdom, and a few solemn voices were heard to proclaim that *they* "couldn't learn a single word" with such momentous doings ahead, but one and all suppressed their excited feelings manfully, and in less than half an hour four and twenty heads, bent industriously over the same number of desks in the preparation room, testified to the struggles that the girls were making to perform their usual duties.

Two hours later, Margot, traversing the corridor, inky-faced, and laden with exercise-books, but triumphant in the knowledge of lessons prepared, met Gretta emerging from the music-room, her violin-case in her hand.

"I've done, Gretta, have you? Oh, ripping, isn't it! Let's fetch Josy; she's finished, I know, and we'll go and roll the ground."

On the field were Adela and Sybil, muffled in coats by nurse's orders, and walking along arm in arm, with all the air of a pair of conspirators on some mysterious mission bent.

"Come on, you two!" shouted Josy, puffing with her exertions. "Come and help. This roller's jolly heavy!"

"*They* won't come," announced Joan Curtis, the school-baby, pushing manfully, and evidently feeling rather neglected by her friends; "they're talking secrets, and they won't let me hear."

"Secrets! Rot!" laughed Josy. "Come and push, you two kids!" she called again. "It's not fair to leave this for the team to do; they'll need every jolly scrap of strength they've got for this afternoon."

"If you mean *us*," said Sybil, turning and surveying the breathless quartette with what Josy called "the most utter cheek!" in her face, "we're *not* kids, and we're not coming! You can just roll your old grass yourselves!"

"All right, just wait till Helen comes along, young lazy-bones," shouted Josy cheerily, and bent herself energetically to the task in hand.

"I can't *think* what's come over Sybil lately," said Gretta to Margot. "She's so *frightfully* cross."

“Oh, mother’ll put her right,” declared her cousin with assurance, pushing manfully, “just wait till she comes.”

But things were to prove very different that afternoon from what was expected. The girls met at dinner—the team sedulously avoiding all puddings, while speaking longingly of the evening’s feast—and listened at the close of the meal to Miss Read’s final announcement.

“All of you are free after dinner,” she said, “to watch the match. The Redford girls get here at two o’clock, and Helen, you, as captain, must see that they are made at home by our team. The rest of you had better be on the field. Tea will be ready in the hall, nurse says, as soon as the match is over—that will be about a quarter to four, I expect, as the first whistle sounds at two-thirty. Those of you who have friends must look after them and see that they have tea; the team must look after the Redford girls, and all the rest of you must look after yourselves all the afternoon. Nurse and I shall both be busy the whole time with all kinds of preparations.”

If anyone had glanced in Sybil’s direction during the utterance by the house-mistress of her final remark they might have noticed a flush of excitement rise suddenly to her cheeks; but nobody did, and her face had resumed the rather peevish expression that it had worn for the last few days by the time grace had been said and it was time for the girls to leave the dining-room.

“Come on, Gretta and Margot!” exclaimed Josy, as soon as they were free; “let’s go to the window that looks on the side gate and watch for the Redford girls. They always drive over from their school, you know; it’s about four miles along the coast beyond this.”

The two friends agreed rapturously. Mrs. Fleming wouldn't arrive just yet, Margot declared, since the time of the match had, by mistake, been omitted from her daughter's letter, and Miss Slater would not sanction the sending of a wire to repair the mistake. Besides which, all the non-players were exceedingly anxious to view the rival team, and to decide from their appearance by methods of their own whether the antagonists were likely to prove victors or victims of to-day's match.

"They don't *look* as if they'd been in any kind of training," announced Josy sententiously, when after half an hour's waiting at last the brake drew up, and a dozen exceedingly healthy-looking specimens of girlhood jumped down. "See that one by the driver! She's a perfect tub!"

"But there's that thin one with short hair; look at *her*!" adjured Margot critically. "She's got eyes everywhere *already*, and she looks as though she's got splendid muscle, don't you think so?"

"Not so good as Helen's, *I* bet," said someone else coming up behind. The conversation ceased abruptly as the observers rushed round to the school-entrance to watch the arrival of the visitors more closely.

Once in the field, Josy was mortified to find that the girl she had designated as a "tub" appeared to be the most important player of all and the captain of the team; a most responsible and energetic person, of whom the rest of her team stood in the deepest awe.

The mistaken one groaned in her horror. "If *that* one's the captain, and looks like *that*, what *must* the others be, for they look quite decent players! They'll beat us to splinters, I *know* they will!"

"They won't," adjured Margot, stoutly. "Why, look at *our* team, and remember the *days* that they've had no pudding. I'd back our team anywhere, wouldn't you, Gretta?"

The sudden sounding of the umpire's whistle gave an exciting thrill to the onlookers, and the match began.

"Oh, I *wish* mother was here! Everyone else's people have come!" groaned Margot. "If *only* I hadn't been such an idiot as to forget to put the time!"

"And I can't think why Stella hasn't turned up yet," remarked Gretta. "She said she would be sure to be here at the start, didn't she?"

That question was answered on the instant by the appearance of Stella herself, who was seen to be advancing in a breathless rush across the field, waving her arms in a state of wild excitement.

"Oh, they've started! I *knew* they would have! *How* unlucky I always am! What's the score? Any goals? Oh, I *am* glad I'm in time to see the first," she announced in a single breath, as she reached the side of her three friends. "Jim *wouldn't* hurry, and I knew we'd be late!"

"Hallo, Stella!" cried the three in unison, but with only a very small fragment of attention to spare for the new-comer and her remarks, as their eyes followed jealously the journeyings up and down the field of the hockey ball. "Good! Helen!—Play UP!"

The shouting died down a little, and Stella, always conversational, began again.

"Oh, I've something to tell you. You, Gretta, especially. I saw——"

“Shut up, Stella, till half-time, can’t you?” This from Josy, who could find interest in nothing but the progress of the game.

“But I *must* tell Gretta! Gretta, I saw——!”

The whistle sounded, and there was a thunder of clapping and stamping, while voices shrill and clear applauded the Cliff School for the first goal of the game.

“I wonder how Sybil’s enjoying it,” said Gretta, pink with excitement, and glancing round the assembled crowd of onlookers in search of her little sister.

“But that’s what I *mean*!” began Stella again. “Gretta, I *saw* Sybil. I was driving up, about a mile away, and she was walking——”

“What!” Margot and Gretta turned simultaneously. “Sybil —a mile away! But how *could* she be?”

“Well, she was, anyway. I *would* have stopped the trap but I was so frightfully late. I’ve been trying to tell you for ages, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“And you let her go on?” Margot was crimson. “Stella, how could you? Gretta, what could Sybil have been doing? Sybil—a mile away!”

“I can’t imagine.” Gretta was shaking with anxiety; the match was forgotten, and she turned for help to her cousin. “Margot, have you any idea? Could she be unhappy and be trying to get home? I never thought—Oh, how selfish I’ve been.”

“You’ve not,” said Margot, thinking rapidly. “I know what it is. She’s off to the ‘Little House’; that’s where she’s gone; and it’s my fault, not yours. She’ll get there, too, if she was a mile away when Stella saw her. She must have started the

minute after dinner. Oh, Gretta, and she'll be terrified if she really meets that old man, and goes to his house and——"

"Well, *I* didn't know," began Stella, rather shamefacedly.

"Look here, Stella, is your trap waiting?" burst in Margot. "I'm going after her. May I ask your boy to drive me? I'll catch her up, perhaps, before she gets there, and bring her back."

"I suppose you can," Stella was beginning rather doubtfully, but Gretta and Josy burst in: "Look here, Margot, let's ask Miss Read what to do. We're not allowed——"

"There isn't any time," said Margot angrily; "and you *know* that Miss Read said she'd be busy all the afternoon. I'm going this instant, whatever you say, and I don't care if I *am* breaking rules—there's nothing else to do."

She rushed across the field as she spoke to the path that led to the school entrance, leaving the others to look after her with anxious faces.

CHAPTER XV

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

"THERE," said Margot, breathlessly, "Stella said that you'd drive me down towards the station; the way you've just come, you know—— Can I get into the trap?"

She stood hatless and excited, looking up into the face of the rector's garden-boy, who was standing at the pony's head. He stared down at her sheepishly enough, and with the most evident surprise at such an unexpected proposal.

"But, Miss Stella, she said I wor to wait for her," he volunteered at last. "Them wor my orders—to wait for Miss Stella."

"But I can't help *that*, I'm afraid," urged Margot. "I've got to go; so do you mind getting in, and we'll start."

But the lad still stared on, and made no movement of any kind. Margot stamped her foot with annoyance.

"But Stella said—— Well, go and ask her if you like. She's over there." She pointed vaguely in the direction of the hockey-field as she spoke, and the boy turned his head.

"Well, if Miss Stella gives me the orders herself!"

"Go and ask her, I said," enjoined Margot. "I'll look after the pony. I know him quite well. Oh, do hurry, there's the most tremendously important thing to do!"

Much overawed by Margot's assurance of manner, the boy, with a parting "Whoa there, now!" to the pony, delivered up the reins and departed on his errand.

"If Miss Stella wor to say——" were his last words.

"Of course she will," insisted Margot. "Oh, do hurry!"

But evidently such a verb was unknown in the vocabulary of the rector's Jim; for five minutes Margot stood at the pony's head in a fever and ferment of excitement; then her powers of endurance gave out.

"Oh, how *slow* they are in England!" she lamented, "and that boy, I declare he's——!" A sudden idea flashed into her mind before even she had finished the sentence. "I'll just not wait for him," she said; "I'll *go*! Stella'll guess when she finds the trap gone; I'm *sure* I can drive quicker than *he* would, too; and who knows where Sybil mayn't be by this time?"

Without losing another moment she hopped up into the trap, shut the little door with an incisive click and, with a professional shake to the reins, was off and away down the road in the direction of the "Little House."

If it hadn't been for the nature of her errand Margot would have been in the seventh heaven of delight. Behind her was the Cliff School, with its rules and regulations; even its delights—her friends and the hockey match—were forgotten for a time; before her was the long winding road with the moors on either hand, and there was no sound to be heard but the thud-thud of the pony's feet. She felt almost as though the old days were back again; that she was as free as the air, and as wild as the gulls that were circling round the cliffs. "Almost" she felt like this, but not quite, for deep down in her heart the strongest feeling of all was fear lest Sybil, having ventured forth to the "Little House" in a state of pique against her sister and her cousin, might come to harm if she were not turned back in time.

"For it *is* partly my fault," Margot found herself reiterating in time to the pony's trotting feet; "and I *have* been rather a beast to her lately; and if she gets frightened at the gipsies, or anything——"

Margot touched the pony lightly with the whip at the prompting of the thought, and urged him onwards, only half-conscious that in her heart was being born a new kind of affection for the aggravating little cousin who was so "frightfully babyish."

"Of course, *I've* been in Australia, and she hasn't; and *I've* had mother——; and I'm a perfect beast to think her always so silly, when it isn't her fault hardly at all." This was the final summing-up of Margot's thoughts, and perhaps it was just as well that she had finished her recriminations, for at that very minute the rector's pony, having traversed about half of the way to the station, thought well to fall down suddenly on his two front knees!

The truth was that he wasn't used to being driven so furiously, on account of the fact that the rector had picked him up cheap at a sale because of a previous accident that had left him with two broken knees. The experienced Margot should have *known* that, she told herself furiously.

"If I'd had the sense to look at his knees before I started I'd have known they'd been broken before," she announced in contrition and annoyance, as she stood in the middle of the road surveying the victim, who, plainly sorry for himself, had scrambled up again with his driver's help, and now presented a desolate spectacle.

"*What* would dad think of me?" continued the aforesaid driver. "He *would* say I was an ass. Yes, I'm sorry enough for you," here she addressed the martyred beast, "for you can't

be driven a single mile farther; but what *am* I to do about Sybil! I can't leave you here."

Her monologue might have lasted longer, for there certainly seemed no way out of the difficulty, had not the sudden appearance of a strange man, far away round a corner of the road, given Margot a clue to the best mode of procedure.

"I'll ask whoever this is," she thought to herself, "to take the pony back to the rectory for me and explain, and apologize most fearfully. Then I can cut over the moors to the 'Little House'; it can't be more than a mile away! It's a good thing I know the way that Stella showed me." She sat down on a milestone to contemplate the results of her reckless driving, and to wait till the stranger should turn the next corner and come into view again.

"Coo-ee!" she shouted presently, as soon as he appeared within hailing distance, standing up and waving her hand.

"Coo-ee!" responded the stranger in an equally practised manner.

"If it doesn't feel just exactly like being back in Australia!" laughed Margot to herself as she advanced to meet the new friend, whip in hand. "Why, it looks something like——! But it just couldn't be——! *Long Jake*—why, it *is* you!"

"Seems like it, doesn't it!" said a tremendously tall and broad-shouldered individual, clad in tweeds, who, with a very wide smile, came striding towards the amazed girl. "I recognized your 'Coo-ee!' "

"But how on earth did you get here?" Margot's eyes opened their widest; her surprise was so great that at first she did not realize how delighted she was at this most unexpected appearance.

"Well, how did *you* get here, yourself?" inquired Long Jake. "I made up my mind to pay a call on a young lady in a fashionable boarding-school, and instead of finding her sitting primly in the parlour at work on her sampler, as I expected, I discover her in the middle of the road doctoring a broken-kneed pony, with signs of furious driving strewn around for all to see!"

"Well, anyway," said Margot, disregarding his last remarks, "I'm perfectly thankful you've come. There's not a single sampler at our school—I expect the boys' schools have used them all up—but there really is an adventure for you to help in, if you'll only listen." She proceeded animatedly to lay the facts of the case before him, and the new-comer listened with amusement in his face, that changed to interest as the tale continued.

When she had finished he went to the head of the pony, that stood rather miserably cropping the grass at the side of the road. "Seems to me you've been breaking rules, Miss Margot," he remarked, "and I expect your mother will have arrived at the school by this time, and will most likely be wondering pretty forcibly where you are. But if you ask for my opinion I think, as we're so far on the way to that 'Little House' of yours, that we can't do better than go straight on. I'll doctor up this chap's knees a bit though, first, and then tether him so that he'll be safe for a time; and, as you say that little cousin of yours is likely to have gone on rather a risky errand, we'll make tracks straight away in her direction and bring her back."

"Oh, I'm so glad you think so," breathed Margot in relief. "I was so afraid you might want me to go back to school, and I know I've broken rules, but I don't see how I could have

helped it. Gretta will tell mother, and she'll know I'm safe; and Sybil may be so frightened."

"Well, that settles it; for it's very likely, I should think," said Long Jake rather gravely, "if the description of the old man that you give is a pretty correct one, that it would be best to bring her back without delay. Look here, Margot, we'll lose as little time as possible. We'll go straight over the moors in the direction of the hole in the cliff, where you say the place is, and we'll cut off an easy mile that way. Can you step out, or shall I leave you here to look after the trap?"

"Rather!" declared his companion. "And, besides, Sybil knows me, you see." And accordingly "step out" the pair did, while the crippled pony forgot his woes for a while and watched them wistfully till they disappeared from his view.

"So that's the place, is it?" inquired Long Jake, after they had walked for a while. "Rum little spot, isn't it? There's been no sign of the child, though. Would she have been likely to try to get inside?"

"Well, if she's doing it for the bravery prize, of course," suggested Margot, "perhaps she might; but she's not likely to *want* to, all alone; and if he's mad and queer, like Stella says, he might frighten her awfully, you know."

"I think we'll just get there as quick as we can, and investigate when we arrive, instead of thinking of horrors. It's most likely that the child's gone back."

"But we should have passed her on the road, you see," said Margot.

Five minutes more brought the pair to the "Little House"; by this time the little girl was panting hard with her exertions and efforts to keep up with the stride of her companion; she looked apprehensively towards the windowless little place,

then, as they drew up outside, she pressed her ear to the wooden door.

"There *are* voices!" she whispered in horror.

Long Jake nodded gravely; then, without a moment's hesitation, he raised his hand and knocked a loud rat-tat.

CHAPTER XVI

SYBIL RETURNS

"WHEW!" said Josy incisively, addressing Gretta and Stella, but gazing after Margot's rapidly disappearing figure. "If she doesn't take the cake for daringness! But, I say, oughtn't we to stop her?"

"It's simply no good," answered Gretta, white-faced with fear at the possibility of the dangers that might have overtaken her little sister. "She'd go all the same. When she feels like this she forgets about rules—at least, about them being at all important, I mean. I think she's frightfully brave, and it would be a blessing for Sybil if she went. And," this with a sudden resolve, "I'm going too. I simply must!"

She turned to make her way in the direction her cousin had taken, but Josy was beside her in a minute. "Gretta, you can't; besides, didn't Margot tell you to give a message to her mother, or something, when she comes? If she's got to go, let her; but it won't help anyone for you to break rules too."

"But suppose they really *do* see that old man?" objected Gretta, still undecided as to which way duty was really calling. "They'll be all alone."

"Well, *you* couldn't help," insisted Josy unflatteringly. "Depend upon it, Margot's all right, and it's awfully likely that she'll meet her mother on the way, I should think; you said she was coming in her car, didn't you?"

"Yes, she is," answered Gretta, greatly comforted by this suggestion. "And I should think they're bound to meet. Well," she half turned back as she spoke, "if I can't be any good it's no use going; she's got Stella's boy, of course, and

he'll be much more use than I could. Oh, I *do* hope they'll meet auntie."

"They're sure to," declared Josy confidently. "And then she'll take Margot on in her car, I expect, and Jim'll come back to wait for Stella. I *don't* think we need tell Miss Read, do you?"

"Oh, that's all very well," announced Stella in a grumbling tone. "And suppose Jim *doesn't* come back? What about *me*? For all I know dad'll be furious with me for letting the pony have the extra journey, and I don't see why I should be blamed. It's not the *first* time I've got into trouble over Margot, and I'm going to ask Miss Read what to do; it's only sensible."

"Well, you may be 'sensible' about it," remarked Josy witheringly, "but you're being jolly selfish as well! If you don't, perhaps Margot and Sybil will get back in about half an hour, and no one will ever know anything about it. But, if you do——"

But Stella had already departed on her errand, which was to prove a lengthy and fruitless one, for, when she returned, the match was nearly over, and the house-mistress had not been found.

"She may have been in the mistress's room, of course," she concluded, after an account of her adventures; "but we're not allowed in there, so I didn't——"

"And that Jim of yours has been searching for you all round the field like a lost puppy, while you've been gone," replied Josy, still feeling rather stand-offish, as she would have expressed it, on account of Stella's "tell-tale ways!" "He's gone back now; he wanted to ask you——"

At that instant two figures were seen approaching the little group from the two different school entrances. One was Jim, returning breathless and excited—a very different youth in appearance from the sulky, sheepish yokel who had, after scouring the playground, returned to where the rector's trap had originally stood. Stella started towards him at a run, just as Gretta turned to fly joyfully in the direction of the second new-comer, Mrs. Fleming herself, who had evidently singled out her niece in spite of the crowd, and was bearing down upon her.

"Why, here you are, Gretta!" she exclaimed. "And where are the other two?"

"Then you haven't——?" Gretta began feverishly, then stopped, for Stella and Josy, followed by Jim, with eyes full of despair, joined the pair breathlessly, excitement lending wings to any feelings of shyness that might otherwise have attacked them in the presence of a stranger. "She's gone!" cried the two. "Margot's gone! She's taken the trap, and ——!"

"Margot gone! But *where*?" inquired that damsel's mother anxiously.

The tale was not a long one, but so involved did it become through the efforts of the three girls to tell it at one and the same moment, while near by shouted and clapped a crowd of hockey enthusiasts, that Mrs. Fleming was little wiser at the end of the recital than at the beginning.

"Let me hear one thing!" she begged anxiously. "Whatever Margot and Sybil may be doing, are they *safe*? Gretta, tell me the story again, and all alone, please. Then I shall understand better."

So to Gretta's share fell the retelling of the story. She repeated it as carefully as she could. "And the trap's gone, and Margot's gone; and we are sure that Sybil went to the 'Little House,' " she concluded. "Most likely because of the bravery prize, you know; and as the old man is mad, Stella says, and Sybil doesn't know he is, she's sure to be terrified. That's why Margot went. We hoped you'd meet her, auntie, as you came."

"Margot's far too quick in making up her mind," said Margot's mother. "Gretta, come with me; we'll go straight to Miss Slater's room. I have been with her for nearly an hour, as we had something very important to talk over, and I must have arrived some little while before Margot started. Before deciding what is the best thing to be done, we must, of course, tell Miss Slater what has happened."

Josy and Stella were left, therefore, to watch the finish of the eagerly anticipated match and to join in the shouts of victory that rose when, five seconds before the last whistle blew, Helen, the captain, made an unexpected and brilliant stroke, thus winning the match by a single goal for her side.

"Three—two! Ripping, isn't it?" exclaimed Josy, but not so whole-heartedly as was her wont. "Oh, I *do* wish we knew where Margot was, and how she's getting on!"

"And the pony, too!" amended Stella dolefully. "I *never* thought that anything like this could happen. I do hope dad won't be too awfully cross!"

A summons from Miss Slater at this moment struck fear into her heart, but the interview was not to be a long one; things must be done, and done quickly, and the head mistress, with Mrs. Fleming's aid, had arranged a plan of proceedings.

“Stella, Margot’s mother is going straight to that house on the cliff to find and bring back

“Helen made an unexpected and brilliant stroke, thus winning the match by a single goal.”

both children; she has kindly offered to give you a lift, and will drop you at the rectory. I have sent Jim off on a bicycle,

with a note to your father which will explain matters; he has probably reached the rectory by this time."

"May I go, too?" inquired Gretta, her eyes turned appealingly towards Mrs. Fleming.

"No, Gretta, I think not," answered the head mistress. "Stella's father, when he reads my note, will probably want to join Mrs. Fleming and go with her; it will be more sensible and useful for you to stay where you are!"

It was no time to grumble, the child knew. She watched until the car turned the corner, and then made her way to the dining-hall, at Miss Slater's suggestion, to find Josy. The latter, roaming round, was as restless as Gretta herself, and equally in need of some employment that would keep her thoughts busily engaged until the return of the wanderers.

"I couldn't have believed that to-day would have turned out like this," said Josy despondently. "We've not *half* watched the match, and now who knows what mayn't be happening in that 'Little House'?"

"Look here!" said Gretta, feeling certainly as miserable with anxiety as anyone could feel, and not daring to think the horrid thoughts that would come crowding into her mind. "Let's go back to the field and watch for auntie's car; it won't come for ages yet, of course, but it'll be something to do."

Accordingly, while the fun of the hockey-tea waxed fast and furious, the two children paced the playground exchanging comforting remarks concerning the subject most near to their hearts, and listening anxiously for any sound that might herald the return of Mrs. Fleming.

"There!" said Josy suddenly, for about the tenth time. "What's that?"

“Why!” answered Gretta, half-amused. “*That!* Why, it’s only the click of the school gate! It’s an errand boy with parcels, I think. I can see him, but it’s getting so dark that I can hardly tell. We’d better be going in, I think, Josy; we could watch from one of the windows.”

The figure by the gate crouched down as the girls drew near on their way to the cloak-room; it seemed to try to hide itself in the shadows.

“Hallo!” said Josy, “rather a weird errand boy, isn’t it? I believe he’s ill or something!”

The pair stood at the bottom of the steps and looked inquiringly at the crouching figure; then—“SYBIL!” exclaimed Gretta and Josy in the same breath. “Why, *however* did you get back!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE "LITTLE HOUSE"

STELLA, once settled comfortably in the motor by Mrs. Fleming's side, became so exceedingly talkative that Margot's mother, who was feeling very anxious about the two children, would have much welcomed a little respite from the streams of conversation that poured unceasingly from the lips of her small companion.

"I don't envy Margot if she's got there!" announced the damsel—who was plainly qualifying for a post as Job's comforter—while she tossed back her pigtail. "Nothing would make *me* go near that house, *I* know!"

"But there's Sybil to think of, too," said Mrs. Fleming. "Perhaps it was on account of *her* that Margot was so anxious to go."

"Well, perhaps so," replied Stella sagely. "But nothing on earth would have sent me there, and I don't think Margot would have wanted to go so much if she'd stopped to think for a minute."

"I'm not so sure," said Margot's mother quietly; "though I certainly think that she should have tried to speak to one of the mistresses first. But that would have brought Sybil into trouble, I expect she thought—so it was rather a difficult position."

"Well, if she thinks she's going to win the Hope-Scott prize for going, I guess she's mistaken. I just got a *scolding* from dad for going into the gipsy's tent for the baby," declared Stella, "and I don't believe Miss Slater would let the prize go

to a person who's broken rules like this, however brave they were!"

Mrs. Fleming smiled, beginning to see some reason for Stella's rather resentful speeches. "I'm quite sure she did not start off for that reason," she remarked. "Also, I believe, as you do, that the prize is not at all likely to be gained for this particular piece of daring. Margot would be the first to agree with me, I think; don't you?"

"Well, perhaps so," admitted Stella, a little grudgingly. "You see, we all want to win it, and as we never seem to have any chances to be brave unless we break the rules, *I* don't know what we can do. We talk about it in the dormitory for hours, but no one yet has thought of anything—except the gipsy baby; and *that* only ended in quarantine for me. I suppose Margot's told you about *that*? *I* have less chance than the others to do anything, because I go home for the week-ends!"

"But mightn't there be an opportunity at home, perhaps?" suggested Mrs. Fleming.

"Ah!" and Stella shook her flaxen head in a superior way. "But then who'd know about it at school, you see? Unless I told, of course, and that would be rather sneakish, and so it wouldn't count."

Mrs. Fleming's breath was quite taken away by this peculiar view, and she deemed it wise to change the subject. "Tell me about this 'Little House,' " she said. "The children have mentioned it in their letters, but I expect you know more about it than they do, as you live nearby."

"Well, it's like this," began Stella, delighted to have an audience. "That house was empty till five years ago; it was a biggish kind of cottage, and had been built on the cliff ages

ago by an artist, father says. And then suddenly this old man came—I don't remember it, but mother does. He boarded up all the windows that look this way, though I believe he has one or two left that look over the sea; and he shut himself in!"

"Well, you'd think anyone might do that," said Mrs. Fleming, "if they wanted to be alone."

"Yes; but he's quite different; he's very old, and he wears a coat like a manservant—with tails, you know; and he only comes out at night, and he never opens his door to anyone; he writes down on a scrap of paper just how much bread and milk and things he wants, and he hardly eats anything; and *once*——"

"Well?" inquired Mrs. Fleming.

"Well, once he wrote down his orders, they say, on a piece of paper that had a 'coronet' on it; did you ever hear of such a thing? And the boy that brought his milk showed it to someone and asked what it meant; and then after that—I don't know when it was—all the village children used to stand and shout outside his house, and call him 'My Lord!' And one day he came out with a stick and chased them away, and called out that he would throw them over the cliff."

"Serve them right, rude little things!" said Mrs. Fleming decidedly.

"Yes. Father stopped them when he heard of it; but the boys still will call after him, and he turns and waves his stick at them, and they do it all the more. Father says he thinks he's queer in the head, and, of course, all the villagers say that he's mad; but *I* think he's a miser!"

"Why?" asked her companion with some amazement.

"Oh, because he keeps himself shut up like that; he must have something hidden, I'm sure. Why, he doesn't answer *father* when he knocks! But, of course, after that time I met him last week, perhaps he will *now*."

"What was that?" inquired her listener.

"Oh, didn't Margot tell you? She was quite upset about it. Almost as bad as she was over the gipsy baby—she wanted to go and do something for him!" And Stella poured forth her tale of the encounter with the old man, ending with the remark, "and he said something about a 'confession' that he had to make!"

"Margot is very tender-hearted," said Mrs. Fleming, "and has never been able to stand seeing anyone suffer. But yours is a very strange story, Stella." She sat back, plainly interested, till her meditations were broken in upon once more by her companion.

"Oh, how quickly we've come! The rectory's only round the next corner, and here's Jim with his bicycle."

The car drew up to enable Stella to alight, and that Mrs. Fleming might receive a note which the rector's boy was waiting to deliver. It proved to be from Stella's mother, who had read Miss Slater's communication, and who wrote to say that the rector was out in the parish, *where*, she did not know, and that under the circumstances she had thought it the speediest plan to write to Mrs. Fleming to this effect. "If he comes in shortly I will dispatch him after you with all haste," she wrote; "and I much hope that your anxieties will soon be set at rest."

There was nothing to do, therefore, but to turn the car in the direction of the "Little House," following the parting advice of Stella as to its whereabouts.

“Only about half a mile; straight along the road; and then you’ll see it quite plainly. It’s quite easy to find, even in the dusk, and thank you awfully for driving me down!” Stella waved her hand, and disappeared through the rectory gate as the motor took to the road again. Mrs. Fleming could hardly restrain her anxious feelings, and was really thankful when the car drew up and the chauffeur pointed out the outline of a small house standing on the moor by the cliff, and not far away.

“That will be the little place, ma’am; shall I be needed to come with you?”

“No, thank you, Pratt; stay with the car. If I want you I will use this whistle of mine,” and Mrs. Fleming touched a small silver dog-whistle that she wore. “Don’t move from here, and if the rector should come this way tell him I have gone in. I can’t say how long I may be.”

“Very good, ma’am.” Pratt, who knew enough of the affair to realize that there was a possibility of excitement ahead, watched his mistress eagerly as through the dusky twilight she made her way to the little house. He could discern her figure still as she stood outside and knocked; then he saw the door burst suddenly open; there were exclamations, and she disappeared within!

It was Margot herself who had responded to her mother’s knock; Margot, with a face of frightened excitement, who burst out crying as she flung herself into Mrs. Fleming’s arms.

“Oh, mother! I did so hope you’d come!”

This from the self-reliant Margot! Mrs. Fleming could hardly believe her ears. “My darling,” she exclaimed; “there’s

nothing to be afraid of now. Where's Sybil? I've come to take you home."

For answer, Margot, her eyes still full of tears, turned half indignantly to her mother. "I'm *not* frightened," she said; "and Sybil's not here; I expect she's all right. Only, mother—that *poor* old man!"

"Well?" asked her mother, much more concerned for the moment, it must be admitted, at the excited state in which she had found the usually self-contained little daughter than at the possibility of some disaster to Stella's "miser"; "where is he, Margot?"

"He's in there," Margot managed to ejaculate, as she pointed to a door leading towards what was evidently an adjoining room. "And they've sent me out because he's so ill; and I can't do anything, they say; but I *know* I could!"

"But who's 'they'?" asked her bewildered parent.

"Long Jake's there!—oh, mother, did you know he was coming?—and the rector's there, too; he was here when we came; and I believe the old man's going to die!"

Here was a very different kettle of fish from that which Mrs. Fleming had expected to find! Meanwhile, also, she thought, where was Sybil? But she decided that the first thing to do under the circumstances was to help to restore Margot's self-control.

"Well, Long Jake has turned up in the nick of time, has he?" she said. "I knew he wanted to surprise you by coming down for your match this afternoon; but I thought his business had prevented. He's been in London a week, you know. Now, Margot, this isn't like you. Be sensible; you and I both know that we can leave Long Jake to do the very best thing in any kind of difficulty. Is there a chair where I can sit

down? This place is so dark. Now tell me all about it, from the beginning, and presently I'll go in."

CHAPTER XVIII

MARGOT'S STORY

MARGOT was seated on the edge of her bed in the dormitory, no single item of the magnificent feast then in progress so much in demand as was the story which she was engaged in telling; her hearers sat transfixed, listening open-eyed, while dainties of the most delicate description were held motionless and forgotten half-way to their lips.

"And you met Long Jake!" broke in Josy, in amazed and envious tones. "Why, it sounds as though you're making the whole thing up! How I wish I could have seen him! But what a wonderful thing! Oh, do go on! Don't take any notice of me if I interrupt."

"We went to the 'Little House' and knocked, and I could *plainly* hear voices inside. Of *course*, I thought it was Sybil. Yes, we'd left the rector's pony tethered up. Wasn't it *awful* about his knees—I told you, didn't I? Then, after Long Jake had knocked again most awfully loud, the door was opened, and there stood the *rector*!"

"But *how*?" interrupted Gretta. "I thought Stella said he was away."

"For a week he was; but he'd come back that afternoon; and when the curate told him about the old man, and how he'd spoken to Stella on the moor that day, you know, and how he'd said something about a 'confession,' he just came off straight to see him on his way to the parish-room, where he had some business or other."

"Well?" inquired her hearers, each taking advantage of the moment in which Margot paused for breath to pop a dainty into her receptive mouth.

"Well, he looked surprised enough to see us, and seemed to think we were lost tourists or something, and had come to ask our way, and he tried to hustle us off; but Long Jake soon told him, and when he heard my name and knew I'd come from the school, he seemed to understand all right, because Stella had been talking about us all at home, you see."

"And what did he *say*?" inquired Josy. "Here, Margot, you'll be hoarse with talking; eat a Brazil nut—they're nearly gone!"

"I couldn't—*really*!" said Margot, taking one nevertheless. "I feel as though I should never eat again after to-day; it's been so exciting. Well, he just said that Sybil wasn't there, but that there was someone very ill in the house, and that he supposed Long Jake didn't happen to be a doctor."

"And was he one?" inquired Josy; for in the minds of all those in Dormitory 3 the hero had become an Admirable Crichton at least.

"Well, he *isn't* one, of course," said Margot; "but he said he'd had a good deal of experience—so he had, in the Bush, you know; oh, you should have seen him when——! Oh, but I can't tell you that now; it's too long. So the rector and he went into a little room, and I sat and waited, and it was growing dark; and then I heard sounds like someone very ill. Oh——!"

Margot's eyes filled with tears at the remembrance; she bit violently into a sausage-roll to hide the state of her feelings, and waited a moment before resuming her story.

"Oh, *do* go on," begged Josy. "I mean, if you possibly can. Leave out that part, and have some ginger-beer first; it's most awfully reviving."

"I'm all right," said Margot. "Then—well, then——! After what seemed like ages, *and* ages—then mother came!"

"Oh, weren't you glad to see her?" inquired Gretta, to whom Auntie Tib was the beau-ideal of every virtue. "Didn't it make *all* the difference?"

"I should just think so; she always puts things right; and when I'd told her, we just built up a fire, and then she went into the room."

"Did she leave you alone for long?" burst in the listeners.

"No, she didn't—not that time. She was dreadfully anxious about Sybil still; and I—it just *shows* how stupid I am!—I got such a fright about the poor old man being so ill, and all that, that I'd forgotten all about her."

"Well?" asked the others.

"Well, the next time mother came to me the rector was with her, and they arranged that he was to bring me back to school in the car and see Miss Slater, and ask if Sybil had returned; and then fetch the doctor on his way back again. Then mother and Long Jake were left with the old man, you see."

"But why leave Long Jake?" inquired Josy. "You'd think *he'd* have brought you, and then we might have seen him!"

"Well, I wondered about that," replied Margot, "and I asked the rector. I hadn't time to ask mother; she was busy cooking something for the old man when we came away. But the rector said the most queer thing. He said, when I asked

him: ‘Under the circumstances Long Jake, as you call him, is the right one to hear the old man’s confession!’ ”

“What on earth did he mean?” burst in Josy; here was another rôle for the dormitory hero. “He’s not a clergyman as well, is he?”

“No, of course not; and I *said*, ‘Why?’ to the rector; and *he* said, ‘I can plainly see the hand of Providence in the fact of the arrival of Mr. Courtney at that moment!’ ”

“Mr. Courtney?” inquired Josy. “Oh, yes, that’s his right name, isn’t it? But I don’t understand.”

“Nor did I, and then the rector said the old man had recognized Long Jake as soon as he went into the room, and had said that he had been praying to live long enough to make his confession before he died. Then the car reached the school, and the rector was in such a hurry to get news of Sybil for mother, and to fly back for the doctor, and all that, that I didn’t hear another word. Oh, Josy, after all I *will* have something if there’s anything left! I’d like a meringue best!”

“Here, I’ve kept you a beautiful unsquashed one,” announced Gretta. “Margot, what a frightfully interesting time you’ve had! But isn’t it awfully mysterious about Long Jake? His knowing the old man, I mean. And do you think he’ll really die?”

“I’m simply wondering with all my might,” declared Margot, “about how Long Jake knows him. I can’t understand it; but I feel somehow better about our old man, because he’s got mother.” Then, with her mouth very full indeed, “Now, I do wish you’d both tell me all about how Sybil came back.”

“Little beggar!” Josy shook her fist in the direction of the opposite dormitory, from which no sounds came. “She

arrived in at the school gate with her arms full of parcels; and Gretta and I saw her. She'd gone to that awful tiny cottage-shop place about two miles away—you know the place; we passed it last Saturday, and I suppose Sybil saw it then. I shouldn't have thought it sold anything, but, anyhow, *she* managed to spend I don't know how much on the most awful coloured sweets and things; just because she'd made up her mind, with the help of Adela, that they'd have a feast, too—nurse or no nurse! I can tell you she reckoned wrongly, though; she'd seen Stella, but she'd gone on all the same, and bought her things, and turned up as cheeky as a sparrow!"

"But she was most frightfully tired when she got back," broke in Gretta; "and we didn't know *what* to do, because we didn't want her to get into a row, and we knew we'd simply *have* to tell."

"What happened then?" asked Margot in great interest.

"Oh, Miss Read came out of the school-door to see if the brake had come for the Redford girls, just as we were standing staring at Sybil as though she was a kind of ghost."

"She took in the whole thing in a minute, and we didn't have to say a word. *She* didn't say much either; she just marched her off, parcels and all, straight to Miss Slater's room!" Thus Josy, with, it is feared, a certain amount of relish for the story she was telling.

"Oh, I do hope she wasn't punished," broke in Margot. "I can't help feeling, you know——"

"Well, we haven't seen her since, anyway," continued Josy; "but there's no sign of a feast in *that* dormer! Gretta's sorry for her, but I can't say that I am; I think she deserves it!"

“I went to Miss Read,” said Gretta, interrupting at this point, “and I told her that I didn’t think Sybil understood rules yet, properly; and that I thought, perhaps, I hadn’t looked after her enough; for I do think that, you know, Margot. I’ve thought so much of music and things——”

“Well, and what did she say?” inquired Margot, feeling very compassionate towards her younger cousin.

“Well, she said perhaps I hadn’t; but that all the same she had caused a great deal of trouble, and that Miss Slater had spoken to her, and that she had been sent to bed in the infirmary for punishment.”

“Poor Sybil!” said Margot. “For, you know, I can’t help feeling that if she hadn’t gone off like that I should never have gone to the ‘Little House,’ and then Long Jake would never have seen our old man.”

“But what *I* want to know is *how* they knew each other!” remarked Josy. “The whole thing’s so mysterious!”

“I’m going to try and think it all out before I go to sleep,” said Margot with a very large yawn.

There was silence for a long time after that; even on dormitory feast-nights sleep must come sooner or later, and the day had been an exciting one, and consequently very tiring.

“Good night,” said Josy, shaking crumbs from her counterpane; “I don’t feel somehow as though I’d eat much breakfast to-morrow, but one never knows! I say, Margot, what happened to that pony?”

“Oh, the rector was awfully nice about him, and he said he’d send Jim round after him as soon as he got home,”

answered Margot; “he’d had an accident like that before, he said.”

There was silence again, and Gretta was almost asleep, following the example of Josy, whose snores could be distinctly heard, when Margot’s voice roused her from her last waking thoughts. “I say, Gretta!”

“Yes,” replied her cousin sleepily.

“Mother told me to tell you, only I forgot because there’s been so much to think about, that she has something important to say to you. She meant to tell you to-day.”

“Oh, yes,” said Gretta sleepily; “it was in that letter——”

“Yes, but she said, too, that she might come over to-morrow; and, if so, she’d have a talk with you. I don’t know what it is, but I believe Miss Slater knows; and mother, if she comes, will be able to tell us about our old man and Long Jake.”

The silence that fell again upon Dormitory 3 was not broken until seven o’clock the next morning. It is likely that Gretta would not have slept so soundly had she known what her aunt’s news was to be.

CHAPTER XIX

NEWS FOR GRETTA

"JUST think!" said Josy, stretching luxuriously in her bed, as she made up her mind for the fiftieth time that it was her duty to rise. "The match is over, and *well* over—hurrah for Helen!—the dormer-feast's all eaten, and I jolly well feel as though I'd had the whole of it; we've got past half-term, and now—well, what *is* there to look forward to?" She gazed appealingly at her two companions, who, both in different stages of undress, were flying through their Sunday toilet.

"Well, I should think you're half asleep still if you've forgotten the Hope-Scott Shield," declared Margot, emerging from a basin of cold water. "Do hurry, Josy, or nurse will be simply wild!"

"Forget it! Who could forget it?" grumbled Josy. "It's on the tips of my fingers to do something brave every day of my life, and I've never done anything yet." She scrambled out of bed as she spoke, and, in the intervals of dressing, continued her remarks: "I've a jolly good mind to get Stella to pretend to drown next time we're in the baths. Her pigtail's long enough to rescue her by, and *then*——!"

"Josy, you're simply frightful!" laughed Gretta. "You'd never get it for *that*! Margot *might*, now, for yesterday; do you think she *could*?" She gazed admiringly at her cousin, who stood in her petticoats, transfixed with amazement at the suggestion.

"*Me!* I like that! It's plain you never heard what Miss Slater said to me last night when I got back. She made me

feel jolly small, I can tell you—about going off like that." Margot brushed her hair vigorously, looking rather shamefaced.

"Then there's only Gretta left of our dormer to get it," said Josy sadly; "and, somehow, you know, Gretta, you're not the sort. You're so frightfully quiet, and 'Ne evill thing she feard'; no, that *isn't* like you. Not that you're not awfully clever at music, and all that; but—as far as bravery goes ——! Well, you don't mind, do you?" and the tactless speaker turned an inquiring face. "I was only thinking it out."

"You'd better shut up with your 'thinking out!' " burst in Margot angrily. "If Gretta's not frightfully good at games and things like that, you should just hear what mother thinks about her fiddle! And it's not only *mother*.' "

"Do be quiet, Margot," begged Gretta. "I know what Josy means; I'm not the sort to be brave about things. The shield'll go to Helen, or someone like that. And, as far as this dormer goes, there's Stella, you know." The clanging of the first breakfast-bell terrified them all into silence, and it was not until the dining-hall was reached that the three friends had time to speak to each other again.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Margot, then, pouncing upon a fat letter that lay on her plate. "Look here, Gretta!"

"Is it from auntie?" inquired her cousin. "Oh, if so, *do* keep it till afterwards and read it in the playground."

As it was Sunday, and free time, therefore, being less limited than usual, Margot agreed, and half an hour later the couple were to be seen, arm-in-arm, pacing the hockey field, the letter held aloft in Margot's disengaged hand.

"Oh, if *only* she tells me about what happened in the 'Little House' yesterday!" she began.

"Read it yourself first," suggested Gretta, "in case there's anything private."

"Pooh!" laughed Margot, acting on her cousin's suggestion nevertheless, until, after reading for a page or two, she gave a great gasp. "Oh, I—*say*!"

"Whatever is it?" begged her companion.

"Well, *read* it; that's all I can say!"

Together the pigtailed heads bent over the open page; stock-still as statues stood the pair as they took in the exciting contents of Mrs. Fleming's missive.

"DARLING MARGOT," wrote her mother, "I have just got back to York, and want to send a line so that you may get it to-morrow, for I know you will be anxious to hear of the poor old man in your 'Little House.' I was with him until the doctor came, and then left Long Jake there; *he* will stay as long as he is needed, but the old man is very ill, and will not want him long.

"I could not explain to you yesterday all that there was to know, but now I have asked Long Jake, and he is willing for you to understand. You remember that, when he came out to us in the Bush years ago, he was in trouble? That, I think, was all you knew at the time. The fact was that he had been charged during his college days with forging the name of his uncle—who was the Earl of Carflick—on a cheque, and he had been convicted of this and consequently punished. I need not tell you that the conviction was a mistake; all the while—though he told no one—he knew that the forgery had been committed by an old servant in his uncle's house—a butler who had been in the family for many years, and of whom, since boyhood, our Long Jake had been very fond. We both knew him well enough to be sure that he would suffer

punishment of any kind rather than throw light on the wrong-doing of another, and he went to prison for that reason. When he was free again his uncle was dead, the old servant had disappeared, and Long Jake came out to Australia to ‘make a man of himself’ again, as he used to say. He stayed out there until he had put together a sum of money; then, with this in his possession, he came back to England last week to look for the old butler, whom he had always felt sure would never have committed this crime had he not been in great difficulties. He meant to help him look life in the face again.

“Then, darling Margot, comes the strange and wonderful part of the story; it was in the ‘Little House’ that he found the old servant; he was ill and dying, but he was longing to make a confession before he died, and to declare that it was *he* who had been guilty of the forgery. It seems almost impossible to believe, but it is true, that, just as he was beginning to tell the rector all this—just at that moment you and Long Jake knocked at the door.

“Since then Jake has not left the old man. You need not be unhappy, Margot, for he is quite peaceful and at rest now, and he will not be left alone again until the end. I think you may tell this to Gretta and Josy, as you have all been so much interested in the ‘Little House.’ Stella will, no doubt, hear something of it from her father, and as Long Jake will be returning to Australia again almost at once—for he has nothing now to keep him here—there is no reason for his sake why the story should be kept secret. This is a long letter; I must arrange very soon to see Gretta, and will write to Miss Slater about this. We have given up the car, so I may come over by train.”

It was at this point that both heads were raised simultaneously. Both the girls' eyes looked remarkably moist. "Oh, Margot!" burst in Gretta almost impetuously. "What an awfully brave man that Long Jake is! Fancy bearing all that!"

"And our poor old man!" said her cousin. "Oh, I'm so glad he's happy now. It's the most wonderful story I ever heard. But *I'm* not surprised at anything brave Long Jake would do!"

The letter, being re-read to Josy in the dormitory before church, provoked louder if not more heart-felt adulation. "Whether that Long Jake of yours is at school or whether he *isn't*, he ought to have the shield," announced that damsel. "Why, the motto simply fits him *exactly*; he's the most utterly downright ripping man I ever heard of in my life!"

"It's funny to think that if it hadn't been for Sybil——" began Gretta.

"Talking about Sybil," interrupted Margot vehemently, "there's one thing I've made up my mind to. I'm going to see that she has a decenter time. She *can't* like chattering to Adela all day. Josy, let's take her in hand; we'll *make* her keen on hockey. We could easily do it; she's as good and better at it than any of her dormer, and she's only six months younger than me. I believe she'd be as keen as mustard in no time."

"It's the very thing!" Gretta was beginning, her eyes sparkling, just as nurse appeared at the dormitory door, looking remarkably brisk and business-like. "Gretta," she announced, "you're to go to Miss Slater's study. No, don't wait a moment. Go down at once!"

But it was Mrs. Fleming's voice that called "Come in," in answer to the girl's timid knock, and Auntie Tib herself rose from a comfortable chair to greet her.

"Oh, auntie! How lovely! And on Sunday, too. Margot, though—shan't I go and tell her that you're here?"

"No, dear; it's *you* I've come to see this time, and for two reasons. Miss Slater has kindly given me the use of her room. You got my message, didn't you, in Margot's letter?"

"Oh, yes." Something in her aunt's manner caused Gretta to feel uneasy. "What is it, auntie?" she ventured. "It's nothing that I've done, is it?"

"Darling, *no*. But it's rather difficult to tell." Mrs. Fleming cleared her throat, while Gretta waited in suspense; then came the deluge!

"Gretta, I've something to tell you. You know how delighted I was when your father allowed us the great pleasure of sending you and Sybil to school with Margot?"

"Yes?" Gretta's tone sounded as bewildered as she felt.

"Well, dear, to cut a long story short, things have happened that we in no way expected. Uncle Bob is not the rich man that he was. I needn't trouble you with details, child, but we are just now in rather a difficult position."

Gretta gazed up without speaking, only half understanding the importance of her aunt's words.

"It's like this, darling. Uncle Bob and I are going back to Australia by the next boat; we start early in the week. We mean to leave Margot here, for we *can* afford that; also, Uncle Bob says that he wants either you *or* Sybil to stay, but to keep you *both* here after the end of this term is not possible. I went to see your father on Friday, and yesterday—

before there was the sudden excitement of Sybil's absence—I spoke to Miss Slater."

"Then——?" It seemed to Gretta as though in one moment all her castles of happiness were tottering; school-life in future was to be either for her or for Sybil; school-life to which she had so much looked forward, and which had surpassed her wildest dreams; which had brought her the longed-for music lessons, and the friends that had meant so much to her. She gazed at her aunt in a bewildered, terrified way. "Oh, auntie!" she said in a whisper. "Which of us is it to be?"

"Gretta," said Mrs. Fleming. "Look at me. Does it mean so *very* much to you?"

A flood of ideas seemed literally to rush into Gretta's mind; she thought of home as it had been, dull and lonely; she thought of school as it was; could she bear to leave it after such a short, short taste of all the joys it held? She turned her eyes appealingly towards her aunt, and tried to speak.

"Gretta," said Mrs. Fleming again. "If I *could* have managed it, both of you should have stayed; but it *must* be only one."

And then, quite suddenly, Gretta realized that, as a Cliff School girl, she must play the game. Sybil must stay, of *course*; there was no other way; her choice was made. She held her head as straight as she could, and gave a crooked, but courageous, little smile. "It just *has* to be me," she said. "And perhaps I'll get music lessons again some day, and, anyhow, I know enough to practise better. Auntie, you've been most awfully kind, and you must have had a *frightful* time yourself!"

"Well, the worst's over now," said Mrs. Fleming bravely. "I dreaded telling you, dear, more than anything. We've given up the car. I hoped by telling Margot that in my letter, that the way might be paved to letting her know the rest."

"Poor Margot!" said Gretta.

"Not 'poor Margot' at all," said that girl's mother cheerfully. "Her schooling's assured, and it will do us all good to put our shoulders to the wheel again. It's *you*, dear."

"But I've the rest of the term, you know." Gretta, until she had voiced the words, hardly realized herself how she was clinging to the comfort of those last few weeks.

"But"—her aunt's voice was stranger than ever, and the girl looked up apprehensively—"I said, didn't I, that I had *two* things to tell you, dear? I did not know the second until this morning, and then, at breakfast-time, I had a letter from your father's partner. He is ill—your father, I mean—and Ann is not proving very competent. A nurse would be a greater luxury than we can afford just now, as things have turned out. Besides, there is not real need for one, and Miss Slater has agreed with me that, as he must have someone just now, and as Uncle Bob and I can be of no use—for we sail on Tuesday—it will be well for you to go home for a time."

Very deep in Gretta's nature was rooted her love for her father; she forgot her woes entirely now in this new complication. "Auntie, *how* ill is he?" she broke out passionately. "He's not dying?"

"Darling, no. A very deeply seated chill; he must be kept in bed and looked after. Dr. Moore says you have more than once nursed him well through a similar attack, and he misses you. Nurse is packing your box; of course, you *may* be back again for a week or two but——"

“Oh, auntie, when can we start?”

“I’m going to take you now, dear. Not because there’s the least danger, but because it’s the last chance I have, before sailing, to see him again; and Miss Slater suggested that you should come, too. We don’t want to leave him an hour longer than we need to the care of Ann; and there is a train in less than an hour’s time.”

It was not in this way that Gretta had expected to leave the Cliff. No good-byes could be said, as by this time all the girls were at church, and, after a hurried rush and scramble, she found herself seated in the fly, opposite to Mrs. Fleming, with her little box by her side, waving her hand bravely to Miss Slater, who herself stood at the school entrance to see the travellers off.

“I wonder if I’ll ever be back,” she thought to herself, but she did not say it aloud. Auntie must not know how much she minded; and, in the rush at the station, the quick journey, with its hurried change at York, and the jolting drive at the other end, she lost sight for a time of the dreadful change that was coming, and thought only of her father. If the doctor’s house looked dingy as the travellers drew up outside, Gretta didn’t notice it, for Ann stood at the door with her cap all awry, but with welcome in her eyes.

“Oh, Mrs. Fleming, ma’am! And *you*, Miss Gretta! Oh, *won’t* the master be pleased! ’E was just saying ’e didn’t know ’ow ’e’d get on without you.”

CHAPTER XX

GRETTA AT HOME

"DARLING Gretta," wrote Margot, "we miss you most frightfully in the dormer. Give uncle my love, and tell him to get well so that you can come back before the end of the term. Mother told me before she sailed about afterwards, and how you're not coming back next term, I mean; and Josy and I think you were a brick to be so brave about staying at home, and letting Sybil come instead. Miss Read thinks so, too, for I asked her, and I expect Miss Slater does as well; anyhow, Monsieur Villon was nearly crazy, Rhoda says, when she went to her violin lesson; he had just heard about your having gone, and was muttering all kinds of French words that she couldn't understand.

"Sybil's getting on with her strokes awfully well. Helen is frightfully pleased. Josy and I get her to practise with us, and yesterday Helen came and watched, and Sybil made some fearfully neat shots. Helen said she shouldn't wonder if she—Sybil, I mean—made a good centre-forward some day. That's frightfully bucking, isn't it? Tell uncle; he'll be pleased. Sybil talks of nothing but hockey, and she's as keen as keen can be; Josy and I'll be awfully bucked if she's ever captain.

"We're all talking more than ever about the Hope-Scott Shield—specially in the dormer, and we wish you were there. We haven't done much yet, though. Stella dashed out into the road to save a dog from being run over when we were out in the crocodile yesterday, but it didn't come off—the bravery, I mean—because the dog had never meant to be run over, and Stella nearly was, herself; and the horse shied, and Miss Read

was quite angry, and we don't think she even *thought* it was brave. In fact, she said it was silly. We're so near the end of the term, only two weeks to-morrow, that someone'll have to do something soon, so perhaps a chance will come. I wish you were here to try for it. We're always talking about you in the dormer, and we're taking jolly good care of Sybil...."

Gretta folded up the letter, which was becoming very frail with much reading, and looked up at the clock to see whether it was time for the doctor to take his next dose of medicine. A month had gone by since the day of Mrs. Fleming's departure, and more than a month since Gretta's return to take up the reins of her father's house again. The month seemed like a year, the girl said to herself, but somehow or other not an unhappy year.

For Gretta, at home, had been quite as busy in another way as at the Cliff School, and in nursing and housekeeping time had been spent that might otherwise have passed in longing for all the joys of the term; also, she could not help knowing that her home-coming had been of the utmost service to her father. His illness had been much more severe, and had lasted much longer, than anyone had at first expected; even now, after a month of invalidism, the doctor, much against his will, was still unable to leave his bed, and the worries that the enforced rest brought in its train were difficult for the patient to bear.

Gretta understood a little of this, and, though she sighed as she replaced Margot's letter in its envelope, she took care to put on a cheerful expression of countenance before mounting the stairs to the patient's room, medicine-glass in hand.

But this afternoon the doctor was in a particularly gloomy mood, as Gretta found when she entered his room; he spoke

in a fretful and weak voice from his bed—the nurse was evidently to blame in some way. “Gretta, you should learn to bring that medicine in *time*. Will you never be punctual?”

“The clock struck three, dad, as I came up the stairs,” replied the nurse.

“Then the clock is wrong; it can’t have been set properly since I’ve been upstairs.” The doctor relapsed once more into a state of gloom; any disturbing trifle would plunge him into depression, nowadays, and Gretta tried to devise a means of comfort.

“Shall I stay with you a little, dad? I could sew, or something, up here, and talk to you.” The girl had spent many afternoons by her father’s bedside, recounting tales of life as spent at the Cliff School; of hockey matches, of dormitory feasts, and daring escapades. He already knew about Long Jake; and the wonders of the “Little House” had been explained; the story of Margot’s adventure with the pony had been narrated, too; and so had the tale of the girls’ various efforts to win the Hope-Scott Shield. There was no little detail that Gretta had not recounted for the benefit of the invalid, and she now turned over in her mind whether there was any incident that might serve its turn again.

But the doctor was not to be interested so easily this afternoon. “I need change,” he declared irritably. “Unless I can get some definite change I don’t see *when* I shall be about again.” He puckered up his brow in a way that his nurse could not bear to see.

“Dr. Moore said he’d come in this evening,” she remarked comfortingly; “he’ll be sure to sit up here and smoke, and he’ll be company for you.”

"*Moore!*" exclaimed the pessimistic patient. "He's got *my* work to do as well as his own. *He'll* be the next to break down."

Gretta was in despair, and, welcoming any diversion from the subject ever uppermost in the doctor's mind, exclaimed with surprise as the tinkle of the front-door bell was heard from below.

"I wonder who that is?" she remarked when Ann's steps were heard mounting the stairs.

"Probably a bill," declared the doctor, in disconsolate tones. "I don't know *how*——"

Tap, tap, came at the bedroom door, and the maid's voice was heard outside. "Miss Gretta, you're wanted."

"I won't be a second, dad," said the nurse; she ran into the passage, in her eagerness nearly falling over Ann.

"Whatever is it?" she whispered.

"Such a nice gentleman! As tall as tall! And *that* broad! And he's asking for *you*, miss!"

"But who *is* he?" inquired Gretta in dismay.

"He's a Mr. Courtney—so he *said*. And he said, too, 'Ask Miss Margaret Grey if I can speak to her for a minute; she'll p'rhaps have heard my name from Mrs. Fleming!' "

"It's Long Jake!" cried Gretta in amazement, her cheeks turned pink, and she rushed downstairs, shyness forgotten; while mystification as to why the visitor had come was swallowed up in a feeling of excitement and delight that at last she was to see her school hero face to face!

An hour later it was a very energetic Gretta who was putting finishing touches to a dainty tea-tray set for two, and destined for the sick-room. Upstairs, from the said room,

came the sound of cheerful voices—the doctor was evidently enjoying the company of his visitor. Gretta's face dimpled with smiles as his laugh rang out in appreciation of some story. "Margot *said* Long Jake always came in the nick of time," she thought to herself; "and it's true—he *does*!"

For Mr. Courtney, in explaining to the girl the reason of his unexpected appearance, had told her of Mrs. Fleming's suggestion that he would probably be welcome at the doctor's house if he could make time to drop in there. "Of course, I'll go straight away," he explained to Gretta, as she came into the drawing-room to greet him, "if you think that your father's not well enough for visitors; but I'm going back to Australia in a few weeks' time, you know, as I've nothing to keep me in England any longer; and, if I could be of any use meanwhile——"

"I believe you're just the very person!" Gretta said, as emphatically as her shyness of the stranger—who was not really a stranger at all—would allow. "Dad *does* need cheering up so badly, and you see he knows all about you. The 'Little House,' and the——" She stopped, thinking that perhaps she had said too much.

The visitor looked rather embarrassed. "Well, that's over now," he said quietly, after a minute. "The poor old chap who lived there has nothing more to worry about any longer." Then, with a sudden and boyish change of tone, "Look here, Miss Gretta, suppose you ask your father if he'd like to see me?"

In five minutes he had been in the doctor's room, and that was an hour ago, now; the girl felt as though her nursing duties were halved, to say the least of it, as she carried the

tea-tray up the stairs, and knocked at the door of the sick-room.

"Here's Gretta," said the patient, in the voice of a rapidly recovering convalescent. "Why, Courtney, you're a doctor yourself, man. I've not felt so glad to see a meal for a month or more."

CHAPTER XXI

THE HOPE-SCOTT SHIELD

"TO-DAY'S the first day of the holidays!"

That was Gretta's waking thought, as she lay in her bed at home, on the morning of the Cliff School prize-giving. To this important function she had been specially invited by Miss Slater, who had written suggesting that, if the doctor's health permitted of it, she should take the opportunity of seeing her old friends again. The letter had been received and answered more than a week ago, but the doctor had not been apprised of its contents. He was making such good progress, thought Gretta, that it would be a pity to worry him with a request for the money necessary for her ticket, and, besides, suppose he should have a relapse while she was away! Also, she knew that if once she were to be received back into the arms of her friends at the Cliff School, it would be terribly difficult to settle down once more to the duties of home; the battle would have to be fought and won all over again, and probably would prove harder than ever.

"So I'm glad I didn't go," she remarked to herself in the intervals of dressing. "And, besides, *Margot's* coming for the holidays!"

This certainly was enough to be happy about, and there were other things, too. Gretta's worries—all, of course, but the insuperable one—were smoothing themselves out in a wonderful way. To begin with, Mr. Courtney had proved a veritable friend in need to the doctor, and incidentally an immense comfort to the little nurse. His constant visits and the influence of his cheery personality had proved to be the

very tonic needed by the invalid, who was now surely, if very slowly, regaining his health and spirits.

"So dad's to be 'down' to-day, and Margot and Sybil are coming home, too," thought Gretta in delight. "Oh, it'll be the most lovely day!" She descended to the dining-room, noticed a letter lying beside her plate; refrained from casting more than a glance in its direction until her father's tray was carried upstairs; then, on her return to the breakfast-table, tore open the envelope, and for several minutes was deep in its contents.

Five minutes later a madly excited girl, with eyes bright and shining, cheeks pink, and lips parted, burst breathless into the doctor's room.

"Dad! Dad! Dad!"

"Why, what's the matter?" Her father looked surprised, to say the least of it, at this unexpected appearance of his usually staid nurse.

"Dad! Oh, but I *can't* tell you. It *can't* be true!"

"But what is it?" The doctor began to feel vaguely anxious. "If it's the letter that you're waving, let me see!"

"Oh, dad!" Gretta held fast to the envelope, unable just yet to give it up even for a moment. "It's from Miss Slater. How *could* I deserve it, really? But she says—she says——"

"Out with it," said the doctor in a professional voice.

"It's the Hope-Scott Shield, and it's to be given to-day"—Gretta spoke in gasps—"and so Miss Slater wrote to me first, because——"

"Well?" inquired the doctor patiently, while his bacon grew colder every minute on his plate.

“Because they’re giving it to *me*!” choked Gretta, and rushed out of the doctor’s room like a whirlwind, just in time to prevent herself from committing the unpardonable offence of bursting into tears by her patient’s side.

“Well, well, well!” said the doctor. He picked up the letter that had dropped to the floor beside him, and was forced to polish his glasses several times very carefully before he could read its contents.

Mrs. Hope-Scott had heard, Miss Slater wrote, how Gretta had cheerfully agreed to give up her life at school in favour of her little sister, and go back to duties at home. She would like, therefore, to offer her the shield, in recognition of what she herself considered to be an act of bravery, shown in everyday surroundings, perhaps, but none the less courageous for that. “You will try to live up to the words on the shield, I know,” wrote the head mistress; “though written of Britomart, the maiden-knight, I should wish them to prove true of all the girls who have been at the Cliff School.”

“But I can’t believe it yet, dad,” said Gretta later on, when, seated beside the invalid in the drawing-room, she awaited with sparkling eyes the coming of the travellers. “What *will* they say? The girls at school *can’t* think I deserved it! Hark!” as the peal of the front-door bell sounded through the house. “I believe they’ve come.”

But the visitor proved to be Mr. Courtney, in a state of excitement so great about something or other that he scarcely seemed to take in Gretta’s wonderful piece of information. “I’ve news,” he announced, entering the room as he spoke, and addressing the doctor; “and news that you will be uncommonly glad to hear.”

“News! More news!” Gretta held her breath. Could it be from Auntie Tib?

“A cable came to me half an hour ago.” Mr. Courtney spoke eagerly. “They landed last week, and——”

“Well?” inquired the doctor excitedly.

“Their affairs are settled, and *well* settled, apparently. The bad news was a scare. Particulars, of course, I don’t know yet, but the main point is that they will suffer no financial difficulty whatever.”

“Oh!” breathed Gretta; this seemed almost too good to be true. “Does it mean——”

“It means a great deal, Gretta,” said the visitor, turning to her kindly. “Freedom from anxiety for Mrs. Fleming, and—a great deal more besides. Also, it means——”

“Yes?” said the girl wonderingly, surprised at his tone.

“The cable is in code, of course,” Mr. Courtney spoke to the doctor, “but one thing Mrs. Fleming has made very clear, in spite of that. She wishes Gretta, without fail, to return next term to the Cliff School.”

“Oh, dad!” Gretta was on her knees beside her father’s chair. “Oh, *dad*!”

“Your aunt is one of the kindest of women, Gretta,” said her father huskily.

“But, dad, I won’t go. I mean, I couldn’t leave you for anything with Ann again. I’d rather fifty times over stay and look after you till you’re properly well. I’ll write to auntie ——”

“Listen here for a minute, Gretta,” said her father; the girl raised her eyes to his at the tone of his voice.

"This message from your aunt is just the best thing that could have happened for all of us," continued the doctor; "and, if it will make your mind easier, I'll tell you something I never expected to be able to tell you at all." He paused for a minute before he continued. "Dr. Moore thinks that a voyage is advisable for my health, and Mr. Courtney offered to get me a berth as ship-doctor on the boat by which he sails to Australia. I should have had no hesitation in accepting his offer but for the fact that I had nowhere to send *you*, my dear, during my absence. Now it seems that the way is cleared, for the *Tarrawonga* leaves in five weeks' time, so I shall just have time to see the three of you back to school before I start. There are scores of arrangements to be made, of course, but to put your mind at rest at once, I think it wise to mention the plan in outline." The doctor sat up energetically in his chair as he spoke, and sniffed the air as though he were already drinking in the ocean breezes.

Gretta gave a cry of delight. "Oh, dad," she said, "could anything ever have been thought of so lovely for all of us? *And*"—she gave a long sigh—"there's the shield as well!"

"I don't wonder you're talking about it," said a cheery voice; and Margot came in at the door with Sybil beside her. "Gretta, *why* we didn't guess you'd get it I *can't* imagine. You should have heard the girls clap! It's the most ripping, *ripping* thing that could have happened."

"And I've broken a front tooth at hockey," said the shrill voice of Sybil. "Miss Read said I was brave. I didn't cry a bit —not even when it bled. I just went on playing. Oh, well, if no one wants to look at it, I'll just go down and show it to Ann!"

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