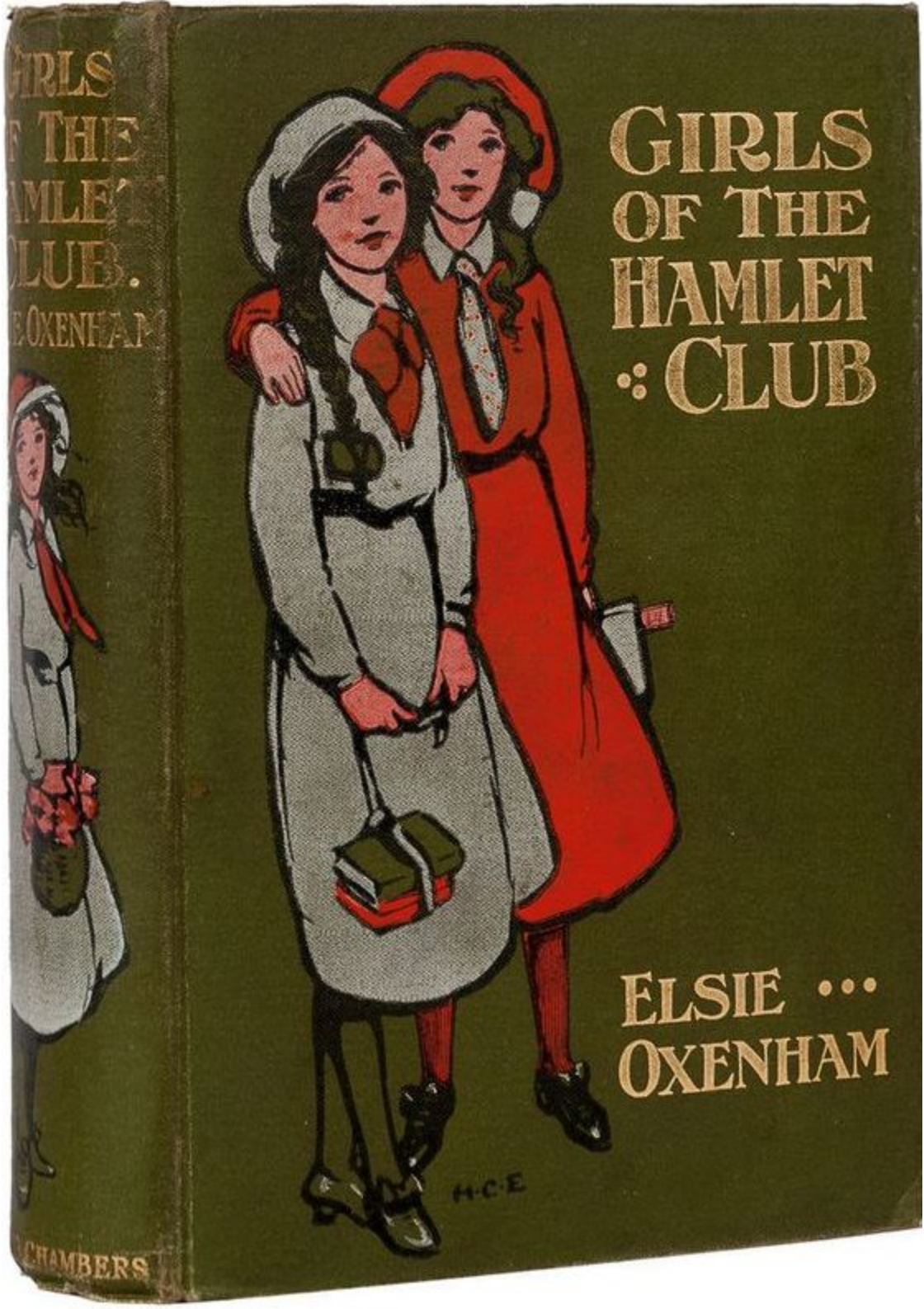
GIRLS OF THE HAMLET CLUB
ELSIE OXENHAM
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HAROLD C

Following Margia's directions, she left her cycle at a wayside inn and entered a wood by a stile. *Page 320.*

GIRLS OF THE HAMLET CLUB

by

ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

WITH FOUR COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS
by
Harold C. Earnshaw

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CHAPTER I.
CICELY'S HAMLET.

The lattice window of the ancient inn opened with a jerk, and Cicely leaned out to sniff the sweet air joyously. Last night she had been too tired to notice her surroundings, but after eight hours of restful sleep she felt ready for anything. A robin on the thatch over her window chirped a greeting, and she laughed back at him, then retreated as a stable-boy slouched into the yard.

The sun was just rising, for it was October, and the nights were growing long. The sky still held splashes of colour, but she could not see the sun, because a green patch of hill shut in her view. Apparently the hill rose steeply behind the inn and cast a shadow over it. But from that smooth top one could see the sunrise, and perhaps something of the country besides. Her instinct was always to get to the bottom of things, if possible. In this case it was the top of things, so far as she could see them, that attracted her. It was only six o'clock, but she began to dress eagerly, wondering if she should wake her father or explore alone.

Her wavy dark hair gave her trouble that morning. 'Of course, since I'm in a particular hurry!' She struggled with the curly tangles, and ruefully resolved never again to be in such a hurry for bed that she had not time to plait it. But she had been glad to roll into bed last night.

It had been one of those exciting days which came occasionally during her father's brief holidays. For many months of each year business kept him in Ceylon, but he always came home during the summer for a few weeks with his only girl, and these visits were packed with enjoyment for Cicely. Lessons—exams.—went to the wall; her father became a boy again, just a few years older than herself, and they gave themselves up to merrymaking. She helped in his shopping for his next trip; he insisted on buying her winter outfit, so that he would be able to picture her when he was far away. They spent happy days in town, and often went off at a moment's notice to some place he had known long ago, or some resort whose pictured advertisement had taken her fancy on the hoardings, and which generally proved a woeful disappointment.

She had awakened yesterday to the news that they were going into the country for a few days. 'The country' sounded delightfully vague, and was a novelty. Once they had gone to the Isle of Wight, once to Cornwall, and last year, spreading their wings as Cicely grew older, to Paris. She had asked many questions, but had been told to wait and see.

There had been hurried packing of suit-case and portmanteau, a morning train to town, and a couple of hours of shopping. Now that Cicely was fourteen, her father was not allowed to choose all the articles of her wardrobe; but Mrs Gaynor, her guardian in his absence, agreed that he might provide her winter coat and hat, if he wished. Cicely laughed as she remembered the lengthy deliberations before he was satisfied with a pretty, brown ulster with big yellow collar and cuffs, and a brown beaver hat to match. And she wondered what Mrs Gaynor would say when the things arrived, for they were handsomer than any one else would have bought. But that was always the result of allowing father to do shopping. Once he had seen the best, nothing less would satisfy him—a fact which both Cicely and the shopkeepers had quickly appreciated. Naturally she preferred that he should do her shopping, when possible.

When this arduous task had been followed by lunch in the dome at Whiteley's, they had made a hurried pilgrimage to Kensington Gardens for a first sight of Peter Pan in bronze, and

then had spent the afternoon at their regular haunt when in town—Maskelyne and Devant's. Her father never grew tired of this, and enjoyed it even more than Cicely herself. Nothing could compare with it in his affections, unless *Peter Pan* happened to be running.

After tea in the roof-garden at Selfridge's, they had taken a taxi to Paddington as dusk was falling. Cicely's home was in a northern suburb, and from the time they left Oxford Street all had been strange to her. But it was too dark to see the country as the train raced along, and she had only been able to distinguish an occasional light in the heavy blackness of the night.

'It's awfully dark. Are there no houses?' she had asked. 'Have you been this way before, dad?'

'Yes, kiddy. No; it's woods and hills and fields, except near the stations.'

'I'd like to see it. I wish we'd come earlier.'

'And missed those cakes'——

'Oh *no*,' she laughed. 'Not for anything.'

'You'll see it to-morrow,' he had promised.

The train had stopped at many stations, and she had been very tired before they left it at last and found an ancient cab awaiting them. It was too dark to see anything, and she had grown very sleepy as the cab jogged along. The lights of the inn, the welcome of the motherly landlady—who had been told to prepare for a lady and gentleman, and had not expected so youthful a lady—and supper in the homely parlour, all seemed like a dream this morning. But the weariness, after all the excitement, was gone, and with the sun lighting the faces of the Michaelmas daisies in the yard, she was eager to know to what kind of place she had come.

She had often stayed in hotels with her father, and had no shyness in making her way downstairs alone. There was generally a door leading into yard or garden by which one could slip out without meeting customers. The staircase made her laugh, because the steps were so high and crooked and narrow; and then she stopped to admire, for she knew old oak when she saw it, and this panelling was black with age.

'It's really old, I do believe,' she murmured. 'It's a real old ancient inn, that has been here for hundreds of years. How ripping!' and she touched the old walls and marvelled. 'It's like Hampton Court, or those old houses we went to in Edinburgh. And yet it's just a little public-house! I wonder what it's like outside.'

A door stood open to the back-yard, and a gate showed the way to the front. Cicely slipped through, and found herself in the courtyard, open to the road.

'Oh!' and she dropped on a bench to gaze and admire.

It was a very little inn. The walls were white-washed, but nearly hidden by the great leaves of a vine, whose strong brown branches encircled the lattice windows. The thatched roof hung over the windows in long eaves, and was broken by two sharp little gables. The sign, 'The Old Beech Tree,' swung above the door. Two great beeches, with smooth gray trunks and a golden glory of autumn leaves, shaded the courtyard, and beneath them the ground was thick with leaves and ruddy shining nuts.

But it was not only the inn which drew that cry of delight from Cicely. A glance showed her that it stood in a worthy setting. Opposite and on each side were the cottages of the hamlet, all thatched, all ancient, all covered with creepers, vines, or climbing roses, all surrounded by tiny gardens full of Michaelmas daisies and autumn flowers. It was evidently a sheltered spot, for the cottage opposite was covered with yellow roses, while an orchard behind was heavy with apples.

‘It’s the duckiest village I ever saw. It’s a picture,’ Cicely decided. ‘I wonder what they call it.’

She put the question to a maid who appeared at the door to shake a duster, and looked much surprised to see her out so early.

‘Whiteleaf! How queer!’ she mused, and then asked the way to her father’s bedroom.

But the girl informed her that he was up and out also; so Cicely laughed, and set out to explore on her own account.

‘He thought I’d still be asleep. I’ll get to the top of that hill before breakfast, and be able to tell him I’ve been energetic too.’

A small boy told her that a path ran up the hill between cottages. She found it easily, and climbed up a lane barely two feet wide, overhung by branches of honeysuckle. This led to open grass, and a faint track soon brought her out on the smooth turf she had seen from her window.

She faced the risen sun, streaming out from behind a golden beech-wood. The colours had faded from the sky, and all was sunshine. The turf was soft as a cushion over the round edge of the hill.

She turned to look down at the inn and her hamlet. Then once more she gave a cry of delighted surprise, and sank down to gaze; then scrambled up hastily as she found the turf drenched in dew. Near by was a great white splash on the green—an old chalk-pit, perhaps, only a foot deep, but stretching away across the hillside. She sat down on the bare ground which did not hold the dew, and gazed at the prospect before her.

She seemed to be looking out over several counties. The thatched hamlet was hidden in trees, and only a peaked roof here and there was visible. But beyond lay miles of flat country, meadows, hedges, golden woods, glistening water. To right and left were other round hills, and a faint blue shadow on the horizon hinted that another range lay there, hidden in mist. But between lay the plain, drowned in sunshine, with clusters of houses dotted about—one little town with a pointed spire and rows of small houses, and another even smaller, surrounded by trees and gardens, with an ancient square tower rising among the roofs. Every hedge and wood, every tree, was a glory of red or gold, orange or brown.

‘Well, kiddy, so you’ve found the Cross?’

She sprang up. ‘Daddy, isn’t it beautiful? I do like this place!’

‘I’m glad to hear that’——

‘But what did you mean? The Cross? I haven’t seen any cross.’

He laughed. ‘You shall see it presently. What do you think I’ve been doing?’

‘Exploring, like me? I couldn’t wait.’

‘Well, so I have. I’ve been hunting a pony and trap. After breakfast we’re going over the hills and far away.’

‘Jolly! But we’ll come back to Whiteleaf? I do like the name, and I love the old inn. It’s really old, isn’t it, daddy?’

‘Very old. You’ll find a date somewhere—fifteen something. Oh yes, we’ll sleep here again to-night. And you like the view of the Vale?’

‘The Vale? Do you mean all that?’ and she waved her hand toward the sunny plain.

‘Just that. This little town with the square tower is Monk’s Risborough. That pointed spire is Princes Risborough, where we left the train last night.’

‘I wondered how we came. Oh, I do like it, dad! And isn’t the air sweet? I’m starving for breakfast.’

He laughed. ‘Come along. Down this way. Yes, it’s a little longer, but I want to show you something.’

‘The Cross you spoke about?’ and she took his hand and followed him down a narrow track to the white road below the chalky splash in the turf. ‘I don’t see it anywhere. Is it a monument? Oh, look! Wasn’t that a rabbit? Right across the road—fancy!’

The road ran round the foot of the hill, and turned a sharp corner toward the village. Cicely chattered on, but at the bend her father stopped her.

‘Now, Cis, turn round and you’ll see the Cross.’

‘Oh!’ She swung round in surprise. ‘*Oh!*’

Where they had been standing on the hill there lay a great white cross, with arms outspread, placed on a high, sloping, white base.

Cicely stared, round-eyed. ‘But where did it come from? It wasn’t there a minute ago. We were up there, and we never saw it.’

‘No, because you were too close.’

‘Was I *sitting* on it?’

‘Exactly!’ he laughed. ‘Sitting on one of the arms. It doesn’t show well from up there, does it?’

‘I thought it was a chalk-pit or a quarry. It’s cut out of the grass, isn’t it? And who keeps it in order?’

‘It’s kept scoured by the owner of Hampden,’ he explained.

‘Hampden!’ Cicely looked up at him eagerly. ‘Is that the same? John Hampden?’

He nodded. ‘He’s one of your heroes, isn’t he? Would you like to see his house?’

‘Oh *yes*!’

‘We’ll ask our pony to take us there. You’re only about a mile from Hampden here.’

‘I am glad we came to this place, daddy. And who made the Cross?’

‘Ah! Danes—Britons—Roundheads! Nobody can tell that.’

They were turning away, when Cicely caught his arm. ‘Stop! Listen,’ she said.

Down the hill, from the road which climbed up among the trees, came a high, sweet voice, carrying far in the still air:

‘Once I loved a maiden fair,
  But she did deceive me.
She with Venus might compare
  In my mind, believe me.’

Cicely’s foot tapped the ground responsively. Some of her happiest hours were those of her dancing lessons, and she knew the quaint old measure which belonged to the quaint old air. ‘Wait, daddy. Let’s see who it is. She’s got a ripping voice.’

‘She was fair, past compare—
  Love is sore temptation.
Who will say but maidens may
  Kiss for recreation?’

A schoolgirl, with a strap of books slung over her shoulder, came swinging along the road. She walked briskly, with a long, steady stride, her head erect, her cheeks smarting in the fresh morning wind, her bright fair hair blown back from her face and swinging in a long plait to

her waist. She wore a neat dress of dark-green serge, belted at the waist, a green cap, and no coat, though the air was sharp.

Cicely looked at her approvingly, though her song had ceased abruptly at sight of them. Then she gave another look at the Cross as they turned the corner. 'And to think I was *sitting* on it, and never knew!' she said aloud.

The schoolgirl heard and glanced at her, a smile leaping up in her eyes as if she understood. But she did not pause, but swung on downhill toward Risborough and the train, her song breaking out again as soon as she was out of sight:

'Three times did I make it known
To the congregation
That the church should make us one,
As priest had made relation;
Married we straight must be
Altho' we go begging;
Now, alas! 'tis like to prove
A very hopeless wedding.'

Cicely chuckled. 'I wish Nancy and the others were here, so that we could dance while she sings. Her voice is splendid. Daddy, that's a nice girl. I wonder where she lives, and where she goes to school. Whiteleaf has no school for girls as big as that, I'm sure. She is older than I am.'

'Wycombe, probably; by train from the station there.'

'What a long walk! Would she do it every day? But she just looked it. Didn't she look awfully well?'

'Suppose we say beautifully well?' laughed her father. 'She was very pretty.'

'She looked ripping!' Cicely said emphatically.

CHAPTER II.
THE STORY OF BROADWAY END.

Lunch at 'The Cat and Rabbit,' a lonely inn among the beech-woods, was over; but the pony was still resting in the stable. Cicely and her father sat in a little wood, which they were exploring before driving on to Wendover, and so home by the main road.

The morning had been spent in lanes and bypaths, and progress had been slow. But they had seen many things, and Cicely had some idea now of the country to which she had come. They had seen the cedars, the peacocks, and the black Scotch cattle at Hampden; had gazed at the mansion from the park; and had explored the church, where the old oak pews, the monuments, and the lepers' windows had given her keen delight. They had wandered in the Glade, and she had been quite unable to find words for her appreciation as they drove down the avenue, with beeches many centuries old swaying great branches across, laden with yellowing leaves, and in the shadows beneath, the vivid red carpet of last year, the misty gray-green of the stems, the dim silent depths of sleeping woods.

They had passed round yellow hayricks, with queer pointed tops, and families of handsome white hens and fine young turkeys. They had startled pheasants from their hiding-places, and her father had laughed when the first rose, almost under their pony's feet, with a wild cry, and she clutched at his arm in dismay.

She understood now that the hill which held the white Cross was the end of a long chain of rounded hills, sweeping up over 'ridges' and down into 'bottoms,' covered with woods and farms, and here and there a big house and park, as at Hampden. So far they had seen no town, or even a village, since they left Whiteleaf; but her father assured her that there were little towns not far away, lying in the valleys, and this morning all their time had been spent on the high tableland, of which Whiteleaf Hill was one steep side.

'But why are nearly all the hens white? Why are the haystacks round? And why do pheasants make that hideous noise?' she queried, as they sat resting in the wood.

He did not answer at once. When he spoke there was unusual gravity in his tone. As a rule, he chaffed and joked with her, and was rarely serious; so at his first words she turned to him in surprise.

'Cis, I'm going to tell you a story.'

'Yes? Is it a true-in-earnest story, dad?'

'Very true, and very much in earnest. It is about your mother, Cicely.'

She looked up, startled. She could not remember her mother, whose name was never mentioned between them, and rarely by Mrs Gaynor. Cicely understood that her father's grief for his wife was still so keen that she was not to trouble him with questions. This was the first time he had spoken of her of his own accord. There was great wistfulness in her voice as she said quietly, 'Tell me about her, daddy. I have so longed to hear.'

'When she was a girl, she lived very near here. I will show you her home on our way back to the inn.'

'Oh!' Cicely's face lit up. 'Then I belong here partly. I'm glad! I like it all already.'

'You belong to it entirely. You are a Bucks lassie altogether, though you never saw your county till to-day. My home as a boy was on the hills over yonder, between The Lee and Wendover. Your mother and I often met and rode and drove together.'

‘I wondered why you could drive so well. We never have a man, do we? It’s much jollier alone.’

‘Your mother and I grew up together. But my father had business troubles, and when he died our old house was sold. I took a position in the business in Ceylon, in which I have remained ever since; though of course my place in it is very different now. But Cicely Broadway and I loved one another, and she was ready to leave her parents and join me out there. They could not bear the thought of it. She was their only child, and they could not lose her. She had other offers of marriage, which would have allowed her to remain near her parents. It is not strange that they refused to let her go so far away. And they believed she was not strong enough to live out there. In that they were right, for she was never strong after you were born, or indeed before. I could not ask her to be my wife when it meant giving up so much, and when her parents were not willing. But she wanted it, and she always had her way. She knew I was longing for her out there, and she could not be happy here. We had always felt we belonged to one another, and she would not listen to any other offer. At last they wrote to me that she was making herself ill, and that I must come home. It broke their hearts to give her up; but they put her happiness before their own and let me take her away.’

‘That was nice of them,’ Cicely said softly. ‘And her name was the same as mine?’

‘Cicely Broadway of Broadway End—yes. Well, as you know, she only lived a year—and I had to write and tell them.’

Cicely reached for his hand, and laid her cheek against it. ‘They’d feel they couldn’t forgive me for being born, or you for taking her away, daddy.’

‘Something very like that. I thought they might want to have you for their own, since she had left you behind. If they had asked for you, I would have felt I had to give you up, since I had taken her away. I thought you might be some comfort to them. But they didn’t want you, Cis, and I was very glad, for I did not want to give you up. You won’t remember your few years in Ceylon; but I was very lonely, and was glad to have you with me. You were company, even though you were only a little baby.’

Cicely could not speak. She fondled his hand, and gazed with dim eyes into the ruddy depths of the wood. ‘It sounds so awfully lonely, dad,’ she faltered at last. ‘I wish I was old enough to go back with you and be company properly.’

‘I’m looking forward to that time too. But I have plenty of friends now, you know. You mustn’t worry over me; I get along well enough. But when you come, that will be another matter; we’ll have rare times together. And now with regard to your grandparents, Cicely. When I had to send you home, your natural place would have been with them; but they feared you would remind them of her, and make them grieve for her afresh. I have written several times suggesting you should visit them, but always with the same result. They feel that their Cicely is gone, and they do not want another.’

‘Like when you lose any pet! Yes, daddy; but if you do have another, it does make up for the first one after a while. It only hurts at first.’

‘Yes; I think you might have been a comfort to them. But they did not think so, and would not try the experiment. But I have felt it my duty to renew the offer from time to time, in case they should have changed their minds. And just the other day I had a letter from your grandfather.’

She looked up in quick dismay. ‘Oh, but I wouldn’t like to go *now*! It would have been all right if I had gone to them when I first came home, before I had any friends in England. But now I’ve heaps of friends, and I couldn’t leave them. You aren’t going to say they want me

now, after all this time, daddy? I won't go! They should have asked me at first. It isn't that, is it?'

'Something very like it,' he said gravely. 'Now wait and hear me out, Cis. I'm not going to say you must go. Don't be afraid. I feel as you do, that it is hardly fair to uproot you now, after so long. But I want you to understand.'

'I won't go!' Cicely murmured mutinously. 'It isn't fair. Why, it would mean leaving school, daddy!'

'Mr Broadway's letter tells me that at present your grandmother is lying ill at Broadway End, their big house near here. She had an attack of bronchitis some time ago, and it has left her heart weak. He says that when she was very ill, a short time ago, she expressed regret that she had never seen Cicely's child. She has not mentioned you again, and he dare not suggest the thought to her, as, while she is so weak, any excitement would be very dangerous. But he says if, when she is stronger, she should again express regret, or if she should ask for you, he would like to be able to send for you immediately. Now I want you to help me to decide, Cis. Your home with Mrs Gaynor is too far away for you to be of any use there. It would take hours to send for you, and he may want you at a moment's notice, if it should be necessary to satisfy her. So it means leaving home and living somewhere near.'

'I don't want to do that,' Cicely said instantly. 'Why, dad, as likely as not he may never want me. If she gets better, they'll just go on as before, saying they'd rather not see me. It's a mere chance if I'd do any good by staying here. It isn't fair to ask me to leave Mrs Gaynor, and home, and the girls, and school, and all my friends just for that. You don't want me to do it, do you?'

'Why, yes, I do,' said her father. 'I think it would be best.' Her face fell in deep distress. 'I feel we have some duty towards these lonely old people, Cis, and I think your mother would have wanted you to do this thing for them. But, though I feel for them, I care more for you. I could not bear to go away leaving you unhappy. If you feel that you really cannot be happy in leaving the Gaynors, I will not ask you to do it. I care most for your happiness, but I want you to decide which way will make you most really happy. So, though I would like you to please your grandfather in this, I shall not insist on it if you feel it is asking too much. But I want you to think it over for a few days before deciding finally.'

'But where would I live? What about school?' Cicely asked dolefully. 'Oh, I don't like the thought of it, daddy! It would be so lonely—you away in Ceylon, and I here in the country, instead of with Mrs Gaynor and the others. Surely you'd rather know I was safe with them?'

'You'll be safe and comfortable enough. Be sure I shall see to that, Cis. Down in Whiteleaf there lives a nice woman, who used to be a servant at Broadway End, and was devoted to your mother. Now she is a widow, with a dear little cottage opposite the inn'——

'With yellow roses, and apples? I saw it this morning. Well, but, daddy'——

'Phœbe—Mrs Ramage—would be delighted to have you to board with her. You would be quite comfortable, and I think you would be happy. She would be very good to you.'

'But it sounds awfully slack, daddy—just me and an old woman! What could I do all the time? What about school?'

'Down in Wycombe there is a big girls' day-school to which you could go. I know Miss Macey, and would be quite satisfied to send you to her. The school has a good name, and over a hundred girls from all parts of the district go to it. You could have your cycle, and ride through the woods each day, only going by train when it was wet.'

Cicely nodded thoughtfully. But so sudden and complete a change was very repugnant to her, and she shrank from the thought intensely. 'I'd very much rather stay with Mrs Gaynor, daddy. I have heaps of friends at school, and we have awfully good times. These other girls may be nice, but then they may be horrid. Oh, can't I go on as I always have done? I do hate changes! It's just what you said, like pulling up roots. And no good may come of it. It's all a chance; they might never want me.'

'On the other hand, you might be just the one thing your grandmother needed to make her wish to grow strong again.'

Cicely wriggled uneasily. 'She should have had me before, then, when I was too small to be keen on things and people. Why, dad, there are heaps of things I'd have to give up—things that *depend* on me! I play goal for the hockey-team, and there's no one else to take it on. And I'm secretary of our literary society, and I was to try for the scholarship at Christmas. Our school hasn't won it for three years, and they said I had a good chance of it this time. Miss Raynham was so hoping I'd get it—five pounds to spend in books, you know!'

'You are a very important person, evidently,' he smiled. 'Well, Cis, you must think it over. Only remember, though I don't say you must stay here, I would like you to, and I think your mother would have wished it also. Now, dear, I am going away to-morrow. I have to see some people in Liverpool, and I may not get back to you for a few days'—in answer to her startled look. 'I will leave you in Phœbe's care, though we will go back to our little inn for to-night. I will come as soon as I can, and you shall tell me what you have decided.'

'Couldn't I go home and wait for you there?' she asked, her lips quivering at the prospect of parting.

'Why, I thought you'd like to spend a few days in your own country! I thought you liked the woods, Cis!'

'I do, but I'd rather go home just now. But, of course, if it isn't to be home any more'——and her voice broke. 'Oh, well, I'll stay here, if you like, just for a day or two. But I'd *much* rather not be here all the time you're away.'

'Now suppose we go and see your mother's home. It will not take us far out of our way. Every inch of these woods, every step of the road, reminds me of her, Cicely. We used to roam through all these woods together—Hampden, Hampdenleaf, Scrubwood—she loved them all, pine or larch or beech.'

He talked on to cheer her up as they drove through narrow lanes, where the brambles reached out long fingers to scratch the trap and tug at Cicely's hair; by soft cart-tracks through the woods; and out at last on a broad white road, firm and hard, running very straight along the foot of the hills—the Roman road.

Before they left the hills he drew up and pointed down a long valley, where, on a hillside, stood a big gray house. 'That's Broadway End, Cis, with the beechwood behind.'

It was a long, straight house, with pillared front and rows of windows, and great cedars on the terrace, as at Hampden. The wood behind showed every colour a beech-leaf can take in October. There were green patches of garden lying about the house, and a park with elms and chestnuts dotted about; but more than that Cicely could not see, for they were a long way off.

'It looks a great big house. Why is it called Broadway *End*, daddy? Is it the end of the wood?'

'Honorend—Beamond End—Buckmoorend—it's very usual in these parts. So are "ridge" and "bottom" and "row." You'll meet them everywhere. Now let's get home, and after tea I'll introduce you to Phœbe Ramage.'

‘Daddy,’ Cicely said suddenly, as they drove down the Roman road, ‘do you remember the jolly, singing girl we met near the Cross? Do you suppose she goes to that same school in Wycombe?’

He laughed. ‘It’s possible; but there are others, you know. Did you like the look of her so much? She was very pretty.’

‘She looked ripping! Oh, if I knew there was *one* nice girl there it would make some difference!’

‘I think I can promise you there will be one nice girl among the hundred.’

‘You can never be sure,’ Cicely said pessimistically; ‘and they’re all nice at Miss Raynham’s.’

‘Oh, come, Cis! I’ve heard you criticise some of them pretty severely.’

Cicely sighed. ‘Just now it seems to me they’re all very nice,’ she said; and her father smiled.

CHAPTER III
SCHOOLGIRLS AT THE STATION.

Cicely sat in the corner, listening while her father and Mrs Ramage talked over old times. Mrs Ramage was not old, as she had at first assumed, but only middle-aged, though sorrow and loneliness had left lines on her face. Her husband had died shortly after their marriage, leaving her the cottage and sufficient to live upon; but she had had no children, and her life in Whiteleaf had been very quiet and monotonous. Her only interest had been in occasional visits to Broadway End, to chat with her friends among the servants and hear the latest news of her old master and mistress. Beyond this, she sometimes took boarders, but otherwise found time hang heavily on her hands; and Cicely wondered why any one should wish to board in Whiteleaf, until she heard some reference to golf, and supposed that might be the explanation. But there were no boarders at present, and Mrs Ramage's face lit up in delight at the prospect of having Cicely to stay with her. Cicely looked dubious, and her father explained that the matter could not be arranged for a few days.

Mrs Ramage was of middle height, but so slight that she looked tall. She was very neat, her black hair drawn smoothly back from her face and rolled tidily behind. Her dark eyes were kindly to any one, but had fairly shone in her welcome to Cicely, in whom she found many traces of her mother.

'She's Miss Cicely over again, Mr Hobart, sure enough. Eh, if the mistress had had her at Broadway End long ago, these many years need never ha' been so lonely. It's fretting has broken her down, Mr Hobart; that's it! She's that lonely and desolate. There's never a young thing about that great empty house, and it's told on both the mistress and the master.'

Cicely shivered in her chimney-corner. 'It sounds awfully dreary. Suppose I do stay here, and they send for me, it won't be very cheerful living there with two old people. Oh, I shall go back to Mrs Gaynor! it's so jolly there. I really can't stay here;' and then she caught sight of Mrs Ramage's wistful face, and felt uncomfortable.

The cottage had taken her fancy from the outside, with its late yellow roses, banks of daisies, overhanging thatch, and old, uneven roof. The bedroom to which Mrs Ramage led them by candle-light had a lattice window under a tiny pointed gable, and only just gave room for one to turn round comfortably. Cicely, being an untidy person, looked round in dismay. Where could she possibly keep all her things? She liked the white-washed walls and ceiling, the old black beams and the ancient furniture. Everything was quaint and very clean, but very tiny, and the thought of living there was rather appalling. But the window, even at that evening hour, stood wide, for Phœbe, coming from the spacious atmosphere of Broadway End, had felt cramped in the cottage at first too, and had never lost her liking for open windows—and no geraniums to block up the sills! Her neighbours said her house was cold; but she preferred it airy, and had never found any of her boarders object to her methods.

Still, the rooms were very tiny, and Mr Hobart, laughing at Cicely's dismay, declared them to be like cabins on board ship. 'You'll have to be tidy, that's all, Cis. Then you'll get along all right.'

Cicely made a grimace. 'I wasn't born tidy,' she said.

They delighted Mrs Ramage by taking supper with her, though the little room seemed packed to overflowing with the three of them, and there would have been difficulty in finding

space for another chair. Cicely wondered what happened when boarders came, but supposed they had to come one at a time. Certainly there was only one bedroom, and she—if she stayed—would occupy that. So presumably there would be no boarders while she was there.

As they crossed the road to the inn she hung on to her father's arm in sudden insistence. 'Daddy, I don't think I *can*! That poky little cottage! She's very nice, of course, and I dare say it would be all right, but I'd so much rather go home. And even if I went to Broadway End, that sounds awfully lonely and dull. Will you mind very much if I say I really can't stand it?'

'I won't take an answer for a day or two, Cis. I want you to think of it all round, and see what will make you most really happy. You know, dear, if we refuse your grandfather's suggestion, the chance may not offer again. The proposal came from him this time, and he is not likely to repeat it. I would like to be friendly with them again and feel they had forgiven me, and this seems an opportunity to please and help them. But I will not leave you here unless it is to be for your happiness. I could not bear to be so far from you unless I knew you were content.'

Cicely sighed. 'I've been very happy with the Gaynors. This is such a big change, and I'd rather not have any change at all. I'll think about it, daddy, but so far I don't like it. You won't mind very much, will you?'

She drove to Risborough to see him off next morning, and stood by the carriage door in very low spirits, waiting for the train to start. Just as the whistle sounded a flying figure passed her, and she recognised the fair-haired schoolgirl they had seen the day before. Her books were slung over her shoulder, her long braid of fair hair flying as she ran up the train. She swung herself in as it began to move, dropped her strap of books on the seat, let down the window with a bang, and leaned out; for she had recognised Cicely, and was vastly astonished to see her left alone. She looked her surprise at the parting, and then Cicely saw something curious.

She had already noticed two schoolgirls in the station, who had taken a carriage near the one the fair-haired girl had entered. One, an older girl, looked out of her window also, and Cicely, taking it for granted they were schoolmates, looked to see some greeting exchanged between them. The fair-haired girl promptly nodded, and called 'Good-morning!' then withdrew into her carriage. But at sight of her the other had turned her head away sharply, without a sign of recognition, and disappeared also.

'Queer!' Cicely murmured. 'They do go to school together, and yet she cut my nice girl dead. I wonder what's up. Perhaps they've quarrelled, or something has gone wrong. And I wonder why my "maiden fair" spoke to her. She must have known. It was very queer!' and she set out thoughtfully on her walk back to Whiteleaf, making up stories as she went of what might have been the cause of the incident.

Mrs Ramage welcomed her with beaming face, and insisted on giving her a glass of milk and some home-made cake after her walk. 'I've just heard I'm to have a boarder for the week-end, Miss Cicely. He'll be here to-night. 'Twill be company for you. I'm real glad.'

'A boarder!' Cicely looked up apprehensively. 'A gentleman? But where will you put him? There isn't room!'

Mrs Ramage smiled. 'Room enough. He doesn't want much. He'll be here by tea-time.'

'Horrid man! I wish he wasn't coming,' Cicely said wrathfully, as she wandered out to sit on the turf above the Cross and think over the problem before her.

She asked many questions concerning the boarder at dinner-time; but Mrs Ramage only smiled mysteriously, and would give no definite information concerning the gentleman. He

was not coming to play golf; he preferred the cottage to the inn. Oh yes, he had been there several times before. No, he did not go out much, only for a stroll in the garden now and then; he took up very little room, and was quiet and easily pleased. Cicely would not find him in her way at all.

'Horrid, stodgy creature! Fancy not going for walks in a place like this!' and Cicely threw on her cap, caught up a walking-stick, and set out for a tramp through the woods, very scornful of the new boarder, but curious concerning him, nevertheless.

CHAPTER IV.
MRS RAMAGE'S BOARDER.

The afternoon, spent all alone, might have been dull, but Cicely was still so new to the woods and lanes that she found them fascinating. Moreover, she had an adventure, and made some new friends.

She passed the Cross and climbed the steep track through the wood, by which her father had driven her to Hampden. When the track reached the hill-top it joined a broad white road with a wide outlook over the Risborough valley and the wooded hills beyond. The air was strong and sweet, for the road was eight hundred feet above sea-level, and the open road and the vale beyond caught all the sunlight and seemed dazzlingly bright after the shadows of the wood. On each side were hedges laden with huge blackberries, and Cicely found her progress slow.

She was reaching up for what she had firmly resolved should be her last berry, when she heard voices. Through a gap in the hedge she saw an empty cottage, with a much-overgrown garden in front. In the garden was the usual well, with wooden bar above, but no rope or bucket. Kneeling perilously near the edge, and peering into the depths, were two small children. Their position seemed so very unsafe, and their distress was so evident, that Cicely struggled through the gap and hurried toward them. Something had obviously fallen down the well—a doll, perhaps—and it seemed probable that one of the children would follow in its efforts to reach the treasure.

It was the girl's voice she had heard, and she gave another wail as Cicely approached.

'Mirry's book! Ve newest book she's got! Oh, *can't* you reach it, Bobs?'

'I'm nearly sure I can't.' The small boy's tone and words were very precise. 'I'm nearly sure it's just too far away. Babs, what shall we do? It will be most—most awkward to have to tell Mirry you threw her book down the well.'

'Didn't frow it, ven. I never! It dist slipped of itself.'

'But you shouldn't have brought it, in the first place,' said Bobs reprovingly. 'I told you to take it back, and you wouldn't.'

Babs very naturally lost her temper at this, and kicked her brother. Then she burst into a wail. 'Try to reach it, Bobs! You's bigger'n me.'

'Let me try,' Cicely suggested, catching the small boy by the coat as he made another frantic effort to reach the book.

The children sprang up eagerly.

'We'll be so much obliged if you can get it for us,' Bobs said anxiously. 'It's really very serious, for it isn't our book at all.'

'Oh, do—do reach it for us!' begged Babs, hopping about in her eagerness. 'It dist slipped down out of my arms, ve silly ole fing, an' vere it's gone an' stuck dist where we can't get at it.'

Cicely laughed, and looked down the well. She laughed again as she saw the cause of the trouble—a new geometry book, whose red cover she recognised. 'I know that horrid old book. You know, I think its best place is at the bottom of a well. I don't use it myself yet, but I've heard the big girls say it's a hateful book, and stupid too. Don't you think we should just leave it there?'

‘But Miriam will want it to-night. She’ll be in a dreadful way if we tell her it’s at the bottom of the well,’ the boy explained in his precise way.

‘Do, pwease, fetch it up for us! Oh, can’t you reach it? Pwease, do twy!’ begged Babs, in such distress that she could not be still a moment; and Cicely had not the heart to tease her more. She lay down at full length, and just managed to reach the book, which had been caught by a tuft of gorse growing in the side of the well.

‘Here, you funny little things! It’s not hurt, not even scratched. Now do be still, if you can, and tell me what you’re doing with somebody else’s geometry book. It’s not much good to you.—Can’t you stop her, Bobs? Is she wound up to go on for ever?’

Babs was dancing in frantic delight, hugging the book to her chest and singing for joy. ‘Sank you! Sank you, oh, so much! Dear, good, kind girl, we do love you, oh, so much!’ It was an improvised anthem to a tune of her own.

Bobs was radiant also, but much quieter. 'We're very much obliged to you. It was really very awkward for us,' he said earnestly. 'Miriam could hardly have helped being cross, could she? It's quite a new book, you see.'

Cicely laughed. 'Is Miriam your sister?'

Bobs nodded.

Babs, still dancing wildly, continued her chant. 'Yesh—yesh—yesh! Our onliest big shishter; that's it! Oh, she would have been cross—so cross! Ve newest book she had! Dear, good, kind girl, we do love you—oh, so much, so much!'

'Can't you stop her, Bobs?' cried Cicely, putting her hands over her ears. 'I'm deaf already, and she'll have me dizzy in a moment.'

Bobs caught his sister by the pinafore. 'Stop it!' he said briefly; and Babs collapsed on the grass, still hugging the book, and laughed at sight of Cicely covering her ears.

'Stand up!' commanded Babs's brother; 'and keep still;' and introduced himself and her as Robert and Barbara Honor.

'I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance,' Cicely said seriously, as he seemed to expect it.

Bobs beamed. 'We're pleased too, and thank you very much. It was most—most awkward about the book.'

'Where do you live?'

'Greenailey; that's it!' said Babs promptly.

'Babs!' There was shocked remonstrance in the small boy's tone. 'Green *H*ailey! Over there!' with a jerk up the road.

'And what were you doing with the book?'

'She likes to make-believe she's Miriam,' Bobs explained indulgently. 'She puts a string round one of Mirry's books, instead of a strap, and pretends she's going to school. But she shouldn't have taken a new book, and I told her so.'

Light broke upon Cicely suddenly. The children were fair-haired, and bore a distinct likeness to the pretty girl who went to school by train.

'Does your sister go down to Risborough station every morning? And does she wear a green dress and cap? Does she sing as she goes along? Oh, I'm so glad!' as Bobs nodded, round-eyed, and Babs broke into a stream of excited questions.

They were the same height, and Cicely would have taken them for twins if the boy's manner had not been so very much older than the girl's. But Bobs informed her that he was eight years old, and Babs was only seven, and obviously felt his extra year gave him an immense advantage in age. So his mature air and precise manner of speech were evidently natural to him, or else the result of reaction from Babs's constant chatter of baby-talk.

Cicely talked with them for a time, and learned that they were in the habit of playing in the deserted cottage, and that Babs felt much more like 'Mirry' if she had something of hers to carry—hence the geometry book. Cicely left them at last, promising to see them again on her way home, and walked on along the road and into the woods by a path on the left, thinking over what they had told her.

Her pretty schoolgirl's name was Miriam Honor. At first she did not care for it, but gradually came to the conclusion that she rather liked it. Where was Green Hailey? She had passed some cottages after leaving the children, but nothing which could be called a village.

She resolved to find it on her way home, and wandered for a while in the beech-wood, tramping with delight through ankle-deep red leaves, and constantly losing her way. A thin cloud of blue smoke led her astray one time, and she climbed the slope to see whence it came, and found a queer little encampment, a hut built of hurdles and sacking, a wood-fire, an ancient steamer-chair, tools scattered about, and two shabby bicycles propped against the trees.

'Gipsies, perhaps! But they couldn't live in that tent, surely! I wonder where they are,' she thought; but there was no one about, so she set to work to find her way out of the wood again.

It was more difficult than she had expected, and she searched anxiously for an outlet which would lead her to the road. For some time she could only find her way to fields or thickets, and to attempt to cross either might be disastrous, she knew. There was nobody to ask, and she began to grow nervous lest the early darkness should fall before she had found her way out. A night in a beech-wood would be no joke, and under the trees darkness would fall much sooner than out in the open.

Then she realised that she was getting frightened, and resolutely set herself to use her wits. She had passed a cart-track some time ago. It must go somewhere. Carts did not plough through woods for fun. If she could find it again, she would follow it—if she could. But she had noticed that these tracks had a way of getting lost in the thickly spread leaves. Still, it was a chance, and she could think of no other.

Where was the track? Surely she had seen it just before plunging up the slope to investigate the gipsy fire. Then it must be in the hollow; and she waded through the rustling leaves, sinking nearly to her knees, but going steadily downhill.

She could not see the sun, but the sky showed red through the densely packed stems. Was it sunset, or could she still count on an hour of daylight? How long had she been wandering in the wood? She had forgotten her watch, and had no guide to the time. At the moment she dreaded nothing so much as the coming of evening. In a wood like this it would be very dark.

With a cry of relief, she found the track and set off at a run, but keeping a sharp lookout for projecting roots. Among the leaves, running would have been as difficult as in soft sand or shallow water; but on the path, smooth and easy as a felt-covered passage, she could make good speed, and was relieved to find the track grow more distinct as she proceeded.

With a shriek, a pheasant flew up out of the hedge, followed in a moment by his mate. Cicely, who had jumped in quite unnecessary alarm, called them all the names she could think of, then forgot them in her relief at sight of the entrance to the wood and a quaint old cottage just outside.

Her mind at rest, for the road was still in sunshine, she remembered her quest of Green Hailey, the village in which Miriam Honor lived. She went to the cottage door, and politely asked her way. 'Can you tell me the way to Green Hailey, please?'

The old woman who had answered her knock looked at her in stolid surprise. 'This is Green Hailey,' she said briefly.

'Oh! But where is the village?'

'This is the village;' and the dame closed the door, with no time to spare for such an unreasonable person who did not know a village when she saw one.

Cicely, feeling rather crushed, walked out into the road to look at the 'village.' There were half-a-dozen cottages, scattered among the trees on the fringe of the wood, with gardens and orchards about them; but no church, school, or post-office, or even an inn.

‘Well!’ she murmured, as she walked on, ‘Whiteleaf’s small, but Green Hailey’s smaller. It hasn’t a single shop. Call that a village! “Hamlet” would be too big a word. “This is the village!” Well, I’m glad she told me. I’d never have recognised it. And my “maiden fair” lives here! Then it must be in a cottage. I wonder which.’

She scanned them all, but there was nothing to help her, and she had to go home unsatisfied. She did not meet the children again, and could not go to look for them, as the sun was setting now and it would soon be dusk. She was used to the lighted streets of town, and the darkness of these country roads would be something new and impossible till she grew accustomed to it. Mrs Ramage had warned her to be home before dark, and after the twilight of the wood Cicely realised the need for caution. The thought of Mrs Ramage recalled that of the unwelcome boarder, and she frowned as she passed the Cross and hurried on to the village.

‘I wonder if the horrid man has arrived. She said he’d come for tea. Oh, I wish he wasn’t coming! It takes away all the cosy feeling. It’s a blessing he’s only come for the week-end; but there’s all to-morrow, besides Sunday, and I know he’ll be in the way. I shall go out for long walks, that’s all. She said he never went out much. I expect he’s an ancient old fossil, no good for anything. Perhaps he’ll sleep all day. It would be the best thing he could do. Well, *I* shall walk to Hampden in the morning, and to Kimble in the afternoon.’

She was distinctly nervous as she entered the cottage, and peeped apprehensively in to see if the bugbear had arrived. ‘Oh!’ She drew a breath of relief. ‘That horrid man hasn’t come yet? Oh, I’m so glad! Let’s have tea before he comes, in peace and quiet—do!’ for Mrs Ramage sat by the fire knitting, and there was no gentleman to be seen.

Beside her, in a big chair, lay a handsome gray cat, purring drowsily, his tail tucked over his nose. Cicely ran forward eagerly. ‘What a lovely cat! You didn’t tell me you had one. Where was he? What’s his name? Won’t you speak to me, you beauty? Tom? Puss? Kitty?’

Mrs Ramage smiled in her quiet way. ‘His name’s Mose. He’s come, you see, Miss Cicely. I told you he’d be here to tea.’

‘What do you mean? I don’t understand;’ and Cicely looked up, her arms round the sleepy Mose. ‘Where was he this morning? And last night?’

‘At home, at Rose Cottage, down the lane. He’s come to stop till Tuesday;’ and Mrs Ramage laughed quietly.

‘Why, you don’t mean to say——? *He* isn’t the boarder? Oh, do say that’s what you mean!’ and Cicely stared and laughed.

‘That’s it. His mistress is away to visit her son in Aylesbury. Mose comes to board with me when she goes away. She can’t leave him alone.’

‘Oh!’ Cicely fell into a chair and laughed. ‘Oh, what a relief! What a fright you gave me! I thought it was some horrid, stodgy old man. Oh, you mean thing, to keep so quiet about it, when you saw how scared I was! You might have told me this morning.’

Mrs Ramage gave another quiet laugh, and went to make the tea. And Cicely sat down to hug Mose and tell him again how glad she was he was not a stodgy old man.

‘Did you really mean Mose when you said you took boarders?’ she asked at tea. ‘Or do you sometimes have people too?’

Mrs Ramage smiled. ‘There are others, like Mose, who come when their folks go away. There’s Mrs Puddiphat, round the corner. Her little white dog comes to stop for a week now and then; and the cat from Mrs Blake’s, near the inn; and some more that come at times. I don’t take any one else, Miss Cicely, so you don’t need to be alarmed.’

Cicely drew another deep sigh of relief. ‘It’s been worrying me all day, except when I thought I was lost in the wood. I do think you might have told me.’

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs Ramage went to answer it. She drew the sitting-room door close behind her; but the high, clear voice reached Cicely easily.

‘Oh, Mrs Ramage, is that girl from London left all alone at the inn? I saw her father go off this morning, and she looked so deserted. I was wondering if I couldn’t’——

‘She’s here, Miss Miriam. She’s stopping with me;’ and Mrs Ramage quietly cut her short.

‘Oh! Then’——

Cicely threw open the door. ‘How kind of you to care!’ she said frankly. ‘I really couldn’t help hearing, you know. Daddy had to go away for a few days, but he’ll be back on Tuesday. Thank you so much for asking.’

Miriam, swinging her strap of books, laughed. ‘I hope you won’t think me rude. It wasn’t just curiosity. I thought if you were all alone over there you’d feel so lonely, and perhaps I could help somehow. But of course you’re all right here. I couldn’t help noticing you at the station.’

Cicely remembered what she had seen. She would have liked to ask the meaning of the incident, but felt it impossible on so slight an acquaintance. Then she laughed. ‘I feel as though I knew you already. Won’t you come in and talk? We’re just having tea. Couldn’t you wait? I made friends with Robert and Barbara this afternoon. I think they belong to you.’

Miriam laughed also. ‘What! our Bobs and Babs? Where did you meet them?’

‘Outside an empty cottage, on the road to your village. What a tiny village it is—the smallest I’ve ever seen!’

‘Oh, Green Hailey’s only a hamlet. No, I mustn’t come in; thank you very much, all the same. But it’s dark already, and mother doesn’t like me to be late. I don’t mind it myself, and there’s no help for it at this time of year; but she gets nervous if I’m much past my time. The road is rather lonely just above the Cross, where it goes through the wood.’

‘I wouldn’t like to go quite alone in the dark,’ Cicely confessed.

‘Oh, I don’t mind. I never think about it. But mother worries, so I’ll have to run. Good-bye just now, but I hope we’ll meet again soon. I’m jolly glad you’re here, and not at the inn;’ and, with a nod, Miriam was off, swinging her books and singing:

‘Once I loved a maiden fair,
But she did deceive me.’

‘How nice of her!’ Cicely said warmly.

CHAPTER V.
WHAT THE SCHOOLGIRLS SAID.

Cicely sat nursing the boarder with much content, and Mose purred his delight at this unusual attention. ‘Does he like being here?’ she asked.

Mrs Ramage smiled. ‘He’s very happy with me. He always comes to see me again after he’s gone home.’

‘No—really? Does he come to call? How sweet of him! Do you know Miriam Honor well, Mrs Ramage?’ Cicely asked presently.

‘Oh yes. She often looks in on her way to school.’

‘She goes to Miss Macey’s school in Wycombe, doesn’t she?’

‘It’s not right in Wycombe. Wycombe Moor, they call it. Yes; she goes by train every day.’

‘And you had told her I was stopping at the inn?’

‘That’s it. She had heard there was a lady and gentleman expected there. Then she met you yesterday morning, and called in at night to ask me if you belonged to them.’

‘And you told her there was no other lady, except me?’

‘Nay, I told her you were the lady,’ smiled Mrs Ramage.

‘I like her. I shall go up to Green Hailey to-morrow on the chance of meeting her or the kiddies. Are there any others?’

‘One brother, a year younger than Miss Miriam. He’s away at a boarding-school. I’ve heard tell she wanted to go too, but ‘twasn’t possible for them both. Their father died five years since, and they’ve had a hard time. They came from Missenden way; but Mrs Honor’s home was in Risborough, so she took that cottage and brought the children here.’

‘I mean to know them. I shall start to-morrow.’

But Mrs Ramage had another suggestion to offer next day. ‘Mr Stevens, from the farm, is driving to Wycombe to-day, and he’ll take you with him, if you like, Miss Cicely. It’s a pleasant drive, and a fine day for it.’

The chance seemed too good to lose, and Cicely reflected that probably Saturday morning would not be the best time to hope for a meeting with Miriam. There was sure to be work to do in the cottage, and her help would be needed. In the afternoon she might be free, and out in the woods, perhaps. So she accepted Mr Stevens’s kindness gratefully, and enjoyed the drive round the foot of the hills to the old market-town. Out of sheer kindness of heart, he brought her home by Hughenden, Speen, and Hampden, across the hills; and she reached home full of delight in the golden woods, bare open ‘bottoms,’ with their stony fields, and quaint little villages.

A note from her father awaited her, written in London as he waited for the Liverpool train to start. Its concluding words gave her a shock:

‘I shall be with you on Tuesday or Wednesday, and hope to find your answer ready for me, for my time at home is short now, and I must see you definitely settled before I go.’

In her interest in Miriam, Mose, and her new surroundings, she had quite forgotten the choice which had to be made—had forgotten she was not here simply for a holiday. She took her dinner, looking very sober, her keen appetite gone, and then set out for a walk, her mind tackling its problem in earnest.

She liked the country very well. She saw prospect of a friend of about her own age, so that she would not be entirely lonely if she went to the new school. Mrs Ramage's cottage was cosy, and she could be very comfortable there. But—but——

There were the grandparents in the background. At any time she might have to leave the cottage and go to Broadway End. The thought did not attract her. The house, as described by Mrs Ramage, sounded gloomy and dull. She had no particular pity for the old people, who had shown themselves unsympathetic towards her in the past, in letting her, a lonely child, be left in the care of strangers. The strangers had been kind, but Mr and Mrs Broadway had never troubled to inquire if it were so. They only wanted her now for their own sake, and she was aware of the fact, and resented it. She was hardly old enough to put their feelings before her own, or feel any very deep pity for their loneliness and grief.

And she was asked, for their sake, to give up so much. She had been very happy in her old life, and strongly objected to any change. Mrs Gaynor was more than kind, and petted her far more than she did her own girls, trying to make up to Cicely for her loss of her mother. And the girls were very jolly. She had been good friends with Margery, Elsie, and Doris; while Nancy, two years her senior, had played elder sister very successfully. They had made her one of themselves till she had almost forgotten she did not belong to them. It was home, and a very merry one. She had her place there—her own beloved little bedroom—her niche in the family arrangements. To leave it all really felt like tearing up roots, and she shrank from it intensely.

Then there was school. They all went to school together every day, and she had made herself of some importance there. Without any conceit, she knew that the hockey-team depended on her to keep goal, just as they depended on Margery as half-back and Nancy as forward. She knew that Miss Raynham was hoping she would win the scholarship, and bring honour to the school. She remembered ruefully her paper on 'School Games,' to be read before the Literary Society in November. And the Christmas play, in which she and Nancy always took part! The dancing class to which they went together! Her life had been so full, and she was asked to break away from it all for the sake of two old people for whom she really did not care.

Or was it not more for her father's sake? He wished her to stay here, and he believed her mother would have wished it also. Poor Cicely found the choice very difficult. All her inclinations drew her one way, but her duty certainly seemed to point in the other. There were alleviations, of course, if she had to stay here, but so far they were no more. Her friendship with Miriam was too slight to be a definite attraction. There was nothing to make her wish to stay. All her wishes lay very much the other way. She wanted to go home. If she stayed here, she would be cut off from home, cut adrift entirely from all her friends. And her father would be on the other side of the world. The prospect seemed unspeakably dreary, and she longed intensely to put away all these troubling thoughts and hurry home to Mrs Gaynor's motherly kindness and the warm welcome of the girls.

She did not cry easily, but she was very near it as she stumbled along, caring nothing where she went. It was pure instinct which had made her turn towards the Cross and climb the road through the wood towards Green Hailey. She had not given a thought to Miriam since she received her father's letter; but as she passed through the scattered hamlet a clamour of voices made her look up. She remembered the Honors, and thrust away the haunting problem for a time as she looked to see if she had discovered their home.

A tiny cottage, with picturesque thatched roof and climbing roses, stood far back from the road, with a long front garden still gay with sunflowers and daisies. A tiled path led to the little porch; a low gate gave entrance through a wild-rose hedge.

Two girls, strangers to Cicely, stood in the tiled path. Both were about her age, and therefore younger than Miriam. One had loose black hair; the other dark brown, with brown eyes and face like a gipsy. Both were gazing up into an apple-tree, where Miriam sat enthroned on a bough. She held half a cocoa-nut hung from a string, and was tying it round another branch so that it should dangle about four feet from the ground.

'Now, children, is that right?—Babs, you can't reach it? That's just as well!—Bobs, ask mother if she can see it from her window. All right?'

'Yesh! Yesh! Kvite all right, Mirry darling. Now where'll we put ve ovver one?'

'I really don't think it could be better, Miriam,' Bobs answered sedately.

'Do come down, Mirry!' called the black-haired girl impatiently. 'Georgie says it's quite true. What do you think of it?'

'If that girl comes back to school, *I* sha'n't speak to her. And I don't believe any of the others will either,' said the gipsy-faced girl decidedly.

'Oh—Georgie!' and Miriam gazed down at her in dismay. 'It was all a mistake. She didn't understand. You do believe it, don't you?'

'Rot!' said Georgie scornfully. 'She couldn't be such a soft. She knew well enough. I think she's got jolly good cheek to come back, and I believe the girls will make it hot for her, that's all.'

'Well, I'll tell you what I think,' said Miriam with decision. 'I think she's jolly plucky to come back after what happened. I believe it was all a mistake, and you know Miss Macey thinks so too. Why, Georgie, she wouldn't have come back if it hadn't been; she simply couldn't. The very fact that she's coming back at half-term shows it was a mistake. She had the chance to have no more to do with us, and instead she's coming back. I think she's downright plucky.—Don't you, Marguerite?'

The black-haired girl looked dubious. 'Mirry, I don't know. I don't know what to think. It's all very queer, and jolly awkward. I know it will be just beastly for Dorothy if she does turn up. I wouldn't be in her shoes for anything. Of course'—with a touch of bitterness—'it doesn't much matter what *we* think. All that matters is how the others look at it. But I guess there's no doubt about that. They've made up their minds already.'

'Then, as you say, it will be pretty horrid for Dorothy'—— Miriam began.

'I put it more strongly than that;' and Marguerite's black eyes gleamed.

'Well, perhaps we could make it pleasanter for her, even though we are Outsiders,' Miriam explained. 'That's what I think about it, Georgie.—Now, Babs, where's that other nut? Shall we hang it from the cherry-tree?' and she swung herself to the ground. 'I say, won't the tomtits have a feast? I wonder if too much cocoa-nut gives them a pain?—It was awfully decent of you to bring us nuts for them again, Marguerite.'

They gathered round the cherry-tree, and Cicely realised two things—that she ought not to have been listening, and that Miriam had friends for the afternoon and would have no time to spare for strangers.

She did not feel very guilty in having overheard the school gossip, since it had been spoken so loudly; but it had roused her interest, and she would have liked to know more. What had the unfortunate Dorothy done? Why were these three 'Outsiders,' and who were the

others whose opinion mattered so much? Was Dorothy plucky or cheeky in braving the opinion of the school, as she evidently intended to do?

'It seems to me,' said Cicely to herself as she turned into the wood, 'that I'm getting interested in that school. Besides all this, why didn't that girl in the train speak to Miriam Honor yesterday morning? Well, if I should go there, I shall get to know all about it, I suppose. But—am I going? To be, or not to be? Oh dear! That *is* the question, of course. And I'd better decide soon, for I'll have no peace till it's settled.'

She wandered up through the wood, her mind drearily working at its problem, the schoolgirls forgotten. She knew her way now, and followed the cart-track on and up till she found herself by a gate, looking out into a great field. She stood hesitating, wondering if the path which crossed it was a public footway.

Suddenly a voice called to her from among the trees close at hand. 'It's all right. It's a public path—or have you lost your way?'


HAROLD C. ERRINGTON

She looked round hastily for the owner of the friendly voice.

She looked round hastily for the owner of the friendly voice. A tall girl, of twenty-one or thereabouts, stood among the trees, a folded easel and sketching materials under her arm. She was fair-haired, and her blue eyes looked kindly and helpful.

'I was wondering where the path led to,' Cicely explained. 'I don't know my way about yet.'

'This is Great Hampden Park. The path runs past the house.'

'Oh, I didn't know I was so near to Hampden! Thank you so much.'

'These are the Hampden Woods. Are you quite a stranger?'

'Quite. I've only been here two days. We drove to Hampden yesterday, but that was by the road.'

'This is much shorter. Where are you stopping?'

'At Whiteleaf, near the Cross.'

The girl nodded. 'I wonder'—— she began, then went on quickly, 'Would you like to see something interesting? If you're a stranger, you'll never have seen it, and it's just a chance. Come down the wood with me, and I'll show you.'

Cicely hesitated, and the girl laughed out.

'What's the matter? Do you think I'm the traditional "old woman in a red cloak" who runs away with girls? Are you afraid I'll take you to the gipsies?'

'Oh no, no! It wasn't that at all,' Cicely cried, reddening and laughing in confusion. 'I was wondering whether I ought to. I came out on purpose to think over something, and—and make up my mind, and I'm afraid if I go with you I shall forget all about it and go home as undecided as ever. But I'd like to come. Is it far?'

'No; just down the wood. It won't take many minutes. Come along. Sometimes problems are all the more easily solved for being left to themselves for a while.'

The girl's eyes had kindled in sudden interest, and were full of sympathy. She asked no questions, however, but led the way through the wood, following a faint track, till they came to a wide clearing where many trees lay on the ground.

'Have they fallen or been cut down?' Cicely asked curiously.

'They've been cut. I hate to see them lying there, but the woods have to be thinned. But these are cut for use. By the way, my name is Margia Lane, and I come from Totteridge, near High Wycombe.'

'I'm Cicely Hobart.'

'You have a fine old name. You should be proud of it.'

'Is it old? I didn't know.'

'John Hampden had a friend Miles Hobart.'

'Oh! I'm glad. I always liked him.'

Margia nodded. 'Now, this is what I brought you to see;' and Cicely gazed with eager eyes.

The clearing held several little encampments, like the one she had found deserted the day before. Low huts, built of hurdles and sacking, their walls formed by heaps of creamy wood shavings, stood among the tree-stumps. Thin blue smoke rose from camp-fires, and a number of men and boys were working round the huts, their cycles propped against the trees.

'What are they doing?' Cicely asked curiously. 'I saw a tent like those yesterday, but there was no one about. Are they gipsies? Do they live here?'

‘Oh no! The huts are only for working in. They live in the villages—Little Hampden, Green Hailey, and others.’

‘But what can they do out here? It’s so far from everywhere. Oh, are they making things out of wood, from the cut-down trees?’

‘Exactly. And here are the “things” they make;’ and Margia led Cicely towards the workers.

Near the huts stood stacks of rounded bars of white wood, placed neatly in piles, four laid crosswise as for ‘noughts and crosses,’ then others laid upon them till the erection was three feet high. The little white stacks stood dotted about among the huts; as they watched, a boy came out carrying an armful, which he proceeded to pile neatly in orthodox fashion.

‘But what are they for? What lots of bars of wood! But how are they used?’ asked Cicely, in much curiosity.

Margia laughed. ‘Don’t you recognise them? They’re chair-legs, waiting to be carted to Wycombe and put together and provided with seats.’

‘Chair-legs! Oh, but how funny! So they are!’ as closer inspection showed lines of beading round the bars, three rings near one end, two at the other. ‘Is that how chairs are made? Out here in the woods? I thought they came from factories and workshops.’

‘This is a chair factory. Those huts are the workshops. See, these are cross-bars quite plain; and those are for baby-chairs, evidently, by their size.’

‘And may we see how they’re made? Don’t they need machinery to smooth them like this? They look almost polished.’

‘They aren’t polished, except by friction. Yes, come and look into the huts. You’ll have to crawl.’

‘Won’t they mind?’

‘The men? No. They’ll only be rather amused.’

They crouched on the creamy shavings, and peered through a three-foot-high opening in the hut. A boy was hard at work with a kind of lathe, which he worked with his foot. A cord from this treadle joined a long arm above his head, which projected through the open end of the hut. The cord was then wound with a single turn round a fresh bar, roughly hewn from a block of beech. This was fixed at both ends into a frame, and as the treadle was worked the vibration of the cord set the bar spinning. The boy held a knife, with which he skilfully chipped at the whirling bar, and the shavings flew in all directions, lay in heaps on the floor, and added to the piles about the walls of the hut.

Cicely watched in fascination as the spinning bar grew smooth and round and polished under the quivering cord and clever knife. Now it looked finished but for the beading. The boy dropped his knife and caught up another, and touched the bar as it flew round. Just a touch, a momentary pressure, and the line appeared; another touch, and the second was finished.

Cicely turned to Margia in round-eyed amazement. ‘How awfully clever! Just a touch, and it’s done. Why, the whole thing only takes a minute,’ as the boy tossed aside the bar and caught up another.

‘One chair-leg a minute. Yes. Shall we watch for a while?’

Cicely nodded, and watched in fascinated wonder as bars were turned out at the rate of one a minute. ‘It’s like magic. Thank you so much for bringing me. Are they here all the time?’

‘Oh no; only at times. Perhaps I had better see you safely away, too, or you’ll be wandering among the pheasants, and the keeper will be after you.’

‘Pheasants? Where?’

‘Up there—all those wooden coops. They don’t like the birds disturbed. There’s a man with a gun about somewhere, keeping guard. Come this way.’

Margia led Cicely back to the park entrance, and paused by the gate. ‘I’m going on towards Green Hailey. This will lead you to the farm at Hampden, and the pretty cottage where the key of the church is kept. I suppose’—and Margia looked at Cicely doubtfully—‘I suppose I couldn’t help, Cicely? You’re in some trouble or perplexity; I can see that in your face. Could I help in any way?’

Cicely’s lips quivered. ‘I’m in an awful hole,’ she confessed. ‘I don’t know what to do. I don’t know that any one can help, but I’d be awfully glad to talk it over with somebody. I’m all alone for a day or two, and when daddy comes back I have to say yes or no, and I’ve nobody to help me. If I might tell you about it while you’re painting? Would you mind very much?’

‘I wish you would,’ Margia said simply. ‘The fact is, I’m in a bit of a hole myself—to use your expression. That’s why I was interested in what you said. I don’t know whether we can help one another, but, as you say, it’s a relief just to talk over things at times. Suppose you come with me, and we’ll have a chat. It can’t do any harm, and it might help one of us.’

‘I’d love to,’ Cicely said wistfully. ‘It’s awfully hard to make up your mind sometimes, isn’t it? Especially when people want you to do one thing, and you want to do another.’

Margia’s lips tightened, and she glanced at her quickly. ‘Yes!’ she said quietly, and led the way back into the wood towards Green Hailey.

CHAPTER VI.
THREE STORIES.

'Oh! Why, it's Bobs and Babs!' cried Cicely, looking at the drawing on Margia's block while the easel was being set up.

Margia smiled. 'Do you know them? They were wandering in the wood one day, and I persuaded Babs to be still just long enough to let me catch her expression. Bobs was easier.'

Cicely laughed and nodded. 'I don't know them well. I've spoken to them once, and to Miriam. But we aren't friends yet. I'd like to be.'

'You couldn't do better. Now I want to get in the background. I posed the children at the foot of that great beech—isn't he a beauty?—and gave all my time to them. To-day I want to paint the trees; they are really more in my line than figures. I feel quite flattered that you recognised Bobs and Babs. Look through my sketch-book and you'll see it's generally landscape and most often trees.'

Cicely sat turning the pages and giving constant exclamations of delight. 'Oh, is this Hampden Glade? How beautiful! Do you sell your pictures? I never saw such lovely tree-paintings before.'

Margia laughed. 'I generally manage to dispose of them. I've had some good commissions too. I love the woods, and I like to be out painting better than anything else.' Her face clouded suddenly. 'Come, let's get to business, Cicely! Can you tell me your trouble? Just tell me in a general way, if you like, without any details.'

'Oh, it's not a secret. Daddy wants me to do what I'd like best—what would make me happiest, he says—but he'd *like* me to do one thing, and I don't want to. I'll tell you;' and Cicely plunged into her story.

Margia listened, saying nothing, looking up continually at her tree, and then painting on with quick, delicate touches, her face very grave.

'So, you see,' Cicely ended, 'I want to go home to Mrs Gaynor and the girls. I've been very happy there. I hate the thought of any change. I don't see half a chance of things being as jolly here'——

'That is hardly the question,' Margia interrupted quickly. 'I'm sorry your father put it to you like that. To have a good time is not the end of all things. If you feel you have chosen as he wished, you'll be happier than if you feel you haven't. If he goes away, and you know you've disappointed him, you won't be happy, Cicely—not really, though things may be as jolly as ever.'

'You think not? You think it would worry me afterwards?' Cicely asked doubtfully.

'I'm sure of it. But you're making your choice much more difficult by laying the stress on the wrong point. The question is not what you want, but what it is right for you to do. The thing to decide is not where you'll have the most enjoyment, but whether your life is to be brave or cowardly, a great life or a poor, mean one.'

Cicely stared. 'Oh, but how? All that? Just by deciding whether I'll please daddy or myself?'

Margia nodded. 'Let me think a moment!' and she worked on swiftly, her brows knit. Suddenly she said, 'Cicely, you know where we are?'

'In Green Hailey Wood!' and Cicely stared again.

‘No; it’s Great Hampden Wood. Old John is one of my heroes, and I think you said you liked him too?’

‘Rather! We had an essay on him at school, and we had a lot read to us first, and I’ve loved him ever since. He was ripping!’

Margia smiled, for the adjective sounded strange in this connection. She did not attempt to explain that, however, but said quietly, ‘Well, then, you should try to be like him. He had to do exactly what you have to do now.’

Cicely’s eyes widened. ‘Please tell me; for I don’t see it a bit!’ she said. ‘He didn’t have to leave school and the girls and his home, and go to a new school and some cross old grandparents.’

‘No; but he had to leave home and give up his easy country life for the sake of others. He had to choose between his own wishes and his duty. And he needn’t have done what he did. What was twenty shillings to him? He owned all these woods, that great park, and the big house you’ve seen. What did that little tax matter to him? But it mattered to some people, and if he had paid it, the taxes which would have followed would have mattered to everybody in the country. It was only the beginning, and he saw that. He had to choose—and, Cicely, I never quite realised what the choice must have meant till I came to Hampden the first time.’

‘Go on!’ Cicely begged. ‘Tell me, please. You haven’t lived here always, then?’

‘No; we lived in London. My sister and I studied there; but last spring she was appointed painting-mistress in a big school near here, and we took a cottage at Totteridge. I cycled to Hampden one day, with his story in my mind, and understood it as I had never done before. I saw what he had had to give up. His beautiful home—that great peaceful park, and the woods and farms and hills, all his—and he a quiet country gentleman, liking to work in his study, ride about among his tenants, do his duty as magistrate in the quiet little towns, and live at home with his boys and girls. He had to give it all up. His choice that day in Kimble Church—quite near you at Whiteleaf—meant, first, his summons to London and all the worry and annoyance of the law-courts. And the case went against him, of course. But that wasn’t the end. He couldn’t give it up and go home then. He saw how things were going, and what was to come, and he had become known as one who would stand up against injustice. Instead of his quiet home-life, there came the turmoil and excitement of elections for Parliament. Then followed those years of strife and legal warfare, argument and discussion, when he was the one man who kept things straight in Parliament and made peace many a time’——

‘I know!’ Cicely said unexpectedly. ‘But for him they’d have sheathed their swords in one another’s bodies. I remember!’

‘Yes. He was needed there, and he knew it. He never shirked the duty he had taken up, but it was the end of his home-life. I wonder if he ever felt like you, that he wished the changes had never come! You know the end of the story. He saw this beautiful, peaceful Bucks he loved so much filled with war and fighting—soldiers in every village, soldiers on the hills at night; fine old houses burned to the ground, though his own escaped. He left his wife and children, and went off to drill soldiers, to lead his troop, to show the roads and passes through the hills which he knew so well. He fell at Chalgrove Field, and died two days later at Thame, after great suffering, quite a young man still. Now, Cicely, reduce the choice he had to make to its simplest, and what was it? His own ease and comfort, or his duty to others—wasn’t that it?’

Cicely nodded, her face very sober. ‘And you mean that everybody who puts others first and their own way last does what he did, only in a smaller way?’

‘Everybody has to face the same choice sooner or later. And it decides whether our life shall be heroic, or low, poor, and selfish. That’s what I mean. I might put it more strongly still, but I’m afraid you’d think I was preaching.’

‘Oh, please go on. I won’t. I mean, I wish you would. People want preaching sometimes, you know.’

‘Well, what is it that we call “duty,” or “service of others”? Isn’t it God’s will for us coming into conflict with our own? Isn’t that the real choice for each of us?’

Cicely sat looking very grave, her fingers twisting delicate leaves of wood-sorrel into a wreath, her thoughts far away. At last she said, ‘But sometimes people haven’t any choice. Sometimes they have to do things they don’t like, with no chance of getting out of it. There was a girl I knew at school; she was set on going to college, and she was sure of a scholarship as soon as she was old enough. But when she was seventeen her mother had a stroke and was awfully ill, and the girl had to give up all thought of college and stay at home and nurse her. It wasn’t at all what she had planned, and she was fearfully disappointed. But she had no choice; there was nobody else. She just had to do it.’

‘But I think the choice remained. She could do it joyfully, glad to give up her ambitions for her mother’s sake; or grudgingly, resenting the necessity. It would make all the difference to her mother how it was done.’

‘I hadn’t thought of that. Then you mean that I must not only stay here to please daddy, but make him think I’m glad to do it?’

‘You want him to be happy about you while he’s away, don’t you?’

‘Oh *yes*! More than anything, almost.’

‘Well, then?’ and Margia gave Cicely a quick look.

‘I’ll do it; at least I’ll try,’ Cicely said suddenly. ‘I’ve known all along I ought to, but I didn’t want to make up my mind and give up all thought of going home. I’ve been putting it off’——

‘I know. Oh, Cicely, I know—and don’t I wish I didn’t!’

Margia’s outburst, after such a while of quiet talking, startled Cicely.

She looked up quickly. ‘Oh, I’d quite forgotten! You said you—you were in a hole too. Won’t you tell me, please? Or mustn’t you?’

‘No, I’ll play fair. I’ve been lecturing myself as much as you, and I’ve been quite aware of it. I’ve only put into words what has been in my mind for days, but I wouldn’t admit it. I wouldn’t think about it. For I have felt, like you, that I would have to do the thing I don’t like; but, like you, I have been putting off the final decision. But after the way I’ve talked to you there’s no escape. I should feel such a humbug if I failed now, and you’d certainly tell me to practise what I preached.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t! But won’t you tell me, please?’

‘I dare say it will seem a very small matter to you, but it’s big to me. I told you we came here in the spring. My sister teaches drawing and painting in Wycombe’——

‘In the school Miriam Honor goes to?’ and Cicely looked up quickly. ‘Where I shall be going too?’

‘Why, yes! We had better be friends, then, Cicely, for we shall see a good deal of one another. Well, I have never felt any wish for teaching, but I have done much painting out in the woods, and have been as successful in my work as my sister has been in hers. But all summer I have been longing for autumn, and now that it has come it is even more wonderful

than I expected. The colours of the woods are beyond anything I ever dreamed of, and I want to be painting every day till the last scrap of daylight is gone.'

Cicely looked at Margia curiously. 'The woods are beautiful, of course, and all the trees are very pretty, but'——

'Child, they're wonderful!—marvellous!—and quite unpaintable. I try, of course, but I never get anywhere near'——

'Oh! Why, your sketches are just exactly'——

Margia laughed. 'I know only too well that they're not. But I want to do what I can, and use every minute of every day till the leaves fall. And—this is the trouble! My sister was ill last holidays, and hardly strong again when term began. A fortnight ago she had a breakdown, and has had to go away for a change. She has gone to friends, who will look after her well, so she didn't need me. Indeed, the doctor said it was better she should be with strangers. And I was anxious not to go away just now. They have tried to do without her at school so far; but now they have written that they will have to fill her place at half-term if she is unable to resume her work. And the doctor has forbidden her to teach for three months, and says he will not answer for the consequences if she attempts it.'

'What a pity! But perhaps she'll be able to get another appointment. Was it a very good one?'

'Very, and she is most anxious not to lose it. The thought of doing so is weighing on her mind and keeping her back, they say.'

'But where do you come in? I don't quite see'——

'The point is,' said Margia ruefully, 'that they have offered *me* the post until she is well again. They know my work—I have shown it in Wycombe—and they think I could teach. I don't believe I could, and I dislike the thought of it intensely. To spend all my time shut up in school; to go down into town every day, when I want to be in the woods, up here on the hills; to be teaching girls, who would know I'm not a teacher, and would be rude, and laugh and whisper behind my back, and disobey if I ever dared to give them orders'——

'Oh, Miss Lane, girls aren't like that!'

'Aren't they? I'm afraid of them, and they'd soon find it out. I wouldn't mind the little ones, but the big, grown-up girls would be too much for me. I hate the very thought of it. It isn't my work. I haven't patience, either, and I know I should get cross about little things and make a fool of myself when I had to teach a class. Can you imagine anything more different from sitting quietly out here, painting all day, and perhaps seeing nothing more lively than a squirrel or a rabbit for hours? And it means giving up my work entirely except on Saturdays, and in this most wonderful season, when all the tints are so exquisite. I've been waiting all summer for this time, and now that it has come I have to go and teach girls in school.'

'Oh, it is hard lines!' Cicely said sympathetically. 'I don't think it's a little thing at all. I think it's most awfully rotten for you. But you won't find the girls so bad, Miss Lane. Miriam Honor wouldn't go on as you said.'

Margia gave herself a little shake. 'I shall have to face it somehow, I suppose. Perhaps you can help me with the girls, Cicely. Give me some points. What ought I to do? I would like to get on well with them from the first.'

'Oh, how can I tell? Be strict, Miss Lane, not slack! Let them see you're in earnest. Girls don't like slack teachers, who can't keep order.'

'I should have thought they'd prefer to have an easy time.'

‘I don’t think they do. They say, “Oh, Miss So-and-so’s no good; she can’t keep order a scrap.” I’ve heard that often. They think more of you if you’re bossy.’

Margia sighed. ‘It’s the one thing I’m not! Well?’

‘Oh, well, you must always be awfully fair, you know, and—and—oh, you’ll find you know all the other things! Girls are all right, really, Miss Lane. If you’re decent to them, they’ll be decent to you; and you will, you know.’

Margia sighed again. ‘Be strict! Be fair! Be decent! Are those the commandments? Thank you, Cicely. I’ll try, but’——

‘It’s great cheek of me, of course, but you asked me, you know.’

‘Of course I did. You’ll have helped me very much if I can only live up to your advice. But I haven’t told you the crowning point of the situation yet. I have an invitation from an old friend to go with her after Christmas to Italy. You know what that means to a painter. I have never been abroad; but if I take my sister’s place the journey will be out of the question, as school will begin again early in January.’

‘Oh, hard lines! That is rotten!’ Cicely cried, in keen sympathy and dismay.

‘It can’t be helped. But the thought of Florence and Venice and Rome hasn’t made the choice any easier. Well, Cicely, we both seem to be facing a choice which is big enough for us, though it might not seem so to other people. Of course, I’ve known all along what I’d have to do, as you said yourself. But I’ve been putting off the thought, hesitating to make up my mind finally. I’ll write to-night, promising to begin work at the half-term. That still leaves me a week’s freedom. After that’—Margia shrugged her shoulders—‘I must do my best, that’s all. You must back me up with the girls, Cicely.’

‘Oh, I will! It will be jolly to have you there. And I’ll write to daddy and tell him I’ll stop here and be good, and he can be making his plans. I’d better’—Cicely’s lips quivered in spite of herself—‘I’d better write and say good-bye to Mrs Gaynor and the girls. I shall miss them all.’

‘I wouldn’t do that,’ Margia said quickly. ‘He may take you home for a few days. You’ll have packing to do, and other friends to see.’

‘Oh, then, I won’t! I’d like to see them all once more;’ and Cicely sat looking thoughtful and downcast.

‘Your friend Miriam has made her choice, you know,’ said Margia suddenly, and Cicely turned to her quickly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I heard about it from her mother. Don’t tell Mirry I told you, though. But I’d like you to understand her. She and her brother—he is fourteen—both won scholarships to big boarding-schools, and both were keen to go. But Miriam had also tried for a scholarship to the day-school at Wycombe Moor, in the hope of winning one of the two. She’s very quick and clever, and she won both. Of course the boarding-school was by far the better. But they couldn’t afford to send both her and Dick away. Boarding-school means an outfit, where at home old clothes will do, and lots of other expense. Mrs Honor thought that, with some difficulty, she might manage it for one, but not for two. And she needed Mirry’s help at home with the little ones. She teaches them in the evenings, besides helping in the house whenever she is at home. So Miriam had to choose between the two scholarships, and whether she or Dick should go away. As she was the elder, she naturally had first choice. But then Dick hadn’t won a second scholarship.’

‘And so she let him go! That was hard lines, when she’d won the scholarship! Thank you for telling me,’ Cicely said soberly; and after a pause, ‘She seems quite happy about it, Miss Lane. I’ve thought all along what a happy girl she is. The first time I saw her she was singing, “Once I loved a maiden fair.” She’s got a lovely voice.’ Margia nodded. ‘She doesn’t let herself think about it now that it’s done.’

‘It isn’t her way. She’d say it was no use.’

Cicely sat thinking of Miriam, and suddenly remembered the other girls she had seen. She looked up quickly. ‘Miss Lane! Can you tell me what dreadful thing it was that Dorothy did?’

‘Dorothy?’ and Margia looked at her vaguely.

‘Oh, don’t you know about it? I thought if your sister taught in that school you might have heard. She did something dreadful, and some of the girls don’t want her to go back. Miriam says it was all a mistake, and she’s plucky to want to go. I heard them talking about it.’

‘I know nothing about it, Cicely. But if you overheard it by accident, I think you should say nothing about it. Now I must pack up, or I shall be caught in the dark before I’m out of the wood. How do you like my beech-tree?’

‘He’s a beauty!’ and Cicely took a long look at the pictured tree. ‘You *can* paint trees! It seems too bad you shouldn’t be allowed to go on doing it.’

Margia gave her a faint smile. ‘Now, none of that! We’d better not sympathise with one another. I’m going home to write to my sister before I have time to change my mind. It will do her good to know.’

She had gone a little way through the wood, when flying feet on the soft path made her look round, and Cicely came running after her.

‘I found these—near where we were sitting—among the leaves. I want you to have them. Fancy, in October!’ and she thrust a bunch of violets into Margia’s hand. ‘Aren’t they sweet? No smell, of course, but isn’t it nice to see them? It feels like spring. And I just wanted to say’—as Margia thanked her warmly—‘I couldn’t say it before, somehow, but I meant it all the time—thank you so much for all you’ve said, and I’m so awfully glad I met you. Good-bye!’ and she fled away through the wood, embarrassed and afraid to say much just then.

CHAPTER VII.
A JAM-MAKING ORGY.

Cicely's father acted quickly once his mind was made up. He was in Whiteleaf by midday on Tuesday, and, having received her letter in Liverpool, had had ample time to write to her grandparents and to make his plans. He carried her off that afternoon, and went first to Wycombe Moor, a little way from the town, to interview Miss Macey at the big school, and make arrangements for Cicely to begin work the following Tuesday—Monday being the half-term holiday. They reached home late at night, and matters had to be explained to Mrs Gaynor and the girls, whose grief at the news shook Cicely's resolution and broke her down completely.

A busy week of shopping, farewell visits, and packing followed, for Mrs Gaynor was instructed to provide her with all she would need for the winter. If she found anything forgotten, or anything unforeseen proved to be necessary, she was to write, and her wants would be supplied immediately. But she was so well provided that it seemed impossible she could require anything more, and she had grave doubts as to whether Mrs Ramage's cottage could hold all her belongings.

During that busy week, with its constant rush, its visits to town, and farewell tea-parties with her school friends, those few days in Whiteleaf seemed like a dream, and the thatched hamlets, the Cross, and the quiet yellow beech-woods seemed very far away. Miriam Honor, Bobs and Babs, Mrs Ramage and her boarders, the quiet talk in the wood with Margia Lane, and the schoolgirl gossip she had overheard—all seemed like another life on which the door had been closed. But she knew that presently they would be the really important things of life, and Nancy and Margery Gaynor, her present home and friends, and the many interests which had filled her life, would seem dreamlike in their turn.

She had hoped to see Miriam before leaving Whiteleaf; but Sunday had been wet, and had shown her what the country could be like at such a dreary time. She had spent most of the day indoors, nursing Mose and reading a book her father had left with her. On Monday Miriam had been at school, and though Cicely had tried to waylay her, she had failed, since there was a more direct route to the station than the one which passed the Cross. So she had not been able to tell her she was to be her schoolfellow, as she had hoped to do.

Mr Hobart's plans made it necessary that he should take Cicely back to the village and leave her in Mrs Ramage's care on Monday morning, since he had to pay several visits on the Continent before joining his ship later in the week. Cicely was well pleased that it should be so, since she would have the afternoon and evening to 'get settled,' as she said, before going to school next day. But she had other plans also, and after seeing him off in the afternoon, she took her cycle and rode to Green Hailey. At the moment she cared very little about Miriam or any one else, but she knew from experience that it was useless to grieve, that the parting had been inevitable, and that the only way to bear it was to do something at once, and preferably something exciting.

She had to walk up past the Cross, but mounted at the top and rode along the brow of the hill to the cottage where the cocoa-nut hung in the apple-tree.

'What a funny smell!' and she propped her cycle against the hedge and went up the tiled path. 'It's like—yes!—Charing Cross Road when Crosse and Blackwell are making jam!' and

she sniffed critically. ‘Blackberry jam! Somebody’s busy. But I’ll try to see her, all the same.’

The door stood open, but no one was to be seen. But she heard laughter and talking within, and in answer to her knock, Miriam’s voice cried, ‘Oh, come in! We’re far too busy to come out, so do come in!’

Somewhat surprised, Cicely followed the sound of voices down the low-ceiled passage to another open door, and found herself in the kitchen. It was very small and very hot, though the window was wide open, for a big fire burned in the old-fashioned range. The room seemed very full of children, and they were all very busy.

Miriam, an overall of green linen covering her dress, her sleeves rolled up almost to the shoulders, was stirring a big pan on the fire, her face crimson, her long yellow plait twisted round her head to keep it out of the way. The smell from the boiling jam was unmistakable, and stronger than ever in the little room.

Bobs and Babs, in holland pinafores, were seated at the table, taking blackberries from a basket, making sure no stalks were left, then putting them into a bowl. They were working hard, as their stained fingers and pinafores showed, and red smears on their cheeks suggested that occasionally they were doing something else as well.

Beside them, but on the table, swinging long black legs, sat Marguerite, the black-haired girl Cicely had seen under the apple-tree. Fountain-pen in hand, she was writing labels for a row of jars, her head bent, her long hair almost hiding her face.

‘Buck up, Georgie!’ she said, without looking up. ‘You are a slacker! I waited for you at Hampden Bottom for half-an-hour. Why are you so late?’

‘It’s growing,’ laughed Miriam, her eyes on the pan. ‘You told me twenty minutes. What have you got to say for yourself, Georgie?’

‘ ’Tisn’t Georgie,’ said Bobs severely. ‘It’s somebody else.’ And Miriam and Marguerite looked up in astonished dismay.

‘It’s ve well-girl, what fetched up your new book, Mirry; that’s it!’ cried Babs shrilly.

Marguerite had tossed back her long hair, and was staring blankly. Miriam, wooden spoon in hand, stood staring also, and her momentary pause gave Cicely time to explain.

‘I’m awfully sorry, but you did say, “Come in,” you know! And I was wanting to see you’——

Miriam laughed. ‘Oh, we don’t mind, if you don’t object to being received like this. Come in, won’t you? We thought you were Georgie Gilks. She said she’d come, but you can never be sure of Georgie. Can you find a seat? I daren’t leave the pan, or the jam will stick; but there’s a chair’—with a wave of her spoon.

But Bobs had slid down, and was offering his, and Miriam nodded approval.

‘You’re Cicely Hobart, aren’t you? Mrs Ramage told me. This is Marguerite Verity.—Marguerite, I told you about seeing Cicely in Whiteleaf.’

Marguerite nodded. ‘You haven’t seen a brown girl like a gipsy anywhere, have you? For she kept me waiting three-quarters of an hour for her at Hampden Bottom.’

Miriam began to laugh and Babs to jeer. Cicely explained that she had not seen the defaulting Georgie, then turned to Miriam. ‘You’re all very busy! Can’t I help somehow?’

‘I’m just going to dish this jam, and then, if you wouldn’t mind helping to tie down the jars, I’d be awfully glad. I could get on with the next boiling—if those berries are ready, Babs?’

‘Nea’ly;’ and Babs, who had taken the chance to slip a handful into her mouth while the elder girls were busy, set to work in a desperate attempt to make up for lost time.

‘I’ll help, Babs, shall I?’ and Cicely set to work.

‘You’ve found us in a fine muddle,’ Miriam said ruefully, as she stirred the pan. ‘It’s a holiday, you see, and we’re making the most of it. We always have an orgy at half-term.’

‘A jam-making orgy?’

‘In the spring it’s marmalade. Yes, it’s too big a job for mother alone, and we eat such heaps of jam. She used to do it; but one day the heat turned her funny, and she had to go and lie down. We couldn’t allow *that*; so now we do it on holidays, and send her out for the day.’

‘Do you really? And does she go?’

‘She has to. I insist,’ Miriam laughed. ‘She spends the day with friends in Missenden. We gather in the morning, boil in the afternoon, and taste at tea. You’ll have to stop to tea if you help. Oh yes; that’s understood.’

‘It’s part of the ceremony,’ said Marguerite, who had been studying Cicely critically. ‘Miriam pours out a saucer for each of us, so that it will be cool. Her jam’s first-class.—You should put down your hair when you have visitors, though, Mirry. It looks a bit funny.’

‘Oh, I forgot!’ and Miriam’s hands went up to her head. ‘I’m sorry, but’——

‘Oh, please don’t! It looks awfully jolly!’ cried Cicely. ‘You must do it that way when you put it up.’

‘Don’t you mind, really? For I know it will go in the jam. I don’t fancy jammy hair’——

‘*I* don’t fancy hairy jam!’ retorted Marguerite. ‘So perhaps, after all, you’d better leave it up.’

Miriam laughed, and caught up her spoon again. ‘I’m so afraid it will stick to the pan. We have only one pan, you see, so we always make two boilings, one before tea and one after.’

‘And you only allow your mother to come home when it’s finished?’ laughed Cicely.

‘She has strict orders not to enter this kitchen till seven o’clock. Till then, I’m boss. If she comes home earlier she’ll have to stop upstairs.—Now, out of the way, everybody! I’m going to dish up.’

‘Three cheers for the blackberry jam!’ cried Marguerite, flourishing her pen and leading the cheers, as the children scattered before Miriam, and the kitchen was filled with steam from the boiling pan.

Six saucers—one for Georgie in case she should turn up—were filled and put on the window-sill to cool. Then Miriam took a cup and ladled the jam into the jars, and Cicely and the little ones hurried on with their task of preparing the second boiling. Marguerite came to help, while Miriam rinsed out the pan and measured water and sugar. Then, when it was safely on the fire, they all lent a hand at tying down the covers on the hot jars.

‘That Georgie is a slacker,’ grumbled Marguerite. ‘It’s a good thing you’re here’—to Cicely—‘or we’d have been very short-handed. And to keep me waiting an hour at Hampden Bottom!’ At which the rest jeered again.

‘Where does she live? And where do you?’ Cicely asked curiously.

‘She comes from Great Kingshill. I’m from Penn. I cycled over this morning. I never allow Mirry to have an orgy without me.’

‘When did you come back, Cicely?’ Miriam asked, as she carried a tray filled with jars to the cupboard. ‘Mrs Ramage told me you were coming soon.’

‘This morning. I’ve come to stop this time. Did she explain?’

Miriam nodded. ‘Has she any boarders at present?’ she laughed.

Cicely laughed also. ‘Yes; a dear little white pup, who’s going to stop a fortnight.’

‘I know—from Ramage’s Farm. It’s to be hoped Mose won’t come to call while he’s there, or fur will fly; they’re deadly enemies;’ and Miriam put the pan aside to make room for the kettle.

She pulled down her sleeves to the elbows, and shook her long plait loose before going to fetch the tea-dishes.

‘I am sorry you found us in such a mess; but it’s one of our very busiest days. Are you sure you don’t mind tea in the kitchen? Sure? It’s too cold to have it in the garden. We always do in summer, but though the weather’s pretending to be summer still, it gets dark and chilly by five. Oh, well, if you really don’t mind we’ll have it in here as usual.’

She went off to fetch bread and cake from the larder, and Marguerite sprang up and followed her. Miriam closed the door, and it was obvious to Cicely that they had something to say which was not for her ears. She talked to Bobs and Babs, and tried hard not to listen, though Marguerite’s voice was raised incautiously at times.

‘It’s quite right. They’re old friends, and I took them by surprise,’ Cicely said to herself, and realised that in their place she would probably have wanted a consultation before admitting a stranger to friendship.

She was curious, however, to see what their attitude would be at tea-time. Would the consultation have cooled their friendship, or increased it? She would tell them she was to be their schoolfellow, and then they would see there was reason in her wish to be friendly. She had been on the point of doing so when Miriam’s remark about Mrs Ramage’s boarders changed the course of the conversation. She looked up anxiously as they returned, Marguerite bringing the loaf and Miriam a plate of cakes.

Miriam’s brows were puckered in a slight frown; but she only said, ‘I’m sorry you won’t see mother, Cicely. She’s heard about you. You must come in another day. As she’s away, you’ll excuse anything that’s wrong, won’t you? Marguerite says I ought to have put on a clean tablecloth. Do you mind?’

‘Why, of course I don’t. But it was you I came to see. You go to Miss Macey’s school at Wycombe Moor, don’t you?’

‘Yes. I’m so glad I made cakes this afternoon, since you’ve come. I always try to use the oven when we’ve made up a big fire for jam;’ and Cicely had a feeling that the subject of school had been purposely turned aside.

She waited a while, then made another attempt. There had been a slight air of constraint about Miriam and Marguerite all tea-time, and she was puzzled and distressed by it. They were friendly enough, but there was something about them she did not understand. She supposed it must be the result of their few words in private, and felt vaguely hurt. She had felt so sure of Miriam’s friendship. She had seemed so friendly that evening when she called at the cottage. She was as friendly still, but something had made a change in her. She hardly seemed so natural and eager as before, and she was certainly worried. Was it over something Marguerite had said? Did Marguerite resent the possibility of an outsider wishing to join their friendship?

That was the only explanation Cicely could think of. She looked doubtfully at Marguerite, and found a trace of something unfriendly in her black eyes. Was it suspicion? And yet Marguerite seemed pleasant enough—on the surface, anyway. But neither she nor Miriam would talk about school. That was the conclusion to which Cicely was forced at last.

‘Do they play hockey at Miss Macey’s?’ she asked, when a pause in the conversation gave her an opportunity.

‘Yes. How do you think you’ll like living in the country? You’ve lived in London, haven’t you?’

‘Well, near London. Not right in town, you know. Do neither of you play hockey? You do, don’t you?’ to Miriam. ‘You look like it.’

‘Is that a compliment?’ laughed Miriam.

‘Why, of course. I used to play, but’——

‘How do you like Miriam’s jam?’ Marguerite interrupted, a distinct cloud on her face.

For some reason, hockey did not seem successful as a topic for conversation. Perhaps neither of them was in the team, and perhaps they had hoped to be. Cicely, supping jam from her saucer, praised it warmly, and Marguerite remarked, ‘You see how hard we must have worked. I’m responsible for about a bushel of those berries. I’m glad I had a basket with me while I was waiting for that wretch of a Georgie, Mirry. That hour and a half came in useful, anyway. I thought I’d just gather two or three while I waited a few minutes, and it was nearly two hours.’

The others jeered again, and Cicely, growing used to her reckless exaggerations, said, ‘Miriam doesn’t have to go far for berries, anyway. I suppose you gathered yours just out in the road, Bobs?’

‘Oh, there are a hundred million on every bush between here and the Cross,’ Marguerite said. ‘It’s easy enough for Mirry to have blackberry tarts.’

This was all friendly enough, but Cicely had the feeling that her references to school were being quietly thrust aside. And Miriam still looked worried. She determined to test the matter. ‘Did Mrs Ramage tell you I’m going to your school?’ she demanded boldly.

‘Yes;’ and Miriam sat with downcast eyes.

‘Do you know’—— began Marguerite.

But Cicely was determined not to be put off this time. ‘It’s not nice going at half-term; I don’t like it at all. But I thought perhaps if I knew one or two of the girls before I began, it wouldn’t be so bad. So I hoped’—she faltered; suddenly conscious of the silence of the other two—‘that perhaps—you’—— and she broke off abruptly.

‘Mirry, your jam’s boiling!’ and Marguerite flew to the fire, knocking over her chair and nearly upsetting Babs, ‘Where’s the spoon? Here, you’d better stir it; it’s your job. I’ll wash up.—Help to clear away, kiddies. Who’ll dry? Tea-cloths are hanging on the bushes outside.’

Miriam rolled up her sleeves, twisted her hair round her head, and took up her post beside the pan again. But her worried look had deepened into a frown of distress, and she was unusually impatient in temper and sharp in speech when Bobs dropped a handful of spoons and Babs scattered the crumbs on the floor.

Cicely went to help in the washing-up, but made no further effort to pry into the mystery. But her lips were tight and her eyes indignant. For some reason, they would not have her for a friend. What was there about her to render her so objectionable in their eyes? She had not asked much. She had not suggested that she should be admitted into their close comradeship, but only that they should show her some kindness on her first day at school. Surely that was a very small request!

Was there any reason why they should be ashamed to introduce her to their friends? She could think of none. She glanced down at her dress as she silently dried teacups, and shook her head. Her coat and skirt were well cut, of a deep rich shade of Liberty red, terra-cotta in hue, which suited her dark eyes and hair admirably. Her blouse was of Liberty silk of the same shade, and her tie and belt matched her skirt. She knew her school costume was very neat, and

that she looked nice. There was no possible explanation there. Had she said anything to which they could object? She could think of nothing, and her puzzled dismay increased.

When all was tidy she hung up her towel, and said she must go home. Mrs Ramage would think she was lost.

'I'll go with you down the road; it's dark, and you aren't used to it,' said Miriam at once. —'Will you stir for me, Marguerite, or shall I pull the pan to one side?'

'I'll stir;' and Marguerite took the spoon.

'Please don't trouble. I can find my way, and I must get used to the dark roads. Besides, I have my bike. Oh, I forgot to fill my lamp. How silly! But I didn't expect to be so late. Then I shall have to walk. But please don't come, Miriam; I'm sure you don't want to.'

Miriam gave Cicely a quick look. 'On the contrary, I do want to, and I intend to, anyway. You can't go through the wood alone. You said the other day you wouldn't like it;' and she took her green cap from a hook in the wall. 'Besides, I want to speak to you. Did you think us awfully queer at tea?' she asked abruptly as they went out into the darkness.

'Yes, I did. I'd hoped we might be friends, as we're going to the same school and living so near one another. You were awfully good that first night, too, when you came to see if I was lonely. But I could see you didn't wish it, so of course I'll not worry you any more. You three are chums, and I suppose you don't want any one else. I could see Marguerite didn't want me. I'm sorry I didn't understand before. If I had, I wouldn't have asked you, and you wouldn't have had to say no.'

'Now, I knew you'd feel like that, and think we didn't want you, and it isn't so at all. I told Marguerite we'd only make a mess of it; but I know I can't make you understand. Cicely, I'd like to be friends. I think it's just awfully rotten for you to be alone in Whiteleaf, and your father so far away, and I know you'll want somebody to chum with besides Mrs Ramage. I'd love to be that somebody. Can't we be friends out of school hours? At school I don't think we can. I don't believe you'll want to. Oh, I can't explain! I don't mean to try, anyway—you'll soon understand. But you can't appear at school as my friend or Marguerite's. You simply mustn't. You'll find that out for yourself quick enough. But here at home couldn't we be friends? Wouldn't that be possible?'

'No. A half-and-half friendship would be hateful. If you won't have me at school, I—well'——

'We can't. It wouldn't be fair.'

'Not fair to you, or to me?'

'Oh, to you, of course.'

'I'll risk it,' Cicely said indignantly; 'though I don't understand.'

'No, you won't, for we won't let you. But if you still want to be friends to-morrow night, we'll be only too glad, and you won't find any more nonsense about us.'

'It *is* nonsense. It's downright silly rot. Why can't you tell me all about it?' Cicely demanded indignantly.

'I could, but I think I'd better not.'

Cicely gave an impatient exclamation. 'Will you meet me to-morrow morning and let me go with you? It's much nicer to be introduced by somebody.'

'I can't. No, Cicely; really it wouldn't do.'

'Well,' said Cicely hotly, 'I think it's very mean of you, and still more of Marguerite, for I believe she put you up to it. You know the ways of the school, and all the girls, and I'm a stranger, and shy, and yet you won't let me go with you. I call it shabby.'

‘You aren’t shy,’ Miriam said promptly. ‘If you were a little shy kid, who was likely to be frightened, it might be different. But you’ll get on all right. You’re not the nervous kind.’

‘That shows how much you know about me. And you really won’t let me go with you?’

‘Not to-morrow. Wednesday, if you like.’

‘Wednesday! I won’t want it on Wednesday. What’s wrong with me, that you won’t be seen with me? Are you ashamed of acknowledging me as a friend?’

‘Oh no; quite the contrary,’ Miriam said promptly, but did not offer to explain the cryptic utterance. ‘Cicely, I wish you wouldn’t hate me. Really and truly, I’m doing what I think is right, and Marguerite thinks so too; and if you still want to be friends to-morrow, we’ll be awfully pleased.’

‘I don’t think it’s at all likely,’ Cicely retorted. ‘I think it’s too bad of you both. Thank you *very* much for coming so far with me. I can find my way *quite* well now, thank you. *Good*-night!’ with greatly exaggerated politeness.

Miriam, with a rueful laugh, turned away, but had not gone far before Cicely’s voice made her turn back again.

‘Miriam, if you change your mind in the night, start early and call for me! Perhaps when you think it over you’ll decide to be more sensible.’

‘I’m afraid not. You’d better cycle, as you said you meant to do.’

‘Then I shall think you very mean. I can’t believe you’ll really let me go alone to-morrow.’

But Miriam had hurried on, and if she heard she made no answer.

CHAPTER VIII.
DOROTHY.

Only after she was in bed did Cicely remember she had meant to confess that she had overheard the conversation by the apple-tree, and ask what it was the unknown Dorothy had done. But she doubted whether they would have told her, and on the whole was glad she had forgotten to mention it.

She waited anxiously next morning till Miriam's usual time was past, in the hope that she would change her mind and call for her. But Miriam's mind had been made up before she spoke as she did, and she did not come. Disappointed and hurt, Cicely mounted her cycle and rode off towards Green Hailey and Hampden on her way to Wycombe. The train which Miriam had to catch was a very early one, which left her some time to spare in Wycombe before morning school, so there was still time for Cicely to cycle the eight miles across the hills and arrive in ample time.

On any other occasion she would have enjoyed the ride, for the way lay by woods, up and down hills, through stony bottoms and quiet villages, but always by a good road. It was the way she had driven with Mr Stevens ten days before, so she had no fear of getting lost; and on such a bright morning the ride would have been very enjoyable if she had not been so worried and, it must be confessed, cross. But Miriam's strange refusal to introduce her at school had wounded her deeply, and she could find no explanation of it, though she had puzzled much over the matter during the night.

For some reason, they were not willing to have her for a friend at school, though she would do very well at home! No, that was not quite right. They were not willing she should enter the school as their friend, but once her first day was over they were prepared to be friendly—if she still wished it. That seemed to have been Miriam's meaning, and it puzzled Cicely, and distressed her keenly. She could see only two explanations, and these were not flattering either to them or to herself. Either they did not want the trouble of introducing a new girl, who would be strange to all the ways of the school and would require assistance at every step, or there was something about her which made them unwilling to acknowledge her as their friend, in spite of Miriam's indignant disclaimer. Neither thought was pleasant, and Cicely's indignation grew the more she thought of the matter.

She was honestly doing her best to live up to Margia Lane's axiom, that her choice, once made, must be cheerfully carried out. Once her mind had been made up, she had tried bravely to see only the bright side of the changes before her, and one of her brightest hopes had been that of friendship with Miriam Honor. They were neighbours, and were to be schoolmates. They had a mutual friend in Margia. Miriam had already shown herself pleasant and kindly, thoughtful for Cicely in her loneliness. Surely it had been only natural to assume that Miriam's friendliness would increase as their acquaintance grew. Cicely had counted much on Miriam, and was proportionately disappointed to find that her hopes were not to be realised. Her friendly instincts had suffered a severe rebuff, and she could imagine no explanation which could restore the previous pleasant relationship.

' "Once I loved a maiden fair," ' she thought ruefully, as she thought it over. 'Well, she *has* deceived me. I'm awfully disappointed in her;' and she repeated the last verse of Miriam's song as she rode gloomily along, for it just expressed her feelings:

‘Happy he who never knew
What to love belongèd;
Maidens wavering and untrue
Many men have wrongèd;
Fare thee well, faithless girl,
I’ll not sorrow for thee.
Once I held thee dear as pearl,
Now I do abhor thee!’

She was not particularly nervous about going to school. Miriam’s reading of her character had been accurate. She was not timid or shy, but intended to ‘get along somehow,’ without worrying about it beforehand. But it would have been very much pleasanter to enter the school with a friend, who could introduce her to the right set, for so large a school must have its cliques, and a new-comer in the middle of term might find herself uncomfortably outside them all. So Cicely felt not only puzzled and disappointed as she rode to school, but undeniably ill-used and cross.

She was riding along, soon after passing through Speen, when she overtook a girl of her own age riding in the same direction. From behind, she at first thought it was the gipsy-faced Georgie she had already seen, for this girl had brown hair also, divided into two bushy masses and tied back with brown ribbons. But when she turned to see who was behind, Cicely saw that she was a stranger.

But she wore the school hat of navy-blue felt, with a silver cord round the crown, and the green school badge in front; for blue, green, and white were the school colours. Cicely had not received hers yet, and the wearing of it was evidently not compulsory, since neither Miriam, Marguerite, nor Georgie wore one. But it looked very neat, and she intended to ask for one at once. So it was plain this girl was on her way to Wycombe also.

‘We ought to speak to one another. It’s stupid to ride together all the way and never speak! But she ought to speak first, because I’m a new girl,’ Cicely said to herself, and waited for the other to begin.

She stole a glance at her face, and wondered. There was something curious in her expression. Was she sulky, or angry? Or was it that she looked afraid? Cicely could not make up her mind, and gave first one explanation, then another, of that curious look on the girl’s face. Her eyes were defiant, her lips very determined, almost angry at times, and yet the predominant expression seemed to suggest that she was nervous, anxious, if not actually afraid. Cicely was deeply puzzled, and wondered if conversation would ease the strain under which this girl was evidently labouring.

‘Why, how silly of me!’ she said suddenly, half-aloud. ‘I know she’s going to school, but she can’t possibly know I am. I haven’t the school hat on, or anything to show. It’s no use for me to wait for her.’

She was riding a little behind, since it seemed so awkward to ride side by side and not speak. But she caught up easily and accosted the stranger. ‘I say, are you going to Miss Macey’s?’

‘Yes. Are you?’ and the girl eyed her curiously. ‘You must be new, then, for I don’t remember you.’

‘I’m quite new. Haven’t you been at school lately?’

‘No; I’ve had three weeks’ holiday. It’s my first term, so I don’t know all the girls yet. Is this your first day?’

‘Yes. I come from Whiteleaf. My name’s Cicely Hobart.’

‘Whiteleaf!’ and the dark eyes swept over her in surprise. ‘Do you live there? It’s such a tiny hamlet.’

‘Yes; but isn’t it sweet? I love the thatched cottages. I’m staying there for a while.’

‘Oh, I see! I thought you didn’t look like a Hamlet.’

The word was so evidently a proper name that Cicely wondered. But the girl gave her no time to ask questions, but asked them herself instead.

‘Have you seen Miss Macey yet?’

‘Yes! I liked her,’ Cicely said guardedly.

‘She’s ripping—just a dear!’ and the girl’s constrained manner gave way to sudden enthusiasm, which, however, died down again quickly. ‘Do you know any of the girls?’ she asked, and it seemed to Cicely that there was anxiety in her tone.

‘I’ve met Miriam Honor, and I’ve seen Marguerite Verity, and another girl called Georgie Gilks, I think.’

The stranger nodded. ‘All Hamlets! But that’s queer! For any one can see you aren’t one.’

‘What are Hamlets, please? I’m awfully anxious to know. And how can you see I’m not one?’

‘Oh, don’t you know?’ and the girl raised her dark eyebrows. ‘Haven’t you heard of the division of the school into Hamlets and Town girls? Oh, well, you’ll soon find out all about that! You evidently haven’t heard much about the school yet.’

Her face clouded, and the thought which was burdening her returned, and brought that curious look into her eyes again. Cicely’s wonder increased, and she set about asking questions in her turn.

‘You haven’t told me your name yet?’ she suggested.

‘I’m Dorothy Darley, from Darley’s Bottom, up that way,’ with a jerk of her head towards Speen. She glanced at Cicely, evidently wondering if the name would convey anything to her. Then, as Cicely only looked politely interested, she seemed suddenly to decide to unburden herself. ‘I’m the ninety-ninth Dorothy in the school, and the most disliked!’ she burst out.

Cicely turned to her with startled eyes.

Dorothy continued vehemently: ‘I may as well tell you. You’ll hear it all at school quick enough. But perhaps if you hear my side first you may understand how it looks to *me*. You’ll soon hear what the other girls think!’

Sudden light broke upon Cicely. ‘Oh, are you Dorothy? *That* Dorothy?’ And then she laughed. ‘Don’t think me cracked. I’m not, really. But I’d heard something about somebody called Dorothy, and I never connected it with you till this moment. Oh, then’—— and she paused. ‘Then I partly know what’s wrong, and why you look like that,’ she had been going to say, but checked herself in time.

‘Tell me what you’ve heard!’ said Dorothy imperiously. ‘Who was talking about me? Miriam Honor? It’s hardly her way.’

‘Marguerite and Georgie began it. They said you were coming back to school, and asked her what she thought. Georgie said—oh, well, she said—that’——

‘Yes? Please go on. I can guess what Georgie said;’ and Dorothy’s tone hardened.

Cicely softened it so far as she could. ‘She didn’t think the other girls would—would be nice to you,’ she said, with much embarrassment. ‘But Miriam was quite mad with her, and

said it—something, I don't know what—had been all a mistake, and you wouldn't ever have gone back to school unless it had been—you simply couldn't. And she said you were downright plucky to go back at all, when you could have had no more to do with them if you'd liked.'

'Did she say that?' and Dorothy's sombre face brightened. 'That was jolly decent of her. I always thought Miriam Honor had something in her, if she does come from Green Hailey! And what about Marguerite Verity? What did she say? That she wouldn't speak to me?'

'She said she didn't know what to think about it, but she knew it would be just horrid for you if you did turn up at school, and she wouldn't be in your shoes for anything. And then she said it didn't matter much what any of them felt, as all that mattered was what the "others" thought, and they'd made up their minds already. Miriam said that if that was so, perhaps they could make it a bit jollier for you; and then they began to talk about the cocoa-nuts for the tits, and that was really all. Perhaps I oughtn't to have told you, for they didn't know I'd heard them. But it was nothing nasty, and you asked me.'

'I'd better tell you the rest. You've heard a good deal,' Dorothy said heavily. 'You'll hear it all at school, of course. But if I tell you my side of it there's just a chance you may believe me, and I can't afford to lose such an opportunity. I sha'n't have many friends—I didn't expect to have any, but from what you say it sounds as if Miriam might stand up for me, and there may be one or two more. But you're new, and you haven't heard their way of it yet. You shall hear mine first, and we'll see.'

'I've been awfully anxious to hear more,' Cicely confessed. 'I couldn't help being curious.'

'This was my first term at school;' and Dorothy plunged into her story, evidently anxious to get the telling over. 'I've no sisters or brothers, and I've always had a governess. But I've longed to go to school, and at last they gave me leave. I didn't know the ways of this school, nor of any school. That's what the girls can't understand. They think any girl who is fourteen and cannot understand their ways must be an absolute idiot. Perhaps I am an idiot, but I certainly didn't understand. They think I did it on purpose. See?'

'I see so far. But please tell me what happened.'

'It was arithmetic,' Dorothy said slowly. 'Of course, I see now how awfully silly it was, and how it must seem to them; but I honestly didn't see it at the time. I found they were using the same book I'd always used with my governess. Our plan at home had been that she set the sums, and I took the book and worked them out. Then I looked at the end, and if the answers weren't right, I worked them again till I got the right one—or till I gave it up. Well, I saw that Miss Macey used that same book, but she dictated the sums instead of giving out the numbers. I supposed the girls had the book at home, and as I had had several other books they used, and hadn't needed to get new ones, I never understood that I wasn't supposed to have that particular one. Miss Macey asked what books I had, and I mentioned it among them. I think now she did say, "You won't need that one," but I never thought any more about it, and when I saw she used it I just supposed she had made a mistake. That's how it happened I had the book and the others hadn't. Well, don't you see? Nobody told me school was different from home, and I just did as I always had done.'

Cicely grasped the position instantly. 'And you always had your sums right, of course! Yes, I see! And the others said you'd cheated.'

Dorothy's face darkened. 'There was an awful row when it came out, of course. At first everybody thought I'd meant to do it. Then Miss Macey saw I hadn't understood, and she

believed it, but the girls wouldn't, and they were just hateful. I was awfully upset—I'd never dreamt of doing anything mean—and the way they talked and wouldn't speak to me made me so miserable that father said I might stop at home, and offered to take me away altogether if I liked. He'd always said he'd send me to Paris when I was sixteen, to a jolly school there; so he said I could go at once if I liked. That's why I've been away for three weeks. Now tell me what you think about it! I've told you the whole story. Do you believe it was a mistake, or do you think I meant to cheat?'

'I want to think it over,' said Cicely briefly, and rode on in silence for some minutes.

Dorothy looked anxious and worried, obviously eager to secure a friend before she reached school. At last Cicely said abruptly, 'May I say just exactly what I think?'

'Yes, please,' Dorothy jerked; 'I want you to.'

'Well, then, it would be much easier if I'd known you before. I can't possibly know what you'd be likely to do; but I can see how things might quite easily happen as you've said. I do think, you know, you were a bit silly not to find out if you were supposed to use the crib. I can't quite understand any one using it without asking. But if you'd used it before, I suppose you just never thought about it. And Miriam said she believed it had been a mistake. She knew you, and she seemed quite sure. I think her opinion is worth something'——

'I owe her thanks for that, then!'

'Besides, she said you wouldn't go back to school unless it had been a mistake. I don't see how you could go back if you'd really meant it! So I do believe it was a mistake, and I'll let people see that I do by being friendly, if you'll let me.'

'Will you?' Dorothy's face lit up. 'Marguerite was right, you know. It is horrid going back, after what happened, and it will just make all the difference if there's somebody who doesn't turn her back on me.'

'It *is* jolly hard lines!' Cicely said, with suddenly awakened sympathy. 'I wonder you're willing to go back! Why are you going? You said your father didn't make you. Wouldn't you rather have gone somewhere else?'

'In some ways, but for some things I wanted to come back;' and Dorothy's eyes filled with determination which matched the resolute set of her lips. 'Don't you see? If I'd never gone back all those girls would have believed for ever that I'd done it on purpose. They'd have thought I was afraid to face them. They'd have said I was ashamed. I'm not afraid of them. I've nothing to be ashamed of. I'm not a cheat, and I'm going back to prove it. Don't you see?'

Cicely's eyes had kindled. 'Yes; and I think you are jolly plucky, as Miriam said. It must be awfully difficult to go back. I think it's pretty fine of you to want to do it. I'll stand by you and help all I can.'

Dorothy looked at Cicely, her face full of deep feeling.

'*Will* you? And do you understand? Oh, I *am* glad! You don't know how I have been dreading it. I'd made up my mind to go, but I knew it would be hateful at first. Going alone was the worst. Not one of them will speak to me'——

'Miriam Honor will, I think. And you won't have to go alone now. We'll back up one another, for I'm a lonely stranger.'

'It is awfully decent of you,' Dorothy said, a quiver of deep gratitude in her tone telling how real her dread had been. 'I do hope we'll be in the same form.'

'I'm to try IV. A. That's what Miss Macey called it.'

‘Good! Then we shall be together. There are A and B of most forms, but there are three Fourths. There’s only one Sixth.’

‘Is Miriam in our form?’

‘Miriam! She’s Sixth.’

‘But how old is she? I thought she was only fifteen.’

‘Nearly sixteen, I think; but she’s awfully clever. She came into the school with a scholarship, you know. There are girls of eighteen in the Sixth, but they say she keeps up with them very well.’

‘I didn’t know she was so brilliant. And Marguerite and Georgie?’

‘All in our form, although they are so chummy with Miriam. Why didn’t you come by train from Risborough? Then you could have had her company.’

‘She has Marguerite and Georgie. They don’t want me.’ Cicely would not tell tales, but there was a touch of soreness in her tone.

‘They don’t go home that way. Marguerite comes down through Kingswood and Totteridge from Penn, and Georgie joins this road at Bottom Farm. She always walks. I don’t think she has a bike. Now you’ll see. This is one of Hilary’s crew, Doris Buckland.’

‘I wish you’d tell me more about the school!’ Cicely exclaimed, as they passed a girl walking down the road. Though they passed her quickly, Cicely had time to see the look of astonishment with which she greeted the sight of Dorothy, and the sudden quick way she looked away from her across the road.

‘You see!’ said Dorothy, with a hard laugh. ‘The rest all feel just the same.’

‘You mustn’t care, that’s all. They’ll soon stop if they see you don’t care.’

‘It wouldn’t have been easy to pretend I didn’t if I’d been all alone. It’s tons easier now I’ve you to talk to; it just makes all the difference,’ Dorothy said fervently.

‘But won’t you tell me about the school? Who is Hilary, and why is that silly Doris one of her crew?’

‘I’ll tell you later, if you haven’t found out for yourself. There’s no time now; we’re almost in Wycombe, and there’s too much traffic;’ and Dorothy was evidently too full of her own difficulties to talk.

‘Now, look out for squalls,’ she said as they reached the school gate; and her face took on its look of hard resolve, which it had lost for a while as they talked.

‘She’ll never make friends while she looks like that,’ Cicely said to herself. ‘She’s too hard. Some will be frightened of her, and others will laugh. But it is plucky of her to come, and I’ll stand by her all I can.’

She had not realised yet that Dorothy’s action in appealing to her was not likely to make her own way any easier. In entering the school as the confessed friend of its most unpopular girl she was hardly likely to win friends for herself. It was, to put it mildly, a bad beginning. But that was the last view of the matter which was likely to occur to Cicely, and she followed Dorothy to the cycle-shed, prepared to do all in her power to ease her difficult way.

CHAPTER IX.
THE BLACK SHEEP.

There was a sudden stir in the cloakroom, and a whisper ran round among the girls crowded there.

'Dorothy Darley! That girl! She has come back, after all! Well, she has got cheek!' Then they all became very busy, hanging up coats, fastening slippers, or arranging combs and hair ribbons before the mirrors on the wall.

Dorothy, with flaming cheeks and head held high, walked to a peg which bore her name. 'There are more pegs over there, Cicely. I'm sorry there isn't an empty one near mine.'

'Oh, that's easily managed;' and the girl owning the next peg promptly removed her hat. 'I'd much prefer other company.'

There was a laugh from several.

Cicely looked her over. 'That's awfully thoughtful of you,' she said easily. 'I hope you're always as obliging as that. There's only one thing I'd suggest. If you could be polite too, it would be a great improvement. It's not usual to jump on people's feet without apologising, and you're no light weight. You came right on top of me when you bounced away like that.'

Dorothy laughed, for the girl, a plump specimen, had undoubtedly 'bounced' away.

'She is stodgy, isn't she?' she said in an undertone, and hung up her hat and coat.

Cicely's remark had drawn all eyes to her, and for a moment Dorothy was forgotten as the girls stared at the new-comer who was so audacious as to take the part of the black sheep so openly. Cicely bore their gaze easily, and proceeded to change her shoes, quite aware she was being criticised, but showing no sign of it.

Suddenly a girl who had been kneeling to remove very muddy boots stood up, tossing back her long black hair. She had had a severe struggle with herself, but she had promised to do a difficult thing, and now or never was the time.

'I'm jolly glad to see you back, Dorothy!' A terrible untruth, but the first words that came into her head. 'Did you see Georgie Gilks on the road? For I've something to say to her. She kept me waiting two hours and a half at Hampden Bottom yesterday.'

An amazed silence had fallen. The girls looked at one another. They had not supposed that any one would be hardy enough to defy public opinion and offer a welcome to the outcast. Marguerite flushed, quite aware of their disapproval, but came forward sturdily with outstretched hand, which Dorothy gripped, her face alight. Cicely's eyes had blazed with sudden understanding and appreciation, and on the spot she forgave Marguerite for her unfriendly attitude towards herself. This was Miriam's doing, of course, but it had cost Marguerite something.

'Is that you, Cicely? Good-morning. I guess you've had a jolly ride;' and Marguerite's black eyes swept over her curiously, as they had done before. Cicely determined to know the meaning of that look before long.

'Yes, I had a ripping ride, but much jollier after I'd met Dorothy, of course. It's always slack riding alone. Is Miriam here?'

'I haven't seen her yet, but she'll be up in the hall. She has to come early because of the silly train. I think they ought to put on a later one for our convenience. Heaps of girls use it,

and it's too bad they should have to come an hour too soon. In the dark mornings it will be no joke.'

This light talk was precisely what was needed to help Dorothy through her first few minutes. It was easy to pretend she did not see the scornful looks, the faces carefully turned away, when she had these two supporters with whom to chatter. This was very different from the lonely return she had so greatly dreaded.

Cicely was much puzzled by Marguerite's friendly manner to herself. She understood that Miriam had probably pledged her to some such action in Dorothy's case. But what was the explanation of their unfriendliness yesterday? of Miriam's refusal to come to school with her? That mystery also she would solve before long.

Marguerite's friends were eying her in scandalised disapproval, and only waiting for a chance to express their feelings. But she gave them no opening, and chattered away to Dorothy till they were ready to go upstairs.

'Am I tidy?' and Dorothy went towards the nearest glass.

The group before it drew away, turning their backs, and she flushed.

Cicely came up behind her. 'Let's have a squint. I feel a perfect sketch after all those miles in the wind;' and she tugged at her curly mane with a pocket-comb.

'Let's go upstairs. Prayers will be in five minutes;' and Marguerite led the way.

'Marguerite,' said Dorothy, in the dark corner of the stairs, 'you're ripping! You don't know how I thank you.'

'Mirry made me promise. I say, wasn't it a splendid sell for them? They thought nobody would, you know. Did you see Geraldine's eyes? And Maud's? They'd have liked to slap me. And how beautifully Cicely squashed Alice!—Is your toe better yet?' she asked anxiously. 'For Alice weighs a ton and a half, I'm sure.'

Their laughter reached the cloakroom, and the girls looked at one another.

'I say, this won't do, you know. If the Hamlets are going to take her up, she won't care two pins if we cut her,' cried Geraldine.

'How very flattering to us, Jelly! I never thought they would, though.'

'If she's satisfied with Hamlets, let her have them. She used to be keen enough on us and the clubs.'

'Oh, she knows she's out of the clubs now. Miriam Honor's at the bottom of it. She does what she likes with Marguerite.'

'We'll put Hilary on to Miriam.'

'You know that's no use, Maud,' said an elder girl.

'I say, who is the new girl? She's no Hamlet. Look at that blouse. It's Liberty silk, or I'm a Dutchman.'

'It's certainly a Liberty colour, and that's certainly a Liberty hat and scarf;' and Cicely's hat, with its silk scarf wound loosely round the crown, was surrounded by a curious crowd.

'Doesn't it match the rest of her beautifully? Did you notice her skirt? It's tailor-made, and awfully well cut.'

'When you've quite finished with my hat'——

The group scattered in dismay, and Cicely stalked into their midst and opened her leather handbag in search of a handkerchief. She was very curious to know why her hat should have attracted so much attention, only she preferred not to ask, but to see if Marguerite or Dorothy could explain. She was turning away, and the girls, feeling very small, were looking at one another, on the verge of embarrassed giggling, when Maud, an older girl, addressed her.

‘I say, do you happen to know who Dorothy Darley is?’

‘She’s Dorothy Darley, isn’t she? That’s what she told me,’ Cicely said, in innocent surprise.

‘Yes. And do you happen to know what Dorothy Darley did?’

‘She made a stupid mistake, and you all’——

‘Mistake!’ and there was a chorus of groans.

‘It was a mistake,’ Cicely said stoutly. ‘Miss Macey believes it, and you ought to, too.’

This, being true, was unpleasant.

‘Look here!’ said Maud sharply; ‘being new, of course you can’t be expected to understand. But that’s all tommy-rot about a mistake, and you shouldn’t be taken in so easily. The girl’s not an absolute idiot. She knew well enough. She’s not dense about other things. But she saw her chance when she found we were using the book she had at home, and she made the most of it. It was a low thing to do, and how she’s got the cheek to come back after being found out I don’t know. You’ll be wise to have no more to do with her now you understand. If you want to have friends in the school, I’d strongly advise you to drop Dorothy Darley.’

‘Thank you *so* much! It’s awfully good of you! But I don’t drop my friends like that, and I’m not so awfully keen to have other friends in the school, from what I’ve seen of it so far;’ and Cicely turned and hurried after Dorothy and Marguerite.

‘She has got a tongue, that girl! And for a new girl, too! She’ll need some sitting on,’ said the discomfited Maud.

‘Turn Hilary on to her, too,’ suggested Alice, who had been the first to suffer.

‘We’d better. Even if she sticks to Dorothy Darley, we don’t want to hand her over to the Hamlets. She looks as if she might be useful. I’m going to see if she plays hockey. We want some reserves.’

‘I wonder if she’d be any use in the Essay Club.’

‘Or if she recites. She’s not shy!’ cried the secretary of the Dramatic Society. ‘Anyway, the subs. won’t worry *her*!’

‘No; we must have her in the clubs, even if we have to overlook her infatuation for Dorothy Darley;’ and the girls hurried upstairs, nearly tumbling over a late-comer, who was entering the cloakroom.

‘Georgie Gilks! Oh, get out of the way, do!’ and Maud pushed past her impatiently.

Georgie smiled, and stood aside. ‘Is it that new girl with Marguerite they’re so keen to get for their clubs? Cicely, I think they called her. Well, I shall have a word with Cicely first. I wonder if Miriam knows her?’

Cicely caught Marguerite and Dorothy as they were entering the big hall, where morning prayers were held before the classes separated. They had stopped for a word with Georgie; and Georgie, though amazed at the sight of them together, had been forced by circumstances to speak to Dorothy, and had done so with a fairly good grace.

‘What have you been doing?’ and Dorothy hesitated before entering the hall.

‘Talking to them,’ said Cicely. ‘They were discussing my hat—I’m sure I don’t know why! I hope they were admiring it. Somebody called Maud has been giving me advice, and I’ve been giving her—well, if you wanted to be unkind you might call it cheek.’

Dorothy laughed, but Marguerite remonstrated.

‘Oh, but, Cicely, isn’t that rather silly? You’re new, and you ought to be trying to make friends, instead of cheeking people all round. If you go on like this—well, *I* know where

you'll find yourself if you do.'

'I don't feel drawn to Maud, or that stodgy Alice, and I haven't any wish to be chummy with Geraldine so far.'

'But you don't understand.'

'Well, you might explain, then,' Cicely retorted. 'When am I to understand? Everybody tells me I don't understand. Aren't you going to explain?'

'Mirry told me not to;' and Marguerite looked worried. 'Come and speak to her.—Come on, Dorothy. Miss Macey's over there. Nobody'll eat you while she's looking.'

But Miss Macey's presence, though certainly a restraining influence, could not check the looks of undisguised surprise and dislike, and the meaning silence, with which Dorothy's appearance was greeted. Once more she was glad she did not stand alone, and was more than ever grateful to her staunch supporters.

It meant much to her that, before Miss Macey had noticed her, Miriam Honor came forward, and before the whole school gave her hearty greeting. Her face had lit up at sight of Marguerite by Dorothy's side, but she looked startled at seeing Cicely in such company.

'Good-morning, Dorothy. I *am* glad you've come back. I asked Marguerite to look out for you. I'm glad she's done it. Isn't it a glorious morning? I envy you your ride on a day like this. It's so terribly uninteresting to come by train.—Didn't you enjoy it, Cicely?'

'Awfully! The woods were glorious; I'd have liked to lie in them all morning, instead of coming to school.'

Miriam nodded and laughed. 'Where did you meet Dorothy?'

'Soon after I'd left Speen.'

'Oh! You came together all that way?' and Miriam looked up quickly.

'Dorothy, Miss Macey wants you.' A small girl brought the message, and Dorothy walked up the room, her colour rising as the girls turned to look at her.

'Did she tell you?' Miriam asked in a low voice.

'Yes. It is hateful for her.'

'She told you all about it, and asked you to be friends?'

'Yes. You do believe it was a mistake, don't you?'

'Of course I do; but I don't think she ought to have done that. It's all very well for her, and I've no doubt she's been awfully glad of your help already, but it's rough on you. If you're known as her friend you won't make many others. She ought to have thought of that. It prejudices the girls against you, and gives you a bad start.'

'I guess I can stand it,' Cicely said lightly. 'I didn't think of it that way, and I don't suppose she did either.'

'She wouldn't. She doesn't see things like that,' Marguerite said scornfully. 'She's straight enough, and all that, you know. She never meant to cheat, or do anything mean; but she never sees how things will affect any one but herself, or how they will look to other people. She only sees her own point of view. I suppose it comes of being an only girl.'

Cicely laughed. 'I'm one myself; but I have grown up in a family, of course.'

'Well, I'm one too; but then I've been to school for years. She hasn't.'

'All the same, she oughtn't to have bagged Cicely for a chum before she'd had a chance to make other friends,' Miriam insisted.

'Oh, well, she's Dorothy, you know.' And to Marguerite that seemed to settle the question.

'Miss Macey's going to ring the gong. I'll see you later, Cicely;' and Miriam hurried off to join her own form.

‘Georgie’ll be late. No, just in time, as usual,’ Marguerite murmured, as Georgie slipped into her place at the last moment.

‘I say,’ she whispered, ‘have we got to take up Dorothy Darley? Does Miriam insist?’

Marguerite nodded, and made room for Dorothy between them. Then Miss Macey, tall, stately, and gray-haired, rose to give out a hymn, and conversation was over for the time.

CHAPTER X.
THE SCHOOL CLUBS.

Cicely, keeping her eyes and ears open, learned several things during the morning's work: that Marguerite Verity was unusually good in French, both in accent and grammar, and apparently had some connection with France besides her name; that Georgie Gilks spelt her surname with a 'G,' whereas from the pronunciation she had supposed it began with a 'J'; that at mention of arithmetic the class with one accord looked at Dorothy, who grew scarlet, and bent over her book; that she herself was quite equal to the demands of IV. A, and would have no difficulty in keeping her place in the form; and that the class seemed divided into two not very friendly sets, one including Alice, Geraldine, and nearly all the rest of the form, while Marguerite, Georgie, and a few more seemed alone in the other. She remembered what she had heard of 'Outsiders' and 'Hamlets,' and began to understand.

By eleven o'clock she had a number of questions to ask. But as Mademoiselle left the room, and before she had time to speak to Dorothy, Alice leaned over from behind, and, poking her in the back, said, 'Hilary Carter wants you, Cicely. She's in the Sixth Form room. You'd better go at once,' as Cicely hesitated; 'there's only ten minutes. You'll hear about it if you keep her waiting.'

Cicely cared nothing for the great Hilary's displeasure, but she was extremely curious to know why a Sixth Former should deign to trouble about one new girl. She was evidently expected to go in fear and trembling, but it was rather in keen expectancy that she answered the summons and sought the Sixth Form room. But the presence of so many big girls, nearly all over seventeen, with their hair very nearly up, was more awe-inspiring than she had thought. She felt a little quaky as she entered, and was glad to see Miriam among the crowd, looking much younger than the others, however. Cicely's old school had boasted no girls over sixteen, and some of these looked so nearly grown-up that she felt very small and young, and much more insignificant than she had done among her contemporaries.

Miriam sat eating biscuits, to which her early breakfast entitled her. Biscuits and glasses of milk were much in evidence on the other desks also. Hilary, a tall girl of nearly eighteen, with her hair done up in many rolls and curls, and a skirt which reached her ankles, was leaning out of the window, but turned at a word from one of her friends.

'Oh, come here, child. Oh, you're bigger than I thought. IV. C, aren't you?'

'No; IV. A,' said Cicely, with dignity.

'What's your name? How old are you, and where do you live?'

'Cicely Hobart—fourteen—Whiteleaf,' was the business-like answer.

'Whiteleaf!' Hilary raised her eyebrows. 'A new Hamlet!'

'It seemed to me a very ancient one,' Cicely said promptly, wilfully misunderstanding her. 'Nearly every cottage is thatched.'

There was a general laugh, and Hilary frowned. Miriam, looking up from her biscuits, laughed also.

'My dear child,' Hilary said severely, 'you needn't try to cheek *me*. I've heard about you, but you needn't try that on with me. I suppose you mean you are stopping in Whiteleaf. You obviously don't live there. Any one can see that'——

'How, please?' Cicely's tone was dangerously meek.

‘Oh, don’t be too innocent. Liberty hats and blouses don’t grow on Whiteleaf bushes, my dear;’ and there was a giggle from the girls standing round.

‘Oh! So that’s what they were doing with my hat? I’m glad to know. I thought perhaps they’d been trying it on. But it’s far too small for Alice, and the colour would hardly do for Maud, would it?’

Maud reddened to the roots of her carroty locks, which was very unbecoming. The dull terra-cotta red of Cicely’s costume, a rich Liberty shade, suited her dark hair admirably, but would have clashed horribly with Maud’s ruddy coiffure. The girls smiled at one another behind her back, and Hilary said sharply, ‘You should learn not to make personal remarks, child. It’s very rude.’

‘That’s out of *Alice*, isn’t it?’ Cicely was innocent and interested. ‘Then I suppose I ought to say, “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?” That was a very easy one, you know. Try something harder next time.’

Hilary, feeling she was getting the worst of the conversation, plunged hurriedly into business.

‘Stop wasting time like this, Cicely. We want to know which of the school clubs you care to join. There’s a subscription of half-a-crown for each. Do you play hockey? What’s your place?’

‘Goal.’

‘Really? That’s awfully lucky. Are you any good?’ Hilary’s manner changed suddenly.

‘We-ell! That’s an awkward question, isn’t it? If I say “Yes,” you’ll say, “What swank!” ’

Hilary laughed. ‘We’ll soon settle it. There’s a practice to-morrow after school—four o’clock sharp. You might do for the Second Eleven. Alice needs a reserve. She often crocks up, and leaves them in the lurch, and they’ve no one decent to fall back on. Turn out to-morrow at four, and let us see your form. Then there’s the Dramatic Society. Do you recite? Have you ever taken part in a play?’

‘Every Christmas since I was eight,’ Cicely said modestly. ‘I generally take the villain, or the ogre, or the angry father, or something serious like that.’

Hilary laughed again, feeling distinctly more comfortable now that they were on pleasanter terms. ‘I guess we can find a place for you, then. We generally get up a play for Christmas, and a much bigger one for Easter. We’re going to start at once, now half-term’s over. Then there’s the Essay Club. I don’t know if that’s in your line? It isn’t mine; Madeline Bradshawe sees to that.’

Another girl of eighteen looked up from her desk. ‘We have fortnightly meetings, and we issue a magazine once a term,’ she said. ‘The meetings are for all kinds of literary work. We write essays, or have readings from different authors, or musical evenings, or take some play and read it in parts, or get some one to give us a lecture. You’ll join, won’t you? We want new members. We’ve just started for the winter; you’ve only missed one meeting. The next is on Friday, and as it’s the last of October, we’re to have a Hallowe’en party, with an essay on the Scotch customs connected with Hallowe’en, and then practical demonstrations. They will include ducking for apples, roasting chestnuts, bob-apple, snap-dragon, and heaps more. It will be a most exciting evening. As a rule, we aren’t as popular as the Dramatic; but everybody’s wishing they belonged now, so we think of admitting visitors at a charge of sixpence each. But we have several other ripping evenings coming before Christmas. I’d strongly advise you to join.’

‘I’d like to. It sounds quite all right; but I’ll think it over for a day or two, please.’ Cicely felt too strange to the ways of the school to pledge herself yet. ‘Ought I to go now? Is that gong for classes?’ and she hurried back to her own room.

‘Well,’ murmured Georgie as she took her seat,’ has Hilary hooked you? Are you going to forsake us?’

‘I don’t know what you mean. She’s been telling me about the school clubs.’

‘*School* clubs! Had she the cheek to call them that? Well, are you going to join and go in with her lot, and drop us?’

‘Why should I drop anybody? I don’t see’——

‘I *say*! Don’t you really? Not yet? Then I will tell you, in spite of Mirry Honor. Talk to me in the dinner-hour, won’t you?’

‘I’ll talk to anybody who’ll give up hinting and speak out!’

Georgie laughed. ‘All right. Call it a fixture. Don’t forget;’ and they settled down to history lesson.

CHAPTER XI.
GEORGIE SPEAKS OUT.

Many of Miss Macey's girls came from considerable distances, and could not go home at midday and return in the afternoon. So the school remained open, and dinner was provided for those who chose to order it. Others brought lunch, while those living in the town went home. Mr Hobart had ordered dinner on Cicely's behalf; but she found that Dorothy was the only one of her new friends who would keep her company, as Miriam, Georgie, and Marguerite were provided with lunch from home. Hilary, Maud, Alice, and a number of others whose names she had only heard stayed to dinner; but already she had perceived that these considered themselves in a different set from the trio she had first known, and before dinner-time came she understood fully; for Georgie took her by the arm as soon as morning school was over, and led her to a quiet corner of the playground.

'Let's get out of Mirry's sight. She'd think I was going to say too much. She didn't want any of *us* to tell you; but I'm going to, and she can say what she likes. Haven't you discovered for yourself the division of the school into Hamlets and Real Schools? Hilary and Co. call themselves the Real School, you know. We're the Outsiders—the Hamlets, because so many of us come from villages and hamlets among the hills—Penn, Green Hailey, Whiteleaf!'

'But do they object to that? How silly!'

'You don't see it all yet. They're quite right, in a way. They are the real school, and we're new-comers, and they didn't like us coming in. About two years ago Miss Macey offered a number of scholarships to girls in Council Schools or little private schools. Before that only these stuck-up girls came, who think so much of themselves, and it was a much smaller school. Miriam and several others jumped at the chance, and won scholarships on the spot. Then the fees were reduced, and others were allowed into the school. Of course, those who'd been here all along didn't like it, and think themselves far better than any of us, and the two sets have never mixed. So now you see!'

'I see so far,' Cicely said slowly. 'Hilary represents the one lot, I suppose? And they aren't friendly to you others?'

'They never have been. They made up their minds from the first to keep us outside things as far as they could. The clubs, for instance.'

'But how can they? Don't you belong to any of them?'

'Do you suppose I, or Miriam, or Marguerite can afford to pay half-crown subscriptions? If one half-crown would cover the lot, some of us might manage to scrape it together, but several are quite out of the question.'

'Oh, I see!' and Cicely began to understand. 'They fixed a high subscription to keep you out? And I suppose most of the Hamlet girls haven't—can't—well'——

'Haven't any spare cash to throw away. Exactly. Our folks have found it hard work to send us here, and extras, like club subscriptions and hockey-sticks, are impossible. Most of us are pretty hard up, and haven't a fraction of the pocket-money of these others. But having heaps of money doesn't make a girl any nicer or better, and it's ridiculous to keep some, like Miriam, out of everything just because of money. She's worth a dozen of Hilary, or any one of her set, for that matter. It's hateful snobbery; but there it is. Miriam's an Outsider—we're all

Outsiders—and you'll have to choose which set you'll be in. Any one can see you ought to be with them.'

'How? I come from Whiteleaf. That's a hamlet.'

'Yes; but you don't belong there. Oh, by your clothes, by that jolly bike, by everything about you. You have the best of everything; any one can see that. We're not blind.'

Cicely looked thoughtful. 'Is that what they were doing with my hat? And is that what Marguerite has been thinking when she looked at me in that queer way?'

'Of course. Marguerite knows about clothes and things by instinct. She's half French, you know. Were you wearing that blouse yesterday, when you had tea with them at Green Hailey?'

'When you kept her waiting three hours at Hampden Bottom?' Cicely laughed. 'Yes, of course I was. Now tell me—I'm beginning to understand—why wouldn't Miriam let me come to school with her? Why wouldn't she and Marguerite be friends yesterday? Was it because they felt it wouldn't be fair to me—because, just as Miriam said about Dorothy, it would be a bad beginning for me if I was introduced by them—by Outsiders?'

'Of course; that's what was wrong with Miriam, anyway. She could see you belonged by rights to the other set—that you'd want to join all the clubs, and have no difficulty about doing so—and she felt it wouldn't be fair to let you be her friend before you understood. She couldn't possibly let you come to school with her, for that would have meant you'd be an Outsider for ever, and be done out of all the good times you ought to have. It's a bit slack being out of everything, you know.'

Cicely nodded, the thought of the Hallowe'en party, the play, and the hockey practice crossing her mind.

'And it isn't possible for me to join the clubs and still be in your set?'

Georgie looked at her shrewdly. 'What do you think yourself? They wouldn't like it, you know. They'd try to get you away from us. It's better to be one thing or the other. Mirry felt you'd have to choose, and she couldn't let you choose before you knew. Don't you see?'

'Yes, I see now. But couldn't she have explained? I felt awfully bad about it. I wish she'd told me.'

'She'd think it would seem like asking you to come in with us. She wanted you to hear about it from the others. She's awfully touchy about things like that—awfully keen on being perfectly fair to people. You saw how mad she was with Dorothy for bagging you for a chum before you knew all it would mean. That's the kind of thing Mirry hates. Of course, she couldn't reckon on your turning up along with the most unpopular girl in the school, and standing up for her as you've done. It was rather different with Marguerite. She was afraid if they were friendly yesterday you'd drop them to-day, when you understood, and she wasn't going to risk being snubbed. She felt sure you'd go in with Hilary and Co., and then she and Mirry would have felt bad. It was awfully awkward for them yesterday. They couldn't expect you to understand, and yet they couldn't be as friendly as they'd have liked.'

Cicely nodded. 'All the same, I wish they'd explained. I felt awfully bad about it. But I see how they felt. Well, but tell me! These others, Hilary and the rest, where do they come from? Where do they live, if they look down on us for coming from the villages? Here in Wycombe, I suppose?'

'Some do. Some come from the country, like we do, but from big, fine houses, you know. Hilary lives near Beaconsfield, and goes home by train, except when the carriage or trap comes for her. Then she drives off, looking like royalty! Maud is from Risborough, a big country-house there. One or two come from Aylesbury every day. Geraldine and Alice live in

Wycombe, and Madeline Bradshawe comes from Marlow, on the river. We're a kind of centre here, and girls come from all the places round. But there's a big difference between coming from a cottage in Green Hailey, or a little farm at Kingshill, and coming from one of the big mansions you've seen scattered about. Dorothy Darley was one of their lot, you know. Darley's Bottom is a lovely place out by Speen.'

Cicely looked thoughtful. Thinking of Broadway End, in which she might yet find herself, she realised that the girls were right, and that she would naturally have belonged to the more wealthy class if she had entered the school unbiassed towards either set. But the snobbishness of the division repelled her strongly. She felt the injustice which excluded a girl like Miriam from all but the strictly business side of school life, for she had come to respect her, partly from what she had seen, and partly from Margia Lane's story. She had never met any such feeling before, and she was not drawn to the girls who had initiated it. Deliberately she decided to say nothing about Broadway End, and to take her stand as a cottage girl from Whiteleaf.

'But it's such rot!' she said vehemently. 'I just hate the feeling of it. The school shouldn't be divided like this. Does Miss Macey know? Can't she do anything?'

'She could insist on the subscriptions being reduced, and that would open the clubs to us. But what good would that do if the members weren't prepared to be friendly? And that's a thing she can't force.'

'No. I see it would do no good. What do they do with the money? For they can't need so much. They must have heaps in hand.'

'Oh, they have a dance at the end of the season or a picnic in the summer. Last year they went on the river. Oh, no; they don't need the money! It's only to keep us out,' Georgie said bitterly.

'Then I call it wicked!'

'Of course it is. But what can we do?'

Cicely looked extremely thoughtful. She was not one to accept an injustice meekly, either of word or deed. Several plans were being born in her mind at that moment, but it was too early to speak of them yet.

'There's the dinner-gong,' said Georgie. 'You'd better go. And I'll confess to Mirry that I've enlightened you.'

'Aren't you coming in to dinner?'

'No; we bring lunch from home and have a picnic. There's a dairy in the town where we get glasses of milk.'

'What fun! I wish I could come with you! But daddy said I must have dinner. I didn't understand.'

'If you really mean to stick to Dorothy Darley, now's your chance. For she goes in to dinner, and she won't have a soul to speak to.'

'Right! Tell Miriam I'll stick to her like a hairy chestnut.'

Georgie laughed and ran off to find Miriam, and Cicely went soberly in to dinner. Many things were clear to her now, and she saw how the division in the school entered into everything. The 'Hamlets' were left severely to themselves. The 'Real School' girls talked together, had their private jokes, their own interests. But they would have been willing to take her into their midst if she had not insisted on standing by her first friend.

On entering the dining-room, she was invited by the great Hilary herself to sit near her and tell about the last school play in which she had taken part. But Dorothy was standing near the

window, her face defiant in an effort to show how little she cared about being left to herself, and as she heard the invitation her eyes filled with dismay. Cicely was her only possible companion, and she had counted on sitting with her. To sit quite alone would be an ordeal she had been dreading all morning. She scarcely thought any one could refuse an offer from so important a personage; but Cicely, after barely a moment's hesitation, said briefly, 'Thanks, but I've promised to sit with Dorothy,' and turned from Hilary, who stared after her with angry, surprised eyes. She had heard of the new girl's strange infatuation for Dorothy Darley, but until now had seen no sign of it herself.

'Well! Oh, if you prefer to sit with the black sheep of the school, of course I've no more to say!'

'But I wonder at your taste,' sneered Maud.

Cicely spared herself the trouble of a retort this time, and taking Dorothy by the arm, said cheerfully, 'Where do we sit? I'm simply starving. I wasted all my lunch-time talking to that lot! I sha'n't do it again. If they want me to-morrow I'll take biscuits with me. I had eight o'clock breakfast to-day.'

'You didn't promise, you know; but it's awfully good of you,' Dorothy said in a low voice.

'I did! I promised to stick up for you, and this is my chance, while Miriam and the rest aren't here.'

They were left strictly to themselves, with a space of two feet carefully preserved between Dorothy and her next-door neighbour, Geraldine, who managed to keep her back turned to them, at much inconvenience to herself.

'It must be jolly uncomfortable! She'll tip over her glass before she's done,' Cicely murmured. 'There! I knew it—splash!'

Dorothy laughed, and Cicely allowed her voice to be heard very clearly as she said, 'Move more this way, Dorothy—you'll get wet. Ugh—messy! Would you like an umbrella? We'll wear our macks to-morrow. If your mother asks why you're taking it on such a fine morning, say you find you require it at dinner. Some people should have tables to themselves.'

'Or pieces of oilcloth, like babies; or a tray. Queer, isn't it, how some people are always spilling things?'

'Oh, some folks like to sit in a sloppy mess.'

The unfortunate Geraldine glared at them, and was not comforted by the cold look of disapproval she received from Hilary. 'Do try not to be so clumsy, child! Sit straight at the table—don't be so awkward.'

Cicely smiled sweetly at Geraldine, then turned to Dorothy with a low remark which roused her laughter; and they talked and laughed throughout the meal, making jokes aloud about the pudding, and in an undertone on other subjects, thus causing much discomfort to the rest of the girls, who naturally feared themselves included.

'Aren't you going to order a school hat?' Dorothy asked. 'It's not necessary, but it's nice to have one, I think.'

'Oh yes! I was meaning to.'

'And have you got a blue coat? That's the latest idea. Haven't you heard?' as Cicely looked surprised. 'They were discussing it when I was here before, and I saw several girls had theirs this morning. We thought it would look nice if all the school, or all who cared to, wore blue coats and white scarves to match their hats, so they were all going to ask that when their winter coats were bought they should be dark blue. It's useful and sensible, and most mothers

would have no objection; and it will look very neat, and give the school a good name. Of course, it's just as you like, but I think it's rather jolly to fall in with the school plans.'

'It's a jolly idea. Yes, I'll see about it;' and Cicely decided to reserve her new brown coat for Sundays, and to ask Mrs Gaynor for a blue ulster for everyday wear. Whiteleaf, up on the hills, would be chilly in winter, though doubtless bracing, and a big coat would be a daily necessity.

When dinner was over and the girls were dispersing, Hilary sought Cicely, and managed to leave the room behind her and Dorothy. 'Cicely Hobart,' she said, 'we're willing to have you in the clubs; but I'd better tell you at once that we don't like the company you keep. If you want to come in with us you've got to stop cheeking everybody, and give up hanging on to that girl,' with a scornful look at Dorothy.

'I'm not sure whether the clubs are worth it,' Cicely retorted. 'I'm thinking it over; I'll let you know to-morrow.'

'You won't be asked twice, my child.'

'No, I suppose not. I'm going to discuss it with Dorothy;' and Cicely marched away, her arm linked in the black sheep's.

Hilary shrugged her shoulders. 'Silly kid! she seems to think we can't get on without her.'

'Well, she would be useful,' Maud said, coming up behind. 'Has she been cheeking you now? We must sit on her somehow, Hilary! They need her in the Second Eleven, and I want her for the play.'

'I expect she'll tame down in a day or two. I hope so, I'm sure,' Hilary said uneasily. 'You don't think there's any chance of her going in with the Hamlets, do you? For that would be awful waste.'

'Goodness, no! Why should she? It would cut her out of everything. She's not such an idiot. She seemed quite keen on the clubs this morning.'

'She said she was considering whether they were worth joining! And I saw her talking to that Gilks girl.'

'Oh, she couldn't go in with that lot! Any one can see she belongs to us. And the subs. couldn't worry her, surely!'

'I don't so much mind her hanging on to Dorothy Darley, if it pleases her, but I don't want her to get too chummy with the Hamlets. She lives near Miriam Honor, and she seemed to know her.'

'Oh, she doesn't understand yet; she'll soon drop them when she finds they're outside everything,' Maud said easily. 'She's the kind that wants to be in all that's going on. Any one can see that.'

'Well, I hope she will. She'd be useful all round;' but Hilary's tone was dubious.

CHAPTER XII.
‘TO BE, OR NOT TO BE, A HAMLET?’

‘I say, Cicely, they won’t have you in the clubs if you make them mad,’ Dorothy warned her, as they walked away from the indignant Hilary. ‘Miriam Honor said I had no right to let you chum with me if it would stop your having a good time in other ways, and I’m afraid it’s going to. You’ve been awfully decent; but I can’t hold you to your promise if you want to get out of it, now that you’ve found what a difference it will make. So you’d better drop me if you want to. I’ll understand. I’ll know it isn’t that you think I cheated, but only so that you can join the clubs.’

It cost Dorothy an effort to make the offer, and she was much relieved when it was rejected indignantly, for Cicely was very loyal.

‘I’m not that kind. Besides, I don’t want to. I think, as I’ve said all along, that you’re jolly plucky to come back at all, and I’ll stand by you right through. If Her Majesty Hilary doesn’t like it, she can do the other thing.’

‘But what about the clubs?’

‘I’m not sure that I want to join them. I’m very particular about the company I keep,’ Cicely said solemnly; ‘and I’m not sure that Hilary and her lot are the kind of friends I want—if they do drive home from school and live in big country-houses. I’m beginning to think they’re not desirable acquaintances.’

‘Well,’ said Dorothy with energy, ‘I just hope you’ll tell them so, and I hope I’ll be there when you do!’

Cicely laughed. ‘I want a chat with Miriam first. I hope she’ll come back from lunch early.’

But Miriam, Marguerite, and Georgie, with Georgie’s younger sister Edna, were holding a consultation round their marble-topped table in the dairy, and only returned to school in time for class. Miriam had deliberately kept out of the way to give Cicely every chance to form other friendships if she wished; but she had high hopes, from what Georgie had told her, that Cicely’s own good sense would keep her from joining the ranks of Hilary’s followers. Miriam’s face lit up with relief when Cicely met her as the gong was sounding, and said briefly, ‘May I go home with you? I want to talk.’

Miriam nodded, her eyes bright, but had to hurry away, and Cicely tackled her afternoon’s work with mind busy on problems not connected with parsing and analysis. She had hoped to think them out during dinner; but the need for upholding Dorothy had put that out of the question. It had been necessary to laugh and talk, or the other girls would have thought they were distressed by their isolation. To sit quiet and think would have been impossible. So she had to think during school hours, and made poor progress with her work for next day. However, that mattered little, as she had nothing else to do during the long evening in the cottage.

‘To be, or not to be, a Hamlet? That is the question, isn’t it?’ she mused. ‘How funny it sounds! Seems to me there’s a pun wandering round, waiting to be caught and chained down. But it’s hardly worth while just for one’s self. Well, is it to be, or not to be?’ and she strove to see all sides of the question, so as to meet Miriam with her mind made up.

‘What about your bike?’ Miriam asked when they met after school. ‘You can leave it here, of course; but you’ll have to come by train to-morrow morning.’

‘I’ll do that. I was thinking I’d have to take it by train. But that means pushing it all the way from Risborough, if we’re to talk, and that’s an awful fag.’

‘Aren’t you going to ride home with me?’ Dorothy asked.

‘I want to go with Miriam to-day. You don’t mind, do you? Will my bike be safe here? Or’—as Cicely caught Georgie’s wistful eye—‘would you care to ride it home and bring it back to-morrow? You do ride, don’t you?’

‘I’d love it above everything! How simply ripping of you! But will you trust me with it? It’s such a jolly one!’

‘Take care of it; it’s new,’ Cicely laughed. ‘Don’t bump it over *all* the stones. You can ride with Dorothy.—Now, oughtn’t we to go? We mustn’t lose our train.’

‘Yes, we’ve only just time;’ and Miriam swung her books over her shoulder and led the way.

‘There! She’s with all that Hamlet lot!’ Hilary said with vexation, as she saw the group break up. ‘She’s only a kid, of course, but I think we’d have found her useful. By rights she ought to be with us.’

‘She’s lent her jolly bike to that Gilks girl from Kingshill. *I* wouldn’t!’ cried Geraldine. ‘It a beauty!’

‘She can’t understand yet. She’ll surely drop them when she knows more about them,’ Maud insisted. ‘You’ll have to enlighten her, Hilary, that’s all.’

‘I’ll tackle her to-morrow. She’ll have to understand she must be one thing or the other. She can’t chum with those Hamlet girls *and* belong to our clubs.’

Cicely and Miriam had to run for their train, so they had no opportunity for conversation till they had left Wycombe well behind; and as they had flung themselves into a smoking-carriage filled with gentlemen returning from the City, they thought it well to confine their remarks to a few whispered words till they were out of the train.

‘I’ve forgiven you, you know,’ Cicely murmured.

Miriam laughed and nodded. ‘Did you see Hilary Carter’s face when we went off together? She didn’t want you to go with me.’

‘I don’t care a pin what she wants.’

‘*Don’t* you? It’s unusual. Most of the girls care a good deal.’

Cicely shrugged her shoulders; but a sleepy old gentleman was glaring at her over his evening paper, so she said no more.

But as they left the station and set off along the road to the hills at a good pace, she exclaimed, ‘At last! Ugh! wasn’t it stuffy? And Wycombe isn’t as fresh as this,’ sniffing the air as it swept down from the heights.

‘No; I love to get out here again. Sometimes it’s so fresh and sweet that I want to jump, or turn somersaults, or shout.’

Cicely laughed. ‘That’s when you sing, I suppose?’

‘Well, how could any one help it on a glorious morning up on the hills? I wouldn’t live in town for anything.’

‘But it will get jolly dark presently. You’ll have to lead me; I’m not used to it yet.’

‘I won’t let you get lost,’ Miriam laughed. ‘Stop me if I walk too quickly. I always race along; it’s because I have to catch trains every day, I suppose. Well, what are you going to do? You understand, don’t you? Are you going in with Hilary’s lot? For, if so, we can only be

friends out of school hours. You can see that for yourself. But I'll be quite willing to do that, if you like. I mean, I won't refuse to be friends at home, though you may prefer not to be friendly at school. I can't answer for Marguerite, though. She'll probably say it's all or nothing.'

'I should think you'd say the same! You wouldn't think much of me, would you? I wouldn't be a friend worth having,' Cicely said indignantly. 'If I dropped you at school, you'd have every right to drop me at home. I agree with Marguerite, though it's nice of you to suggest the other way'——

'I was thinking of you and the clubs. You'll want to join; and Hilary wants you. I could see that. She'll make an effort to get you.'

'She'll have to try pretty hard!' Cicely said grimly.

'You're not going in with them?' Miriam's tone was eager, in spite of herself.

'No; I've been thinking it over. I can get along without the clubs'——

'But don't you think you ought to join them? Wouldn't your father want you to? He'd wish you to have as good a time as possible. And why shouldn't you? You can afford it, and you'd enjoy it'——

'And it would throw me in with a horrid snobby lot of girls, who care about money and clothes and all kinds of show. I'm not so keen on it, thank you!'

Miriam laughed. 'It's for you to decide, of course.'

'Well, now, do you think it's worth while making friends you don't care about for the sake of a few games of hockey?'

'No!' said Miriam promptly.

'That's how I feel.'

'But don't you think you ought to join in the games for the sake of the school? Miss Macey will want you to.'

'I don't care. If she can't keep that horrid kind of feeling out of the school, I'm not going to join in the games just to please her.'

'Oh, she can't help it. She couldn't make the others be friendly. But are you quite sure you understand? We're Outsiders—out of everything. They have jolly times at their meetings, I believe; and you're keen on hockey.'

'I can get on without hockey for one winter. Really and truly, Miriam, I *don't like* any girls who can be so hatefully small and mean as to keep other girls out of all the nice things just because they happen to be poorer than themselves. I think it's disgusting and low, and they ought to be ashamed; and I'm not a bit keen on being chummy with them.'

Miriam nodded. 'It's all rot, of course; but we certainly aren't as well off as they are, and that's all they care about. I'm proud of my father, and I don't'——

'Tell me about him, won't you?'

'His father was a poor country minister, who never had more than eighty pounds a year,' Miriam said gravely. 'He had three sons, my father being the youngest. He educated them all till they were able to win scholarships and get to college, and they all went into the ministry. One is in Canada, one a missionary in India. It's not a bad record, I think. My father was never anything but a country minister, without a penny more than he needed, and he only just left enough for us to live on. But he helped people and did good, and everybody loved him. And we're getting along, and'——

'And you and your brother are doing as he and his brothers did—educating yourselves. I think it's splendid, and you may well be proud,' Cicely said warmly. 'Don't look so surprised.

Miss Lane told me. I met her in the wood one day.'

'Oh, do you know her? I didn't know. She's fine! Did you see her at school to-day?'

'No. Was she there? She said she'd come.'

'You haven't had drawing yet, have you? She gives private painting lessons all morning, and takes classes in the afternoon. She'd have dinner with the mistresses, so you wouldn't see her then. We had drawing with her this afternoon.'

'Oh, how did she get on? She was awfully nervous about it.'

'I thought she was nervous; but she got on all right. The girls know her work, you see; they've seen her paintings in the shops, and they're awfully keen on them. So they're pleased to have her teach in the school.'

'I thought she'd get on well enough.'

'I've known her for some time. Well, you see, Hilary and her friends look down on me no end; but I'm quite proud of my family myself. Then take Georgie Gilks. Her brother has a small farm, and has quite a struggle to keep it going. The father and mother are dead, and this brother is bringing up Georgie and Edna. And though he needs every penny for the farm, he's scraped together enough to send them to this good school, far better than he went to himself, and he's doing all he can to give them the best education possible. He's going to be married some day, but he's putting it off till the girl's are educated and able to support themselves. I think that's pretty fine, you know.'

'Rather! And Marguerite?'

'Her aunt isn't rich, but has enough to live on comfortably. But Marguerite's different from the rest of us. Her family is far better even than Hilary's. You haven't heard her story yet? Oh, well, she must tell you herself. But she belongs to a very old French family. There's really no need for the others to despise us, you know.'

'Now tell me about them. Are they so awfully important?'

Miriam laughed, and said, 'Hilary's father is a retired draper, who made money in town and bought a big house near Beaconsfield.' Cicely chuckled scornfully. 'Maud is different. Her father is in the Army, and Army people always think themselves better than any one else. Madeline Bradshawe and Dorothy Darley belong to real old families, who have lived for generations where they do now. But Hilary does *not*. Madeline's a great deal decenter than Hilary, by the way. She's always quite friendly, and I've sometimes thought she could improve matters if she'd take the trouble. But she's wrapped up in the Essay Club, and cares for nothing but books and painting and trying to write on her own account, and she doesn't take much notice of what's going on. Now Hilary's in everything, and a regular manager.'

Cicely nodded thoughtfully. 'I'd as soon belong to your set as theirs, and I think you've just as much reason to be proud. I'm going to be a Hamlet and let the clubs go. I suppose Dorothy will come in with us now? They aren't likely to take her up again, and we've been friendly.'

'If she cares to, and I guess she will. She wouldn't have much to do with us before, and that was partly why Georgie was so unwilling to be nice to her now; but that was rather too bad.'

'You seem to make Georgie and Marguerite do pretty much what you like.'

Miriam laughed. 'Oh, we get on very well together. I was awfully sorry to be so hateful to you last night; but you know now how I felt, don't you? What did you think was wrong?'

'That you and Marguerite didn't want me,' Cicely said promptly. 'I thought you were satisfied with one another, and didn't want any one else.'

‘I knew you would. Didn’t you hate us both?’

‘No; but I felt rather bad. Will you invite me to the next jam orgy?’

‘Rather! We’ll expect you. But, I say! there’s one thing. Mrs Ramage told me you belonged to Mr and Mrs Broadway, and you might be going to live at Broadway End when Mrs Broadway was better.’

‘I didn’t know she’d said anything about it. Have you mentioned it to anybody? Then please don’t,’ Cicely said quickly. ‘I’m going to be a Hamlet in earnest, and nobody need know anything about Broadway End. I may never go there, anyway.’

‘All the same, you really belong to the other set, you know;’ and Miriam paused at the beginning of Whiteleaf.

‘I don’t want to belong to them. I’m going to tell Hilary so to-morrow.’

‘Well,’ Miriam laughed, ‘you’ve made just about as bad a beginning at school as you possibly could. You arrived as the friend of Dorothy Darley; you cheeked the most exclusive and important girls all round; you confessed to being acquainted with several notorious Hamlets, such as Marguerite and Georgie; you went in to dinner with Dorothy, and refused to sit with Hilary when she asked you; you lent your jolly bike to Georgie; you told Hilary you weren’t sure whether the clubs were worth joining; and you walked off home with *me*! It’s a brilliant beginning, I must say. You’ll end by being really popular at this rate, especially after you’ve had it out with Hilary, and told her you don’t desire the honour of her acquaintance.’

Cicely laughed. ‘Or that I don’t consider her a desirable kind of friend. She’ll want to eat me, won’t she?’

‘She wants you in her clubs. She’ll try to make you see the error of your ways.’

‘It will be interesting to see how she’ll do it,’ Cicely said coolly. ‘I’m quite content with the friends I’ve made, and I intend to have as much fun outside the clubs as in. She’s expecting me at hockey practice to-morrow. I’d better break it to her early that she isn’t going to get me. You’ll meet me in the morning? Thanks awfully.’

‘Good-night!’ Miriam swung off up the hill to Green Hailey in unusually high spirits, and her cheerful song rang out again. It was new to Cicely this time, and she waited to listen.

‘ “Why are you wandering here, I pray?”
An old man asked a maid one day.
“Looking for poppies so bright and red,
Father,” she said, “I’m hither led.”
“Fie, fie!” was the old man’s cry;
“Poppies, ’tis known by all who rove,
Grow in the field and not in the grove.” ’

The clear voice died away, and Cicely laughed and turned homewards.

CHAPTER XIII.
CICELY SPEAKS HER MIND.

Cicely wrote her note to Mrs Gaynor, asking for the blue coat, with comfortable assurance that it would arrive in a few days. Her father had expressly said she must have everything she found necessary, and this request sounded so very reasonable. Whiteleaf itself seemed sheltered, but the roads all around were so breezy and bracing, open to the full force of west, south, and even north winds, that heavy clothing was sure to be required during the winter, and one coat could hardly be asked to do duty for every day in the week. She had forgotten to ask for her school hat, but resolved to do so next day.

There was distinct satisfaction in the thought that her dress was so good in every particular as to have proved her a desirable recruit for the school clubs in spite of her friendship with so many Hamlet girls. She chuckled as she remembered the group surrounding her hat.

'Daddy said it seemed rather much to give for a soft straw with only a scarf round it. But Mrs Gaynor told him it was a good one, and I loved the colour. They knew it was Liberty! I'm glad my things are as nice as any of theirs, though I'm not going to join their silly clubs. They'll see it's because I won't and not because I can't, and I'm glad of it. It will be jolly to have the school hat and coat as nice as any of them, too;' and she ran with her letter to the post, giving the 'boarder' an early morning walk. It was a cold morning, with the first touch of frost in the air, and Cicely laughed. 'Big coats to-day! I'll have to make my brown one do;' and she hurried back to the cottage to search for it.

The sun was just rising behind the green hill of the Cross and lighting up the vale spread below. It would be warm enough at midday, but chilly again in the evening. Cicely was heartily glad of her big coat and fur hat as she took up her satchel and went out to wait for Miriam, humming the tune to which they had parted the night before.

'I say,' was her greeting, as Miriam ran down the hill to meet her, 'tell me the rest of that song you were singing last night. Why did he object to her looking for poppies?'

Miriam laughed. 'Don't you know? In the next verse she tries to make him believe she's waiting to hear the nightingale, and he points out that they only sing at night. Then in the last verse the young man appears, and the old one sees through it:

> The sage looked grave, the maiden shy,
> As Lubin jumped over a stile hard by;
> The sage looked graver, the maid more glum,
> Lubin he twiddled his finger and thumb.

That's what she was really after.'

'Oh, I see! I never heard it before. I say, Miriam, I wouldn't live down in the town for anything! Seems to me it's we hill-girls who might despise those Townies. I'm quite proud of Whiteleaf and the hills and woods already, and it must be heaps healthier up here than down in the valleys;' and Cicely looked out over the vale towards Aylesbury and Oxford with a throb of delight in its sunny beauty.

'Do you feel that already? I'm glad. I thought you would. Oh, I've thought it for long enough. I love the wind, and the sun, and the wide views of open country. All the towns about here lie low, and I feel so shut in. But here, perched on the edge, with all the hills behind us

and the vale in front, we get all the air and all the sunshine, and *I* think all the health and good temper and everything worth having. Doesn't a sunny, windy morning put you all right for the day?'

Cicely laughed. 'I like it, and I feel I've had a good beginning. Don't you feel immensely superior to the Townies?'

'If you call them that at school, Marguerite and Georgie will certainly adopt it.'

'I've no objection. If they call us Hamlets, we'll call them Townies. I'd much prefer to be a Hamlet. You don't wear the school hat, then?' said Cicely, with a glance at Miriam.

She was wearing her green knitted cap, and a warm brown coat which had already seen much service.

'No. It costs three shillings, and that's part of the price of a pair of boots,' she said bluntly. 'You'll have to get used to that kind of thing, Cicely. I can't go in for luxuries. It's all mother can do to give me what I need. I knew when I came to school I shouldn't be able to have everything like the other girls. Do you mind?'

'Mind! Of course not! Why should I mind?' Cicely said warmly. 'I'm not a snobby Towny. But it's rather hard on you. Don't *you* mind?'

Miriam said nothing for a moment, but walked on, her face very sober.

'I do mind,' she said at last, 'and I won't pretend I don't. I'd like to have nice things. I can't help wishing sometimes I had all the others have. But I knew how it would be when we decided I should come to this school, and I made up my mind from the first I wouldn't think about it. If I was going to be miserable over little things like that, I'd have been better not to come at all. It's easy enough, up in Green Hailey, to forget the things I'd like to have and be quite pleased with what I've got; but I knew once I went to a big school and met other girls I'd feel the difference, and see how shabby my things were, and want to have lots of changes of blouses and frocks like they do. I decided that I wouldn't go in for any nonsense of that kind; that I'd come to school, and I wouldn't care more than I could help; and that if I did care, I would never let mother know. It was important I should come to school, you see.'

'It seems to me,' Cicely said impulsively, 'that Dorothy Darley's not the only plucky girl in the school.'

Miriam laughed. 'Oh, it's not really worth thinking about. Of course, it was difficult at first, for the others were *not* nice when we went first. But they've had to get used to it; only you can understand how they don't want us for friends. Mother gets me the best things she can, but I can't keep having new ones. As for school hats, and blue coats, and all that nonsense, I can't let her hear a word about it. It would worry her, and it can't be helped.'

Cicely thought of the letter she had just posted. Was it all nonsense? She had never thought of it in that light. The idea, as suggested by Dorothy, had sounded attractive, and she had adopted it with enthusiasm, but without thought. She changed the subject, and was meditative as the train carried them to Wycombe.

Miriam had looked her over with keen appreciation when they met. She delighted in pretty things, and only she herself knew how she had suffered and envied and longed to be like the other girls since she joined the Wycombe school. Cicely's brown coat, with its broad collar, and the soft brown hat above her curly dark hair, suited her to perfection. There was no one to suggest to Miriam that her green cap and old coat suited her equally well, and that, with her glowing cheeks, lightly tanned skin, thoughtful eyes, and long braid of shining yellow hair, she needed no 'pretty things' to make her a very pretty schoolgirl, and one who compared very favourably with any other in the school. She was quite unaware of it, and careless of it so

far; but it would have been a real comfort to her if she had known how she appeared to Cicely's eyes when she first met her below the Cross.

'Do you remember that morning I saw you in Risborough station?' Cicely asked suddenly, as they walked through the town towards Wycombe Moor.

'When you said good-bye to your father? Yes?'

'Well, I want to ask you something. I saw Maud cut you. You must have known she would. Why did you speak to her?'

Miriam laughed. 'Because I knew she didn't want me to. It sounds mean, doesn't it? But Maud is a cat sometimes. She had a friend with her, so she wouldn't speak to a girl from Green Hailey! She's often like that. I knew what she'd do, but I rather enjoyed it. I could see she didn't want me to speak to her. It was too bad, I suppose; but she has no right to be like that.'

Cicely laughed. 'It served her jolly well right! I couldn't understand it.'

But she became thoughtful again as they entered the school gates, and still more so when they found the cloakroom full of girls, hanging up school hats and taking off new blue coats. They certainly looked very neat, and she knew there was no reason why she should not have the same if she wished.

Dorothy and Georgie greeted them gaily. They had come together, and seemed by this time very good friends; and Cicely congratulated herself on the happy thought of making her bicycle help in the reconciliation.

Hilary and several of her friends were there also, and were anxious to tackle her on the subject of the clubs at once. It was both fortunate and unfortunate that this should be so, for while the size of the interested audience made her views public property at once, the number present made it harder for her to speak her mind. She was not shy, but it was less easy to speak out before so many.

'Do you feel ready for Hilary?' Miriam had asked as they walked from the station. 'Have you thought what you'll say to her?'

'Not exactly. What's the good? You never say what you've thought when the time comes. No; I just feel—prickly! Ready to answer back, whatever she says.' Cicely knew no other way to describe her aggressive mood.

It was unusual for so many girls to be present so early. The train which Miriam joined at Risborough brought a certain number, but it left an hour before classes began, so the girls from the neighbourhood did not arrive till nearer half-past nine, and the early birds had time for gossip or preparation-work. But to-day the town girls had come early also, and the reason was soon apparent.

Hilary came shouldering her way through the throng to Cicely, who was questioning Georgie severely as to her treatment of the bicycle.

'Come here a moment; I want you, Cicely!'

'Let's have it out and be done with it!' Cicely murmured, and obeyed the summons; while Georgie and Dorothy turned eagerly to Miriam, saying, 'Is she going to join the clubs? Or will she stick to us?'

'She told me yesterday she was so particular about her friends that she didn't think she'd join. She said they weren't desirable acquaintances,' Dorothy observed. 'I'm just hoping she'll tell them so.'

Hilary was quite aware of the interest and anxiety with which the Hamlet girls were listening, and was not too easy in her own mind. If the new girl threw in her lot with the clubs,

it would be a fine opportunity to triumph over the assembled Hamlets. But if she did not, the triumph would be theirs, and the position distinctly uncomfortable. It was incredible, however, that any girl could be so blind to her own advantage as deliberately to exclude herself from all the social side of the school life—if she understood. If she still did not, she must be enlightened at once.

'Have you brought your hockey-stick for this afternoon's practice, Cicely?' Hilary spoke as naturally and as pleasantly as she could.

'No, I haven't.' Cicely's aggressive tone gave warning of her mood.

'Not? Oh, well, I dare say we can lend you one. By the way, there's a meeting of the members of all the clubs before school, at a quarter to nine. We want to propose a new idea. It's no secret—a grand federation of all the clubs, to be known as the United Clubs Society. We want to discuss the whole question. You'll come, won't you? You're going to join the clubs, of course?'

The tone of certainty did not soothe Cicely's feelings. Why should she be taken for granted, as if she had no mind of her own? However, she answered with extreme politeness.

'No, thanks. I've decided not to join the clubs.'

'*Not?*' Hilary's tone was incredulous. 'But why not, Cicely? *Everybody* belongs to them—everybody in the school worth knowing! You'll be out of everything if you don't join.'

'Thanks; I prefer to be outside.'

'Oh, but, Cicely, that's silly! You don't understand. You want to have a good time, don't you? Well, I know the school pretty well, and I tell you it's impossible unless you join the clubs. Everything worth doing is worked through them.'

'Well, it oughtn't to be, then. That's what I think!' and Cicely faced Hilary indignantly.

'That's nonsense, child; it's necessary. You don't know the ways of the school yet.'

No girl of fourteen likes to be addressed as 'child' by any one, least of all by a schoolfellow, even though she has her hair nearly up. Cicely was beginning an angry retort, when Madeline Bradshawe broke in, seeing that Hilary's methods were only causing trouble.

'Cicely, I hoped you'd join the Essay Club! Don't you want to come to the Hallowe'en party? Of course, you can come as a visitor, but I hoped you'd be a member.'

'Thanks; I sha'n't be coming at all. I don't care to.'

'But what about the Dramatic Society?' demanded Maud. 'We were going to put you in the Christmas play, after the way you spoke yesterday. Of course, you may not be good enough, but we thought we'd give you a trial, since you've had experience, and aren't likely to collapse with stage fright at the last moment.'

'And what about the Hockey Club? If you can play, and won't, it's very mean. You ought to play for the sake of the school; and it's quite likely we'd be able to put you into the team very soon,' coaxed another.

It was not easy to withstand all the elder girls of the school. Moreover, the attractions they urged appealed to Cicely strongly, and it had cost her something to put them aside. The Hamlets in the background looked at one another anxiously. They knew she was willing to remain friendly; but would she be tempted by the delights of the clubs? No one knew better than they how impossible a half-way course would be. If she yielded she would be lost to them as a companion. And, after all, why should she not? Her father would have wished her to join in all the activities of the school.

While she was confronting Hilary, all Cicely's most prickly side was uppermost. But when addressed by others, who were so much more moderate in tone, she calmed down, and

answered quietly, ‘Thank you very much; but I’ve thought it over, and have decided not to join the clubs or have anything to do with them. I think I quite understand; it’s been explained to me by several people. I’d prefer to be outside the clubs, thank you.’

‘But why? Why? You’d enjoy them, you know.’

‘I suppose it isn’t the amount of the subscription that’s troubling you?’ Hilary’s tone was scornful and offensive.

‘No, it isn’t! Yes, it is, though! But it’s chiefly that I prefer the company to be found outside the clubs!’ and Cicely flashed round upon her.

Dorothy chuckled. Georgie grinned in open delight, and made mental notes for Marguerite’s benefit.

‘Oh, come, Cicely! Who’s been telling tales of us behind our backs? What have they said to you? We’re not so bad as that, surely!’ Madeline’s voice made itself heard above the indignant outcry of the rest. Hilary was making scornful remarks about ‘Hamlets,’ and Maud was wrathfully demanding of Cicely what she meant by it.

‘I’ve heard about your clubs, and I’d rather find my friends outside them.’ Cicely was fairly set going now, and was determined to speak out for once, and to be so emphatic about it that the subject would not need to be reopened. ‘I’m very particular about my friends, and I don’t think I’d find the kind of company I like in any of your clubs. I’d much rather be out of them.’

‘I say, Cicely, that’s going it rather strong!’

‘Cicely, what do you mean?’ demanded Madeline, in righteous indignation. ‘Will you please tell us in what particular way we are not fit company for you, and why we’re not good enough to be your friends?’

‘Yes, I’d like to; then perhaps you won’t ask me again.’

‘We certainly won’t!’

‘Don’t worry about that, my dear!’

‘She seems to think we’re pining to have her!’

‘You invited me,’ said Cicely. ‘I’ve the right to refuse, and to tell you why.’

‘We asked you in a decently polite way, I hope?’

‘Well, I’ll tell you why I don’t care to join the clubs;’ and Cicely spoke more quietly, but with great emphasis. ‘It *is* the amount of your subscriptions that has set me against them! I think it’s a wrong, mean, low kind of thing to have fixed such high subs. that a lot of the girls can’t join. Your subs. are just to keep them out. You don’t need the money; you have to use it up in picnics and parties. But you do want to keep out the girls from the country; you want them to feel they’re outsiders, and different from you, and so you’ve fixed your high subscriptions. I think it’s a low, shabby trick, and I don’t care to be friends with any girls belonging to the clubs. That’s all—the whole reason. Oh!—and there are much jollier and very much pluckier girls outside the clubs than in! I know I can’t do both things, and as I’ve already made some friends outside the clubs whom I value very much, you’ll see it’s quite impossible for me to join. Thank you for asking me; but I don’t consider it a compliment, though no doubt you mean it as one. I’d be ashamed to be a member of any club which had made its rules and fixed its sub. for your reasons. I’d feel I was being a horrid snob.’

‘Cicely, do stop!’ Miriam, half-laughing, half-dismayed, had been trying to get to her for some time, but had been restrained by Dorothy and Georgie. ‘You won’t do any good by that kind of thing.’

‘I won’t say any more. I just wanted to make it perfectly plain.’

‘You’ve done it, and no mistake. You needn’t have any fear that you’ll ever be asked again to join any club of ours, Cicely Hobart. We shall have much pleasure in leaving you to the friends you’ve chosen, and I jolly well wish you joy of them. I hope you won’t get tired of being an Outsider and a Hamlet; for even if you do, you’ll never get another chance to come inside in *this* school!’ Hilary was the first to recover her breath.

Madeline Bradshawe looked very serious. She did not like the accusations hurled at her by Cicely. It was the first time the feeling of the Hamlet girls had been voiced, as Miriam, though resenting the attitude of the original members of the school, had been content to accept it passively, being far too proud to struggle for the recognition denied her willingly; and the younger girls had followed her example. Cicely had given bold utterance to what they had felt; and while none of the accused girls enjoyed her bitter words and the clear view of themselves in others’ eyes which she had flung before them, Madeline found the position very distressing, and felt both ashamed and uncomfortable. She had not realised how the exclusive rules must appear to the shut-out girls, and she perceived that something was very wrong in the state of affairs if this were how the school appeared to a new-comer.

Hilary and Maud, pictures of offended dignity, had stalked away to their meeting. The others followed, some looking curiously at Cicely, as at a creature of an unusual species which had appeared among them, others scornful and amused.

Madeline was the last to go, and at the door she turned to Miriam Honor. ‘Is that how it looks to you? Do you feel as she does?’ she demanded.

Miriam looked her straight in the eyes. ‘Yes!’ she said.

Madeline went on to the meeting, her brows drawn together in a frown of dismay. Miriam followed Georgie and Dorothy, who, laughing and congratulating their new champion, were conducting her to the cycle-shed to show that her cycle had not suffered during its night at Kingshill.

CHAPTER XIV.
CICELY FORMS THE HAMLET CLUB.

'Mirry, will you do something for me?' and Cicely caught Miriam as she was leaving the school for dinner. 'It's only this—buy me a picture post-card and a halfpenny stamp. Here's the money. Get a nice picture of Wycombe, unless there are any of Whiteleaf.'

'There's one of the Cross. Would that do?'

'That would be ripping. It's to contradict a letter I sent this morning. I'll post it on my way home;' and during the afternoon Cicely scribbled a line to Mrs Gaynor, explaining that she found the blue coat would be unnecessary, after all. 'I'll be a Hamlet out and out, and not try to be like those others,' was the decision to which she had come.

In drawing-class that afternoon she and Margia met, but only exchanged smiles of understanding and greeting. It was soon evident to Cicely that there had been no cause for Margia's nervousness as to her teaching powers. She had dreaded the ordeal of facing so many girls, but found herself able to cope with them when the time came. Her paintings had been exhibited in Wycombe, and much admired by the girls, as being the work of 'our Miss Lane's sister.' Now that that celebrity had actually come to teach in the school, the girls were pleased and proud to learn from her, and she had no difficulty in controlling them.

She was known to several of the girls, both Hamlets and Townies. Cicely's nickname had been adopted with enthusiasm, as Miriam had foreseen. Marguerite, in Penn village up on the hills, lived not far from Margia at Totteridge; and Georgie was a fairly near neighbour also. To Cicely all the villages and hamlets were mere names at present; but she intended to spend her first fine Saturday in a cycling trip through the neighbourhood and get to know her way about.

'Come to dinner with me, then,' Dorothy said instantly, when she heard the plan as they rode towards Hughenden on their way home. 'We'll be awfully pleased. Mother knows all about you already. I say, you did give it hot to Hilary and Co! Sure you aren't sorry? For they'll never have you in the clubs now, you know. I've paid my sub. to the Hockey Club and the Dramatic Society, but of course they won't have me now. But they would have been glad to have you. I guess it's the first time a girl refused to join. Quite sure you aren't sorry?'

'I'm glad. It was jolly to tell them what I thought; I just enjoyed it.'

Dorothy laughed. 'They didn't,' she said.

One result of Cicely's stand which she had not foreseen was to deepen the cleavage between the two parties in the school. The club girls, following Hilary, assumed an air of displeasure towards the Hamlets, which was meant to impress, but only caused derisive laughter. The younger Hamlet girls, on the other hand, were emboldened by the fearless attitude of their new champion, and her tone of scorn towards the clubs was generally adopted by those of whom Georgie and Marguerite were recognised leaders. These two in turn looked up to Miriam, their only representative in the Sixth; but Miriam was working hard, with matric. in view the following June, and was not prepared to take active measures in defence of her rights, though she sympathised with the younger girls' resentment over their position. Cicely seemed more likely to help on the hopes which some had cherished of one day making good their place in the school, and perhaps even being revenged on the exclusive Townies.

To the great annoyance of Hilary and her friends, and of Geraldine and Alice in Form IV. A, Dorothy Darley had been accepted as a friend by the Hamlet girls, and her unfortunate

mistake at the beginning of her school life completely forgotten. This obviously made it useless for the others to ignore her as they had intended, for such action had no effect on her whatever. She had plenty of friends, and did not care whether the rest talked to her or not. The plan of sending her to Coventry fell hopelessly flat, and the fact did not improve the temper of those who had hoped thus to make her suffer. She simply ignored them in her turn, to their intense but helpless wrath, and for this also they blamed Cicely. Had she not been the first to show friendship to 'that girl'?

On both counts she was held in disfavour by the influential majority; but with Dorothy, Marguerite, and Georgie in her own form, and Miriam out of school hours, she was content, and soon found herself even enjoying the position she had made for herself. The younger girls were not unnaturally inclined to look up to her and allow her to lead them to some extent. When presently she made the suggestion which won her her place in the school and made her a person to be reckoned with, she became more of a leader among the Hamlets than ever.

She thought much over the state of matters, and often in the long, quiet evenings, when home-work was done and she sat nursing Mrs Ramage's latest boarder—a gray kitten, whose mistress was ill and could not look after him—she would drop her book and sit gazing into the fire, wondering how the problem could be solved.

The position in the school was wrong. There was an unpleasant feeling between the two sets of girls which should never have existed. It had come about naturally, however, and it was not easy to see how it could be altered. In course of time it might die down, but that might be a matter of years, and in the meantime the atmosphere was very uncomfortable.

'Miss Macey ought to'—— Cicely would begin, and then she would stop. After all, what could Miss Macey do? She might scold, lecture, argue, even plead, but she could not force a spirit of friendship into the school. It must surely, to be of any value, come from the girls themselves. Miss Macey might do much, but she could not do everything, and Cicely was not disposed to appeal to her.

'It seems to me,' she decided, 'that a few girls *in* the school could do something. I don't quite see how, but I think they could. They could do more than any mistress; I'm sure of that. Things are all wrong, and they ought to be altered. Of course, Hilary and her Townies don't want them altered. But I shall keep thinking about it; and perhaps some of the others would help. Miriam would, of course, and Marguerite—no, I don't know about her and Georgie. What they want is more to pay out the Townies, to get even with them, than to make friends;' and she fell to brooding again.

One thought emerged clearly from all her puzzling. The Townies had their clubs and societies. Why should not the Hamlets be organised also? At present they had no bond but their common irritation at the treatment meted out to them; but there was no reason why they should not have their club as well. United they would be strong. Moreover, if they found interests among themselves, they would more easily forget the school clubs from which they were debarred.

'It *might* be possible,' said Cicely slowly to the gray kitten, 'to have a jolly club among ourselves which was such good fun that we wouldn't have time to think about the others. If we Hamlets could have all we wanted in our own club, we might forget theirs. Yes, there's something in that. It might make things pleasanter, too, in time. I wonder'—— and she wandered off into a dream, which had very practical results.

Next morning she met Miriam below the Cross, in the first brilliant sunshine of a clear cold day, her cheeks tingling with the wind, her eyes bright.

‘What’s up?’ laughed Miriam. ‘You look as if you like it, whatever it is.’

‘I do! I’ve been waiting all night to speak to you.’

‘I say! Whatever is it?’

‘Well, look here! I’m proud of my hamlet at Whiteleaf, and you’re proud of yours at Green Hailey; and we wouldn’t either of us like to live down in the valleys, with not much view, and without our glorious wind and all our fresh air. Would we?’

‘Certainly not. But what are you working up to?’

‘And the other Hamlet girls feel the same; or if they don’t, they ought to. Now, why shouldn’t we all join together and form a club, and call it the Hamlet Club?’

Miriam looked thoughtful. ‘A club of our own, to match the school clubs?’

‘Yes—but no subscriptions;’ and Cicely’s eyes danced.

Miriam assented with a laugh. ‘It would be rather jolly. I wonder why we haven’t done it before? A club for all the country girls—a Hamlet Club! Yes, I like the idea; but we’re so scattered, we couldn’t do much, you know. We could only meet at school; we live so far from one another. We couldn’t have evening meetings, or anything of that kind.’

‘No; I thought of that. But if we started the club, we might find something we could do later on. We might form the club, and enrol members, and take a pledge, and make rules, and have a motto, and that would be a good start, anyway.’

Miriam laughed. ‘It would—rather! A very good start. I couldn’t have thought of all those things. I haven’t half your ideas. But it would be jolly to have the club, and feel that we belong to it.’

‘Our first rule, or the first bit of our pledge, must be that we’ll be proud of our hamlets, and glad we’re country girls living up on the hills.’

‘Yes; I like that. Any more rules?’

‘Well, I thought’—and Cicely eyed Miriam eagerly—‘to be friendly to everybody—*everybody*!’

‘Everybody in the club, with no special chums?’

‘No; not that at all. People must have chums. Friendly to everybody, I said.’

Miriam gave Cicely a quick look, its eagerness matching Cicely’s own. ‘Do you mean that?’

‘Of course I do. Do you think the girls won’t? We’ll make them, you and I.’

‘I was just afraid,’ said Miriam slowly, ‘that you meant the club to be a rival to the school clubs, and I was afraid it would only make our girls feel worse. I thought perhaps you meant it to be in opposition—our club against theirs.’

‘Well, I don’t—not that. I don’t want to make things any worse. They’re bad enough. I’m not proposing the club for the sake of annoying Hilary and the others, or to interfere with them in any way. But I don’t see why our girls shouldn’t have their club too. We’ll keep it to ourselves, and not try to make it a rival to the school clubs in any nasty way; but I don’t see why, when we’re left out of the others, we shouldn’t have our own. Nobody could object to that. That’s why I want that second rule. I want it to be quite impossible for our club to work against theirs, and I want our girls to know it from the first.’

Miriam nodded. ‘And something might come of it some day; you can’t tell. I like your rules. What motto do you propose? I can see you’ve thought it all out.’

‘All night!’ Cicely laughed. ‘But I won’t tell you the motto yet. Ask me again on the way home. I’ve an idea, but I want to make sure of it. I’m going to look up a quotation at school.’

‘Perhaps I know it?’ Miriam suggested.

Cicely laughed and shook her head. ‘I’d rather look it up. Suppose we talk it over with our own set to-day, and not tell the rest till we’ve thought more about it. We’ll tell Marguerite and Georgie and Dorothy—we five. Perhaps they’ll have some ideas. We can see how they like it, anyway.’

‘Oh, they’ll like it! It’s just what we’ve been wanting, but nobody happened to think of just the right thing.’

‘In summer we could make it a rambling club, and have picnics near each other’s hamlets. We might have a competition for the best story of our hamlet, or the best description of its history. Marguerite was telling me about Penn and Jordans and Chalfont, and of course there’s Hughenden and Hampden. We’ve lots of history about, and heaps of stories.’

‘No need to wait till summer for that. We could meet on Saturday afternoons. Cicely, I’ve a feeling that your idea may grow.’

‘I hope it will. It’s only a little one, but it’s a beginning.’

‘We’ll come in early from dinner, and meet in the library and talk it over. Shall I tell Georgie and Marguerite, or wait till we’re all together? You ought to tell them. It’s your idea.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind. You tell them at dinner-time,’ Cicely said magnanimously.

But she was relieved, all the same, when Marguerite and Georgie, hurrying in from lunch, accosted her with, ‘What’s up, Cicely? Mirry says you want us for something—she won’t say what; but she says it’s something ripping. You and she have been looking jolly mysterious all morning. What’s new now?’

‘She hasn’t told you? She is a brick! She knew I wanted to tell you myself,’ Cicely said warmly. ‘Come into the library, then, and we’ll talk it over. I’ve been telling Dorothy. The Townies couldn’t think what we were talking about all through dinner. I believe Hilary thought we were talking about her—as if we had time!’

‘Does Dorothy approve?’ asked Miriam.

‘Yes; but she isn’t keen on Rule No. 2;’ and Cicely slipped her hand through Miriam’s arm. ‘Stick up for it, won’t you, Mirry?’

‘I think it’s necessary, unless the club is to do more harm than good.’

‘That’s what I felt. Good!’ as they found the library empty.—‘Lock the door, Georgie; no Townies wanted in here!’

Much surprise was felt when it became known that the five leaders of the Hamlet girls were locked into the library for a private meeting. Meetings with locked doors were officially forbidden; but the Town girls had held so many themselves that they were forced to overlook the sin being committed. They were intensely curious, and would have given much to know what was going on. For the first time they felt shut out from something, and did not take to the situation kindly.

‘I don’t like it. They’ve no right to have secrets. Private meetings shouldn’t be allowed!’ said Hilary hotly.

‘Oh, come, Hilary!’ Madeline’s sense of justice moved her to protest. ‘What about our meetings?’

‘They aren’t private. We don’t lock the doors—not as a rule. Any one can come, if she’ll join the clubs.’

‘Yes; but we know very well these girls can’t.’

Madeline’s logic was not pleasing to Hilary. ‘It’s all this conceited new kid, Cicely Hobart. She’ll make trouble in the school before she’s done,’ she said bitterly; for Cicely’s attack still rankled.

In the library the despised Hamlets were enjoying a heated discussion. Cicely, perched on the table, sat swinging her legs and holding forth on the subject of the club. The others sat on the hearthrug, and applauded or argued according to circumstances.

'Ladies, I propose that we form a club. Since we are out of the school clubs, we ought to have one of our own.'

'Hear, hear! What a ripping idea! Won't Hilary be mad?'

'It must be called the Hamlet Club. Yes, really,' as Georgie protested. 'I know they call us Hamlets to make fun of us, but I don't care. I'm proud of the name, and I mean to show it. I'm awfully fond of my village already, and you all feel the same. Marguerite's as proud of Penn as she can be. I haven't seen it yet, but I'm going to as soon as the weather permits. But to hear Marguerite talk about Penn Wood, and Penn Church, and Penn Street, and Kingswood, and Tyler's Green, you'd think there was no place in England equal to them. Dorothy's just as bad about Darley's Bottom, though she says there are only four cottages; so it's a real hamlet, like Green Hailey'——

'And *I* think there's no place like Green Hailey,' laughed Miriam. 'Quite right, too. We live in some of the quaintest, prettiest, sweetest, cleanest, sunniest, and most ancient hamlets in the country, and we ought to be proud of them.'

'What a collection of superlatives!' laughed Dorothy.—'Well, Cicely, granted that we are proud of our hamlets, and wouldn't for anything live in a town down in the valley, what then?'

'If we're so proud of our name that we adopt it for our club, the Townies won't be able to use it to jeer at us any longer. If they say, "You're only a Hamlet," we'll be able to say, "I'm a member of the Hamlet Club," which none of them can ever be. I want our first rule to be that we're proud to be members of the Hamlet Club. And to be eligible for membership we must live in a hamlet, or have lived in one, and must be friends with all Hamlet girls on equal terms. No snobs allowed. That cuts out Hilary and her lot, you see. Some of them live in villages, just as Dorothy does, and they might claim the right to join; but they aren't prepared to be friendly.'

'That almost includes Rule No. 2, doesn't it?' asked Miriam.

'Oh, that rule's impossible! It takes all the fun out of the thing,' grumbled Dorothy; and Georgie and Marguerite looked anxious.

'I don't believe it,' Cicely retorted with spirit.—'No, it doesn't include the second rule, Mirry. That condition of membership only affects ourselves. I propose, for our second rule, that all members pledge themselves to be always friendly to everybody;' and she looked round defiantly.

'There!' cried Dorothy; 'don't you see? I thought our club was to pay the Townies out for being nasty to us; to show them what it feels like to be left out of secrets; to work against the school clubs, and interfere with them, and spoil their fun if we can'—— She paused.

'Yes, it does sound nice, doesn't it?' Cicely retorted. 'Dorothy, we can't begin that. We aren't babies. You had to stop because it sounded so hateful. It's kiddy, too, to go on like that. You wouldn't sit down and cry because you can't get into the clubs. But to form a club to be spiteful would be just as bad. You haven't thought about it yet. If you think, you'll see how impossible that kind of club would be. Georgie, you must see it. Marguerite, what do you say?'

'I side with Mirry,' said Marguerite bluntly.

Cicely laughed. 'Without hearing which side she's on?'

'I don't need to hear. Besides—yes, I would! I would side with her without knowing.'

‘Oh, Marguerite!’ protested Miriam, laughing and reddening.

‘And it’s not because I haven’t any mind of my own, either. It’s because I’ve got a mind, and I’ve made it up, and I’ll stick to it. I’ve followed her advice and copied her millions of times already, and it always pays.’

‘Marguerite!’ Miriam protested again, her colour deepening.

‘Bravo, Marguerite! I like that,’ exclaimed Cicely.—‘Oh, you needn’t blush, Mirry! You’ve been her chum for two years, and you’ve got to pay for it. You’ll have to be jolly careful what you do, though.’

‘That’s what I’m thinking. But, girls, I do think Cicely’s right in this. If we start a rival club we shall only have endless quarrelling and bad feeling in the school. It wouldn’t pay. If the object of our club was to make the others feel bad, to pay them out, no good would come of it. It would be awfully bad for the school, too. We can surely have our club without trying to injure theirs. There must be plenty of things we can do without interfering with them, or even copying them.’

‘Yes!’ Cicely nodded. ‘I’d like ours to be different, if possible. We don’t want them to say we’ve no ideas of our own.—Dorothy, don’t look so doleful; we’ll have plenty of fun.’

‘But that’s so vague. Now, if you said we’d have a club to—to smash up the school clubs and make the Townies wild, everybody would want to join at once.’

‘Dorothy!’ cried Miriam.

‘It does sound rather bad,’ Marguerite acknowledged; ‘though they certainly deserve it.’

‘When I told Hilary I wouldn’t join the clubs,’ Cicely began impressively, and had their instant attention, ‘I said I thought it was wrong, and mean, and shabby for one lot of girls in the school to set themselves up against another lot. I said I thought the division in the school was wicked, and I’d not be friends with the girls who had caused it. Well, I think so still, and I’m not going to do anything to make the division worse. We’d be as bad as they’ve been if we had a club like that. It was all new to me when I came here. At my last school everybody was friendly; though we had special chums, of course. When I found how it was here, I just hated it; and I wouldn’t have proposed the Hamlet Club if I’d thought it would make things worse. But I don’t see why it should. The school will be divided into two sets, of course; but it’s that now. We Outsiders will all be joined together—that’s all.’

‘The others won’t like being left out,’ Miriam remarked, ‘but it will certainly serve them right.’

‘They’ll be the Outsiders now. It will be quite a change for them,’ Georgie said gleefully; ‘I hope they’ll enjoy it.’

‘That sounds like an Outsider at the door now;’ and Cicely slid off the table and went to the door, whose handle was rattling violently. ‘Who’s there?’ she demanded.

‘It’s me—Maud. I want a book. Why is the door locked?’ demanded an indignant voice.

‘Maud! First time *she* ever wanted a book in dinner-hour!’ Dorothy murmured. ‘She wants to know what we’re up to; that’s more like it.’

Cicely threw open the door. ‘Do come in! I wonder who turned the key. Awfully careless of somebody. It’s not allowed, is it?’ she asked innocently. ‘Can I help you to find your book? English Grammar, I suppose?’

Maud cast a suspicious look at the four on the hearthrug.

‘Thanks! I can find it myself. I’m afraid it will take me some time, though;’ and she began to look over the shelves, with the obvious intention of waiting there till the bell rang for classes.

Cicely solemnly winked at the rest, and Georgie began to giggle. The sound did not improve Maud's temper; but before she could think of anything to say, she heard Cicely's voice.

'Well, now, I don't want you to say a word to anybody till to-morrow. We'll all think it over, and I do hope Dorothy and Georgie will agree to side with the rest of us.'

Maud listened intently.

'Oh, I will, though I do think we might have had some fun Dorothy's way,' Georgie said quickly.

'Well, you think about it all night, like I did all last night. I really don't think we need settle anything more to-day. So suppose we help Maud to find her book,' Cicely suggested mischievously.—'Oh, Maud, that's the history shelf! You know the grammars are over here.'

'Who told you I wanted a grammar?' demanded Maud wrathfully.

'I thought you wanted to study the verb "to be," governing the nominative case,' Cicely explained; and Maud, who had not noticed her slip, glared at her in angry bewilderment.

Dorothy and Marguerite, with mischievous eyes, offered English grammars for Maud's inspection.

Maud turned on them angrily. 'At least I'm not looking for a crib. *I* can do my arithmetic without an answer-book,' she sneered.

Dorothy crimsoned, and looked helplessly at Cicely.

Cicely's eyes searched the shelves for inspiration. 'Can you really? I'm glad to hear it. I should never have thought it. Do you ever get it right?' she said absently. And then, with sudden delighted energy, 'I say, Maud, here's the very book for you—*Tales for Little Listeners*! Wouldn't you like to show it to Hilary?—I say, girls, there's the gong! Come on!'

CHAPTER XV.
THE MOTTO OF THE CLUB.

'I don't understand you, Cicely!' Dorothy murmured, as they went into singing-class. 'Sometimes you're as snappy as anything, and say things that make people awfully mad; and then you go and insist on rules about being friendly to everybody! Why can't you be one thing or the other? Either be nice like Mirry Honor, or nasty like me.'

'I'm afraid it's true. I suppose I'm a mixture, like most people. I don't want to do shabby things, but when people rub me up the wrong way I know I do say things sometimes. If you tread on a dog's tail he snaps, and if you worry a cat she spits, and when people worry me and tread on my feelings I have to snap and be catty too. Hilary and Maud and the rest of their lot always rub me up; the very way they look down on us makes me feel wild. Then they speak to me, and I have to work it off. But I'm never like that with *nice* people.'

Cicely was already becoming famed for her sharp speeches, and when Maud had appeared after her fruitless visit to the library, Hilary had asked instantly, at sight of her face, 'Well, what's the Snappy One's latest?'

Maud's answer did not soothe the feelings of any of the Townies, and that afternoon, in the cloakroom, their disapproving attitude was more marked than usual.

Cicely suffered it for a time in silence; then, as a number of girls in their neat blue coats and hats and white scarves left the room, she turned carelessly to Georgie. 'Looks like a charity-school, doesn't it? *I* wouldn't go about dressed like five dozen other girls. People will think they're dressed by Miss Macey at so much a head.'

'Or that she got blue coats cheap if she took the lot,' laughed Georgie, in delight; 'like an orphan asylum, you know.'

'I say, Cicely, that is rather too bad!' remonstrated Dorothy, as she drew on her own blue coat. 'You seemed keen enough on it at first. What put you off? Aren't you going to have a school hat, after all?'

'Not I. Why, people might take me for Alice's sister, or Jelly's! What could be more awful?'

Dorothy shrugged her shoulders, but the rest laughed; and the reference to the charity-school was known to all the Hamlets by next day. It was an idea which had never occurred to Hilary when she made the proposal, and she and the other Townies writhed under it, and showed a sudden reluctance to wear their new blue coats.

As soon as Miriam and Cicely reached Risborough, and set out on their twilight walk to the hills, Miriam demanded that the morning's conversation should be finished.

'Did you look up your quotation? What is our motto to be?'

'Well, you know, our name's a kind of pun. We know what it means, but to other people it might very well mean the play. So I thought if we could take a quotation from *Hamlet*, we ought to.'

Miriam laughed. 'Well?'

'Now don't say it's silly till I've explained. "To be, or not to be, that is the question"—you know that?'

Miriam laughed again. 'I've heard it before, certainly. Well?'

‘Well, the Townies say we are *not to be* in their clubs; we say we *are to be* something, so we’ll have our Hamlet Club. See? And there’s something else.’

Cicely walked on in silence, and Miriam waited expectantly. At last Cicely said abruptly, ‘It means something more—to me. But I can’t tell you about it, Mirry. I couldn’t put it into words properly. But if you care to tell Miss Lane about the club, and the motto, I believe she’ll know what I mean by it.’

‘But how?’ Miriam asked, in much surprise. ‘Why should she know, Cicely?’

‘Because of something she said to me once. You ask her. I believe she’d understand.’

‘But why won’t you tell me yourself?’

‘I’d feel silly, and you’d think I was trying to be goody. Ask her, and see what you think. Now let’s talk of something else. Did I tell you about our new boarder? He’s a parrot, and he lives in a cage in the kitchen. He’s come for three days, and it’s quite enough, for he talks more than I do, and he hates the kitten.’

Miriam was very curious to hear more, but Cicely was so evidently determined to change the subject that she had to yield. She tried to make time for a talk with Margia next day, but failed to find her alone; so she determined to seek her on Saturday, when she would be painting in the wood.

The five promoters of the Hamlet Club met in complete agreement as to their first two rules, and decided to make their proposals known to the rest of the Hamlet girls on the following Monday. Dorothy still regretted Rule No. 2, but saw that the forces in favour of it were too strong for her. If Cicely, Miriam, and Marguerite were determined, and Georgie would fall in with their wishes, it was useless to oppose them further. The motto was adopted, with the simple explanation given by Cicely to Miriam, and no hint at present of any deeper one underlying it. The girls appreciated it as emphasising the double meaning of their title, and felt the Hamlet Club was vastly superior in name to the commonplace Hockey Club and Dramatic Society.

Saturday morning was fine, with roads well dried by a high wind, so Cicely rode off very early to explore the hamlets in which her friends dwelt. She understood now that Whiteleaf lay on the edge of a wide hilly country, where the high ground fell suddenly to the plain. The White Cross lay spread on the slope, with the vale at its feet; and behind, the hills and dales, ridges and bottoms, woods and meadows, of the Chilterns. Farms and villages and hamlets were hidden among the hills, and she was out to explore them.

For the sake of change she forsook the hill road by which she cycled to school, and rode down to Risborough and along the broad highway in the valley to Wycombe. This was easy going, level and straight, a road which it was a delight to ride; she followed it till she reached Loudwater, and looked down the valley towards Marlow. But then her troubles began, and she sighed for the ease of the Aylesbury road as she pushed her cycle up a steep, winding lane, whose stony ruts made the way more difficult.

With her cycle she could not attempt short cuts. She leaned on a gate, and looked longingly at a footpath running straight to the tree-crowned hills, with the red houses of Penn perched on a height. The wind sweeping across from the heights was sweet and strong, and she turned from the valley and climbed resolutely on, much refreshed by the purer air.

The lane led her at last into the straggling village, and here Marguerite met her, and took her to see the old church, pointing with much pride to the brasses of the Penn family—the row of little boy figures in their quaint costumes, and of little girls in ruffs and hoods and long skirts, all with folded hands or holding Bibles, ranged behind their parents in order of height.

As Cicely had so far to go, she could only stop at the little ivy-covered house, where Marguerite lived with her aunt, for a brief call and a glass of milk and slice of home-made Bucks cake, which were very refreshing after her climb. Then Marguerite mounted her cycle, and led the way by Penn Bottom to Penn Street village.

'I don't ride to school, because I go down through Kingswood, and I'd have to push more than I could ride. But I ride a lot up here—to Georgie's, or to Green Hailey, or to see Dorothy.'

'Miriam said I must ask you to tell me why you're half French,' Cicely suggested.

Marguerite laughed. 'Some day I will. Just now I want to show you the wood. This is the beginning of Penn Wood. We'll go right along this side, then in at Penn Street and right through to Beamond End, and back along the Wycombe road. How do you like the Cathedral?'

'The wood? I just *love* it,' Cicely said fervently. 'That's a good name for it; it's more like a great cathedral than anything else.'

'I always think so. I love it too. It's so much darker than most of the woods. That's the fringe of larch and pines, but they're only outside. The inside is mostly beech, as usual.'

A broad belt of sombre larch and pine gave an appearance of depth and gloom to Penn Wood which the lighter beech-woods lacked. Long aisles led into the wood, with heavy shadows, giving an impression of mystery; but when the girls rode down the broad path over the carpet of pine-needles and dead leaves, the ruddy heart of the wood opened to them and took them in, and they found themselves in a glowing golden splendour of autumn leaves, with shafts of sunlight playing on the gray-green trunks, and mysterious silence everywhere. Cicely would not speak till they had left the shadows and were riding down the sunny Amersham high-road.

'As a rule, I'm pretty good at talking, but I could no more have talked in there than in St Paul's,' she said, with deep feeling, and glanced back at the stately rampart of pines.

Marguerite gave her a quick, satisfied look. 'I'm glad you like my wood. I'm glad you didn't want to chatter. Now we'll leave our bikes at Miss Lane's cottage, and walk through Kingswood and back, and you'll see how I come to school every day.'

Cicely was eager to see Margia's home, but disappointment awaited them at Totteridge, for Margia was out painting in the wood near Hampden. The old woman in charge of the cottage allowed them to leave their cycles in the garden, however, and they wandered off into Kingswood, down and up its sudden steep hollows, and among its scattered trees. There was more room here than in Penn Wood, the trees stood less thickly, and there was more air and sunshine. Sitting on a log, they heard the monotonous note of a wood-wren, as he wandered from bush to tree, and the constant murmur of pigeons in the tree-tops.

Then Marguerite went home, and Cicely rode off to Darley's Bottom, to be cordially welcomed by Dorothy's mother. The big house stood on a hillside, looking down a stony 'bottom,' where rows of hencoops and little wooden huts excited her curiosity, till she was taken to see the poultry, the pheasants, and the turkeys fattening for Christmas.

From Darley's Bottom Cicely rode to Kingshill, and turned when she had climbed up to the plateau to look across the valleys, Hughenden, Bryant's Bottom, Darley's Bottom, all meeting at her feet. Georgie and her sister Edna were eager to introduce Cicely to their brother, a sturdy young farmer, and to show her the little farm, where the round hayricks and the handsome white hens caught her notice again.

Georgie had borrowed a cycle, and rode with her down to Little Missenden, where the oldest church Cicely had ever seen faced her as she entered the village, and then up the long hill to Prestwood by way of starting her on her homeward ride. Here she insisted on leading her through a little wood to a gate overlooking the Missenden valley, Great Missenden lying in the hollow, with a haze of blue smoke above, its fine church among the trees, and wood-crowned hills beyond.

'And what's across those hills? More woods and hamlets?' Cicely asked.

'The Lee, Potter's Row, Ballinger Bottom, Charteridge, Chesham,' said Georgie; and Cicely looked eagerly across the valley, and resolved to ride that way some day, for some of these names had been mentioned by her father in speaking of his old home.

To go farther to-night would mean being caught in the dark, however, and she doubted whether she could find her way home. So she parted from Georgie at Nanfan's, and rode home by way of Hampden and Green Hailey.

Miriam's Saturday duties kept her busy all morning; but as soon as the midday dishes were washed up she left Bobs and Babs, with strict orders to be very good, and went in search of Margia Lane. She had asked where Margia intended to spend the day, so she knew where to find her. Through Great Hampden wood and park, down the Glade to the Bottom, and up the steep lane into Hampdenleaf Wood she went, covering the ground quickly with her easy swinging stride. Once in Hampdenleaf, she soon found Margia, seated at the top of the wood, painting, or, as she said, 'trying to paint,' the downward slope where the red beech carpet and the gray-green stems were blended with a delicate blue mist from the valley below.

Miriam, sitting at her feet, requested permission to talk.

Margia laid down her brush with a sigh. 'It's beyond me! Why did I ever attempt it? Sheer impertinence, wasn't it, Mirry? I'm rightly punished by—that!' with a dissatisfied look at her sketch. 'I'll be less ambitious next time. Yes, talk to me. I'm disgusted and disappointed, and I'll be glad to think of something else.'

'Why, Margia, it's beautiful! How can you?' Miriam cried indignantly.

'Oh, my dear girl, it's hopeless! Pretty enough, maybe, but—all wrong.'

'You know if you send it to town you can get pounds for it. How much will it be, do you think?'

'I don't know, or care. I'm trying to paint it because I love it. These beech colours are wonderful; but I'd have to give days to them, instead of hours. Well, Mirry, what's the problem?'

Miriam, looking thoughtful, described the Hamlet Club, and then told of its motto and of Cicely's mysterious hints, 'Now what did she mean, Margia? She said you would know.'

Margia looked very thoughtful also, and did not answer at once. 'I can only guess,' she said at last. 'I had a talk with Cicely one day in Hampden Wood, after I had shown her the chair-turners. She was hesitating whether she should do what she wished or what was obviously her duty. I suggested that every one had to make the same choice sooner or later, and told her how I had been hesitating myself—as you know, Mirry. We both decided we would do what was right, and set our own wishes aside. I wonder if she is thinking of that.'

Miriam, seeking for beech-nuts among the fallen leaves, looked deeply thoughtful still. 'You think she means the motto to remind us that we have to choose, and go on choosing, and to help us to choose right when the time comes?'

'That is the meaning it suggests to me.'

‘She said you would know. Then she must have meant that. Yes, I think she did. I like it. But, Margia, some people don’t have to choose. They go on in their easy way, and never have to decide any big question.’

‘It may never be a big choice. I grant that,’ Margia agreed. ‘But the choice remains, Mirry. Selfish or unselfish, our own will or other people’s, our own way or a better and higher—we have to answer that question even in an easy-going comfortable life, with apparently no great question in it. We still have to put ourselves first or last.’

Miriam nodded. ‘And if we don’t choose—if we put it off’——

‘We actually choose the lower way, don’t we? We go on in our own easy way, putting off the choice into the dim future, and in the meantime we actually choose our own way, and probably never make any other choice at all.’

Miriam nodded again. ‘That’s true. Thaat’s eet!’ with a touch of Bucks dialect. ‘Thank you, Margia. Yes, I see.’

She met Cicely spinning along the Green Hailey road in the twilight, and stopped her with inquiries as to her day’s ride. ‘I like your motto, Cicely,’ she said abruptly, as they walked down the road below the Cross.

Cicely gave her a quick look. ‘Have you been talking to Miss Lane?’

‘Yes, in Hampdenleaf Wood. I think I know what you mean by it, and I like it.’

‘I thought you would,’ Cicely said quickly. ‘But will the others understand? Or sha’n’t we tell them? They’re satisfied with it as it is.’

‘They ought to understand. It might—well, be useful to some of them sometime.’

Cicely nodded with understanding. ‘This is what I think. Let it be our club secret. We’ll call a private meeting some Saturday afternoon in the wood, and you shall explain. But’——

‘Oh, why me?’

‘Because you’re the oldest member, and’——

‘Methuselah!’ laughed Miriam. ‘The oldest inhabitant.’

‘And they’ll take it better from you. They’d mock if I proposed it; but they think a lot of you, and’——

‘Cicely, what nonsense!’

‘It isn’t nonsense, I assure you,’ said Cicely solemnly. ‘It will make all the difference if it comes from you. But I shall propose that the meaning of our motto be a secret, known only to members of the club, and jealously guarded from every one, and particularly from the rest of the school.’

‘That will please Dorothy,’ Miriam laughed. ‘She’s very anxious to have some secret to make Hilary mad.’

‘I’ve thought of a badge for the club;’ and Cicely paused at the foot of the Cross and remounted her cycle.

‘Oh? Good! But aren’t you going to tell me?’

‘Yes, of course, or I wouldn’t have mentioned it;’ and Cicely steadied her bicycle as if practising for a slow cycle race. ‘It’s this—a plain white cross standing on a sloping white base, all on a green ground. Anybody would recognise that for Whiteleaf. It means something too. You think about it;’ and she rode off into the darkness, leaving Miriam standing wondering beneath the Cross.

CHAPTER XVI.
A SUDDEN SUMMONS.

The meaning of the badge puzzled Miriam, till she worried it out for herself during service in Great Hampden Church next morning. A cross stood for giving up—for sacrifice. This Cross probably commemorated a victory. The connection between the club badge and its motto was sufficiently obvious, and appealed to her strongly. Certainly Cicely had something in her when she could make these suggestions!

They met at school on Monday, for it was a brilliant autumn morning, and Cicely had been tempted to ride to school. She announced her intention of going home by train, however, and lent her cycle to Georgie again, thus giving her a few hours of absolute bliss.

As they met, Cicely's eyes sought Miriam's questioningly, and with a touch of shyness.

'Will the badge do? Is it good enough?'

Miriam nodded. 'I like it too. Yes, indeed, Cicely. It's ripping.'

'Don't tell anybody unless she sees it for herself,' Cicely begged; and Miriam nodded.

In the interval between dinner and afternoon school, all the Hamlet girls were called together in one of the class-rooms, and the plans for the club laid before them by Miriam and Cicely. The idea was adopted with keen delight; rules, badge, and motto were accepted and acclaimed—the last-named under its simpler meaning only, however. The office of president was formally offered by Dorothy to Cicely, and promptly declined. Cicely and Marguerite then requested Miriam to accept office; but she refused as promptly and resolutely as Cicely had done. With a busy half-year of preparation for matric. before her, she was not open to any position of responsibility, she explained. Thereupon Cicely was again, unanimously and very emphatically, requested to become the first president of the club, and this time she consented, to the general satisfaction.

By her suggestion, enthusiastically seconded by Dorothy, the club's existence was not kept secret from the Town girls. The name, badge, and motto were made public, and were quickly known throughout the school. There was much scoffing and criticism, of course; but the Hamlets cared nothing for these, and soon began to feel, and then to show, a new spirit of independence and *esprit de corps*. They were of some importance now; they were members of a club.

This would not satisfy them for ever. Soon they would want the club to take more definite form. They would demand to *do* something; and if no suggestion were forthcoming, their activity would be apt to show itself in reprisals towards the Town girls. Cicely was aware of it, and had many an anxious consultation with Miriam as to what form the club should take. But before she was prepared with any suggestion there came an interruption, and her plans were thrust aside.

On Friday afternoon, when she reached Mrs Ramage's cottage in the dark, she found a big carriage and a pair of unusually fine horses slowly parading before the inn. She paused to admire, and Mrs Ramage came hurrying out. 'Miss Cicely, the master has sent for you. The carriage has been waiting an hour and more. You're wanted at Broadway End.'

'Oh! *Oh!*' Cicely gasped in blank dismay. 'Oh, I don't want to go!'

She had forgotten the grandparents in the background. This sudden reminder that school and her club were not the only reasons for her presence in the neighbourhood came as a

tremendous shock. The thought of going alone to the big unknown house was overwhelming. She was tired and hungry, ready for tea and rest, and in no condition to face a new life among strangers. She was not shy; but just now she felt distinctly nervous, if not afraid.

'Must I go, do you think?' she asked piteously. 'I'd so much rather not.'

'Oh, you'll have to go, dearie. They say the mistress is asking for you. The man's tired waiting;' and as Mrs Ramage spoke the carriage drove up.

There was no help for it. Cicely hesitated, then very reluctantly stepped in, and threw her strap of books on to the seat. 'I hope they'll let me come back soon. They won't want me to stop the night, will they?'

But Mrs Ramage closed the door and the carriage started, and Cicely discovered on the seat her small suit-case, evidently packed with necessaries.

'Well, I think it's just hateful of them, and I'm not going to like any of them,' she burst out, finding relief in giving vent to her resentment. 'They treat me as if I was a dog or a cat, with no feelings of my own. I'm to go here or there, to the cottage or to the house, without a chance to say yes or no. They've never dreamed of asking what I'd like. I just hate the whole lot of them;' and she curled up in a corner of the roomy carriage, and gave herself up to angry thoughts.

She was hungry and very tired, for it had been a drill afternoon, and drill was always tiring to the girls who had a long walk morning and evening. So she was in no fit state to accept this sudden summons philosophically.

The drive seemed short, and indeed was only three miles. She could see nothing as they went but occasional distant lights in the direction of Kimble. She did not want to reach her destination, so it seemed a very short time till they were standing in the broad sweep of the carriage-drive, between the cedars and the pillared porch of the great house. The door stood open, and an old gentleman, white-haired but very erect, came hurrying out in the blaze of electric light at the top of the steps.

Slowly, and feeling very resentful, Cicely climbed down out of the big carriage. She went forward to meet him reluctantly, her eyes indignant. She certainly looked the reverse of amiable as she stood, her beaver hat pushed back, her dark curls untidy, her big coat thrown open—for the carriage had been stuffy—her strap of books slung over her shoulder, her whole attitude expressive of her feelings. But Mr Broadway did not seem to notice these things.

'Child, come along! We have been waiting for you all afternoon. Make haste—don't stand there.' He switched on another light, which fell full upon her face, and his tone altered, becoming suddenly gentler. 'Your grandmother is asking for you. For the last two days she has been calling for your mother, but to-day she is more herself, and this morning said to me she wished she could see Cicely's child. I told her you would come, and we have been waiting for you ever since. You are very like your mother.'

Cicely's protest, and explanation that she had been in school, died on her lips. There was something in his tone as he said her name, and the words 'your mother,' which checked her reply. She followed him silently across the great hall, and began dimly to perceive the anxiety which underlay his irritable manner.

She was too tired and excited to take much notice of her surroundings. But as she went up the wide staircase of old black oak, with finely carved balustrade, the paintings hanging on the panelling caught her eye. They seemed familiar, and a second look showed her that they were all pictures of the country-side, framed sketches of woods, hills, and dales, orchards, dark

pines, and delicate larches. They were very like Margia Lane's work, and Cicely wondered if they could be hers. But Mr Broadway had paused before a door in the first wide corridor.

'Your grandmother is very ill,' he said abruptly; 'she has had no strength to rally, and has not seemed to care to try. If she finds you like your mother she may care to live for your sake. If you fail, we can do no more for her.'

He stopped, and she saw his lips tremble. Suddenly she knew that he was very fond of his wife, and that beside her nothing mattered much; that she had been lying very ill, dying perhaps, and that he could think only of her. How should he think of a schoolgirl's feelings?

Her resentment began to die. She still said nothing, but followed him quietly into the silent bedroom, where a nurse came noiselessly to meet them, a look of relief in her face.

A big carved bed, hung with figured silk curtains, could be seen dimly by the light of a shaded electric lamp and a bright fire. In it lay an old, weak, tired lady, her white face turned to the door with an eager look. The last of Cicely's resentment died away. She was glad she had stayed in Whiteleaf, glad she had not refused to come to-night, nor even delayed an hour. She was wanted here. She forgot she was tired and hungry, forgot she had an appointment to meet Miriam to-night, forgot everything but that old lady with the weary face and wistful eyes.

'Cicely!' the weak voice called her, and a sudden light dawned in the tired eyes. 'Cicely, my dear!' and Cicely bent over the bed.

'Grandmother dear! I've been waiting for you to want me. I'm so glad you've let me come at last.'

The weary eyes smiled at her. 'Don't go away, my dear! Stay with me!' Then they closed heavily, the invalid's hand which held Cicely's relaxed, and she fell asleep.

The nurse nodded, looking satisfied. 'She'll do now,' she whispered; and Mr Broadway drew Cicely from the room.

'We could not get her to sleep,' he said, a quiver in his stern voice.

At first Cicely had thought her grandmother seemed much the elder of the two, and supposed her illness had aged her, but now Mr Broadway seemed as old and tired as she, worn out with long anxiety. How lonely they seemed, and how fond of one another! Cicely realised how, after losing their only child, they had become all in all to each other, not wanting even a grandchild to come between them; and how his wife's illness and the dread of losing her had broken the old man down. He looked worn out and ready to collapse now that the strain was relieved.

'I do hope she'll get better now,' she ventured to say, as she followed him down the staircase. Beside these two she felt suddenly young and strong, and as if she would like to take care of them, pet them, please them in any way she could.

It was this instinct which made her touch his arm and say, as he had not answered, 'Couldn't we have some tea? I haven't had any. Have you?'

He looked down at her with startled eyes. 'Tea? No; I never thought of it. Bless me, child, are you hungry?'

'Starving!' she said with pathetic emphasis; 'I've got quite a funny feeling *here*,' pressing her hand to her chest. 'I suppose it's the beginning of starvation.'

He laughed grimly, and called a maid. 'Prepare tea for Miss Cicely at once.—Will you have any meat with your tea?' he demanded. 'When did you have your lunch?'

'At one o'clock. I usually have eggs, and I prefer them scrambled; though omelettes are nice too,' Cicely said candidly.

He laughed again. ‘Dinner is at half-past seven. It is now after six.’

‘Oh, then I’ll wait till dinner; but I would like some tea to go on with.’

‘You shall have it. Was that why you looked so indignant when you arrived? I had not realised you might be hungry.’

‘Did I? I’m awfully sorry; but I was feeling rather bad. I’d come straight from school, and one feels so grubby. Besides, we had drill this afternoon, and though it’s jolly, it’s tiring too.’

‘Perhaps you would like to go to your room, and—er—remove the grubby feeling,’ he suggested; and a housemaid led her to the pretty bedroom prepared for her.

They had evidently never doubted that she would come. A fire was burning, the bed ready; even hot water was waiting. The room seemed large enough to take in the whole of Mrs Ramage’s cottage. The bed looked almost as big as her former bedroom. With a sigh of relief, she realised that here she could be as untidy as she liked, and tossed her hat on to the bed and looked for her suit-case in search of slippers.

The case was already unstrapped, and her belongings disposed of neatly, her slippers warming at the fire, a white silk blouse spread on the bed. She sighed again in satisfaction. It was very pleasant to be waited on! This would be a great change from the cottage. She liked luxury, and apparently would find it here.

A maid tapped at the door to inform her that tea was ready; so she tidied herself hastily, but did not change her dress till afterwards, and ran quietly down to coax her grandfather into drinking a cup of tea with her.

A round table was drawn close to the fire in the big hall, and Cicely, presiding with much importance, proceeded to show what a schoolgirl’s appetite was like, even with dinner in prospect. When she had eaten what seemed to the astonished old gentleman a good square meal, she remarked that she thought she could wait till dinner now, and, unconscious of his amusement, drew a stool close to the fire and settled down to conversation.

That evening was a new experience to Mr Broadway. For years he and his wife had lived alone, and their subjects of conversation had necessarily become limited. For hours they would sit without speaking, content to be together, both reading or at work on their hobbies. His was poker-work, and during the winter he made numerous fancy articles for presentation to friends. Hers was wool-work of different kinds, and she would knit and crochet for hours at a time. Their conversation naturally was concerned chiefly with these interests, with the day’s news, and with local or household gossip.

But Cicely must talk, and had never yet been at a loss for something to say, She brought a new world of interest into the quiet house; and having found a listener, she talked on all evening. It was unusual for Mr Broadway, but distinctly good for him. He had been much alone since his wife’s illness, and the habit of moody silence had grown on him. But before the stream of Cicely’s chatter it vanished like sand before a torrent. He was amused, interested, and by the time dinner was over was looking brighter than he had done for weeks, and more companionable than she would have believed possible from her first sight of him.

In answer to her questions he explained that the paintings hanging on the staircase were Margia Lane’s work, and Cicely explained Margia’s present connection with the school. Mrs Broadway had seen some of her sketches in Wycombe, and had been delighted with them, Mr Broadway had thereupon given Miss Lane a commission to paint a number of sketches of the woods or country at various seasons, and had hung them one night to surprise his wife next day. They could have had no better background than the ancient oak panelling, or more fitting surroundings than the wide hall from which the staircase rose.

Dinner in the big dining-room was an ordeal, and Cicely felt thankful for Mrs Ramage's foresight, which had provided her with something more suitable to wear than her red school blouse. Though only her grandfather, the nurse, and herself were present, the occasion seemed sufficiently important to demand some kind of evening costume.

Her appetite remained an amusement to Mr Broadway, and he was careful that cakes should accompany the coffee in the drawing-room. Cicely scorned the suggestion that the coffee might keep her from sleeping, and explained that she had never known what it felt like to lie awake an hour after getting into bed. She would rather like to try. It would be interesting to keep awake all one night. At what hour did the cocks begin to crow? When did the birds start singing, and which woke first? Mr Broadway sighed and smiled, and answered without difficulty.

As they sat over the fire they discussed the future. Cicely must remain at Broadway End, of course. Mrs Ramage could pack her belongings, and the carriage would fetch them to-morrow. But Cicely demurred. She would like to pack her own treasures, or at least to superintend. And could she go to school from Broadway End?

'Certainly. We'll drive you over to Wycombe every morning,' her grandfather promised.

'Oh, no; *that* won't do!' and she had visions of arriving in state, and of the amazement of Town girls and Hamlets alike. 'That wouldn't do at all. Of course I could cycle; it's only a little farther than from Whiteleaf. But I'd miss Miriam, and I don't often see her in school. Couldn't I drive to Whiteleaf, and walk to Risborough as I've been doing?'

'You could, of course; but why not drive all the way? Why tire yourself walking?'

'Oh, I love the walk! I'd miss it dreadfully; and there's a jolly girl I always go with. She comes from Green Hailey, and we meet and walk together to the train.'

'You could pick her up in the carriage.'

Cicely shook her head. 'I don't want the carriage to come to the station. There's Maud, and there are others. You don't understand. I don't want the girls to know I live here. They must think I'm still at Whiteleaf. It wouldn't do at all. It would spoil everything if I went to school in that carriage. You see, I'm a Hamlet, and I'm going to be a Hamlet, no matter where I live. I'm the president.'

'The president? A Hamlet? I don't quite'——

'No, you couldn't very well, could you? But I'll tell you all about it, and then you'll understand;' and she launched forth on the subject of the Hamlet Club.

Mr Broadway knit his brows in dissatisfaction when he understood. He would much have preferred to hear that her friends were among the more wealthy and influential girls, and he said as much; but even as he did so, he realised that she had been left too long alone to accept interference in such a matter. She had been allowed to make friendships of her own choice, and the ties thus formed could not be lightly broken, if there were any loyalty in her character. While he was dissatisfied, he was yet relieved to find that she would not give up her friends.

'They're some of the nicest girls in the school, and come from the nicest homes;' and she spoke warmly in their defence. 'I don't care whether they live in cottages, or tiny farms, or manor-houses. If they're nice themselves, that's all I care about. Besides, I couldn't get in with the Town girls now, even if I wanted to. I've quarrelled with most of them. They say I cheeked them all round, and they won't forgive me for telling them what I think about their clubs. They wouldn't have me now, and you wouldn't like me to have no friends at all! You know Miss Lane, grandfather. Well, she knows all these girls, and likes them; and she thinks an awful lot of Mirry Honor. *I* think she's the nicest girl in the school, and I'm sure she's the

cleverest. Well, you see, I mustn't go to school in the carriage, or they'd all know I wasn't a proper Hamlet any more. They mustn't know I've come to live here.'

'But your friends will have to know!'

'Mirry and Dorothy will have to, of course, or they'll be looking for me in Whiteleaf. But the others needn't, and the Townies mustn't. I'm going to put Whiteleaf on my membership card as my hamlet. We're all to have cards, with the motto and badge. Marguerite is doing them. She prints awfully well. We're going to have a meeting one Saturday and distribute them. Well, grandfather, I'll be glad to live here. The house is ripping. I'll be very quiet and not disturb grandmother, and I'll go to her whenever she wants me. But I don't want my coming here to interfere with the Hamlet Club, for I'm very keen on it.' And Mr Broadway agreed to let her have her own way.

CHAPTER XVII.
THE HAMLET CLUB MEETS.

Twice during that first night Cicely was awakened by the nurse, and led, in slippers and dressing-gown, with sleepy eyes and tumbled dark curls, to her grandmother's bedside, to satisfy the old lady that she was really there. A word and a touch of her hand were sufficient, and Mrs Broadway slept again, Cicely stumbled back to bed, and was late for breakfast. But Mrs Broadway was stronger next day, and Mr Broadway much more cheerful. The servants looked with approval on the new member of the household, and hoped for livelier times in future; and the faces of grooms and gardeners brightened when she appeared with her grandfather on a tour of inspection. Broadway End had been quiet and gloomy long enough. Now there was some prospect of life and interest, as soon as the mistress's recovery was complete.

After lunch the carriage was placed at Cicely's disposal, and she drove to Whiteleaf to pack up her books and treasures, to leave Mrs Ramage to attend to less interesting articles, and to find Miriam and explain what had happened. But Miriam understood already, having called to see her the evening before; so Cicely had only to warn her to keep the story from the rest of the school.

'You don't want them to know?' and Miriam's face brightened. 'You aren't going to forsake us Hamlets, then?'

'Mirry!'

'I didn't really think you would, but it may make things a bit awkward. It's queer, you know. You're our president, and yet you live in a finer house even than Hilary, and you ought to think as much of yourself as she does.'

'It's all an accident where we happen to live,' Cicely said sturdily. 'But I know it's queer, and some of them might say I wasn't eligible as president any longer. I mean to belong to Whiteleaf still, and Broadway End is just an accident, though it's a far bigger house than I expected. So don't tell anybody, will you, Mirry? Unless perhaps Dorothy. She might turn up here to look for me. But don't tell even Marguerite or Georgie. It might make them feel queer.'

'And why shouldn't it make me feel queer in just the same way? You mean, of course, they might feel the difference between you and them; but it's just the same'——

'Yes; but I did hope you and I were too good friends for such nonsense; and, besides, I thought you were too old to be so silly, Mirry Honor,' said Cicely hotly, with her usual vigour when indignant.

Miriam laughed. 'I'll say no more about it,' she said hastily. 'I say! Marguerite says the membership cards will be ready next week, so if Saturday's fine we might have our meeting then.'

'If Dorothy can have the badges ready. It is decent of her and Marguerite to do so much of the work. Where shall we meet? In the wood somewhere, if possible?'

'It should be in the wood, or in a hamlet,' Miriam agreed; 'and near Wycombe, for that suits everybody.'

'In Kingswood, then,' Cicely said decidedly; 'down in the hollow, where the wood is more open.'

Saturday was fine, and was preceded by a week of clear, frosty weather, with skies of richest blue, and a sharp wind which dried the ground and made walking or cycling a delight. Cicely and Miriam came by train together, and walked up the hill to Totteridge and so into the wood.

'Why the white dress?' demanded Miriam, with a glance at what she could see of it under Cicely's coat.

'Oh, that's to please grandmother! I hadn't time to change, so I just wore my big coat over it. I'm not trying to dress up and show off. Did you think I was?' she demanded quickly. 'You might know me better, Mirry!'

'I wasn't sure. I didn't think you would, but when I saw your dress I wondered.'

'Grandmother won't have me in her room in my school things. It's too bad of her, for I'm sure they're nice enough. But she doesn't like skirts and blouses. I always have the fag of changing when I'm going to stay indoors and she's likely to want me. Of course it feels nice and clean, and it means being lazy! No one could do home lessons in a white frock! But she insists on it. She asked me to wear white in the evenings, or when I'm about the house, and she's so old and ill that I'd do anything to satisfy her, even if it is silly and a fag. She says my mother used to wear white, and she likes me to, too. But if I'd thought you'd think *that*, I'd have stopped to change, if it had made me lose the train!'

'I apologise!' Miriam laughed. 'But I shouldn't be surprised if Dorothy did. It won't occur to any one else; but Dorothy won't see any reason why she shouldn't. She's that kind.'

She was right. The occasion had seemed to Dorothy worthy of a change of costume, and she wore a white summer dress under her long coat. Cicely knit her brows, but was not in a position to remonstrate.

The meeting in the wood was a pleasure that day, with firm ground underfoot and sunshine streaming upon the fallen red leaves and dull gray stems of the beeches. The cloaks spread on the soft carpet were hardly needed, and the girls lay among the bumpy roots and leaned against the trees.

The badges provided by Dorothy were received with much delight. They were little squares of green linen, with the form of the Cross standing on its sloping base, cut out of white calico and stitched neatly upon the green. The girls pinned them on their breasts, and felt honourably decorated.

Marguerite's membership cards were also much admired. They bore the name and motto of the club in Old English lettering at the top; then followed the name of the president and of the individual member. In one corner was her registration number, and in the other the name of her hamlet.

When these had been distributed, the members took hands in a big ring, encircling many tree-trunks, and repeated the two rules of the club. Three cheers were given for the president, who acknowledged them in a brief speech, wishing good luck to the club, and hinting at developments in the near future, which, however, could not be made public yet; the reason being that she did not yet know herself what they were to be. Then Cicely called on 'our esteemed representative in the Sixth;' and Miriam rose, looking rather nervous.

'Lady President and fellow-members, I want to give the club a good send-off, and I'd like just to wish it all good fortune and sit down again. But the honourable lady in the chair'—Cicely laughed and patted her tree-stump—'has given me a difficult job to do, and as she always gets her own way I suppose I'll have to do it. But I want you to know that it's her idea all through, only she's too shy to explain it to you.' Cicely looked away through the wood, in

search of the doves murmuring overhead. ‘She has asked me to explain the secret meaning of our motto.’ Interest deepened suddenly; no one had known there was a secret meaning. ‘Please keep it a secret; don’t tell any one outside the club. We don’t want the rest of the school to mock, and they might want to. But the motto means more to Cicely and me than we’ve told you yet, and we think you ought to know. You needn’t take any notice of the other meaning unless you like. If you don’t care for it, just forget it, and let it mean to you only the question whether we are or are not to be out of everything in the school. But to some of us it means the question all have to decide sooner or later, whether they’ll just have a good time and please themselves and get all they can and care for nothing else, or whether they’ll put more important things first, and—and care about other people, and try to do great things in the world. It’s not very easy to explain, and it’s very difficult to say it, but I hope you’ll understand. It just makes all the difference how we decide. And Cicely says when she thinks about it she always remembers our hero, who belongs to us here so much more than to other people, because he lived here—John Hampden. He chose right, though it meant giving up so much, and I do think all we girls living here in his country ought to think about him sometimes; and if we can’t be as great as he was, we can be great in our own way. Well, that’s what the “question” of our motto means to Cicely and me. Don’t let’s try to annoy the Town girls and set ourselves against them! It’s so mean and kiddy to do anything like that. Let’s be content with our own club, and not interfere with theirs. Thank you for listening so nicely. I’ve said it very badly, and it’s been stodgy and uninteresting, I’m afraid; but I’ve done my best, and I hope you’ll understand;’ and Miriam sat down, very hot and embarrassed, and dissatisfied with herself.

But the girls would take much from her which might have been received impatiently from any one else. Little was said; but her shy words went home, and were remembered by many long afterwards, and proved a help to some in times of difficult decision.

There was a moment’s awkward silence when she had finished. Then Cicely sprang up. ‘Girls, I propose a vote of thanks to Miriam Honor. Our club has had a good start this afternoon. I hope we’ll all belong to it for a very long time, and welcome any new Hamlet girls who may come to the school, so that they’ll have no chance to feel lonely or out of things for a single day.—Dorothy, will you second? Thanks.—Three cheers, then! and afterwards we’ll all take hands and sing “Auld Lang Syne,” and then we’ll go home to tea.’


HAROLD C. CRANSHAW

The five original members of the club walked through the wood together on their way home.

The five original members of the club walked through the wood together on their way home. Cicely, Miriam, and Dorothy, with linked arms, talked earnestly of plans for the club's future; while Georgie and Marguerite, behind, discussed Miriam's speech.

'We'll have to do something soon, Cicely,' said Dorothy decidedly. 'They won't be satisfied long without some object. Couldn't we have a hockey club?'

'How could we all get sticks? They cost a lot, Dorothy,' Miriam reminded her.

'Net-ball isn't expensive,' Cicely said thoughtfully. 'We could play that. But I've been thinking—I want my granny-people to get to know you all. I think they'll like you! And I'd like to do something for them—perhaps at Christmas. They're so lonely, and old, and dull. Couldn't we give them a treat to cheer them up?'

'You talk as if they were in the workhouse, instead of having everything they could possibly want!' laughed Dorothy.

'They haven't everything; I've been there long enough to see that. They've settled down into grooves, and stuck in them. When grandmother is better she'll just go back into hers again. I want to wake things up a little. Couldn't we get up an entertainment for Christmas? It would be something for the club to do, and it would please them, and be good fun for us. We always had a Christmas entertainment at school, and we always enjoyed it. What could we do? Have we any brilliant specimens among us?—You know the girls best, Mirry. What can they do? What can you do yourself?'

'I? Oh'——

'She sings, you know,' Dorothy said promptly. 'Put her down for two songs and encores, Cicely.'

'Dorothy, don't be silly. I only sing in class.'

'Then it's time you began singing out of class, and having your voice trained, my dear.'

'Mirry, don't tell stories,' Cicely said severely. 'You sing out in the road; you know you do. I've heard you! You shall sing the "Maiden Fair," or "Why are you wandering?" or some other favourite of your own.'

'Those old things! Mother sang them to us all as babies.'

'That's why you sing them so well,' Dorothy explained.—'She's all right, Cicely. Marguerite sings rather prettily, too, but not like Mirry. I might manage something with my violin, but it won't be brilliant. You recite, don't you?'

'I used to. I used to dance, too, but'——

'Dance!' said Dorothy quickly. 'Now that's an idea! So did I. Could you manage a minuet?'

Cicely looked up quickly. 'Oh, have you learned dancing? I love it! I've been missing it so. I think the grannies would like that. Yes, of course, the minuet, or—you don't know "Rheinlander"?'

'*Don't* I? It was my favourite. I like flopping down on one knee'——

'Then you take the gentleman's part!' Cicely cried eagerly. 'I was always lady to Nancy Gaynor's gentleman. Do you remember it?'

'I've cousins in Amersham who used to come over for dancing lessons. Remember it? How could one forget? I say, have a go now!'

They were in an open glade at the entrance to the wood, its ruddy carpet flecked with sunbeams, the gray-green velvety stems standing far apart. Dorothy tossed aside her blue

school coat and hat, and stood slim and straight in her loose white dress. She held out her hand.

‘ “Rheinlander”?’ she said; and Cicely laughed, threw off her coat, and stood bareheaded and white-robed also.

Georgie and Marguerite, coming up behind Miriam, stood and gasped and gazed. The ‘lady’ and ‘gentleman’ took hands, and stood for a moment, bending slightly, laughing at one another, Cicely humming a few bars of an air. Then they ran daintily forward over the red leaves, two bending, swaying white figures, sometimes back to back, sometimes clasped closely as in a waltz, sometimes with hands linked lightly, feet flying, every movement picturesque and graceful. The girls, watching breathlessly, could not remember many of the movements; but three were impressed on their minds—one, when Dorothy suddenly fell on one knee on a patch of bare ground, with such a resounding clap that it seemed she must have bruised her knee, and Cicely, holding her hand lightly, danced round her, looking down into her upturned face; one, when the ‘gentleman’ threw wide her arms in invitation, and the ‘lady’ sprang into them and was clasped to her partner’s breast; and another, when, at the end of the dance, Dorothy caught her ‘lady’ round the waist, and tossed her high into the air, Cicely holding herself stiffly upright as she flew up and down again. Then they paused, as at the beginning, bodies bent, hands caught lightly, and then danced off among the trees, followed by rapturous applause from the audience.

‘That’s awfully pretty, Cicely!’ cried Miriam.

‘It’s lovely! But what made you do it? Are you often taken that way? And who taught you? How did Dorothy know? Have you been practising it together?’ cried the others.

‘It wants the music, of course;’ and the dancers came back panting, to put on their coats. ‘But it is jolly!’

‘But how did you throw Cicely up like that, Dorothy?’ asked Miriam. ‘Isn’t she heavy? And isn’t your knee black-and-blue?’

The dancers laughed.

‘I jumped. It wasn’t all Dorothy. I jumped as high as I could,’ said Cicely.

‘And I stamped; I chose that bit of hard ground on purpose. It doesn’t hurt; it wasn’t all knee,’ Dorothy laughed.

‘Girls!’—and Cicely slipped the elastic of her big hat under her curls, pushed the hat back comfortably, and faced them with glowing eyes—‘I’ve had an idea! I had it while we were dancing. We’ll make the Hamlet Club a dancing club, and learn morris and country dancing. It’s easy to learn—I think I could teach it—it’s jolly good exercise, and it’s jolly good fun. We used to love it at school. It costs nothing to speak of. I can easily get sticks and bells and handkerchiefs from town’——

‘Sticks? To dance with?’

‘We’ve got handkerchiefs!’

‘Not big enough,’ said Cicely.

‘And what are the bells for?’

‘To wear on your ankles. Then, when you kick, they jingle;’ and Cicely gave a demonstration of the morris step.

‘Oh, but that’s queer!’ said Dorothy at once. ‘That’s not an ordinary step.’

‘No; it’s the morris. You’ve never danced it or you’d know. Don’t you see? It’s all so beautifully in keeping with our club. The dances were known centuries ago in the villages—probably in these villages. Each village had its “side.” Why shouldn’t they have them again?’

‘Its “side”?’

‘Its morris “side.” We would say “troop” or “band.” There are just enough of us, if Edna will join, Georgie. You need six for a morris. Any number will do for a country-dance. But if we formed a “side” and learned a few dances, we could each teach another set. I know quite enough to start on, I think. “Laudnum Bunches,” “Rigs o’ Marlow,” “Constant Billy,” “Trunkles,” “Country Gardens”—I know I could teach all those. Now what do you think?’

‘It’s a ripping idea!’ Dorothy said enthusiastically. ‘I’m on!’

‘What do you do with the sticks and hankies?’ Marguerite asked eagerly. ‘And do you have to dress up?’

‘It’s not necessary, but it looks nicer for all the “side” to dress alike, if possible,’ said Cicely. ‘Of course, it was a man’s dance originally. You read of the morris *men*. You can see that by the step. You kick and jump and fight and stamp, and clap hands and strike sticks, instead of bowing and curtsying and gliding and bending. I forgot “Bean-setting.” We must have that, because of the dibbing.’

‘Now you’re talking a language we don’t understand,’ laughed Miriam. ‘What is dibbing?’

‘I’ll show you when we have the sticks. You do like the idea, don’t you, Miriam? You’d be willing to join in? We might find four more little ones, and let Bobs and Babs have a “side” too. They’d learn quick enough.’

‘I think it sounds awfully jolly,’ said Georgie enthusiastically. ‘Ordinary dances, like quadrilles and lancers, are slow, and waltzing is silly. *I* don’t care for it, anyway!’ as Cicely protested. ‘As for that lovely thing you and Dorothy did just now, I could never learn anything like that. I’m too stiff—all joints and corners. But I could stamp and kick, and I like the idea of a fighting dance.’

‘Then you’ll love “How d’ye do, sir?” ’ Cicely laughed. ‘I’ll be afraid to dance with you for fear you’ll box my ears in earnest. It’s boxing, you know.’ And Georgie beamed.

‘I like the idea very much, and I think the others will too,’ Miriam said heartily. ‘I’ve heard of morris-dancing, but I’ve never seen any. None of us go to dancing-classes at school, so it will be quite new’——

‘Oh, they’ve never learned morris-dancing! I asked some of the girls when I went first, and they’d never heard of it. We’ll be doing something quite original. We might give a display in time, and invite the Townies. They’d be green with envy.’ And the rest laughed.

‘I do like those old names.’ Miriam said appreciatively. ‘What do they mean? They’re awfully quaint. Say them again, won’t you?’

Cicely laughed. ‘ “Laudnum Bunches,” “Constant Billy,” “Blue-eyed Stranger,” “Morris Off,” “Trunkles”—oh, don’t ask me what they mean! There’s “Greensleeves,” too, and “Green Garters,” and “Green Stockings.” Green must have been the festive colour in those days. I suppose they’re the names of the old tunes. We’ll need music, of course. The tunes simply make you dance. And in “How d’ye do, sir?” you have to sing;’ and she hummed the air, ‘How d’ye *do*, sir?’

‘I say, can’t we begin now?’ Georgie was all impatience.

‘Where can we practise? We’d better learn the steps and movements, and then find some one to play for us.’

‘Miss Lane will do that,’ Miriam said instantly. ‘She says she doesn’t play, but she can fiddle. I’ve heard her play “Sir Roger” and the hornpipe and Scotch reels, so she ought to be able to manage your morris tunes. I suppose a fiddle will do?’

‘Couldn’t be better. But will she?’

‘If it’s in the evenings, and doesn’t take her from her painting, I’m sure she will,’ said Miriam. ‘Could we practise in the wood?’

‘It rains *sometimes*,’ Cicely reminded her; ‘and think of the mud! It’s just a chance we’ve been able to meet outside to-day; nine days out of ten we couldn’t.’

‘If you could come to Darley’s Bottom I’d ask dad to have a barn cleared, and we could practise there,’ said Dorothy eagerly. ‘Would that do?’

‘Ripping! I’m sure the old morris men used to practise in barns. Let’s meet next Saturday and have a long afternoon at it. You’ll soon get hold of the step, and then the dances are very easy. I’ll get the sticks and things. Let me see!’ and Cicely eyed her prospective ‘side’ thoughtfully. ‘I’d better be leader, and call the movements till we get used to them. We stand in two rows, you know, and number one, three, five, and two, four, six. One and two are partners, and so on.—Dorothy, I’ll have you for partner, as you’ve danced before; so you’ll be Number Two and lead the other column’——

‘Am I lady or gentleman?’

‘I told you there was no lady or gentleman. We’re all the same, only partners.’

‘How weird! Are you *sure*?’

Cicely laughed. ‘Mirry, I want you to be Number Six, so you’ll stand at the back, behind Dorothy, and Marguerite can be Five, and come behind me.’

‘Why do you put Mirry at the back?’ Marguerite asked jealously. ‘She’s the biggest’——

Cicely laughed again. ‘Because it’s the post of honour. In corner-dances, Mirry and I will have to lead off. She’ll be my opposite, as you’ll be Dorothy’s. One and six, two and five, and then three and four—don’t you see? Georgie and Edna in the middle will have to copy us, for Edna’s so much the youngest. In some dances Dorothy and I will lead; but in others it will be Miriam and I, because we dance across from corner to corner—like in “Sir Roger,” you know. And when we reverse, you and Miriam will be leaders.’

‘I’ve never danced. I don’t know whether I’ll be good enough,’ Miriam said doubtfully.

‘Oh, go to!—as the old morris men would have said. You’ll dance all right, Mirry; don’t you worry! I wouldn’t want you for my opposite if I wasn’t sure of you. We’ll start with “Blue-eyed Stranger.” That’s easy.’

‘It all sounds very jolly,’ said Miriam. ‘But, my dear Lady President, we promised to catch the 4.30 train, and your—oh, well, never mind! But we’d better run, or we’ll lose that train.’

‘Good-bye, all, till Monday!—Come on, then, Mirry!’ and Cicely caught her hand and raced across the triangular green of Totteridge and down the hill.

‘You nearly gave me away!’ she panted, when they were, out of hearing. ‘What were you going to say? The carriage?’

‘Yes. “Your chariot will be waiting, and your fiery steeds champing with impatience,” is what I *was* going to say.’

‘It’s as well you didn’t! Georgie and Marguerite would have stared. I wonder how long I can keep it dark?’

‘You’ll have to explain if you want them to go to the house at Christmas, as you suggested.’

‘Yes; but by then they’ll be so keen on this dancing that they won’t want to do without me even if I’m not a proper Hamlet. I say, Mirry, thank you awfully for what you said!’

Miriam flushed. ‘I didn’t like doing it. I was afraid they’d laugh or think me silly.’

‘They didn’t. It just gave the club the start it needed. It was awfully good of you, for I know you didn’t want to. I couldn’t have done it myself.’

‘I didn’t want to; but I wanted it done by somebody. We’ll have to live up to our motto, now that we’ve made it public, you know.’

‘That’s so,’ Cicely said thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XVIII.
DANCING IN THE BARN.

The big house at Broadway End was a very different place now that Cicely's influence could make itself felt. 'Stodginess' she abhorred; dullness and quietness were out of the question where she came. As soon as her grandmother was safely on the road to recovery, Cicely threw off the restraint with which she had curbed herself for the first few days, whistled as she ran up and down stairs, sang in her bedroom and while she prepared her home-work, chattered to every one, and crossed the big hall or ran down the corridors to the steps of the morris-dance. The maids smiled when, with her return from school, the cheerful noise began again; her grandmother liked to hear her—at a distance; and Mr Broadway's silent habits vanished more rapidly every day. He felt younger already, and sometimes even went back in thought to the days of fifteen years ago, when her mother had sung and danced and chattered in just the same way. Only now did he realise how lonely the years had been, and how the house had needed the presence of some young life.

Cicely's preparations for evening work always amused him. She required her tea the instant she came in from school, and did not care to talk much till she had had her first cup. After that she was eager to tell the day's news, and soon learned to call him to come and listen if he did not happen to be waiting for her. But after tea, which she preferred in the cosy corner of the hall by the huge fireplace, she adjourned at once to the library, cleared the big table, spread her books over its polished surface, and tackled arithmetic, parsing, or exercises, singing all the time. She explained that it did not interfere with her work—in fact, it helped. She did not think what she was singing. Often it was dance-music, with no words but a lilt and swing which fascinated her, and, as she said, set her thoughts spinning. 'All Around the Maypole' and 'The Red Shore' were particular favourites, and so were 'Half Hanikin' and 'Early One Morning.' For one whole evening she worked to the tune and words of 'Constant Billy:'

'O my Billy, my constant Billy,
When shall I see my Billy again?
When the fishes fly over the mountains,
Then you will see your Billy again.'

Often this half-unconscious song was accompanied by a quite unconscious shuffle and stamp of her feet, as if the music demanded it, and the effect to an unaccustomed listener was curious, and not suggestive of work. But Cicely triumphantly showed pages of correct sums and neat French exercises and well-expressed essays, and told of a steadily rising place in class as she grew more used to the new books and the requirements of her mistresses.

'I couldn't work quarter as well if I didn't sing,' she insisted. 'I always needed a room to myself at the Gaynors'. And how could any one sing "Half Hanikin" and not stamp? I wonder what the name means! Mirry Honor's always wanting to know the meaning of the morris names.'

Mr Broadway would gladly have seen her less interested in her school friends and more content at home. He was apt to be impatient when she disappeared for a whole afternoon to dance in a barn at Darley's Bottom. But, as she did not hesitate to point out, he had allowed

her to form these friendships while she was left lonely in Whiteleaf, and she could not break them now. He tried to bribe her with an offer of riding lessons as soon as he found she could not ride, and the gift of a pony on her birthday late in November proved a severe temptation. But she resolutely confined pony and lessons to Saturday mornings, and continued to meet Miriam in the afternoons.

On their first Saturday in the barn, she drove to Green Hailey and picked up Miriam, who was just setting out to walk to Darley's Bottom.

'Of course you're going to drive with me! I'm sick of going alone in this old carriage. Besides, I want your help. We must only drive to Speen, you know, and walk from there to Darley's. I don't want the carriage going there. So we'll have to carry all those things. These are the morris-sticks, and those are the bells and handkerchiefs.'

'That sounds like business. Did Mr Broadway send for them for you?'

'I told him I wanted some things for the club, and he told me to send for what I liked. So I wrote to Mrs Gaynor. I say, Mirry, I want you to do something for me! That big house is far bigger and more important in every way than I expected. There seems to be everything any one could want, and I never have to do anything for myself. There's always a maid running round after me picking up the things I leave lying about, and putting on my buttons, and so on. I don't even have to brush my hair. I rather wonder that they let me wash my own face. It's a big change from Mrs Ramage's cottage!'

'It must feel very funny,' Miriam said thoughtfully, remembering her morning of washing-up, making bread, cleaning the kitchen, and washing and ironing pinafores for Babs.

'It does; and I'm getting to like it! I didn't at first. There's to be a pony, too, and I'm to learn to ride. Now, Mirry, I'm afraid of myself. I want you to watch, and if you see me beginning to get snobby, or to put on side, or anything loathly like that, please jump on me quick! Say anything you like, so long as it's bad enough to pull me up. Pinch me if you think it would do any good. But don't—*don't* let me turn into a rotter like some of those Town girls are. Be a real decent kind of friend, and take care of me.'

Miriam laughed. 'I'll keep a good lookout—though what I'd say or do if I saw it coming on I really don't know.'

'Oh, you could make me listen if you tried!' cried Cicely. 'You did pull me up over that white dress, you know, when I didn't deserve it.'

'I don't think you're in much danger so far,' Miriam assured her.

They left the carriage at Speen, and taking the bundles and slinging their rubber shoes on their arms, they walked the last mile to Darley's Bottom, and were received noisily by the rest of the 'side,' gathered in a big, dimly-lit barn, with piles of hay stacked in one gloomy end. Georgie, Edna, Marguerite, and Dorothy rolled out of the hay as they appeared, and began picking it off their dresses and out of their hair.

'We've been waiting for you. But you've had a long walk; you'll want to rest before we dance,' said Dorothy. 'Come and lie on the hay, and get all bitty like we are; you look so dreadfully tidy compared with us.'

'Oh, I'm not tired! I don't want to rest, and I don't think Mirry does either. We're good walkers, you know,' Cicely said airily.—'*Do* you feel the need of a rest, Mirry?'

'I'm really not very tired,' Miriam laughed. 'I think I could manage a kick and a stamp. You've all come in drill-things, as the lady president suggested, I see. It's a good plan.' And the neat blue tunics, white blouses, and green girdles proved a very suitable costume for dancing.

‘Here are the sticks and things. Let’s put on the bells at once. You’ll get the step better. Don’t fool about with the sticks, Georgie; get to business!’ And Georgie and Edna meekly surrendered the staves with which they were sparring.

Cicely showed them how to fix the bells below the knee, and then demanded an exhibition of steps to see what progress they had made. Georgie had grasped the peculiar step, and promised to become a good dancer very speedily. Miriam also gave satisfaction, for she had had the advantage of private demonstrations on the Risborough road on the way home from school; but Marguerite and Dorothy found more difficulty. Dorothy could not forget the fancy steps and gliding movements of the dances she had hitherto known, and could not remember to use her heels and knees as she had to do to ring her bells properly; and Marguerite’s French blood found the sturdy, vigorous morris step strange and difficult. But a little extra practice on their part enabled them to grasp its peculiar demands, and then Cicely initiated them into the various movements—go and come, cross over, back to back, and several others.

‘Once you know these, we can begin. I’ll call the movements, and you’ll soon get into them. Georgie, always cross with your *right* shoulder to your partner’s, or you’ll have us in endless muddles. In chain, remember you follow me, and Marguerite and I go in the shape of a big S. That’s right. Now let’s practise Capers.’

‘Capers?’

‘High-stepping, you know—like this. You can’t dance too hard or too high. Don’t go over on your back when you first try it, though.—Swing your hands, Dorothy.—Feet higher, Marguerite; but keep your balance.—Always right foot first, Edna.—Remember the jump, Dorothy. Now try Slow Capers—like this.’

‘Does our word “to caper” come from the old morris-dancing, I wonder?’ Miriam pondered, as they rested on the hay.

‘Probably. You always want to know where names come from, Mirry.’

‘It’s interesting. When can we start a dance in earnest?’

‘Now, if you’ll remember those movements. We’ll get in a muddle once or twice, but you’ll soon get into it. We’ll try “Blue-eyed Stranger,” for that’s in column, and Dorothy and I will lead. If that goes all right, we’ll try a corner-dance—“Laudnum Bunches.” ’

They all worked with a will. The jingling bells and waving handkerchiefs proved inspiring, even without music, and progress was rapid. By the time Mrs Darley summoned them to tea they had grasped the principle of the first two dances, and were clamouring for something more advanced. Georgie wanted ‘that fighting-dance,’ and Dorothy was eager to use the sticks or try some hand-clapping.

But Cicely knew the importance of keeping something in reserve. She showed them how to hold the little staves, but refused to explain the movements of the dances this week.

‘You’ll get muddled if we try too many all at once. Let’s have a country-dance instead. That’s different; you can’t confuse them. Remember it’s the ordinary dance step now; no more kicking and hopping. You won’t need bells for this, Georgie. You all know “Sir Roger.” It’s the same kind of thing. Two lines; Marguerite, Georgie, and I will be ladies. Can you curtsy, Georgie? Now shall we have “Three Meet,” or “London is a fine Town,” or “Bo-peep”? “Three Meet” is a good one for six. Link arms, men! Women also!’

‘You might say gentlemen and ladies!’ Dorothy suggested.

‘In our dance-book it was always men and women. I like it; it sounds so quaint and country-like. We’re village dancers, you know. Advance and retire, twice. Now Dorothy and I

lead up the middle; all follow in couples. Now we swing, and so on. You'll soon get used to it. I like "Gathering Peascods" too, but we want more to make that go well.'

'More quaint old names,' laughed Miriam.

'I like the morris best,' said Georgie when, after a riotous 'Sir Roger,' they threw on their coats and lay resting in the hay. 'I just love the end of those dances, when you call, "All in!" and we get in a ring and stand on one foot and shout.'

'And throw up your hands,' said Cicely. 'Yes, people aren't prepared for the shout at the end. It's a good finish. Now, what do you think? Can we teach the rest of the club, or must it be only for ourselves? If we practise till the holidays, could you each train six more, when we have plenty of time?'

'Why not? You taught us.'

'I think we could, Cicely,' Miriam said eagerly. 'I know they'd all love it. But where could we meet?'

'Next summer we'll dance in the woods and on the greens, as they used to do. But just now'——

'You can have this barn as often as you like, you know,' said Dorothy. 'Father promised it should be left empty for us.'

'The problem is solved, Mirry!—Dorothy, in the name of the club I thank you,' the president said solemnly.

'It's central. Yes, that's ripping. Then we must learn as quickly as we can, and be ready for the holidays.'

'I'll invite the whole club on the Saturday before Christmas,' said Dorothy eagerly. 'They can sit on the hay, and we'll give them a demonstration. Then they'll know what they're going to learn. Can we be ready by then? We must learn some stick-dances, you know.'

'And the fighting-dance!' pleaded Georgie.

'We'll have "Rigs o' Marlow" and "Bean-setting" next week, and "How d'ye do, sir?" for Georgie's sake,' said Cicely. 'Then we'll still have time for "Constant Billy" and "Country Gardens" and "Step Back." Yes, we'll be ready, Dorothy. It's a ripping plan, and thank you awfully. We'll invite the girls at once, and tell them it's very important, but a great secret. Then they'll see the club is really going to be of some use; and next term, when we've got into the way of it, we'll have the country-dances, where you want a lot to do them properly.'

'We ought to have music now,' said Marguerite. 'Shall we send a deputation to Miss Lane?'

'Cicely must go,' said Dorothy; and Cicely, Miriam, and Marguerite were requested to wait upon Margia, explain the new development of the Hamlet Club, and beg her assistance.

'You'll be tired by the time you get home, Mirry,' said Marguerite, as they changed their shoes. 'Did Cicely walk too? I thought she'd cycle.'

'Cycle!' and Cicely looked up. 'You're pushing half the way in this country. Look at the hill beside the Cross.'

'But you'd have had a fine smooth run after that. You two will be tired. It's quite four miles. To walk each way and dance for three hours in between is fairly lively exercise, even for you.'

'I don't feel overtired yet. I can manage to get home, anyway,' laughed Miriam, but felt rather guilty at thought of the carriage waiting for them in Speen.

'I nearly came to look you up this morning, Cicely;' and Marguerite tugged at a boot-lace. 'I was cycling round Hampden and Denner Hill, and I nearly came along to Whiteleaf. But I

went to Georgie's instead.'

Cicely looked up from her seat on the floor. 'It's as well you didn't,' she said slowly; 'you wouldn't have found me. I'm not staying in Whiteleaf just now. Haven't I happened to mention it? Oh, Mirry knew. I'm staying with my grandmother. It's quite near Whiteleaf; but don't go looking for me at Mrs Ramage's, or you'll be disappointed.'

'I'm glad you told me. I'd have been pretty wild if I'd come all that way and not found you. Where does your grandmother live? And why weren't you with her before?'

'She was ill. She's better now.—Are you ready, Mirry? Then we'd better get along. I couldn't find my way without you; so don't lose me in the dark, will you?'

'I hope you won't be too tired. It's a long way after all that dancing,' Georgie said anxiously. 'Don't you want to rest?'

'Oh, Miriam and I are good walkers,' Cicely said lightly, as they set out through the darkness.

'We're winning a reputation we hardly deserve, I'm afraid,' she laughed, as they tumbled into the carriage. 'I know I couldn't walk three miles more.'

'Yes; I felt we were rather cheating them. Marguerite looked quite worried. But it's nearly as far for her.'

'We'll tell them soon. I had to say something to stop them coming to Whiteleaf after me. Now we must see Miss Lane on Monday. They'll love the dancing still more when we have music.'

CHAPTER XIX.
‘FIREWORK’ CICELY.

On Monday Cicely cycled across the hills to school, as a bright morning often tempted her to do; so Miriam was upstairs in the hall long before she arrived. Georgie and Marguerite were in the cloakroom, however, and a number of Townies.

‘Have you got over your exertions of Saturday yet, Cicely?’ asked Marguerite. ‘You must have been fagged out.’

‘I wonder you weren’t too stiff to cycle,’ Georgie observed. ‘Say, it wouldn’t be good for you to ride home too, you know. You mustn’t overdo it. All sorts of horrible things happen to people who overstrain themselves cycling. Better let me take the bike off your hands for the night.’

‘How kind!’ laughed Cicely; ‘but I’m neither tired nor stiff, unfortunately for you.’

‘I don’t see how you can help it, after all that’—— Georgie stopped under Cicely’s warning look. ‘Oh, it’s all right; they’re not listening. They’re all off their heads to-day.’

‘What do you mean?’ and Cicely realised that Geraldine and Alice were unusually excited, and even Hilary and Maud showed signs of jubilation. ‘What have they done? Did they win the Slough match on Saturday? I’d have gone to watch if we hadn’t been so busy.’

‘No; they lost—three, none. An awful come-down, for they won it last year. No; it’s the results of last month’s music exam., the Associated Board. They came on Saturday, and were posted to the girls who’d passed.’

‘Exam. results? I say! and have we done well?’ Cicely’s instant interest was in curious contrast to Georgie’s indifferent tone.

‘*We* haven’t done anything. None of our girls went in—only Townies.’

‘Georgie! it’s all the same in an exam. I mean the school, of course. Are the results good? But I can see they are; everybody looks so pleased.’

Everybody did look pleased, excited, and relieved, except Georgie, Marguerite, and a little group of Hamlet girls, who were undressing with ostentatious indifference to the jubilant Townies.

‘Very well, I believe,’ said Georgie carelessly; while Marguerite’s black eyes watched Cicely curiously. ‘They say everybody’s passed, and Hilary and Maud have Honours; and Geraldine and somebody else in the intermediate, too. Miss Bates is a jolly good music-mistress, you know.’

‘She must be, if she’s got Jelly through with Honours,’ murmured Marguerite.

‘But that’s ripping!’ cried Cicely. ‘Miss Macey must be pleased.’

‘I believe she is.’ Georgie’s tone was extremely casual. ‘I heard some one say they’d never done so well before.’

‘Georgie, don’t you care? You talk as if it didn’t matter a scrap. Marguerite, you aren’t the least bit excited. What’s up with you both?’ and Cicely eyed them in mingled wrath and amazement.

‘It doesn’t affect *us*, Cicely—unless Miss Macey’s pleased to the extent of a half-holiday,’ said Marguerite.

‘They’re only Townies;’ and Georgie shrugged her shoulders. ‘You wouldn’t expect us to be enthusiastic over Towny results, surely?’

Then Cicely's wrath blazed up, and she turned on them. '*Towny* results! They're *school* results! Do you care nothing for the credit of the school? Georgie, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Marguerite, how can you say it doesn't affect us? Surely any girl in the school would be glad another had done well. You don't mean to say you'd let that silly feeling come into a thing like this?—that you don't care about their success just because they're not your friends? Well, I think it's disgusting, and hateful, and small-minded, and I wouldn't have believed it if anybody had told me.'

'I say, Cicely, hang on!' cried Marguerite.

'They don't want us to be glad. They've left us outside everything. They couldn't expect it,' argued Georgie.

'Then you ought to be better than they expect. Do you mean to say you haven't congratulated them?'

'Rather not!' exclaimed Marguerite.

'What! go and speak to Hilary? Cicely, how could we? You know we'd only get snubbed,' said Georgie.

'I'd rather risk it than not say what I think,' observed Cicely. 'Besides, I don't know anything of the kind. Any one would like to be congratulated on getting Honours. *I'm* not afraid of any Towny, anyway.'

'Oh, but we're not all like you!'

'What's she going to do?' queried Dorothy, pausing in the doorway, her satchel in her hand. 'Who is she going for now? And what have they done? Is she going to give Hilary a lecture?'

'No; congratulate her on getting Honours in the music exam.!' There was deep disgust in Georgie's tone.

'I say! Really? But whatever for? Congratulate a Towny?'

'Yes. Don't let her hear you; we've been getting it hot. She seems to think we should have fallen on their necks.'

'Our lady president's a little queer at times,' Dorothy murmured, watching Cicely curiously.

'It seemed queer to me, too,' Marguerite agreed; 'but I've an odd feeling that Mirry would say she's right.'

'Do you think so? How odd!' Georgie said frankly.

'Don't you remember how she congratulated Maud last year, when she did well in this very exam.?'

'No; I'd forgotten. But Mirry's funny sometimes, too.'

'It certainly wouldn't have occurred to me to congratulate a Towny,' Dorothy confessed.

Cicely had finished unlacing her boots, and jerked on her slippers before approaching the excited Town girls. Her every action told of indignation and scorn. Hilary had paused in her eager talk at sound of the raised voices, and then turned away with a laugh.

'Something seems to have gone wrong in the Hamlet camp. The Firework is kicking up quite a shindy. She seems to go off unexpectedly every now and then. This time her own dear Hamlets are getting the benefit.'

Then Cicely rose, kicked aside her boots, and turned her back on Georgie and Marguerite. 'Hilary, I've just heard about the exam. I am so awfully glad. It's ripping! Is it true that nobody has failed? That's quite the best of all, isn't it?'

She approached the astounded Townies with every appearance of fearless composure, but with a certain inward dread. How Georgie would jeer if they were not cordial! It would be very unpleasant to be snubbed in public. She realised that she had run the risk of it; but, according to her creed, she did not see how else she could have acted.

For a moment Hilary was too much taken by surprise to speak. This amazing overture by 'Firework' Cicely left her breathless. The indifferent attitude of the Hamlet girls to the great event had nettled the Townies in spite of themselves. They felt they had deserved congratulation, and had been annoyed not to get it. Geraldine, rejoicing in Honours for the first time in her life, had greeted Marguerite with her great news, and had been wounded and repelled by the careless, 'Honours? Have you? How queer!' with which Marguerite had turned away. The elder girls knew better than to invite such a snub, so they had kept their news to themselves. Cicely was the first Outsider to refer to it, and for a moment they were all utterly taken aback.

Hilary recovered first. 'I think it's really jolly good,' she said as naturally as she could. 'It would have been rotten if I hadn't got through, and Maud was safe enough; but some of the kids have done awfully well. Miss Bates is a darling; she's worked hard.'

'I'm sure she has. Geraldine's got Honours, hasn't she? Just fancy!' Cicely could not resist that, and Geraldine's glow of pride subsided. 'It's really awfully good,' Cicely added hastily. 'We're all delighted!'—a polite fiction, at which her hearers raised their eyebrows and laughed, understanding perfectly. 'But you've got Honours too, Hilary, haven't you? And Maud? It's fine for the school.'

'Ah!' Hilary shot a quick glance at her. She hesitated, then decided it would be safer not to ask questions. One could never tell how 'the Firework' would take them. 'Yes. I didn't expect to get Honours. I was awfully nervous. They must have given them out of sheer pity when they saw what a funk I was in. It's a weight off my mind, I can tell you.'

'Now what was the meaning of that?' murmured Maud, as Cicely went back to her corner to greet Dorothy. 'Isn't she queer? What will she do next? Think of a Hamlet congratulating us! Is the world coming to an end?'

'Don't you see? She puts the school first. She's not pretending; she's really pleased; not for us, of course, but for the sake of the school. She's good sport,' said Hilary, with conviction.

'Had she been telling the rest what she thought of them, do you think?'

'It looked like it. I wish she'd drop them and come in with us.'

'Perhaps she said too much, and they won't forgive her.'

'No fear; she wouldn't stand it. She'd only tell them what she thought of them, and then insist on being friends. See there!' as Cicely went off arm-in-arm with Dorothy and Marguerite.

'You are a queer creature, Cicely,' Dorothy was saying.

'Think so? I'm sorry—sorry you don't think as I do. We'll ask Mirry's opinion.'

'Mirry'—and Marguerite dropped on the form beside her friend—'isn't Cicely weird? She's been congratulating Hilary and the rest on the exam. results.'

Miriam looked up with an understanding laugh. 'Well, haven't you?'

'Mirry! Me speak to Hilary?'

'She looked at Cicely as if she was a—a rattlesnake,' said Georgie.

'But she was all right when she knew what I'd come for,' Cicely said. 'Mirry, oughtn't they to be glad for the sake of the school—Townies or not?'

‘Well, I should have thought so. It’s a jolly fine thing for the school. Miss Bates is awfully pleased.’

‘Purple with excitement; I can see that,’ Marguerite murmured.

‘Wish it was my music lesson to-day. She was a terror on Friday,’ said Dorothy.

‘Nervy; she knew the results were due. Here’s Miss Macey. Is she going to announce them?’

‘Yes. Meet me at two o’clock, and we’ll find Miss Lane, Cicely;’ and Miriam hurried away, to offer her congratulations to Hilary and Maud as she joined them.

Miss Macey’s announcement was greeted with rapturous applause from every Town girl in the hall, and in this Miriam and Cicely joined heartily. After a moment’s hesitation, Marguerite clapped also, but without enthusiasm. The rest of the Hamlet girls sat unresponsive, and tried to look indifferent and unconscious.

Miss Macey knit her brows in distress. She had seen this happen before, and had spoken her mind on the subject already. When the cheers had died away she said a few grave words of reproof. ‘I am deeply grieved to see a number among you refrain from applauding your comrades who have done so well. To let private feelings enter into a matter of this kind shows a lack of public spirit which I deplore. I would have liked to think my girls put their school first, and were sufficiently large-hearted to forget little feuds and jealousies at such a moment. Surely the honour of your school is dear to you all? I am sorry to have had to speak thus on a day which should have been only one of congratulation. I would have liked to think you could all rejoice together. You have disappointed me, girls. Now go to your classes.’

‘One for the Hamlets,’ murmured Maud.

‘Yes; but remember the Firework. She knew it without being told. She has something in her, that Cicely Hobart. She’s sporty; she ought to belong to us,’ Hilary sighed.

Cicely looked very sober as she went to her class-room.

Georgie slipped her hand through Cicely’s arm. ‘You needn’t look so glum; you and Miriam were the shining exceptions. I guess you quite cheered Miss Macey up.’

‘I don’t want to be an exception. I’m in this with the rest of you. Georgie, I feel *bad*!’

‘Oh—inside? Too much cycling? I told you so.’

‘Farther inside still. I’m thinking of our club. I’m ashamed that Miss Macey should have had to speak so. The worst of it is that she’s right. There is a wrong feeling among us; there’s no loyalty to the school. It makes me feel sick.’

‘Oh, don’t worry! Besides, she doesn’t know. “*Little* feuds and jealousies”! “Your *comrades*”! We know whether they’re little or not, and what kind of comrades the Townies are. They don’t want us, Cicely.’

But this new sign of the division in the school had hurt Cicely anew, and she was very thoughtful during morning school. She sighed at last, and put the matter away for the moment. ‘It’s true, and it’s hateful, but I’ll alter it before I’m done!’

The deputation from the Hamlet Club waited on Margia during the dinner-hour. They invited her into the library, seated her by the fire and themselves on the hearthrug, then explained their wishes, and handed her books of morris and country dance music. Margia laughed, and saw at a glance that she could give them valuable help. She only stipulated that she must not be asked to give up precious hours of daylight to fiddling, but promised to come to Darley’s Bottom at tea-time each Saturday, and play for them in the evening.

‘We’ll have to light the barn with lanterns, as we did last Saturday,’ laughed Marguerite. ‘It was weird. Did you see the shadows as we jumped?’

‘I liked it; it was so mysterious and ghostly,’ said Miriam.

So Margia was prepared for the sight which met her when she reached Darley’s Bottom on the following Saturday afternoon, carrying her violin. The farmyard was very dark, but light was streaming out of a big doorway, and here were gathered servants, farm-hands, and children, attracted by the strange sounds they had heard coming from the barn—jingling bells, clashing and thumping staves, an occasional unexpected shout. She made her way through the crowd, and found ‘Bean-setting’ in progress, the ‘side’ thumping, or ‘dibbing,’ their short sticks vigorously on the ground, dancing across, dibbing again, turning back to back to dib once more, and at ‘All in!’ called by Cicely, jumping into columns and standing breathless with staves crossed. The gloomy barn was lit by great lanterns, which threw gigantic shadows into the corners, and fell on the flying hair of the dancers and twinkled back from the jumping bells.

Margia’s appearance was greeted with a shout, and the ‘side’ broke ranks and surrounded her, flushed and panting, their hair disordered, tunics and green girdles flying. Music was the only thing wanted to make their enjoyment complete. They were ready to go through all their dances if only she would play for them. She laughed, tuned up hastily, and shouldered her fiddle.

‘What’s first on your list? “Laudnum Bunches”? Here you are, then.’ And staves were hastily dropped and handkerchiefs caught up.

‘That just makes all the difference!’ cried Miriam, when their closing shout, with arms flung up and right foot raised, had startled the audience in the doorway. ‘I’d no idea dancing felt like this, Cicely. I forget everything, and feel as if I could go on for ever. It’s—what’s the word?—not only exciting, but’——

‘Exhilarating,’ laughed Margia. ‘I’d like to join in.’

‘Do! We’ll teach you’——

But Margia laughed, and struck up ‘Rigs o’ Marlow;’ and there was a rush for staves, that not a moment should be lost.

They closed with ‘Sir Roger,’ and went home late, but flushed with exercise and bright-eyed with enjoyment. Cicely and Miriam were supposed to have the longest walk, and Georgie and Marguerite pitied them exceedingly. But they only laughed, and Margia, understanding, laughed too.

‘We’ll have to confess soon; I feel a regular fraud,’ Miriam said, as she sank on the cushions of the waiting carriage.

‘We will—soon; but not just yet. I’m going to have a party at Christmas, and invite all our “side.” I want to see their faces,’ Cicely laughed.

CHAPTER XX.
THE AYLESBURY MATCH.

One morning early in December Cicely met Miriam with news to tell. ‘I’ve been awfully worried for a few days. The grannies are going to the south of France, and they’ve offered to take me with them.’

‘Oh, Cicely! what about the club?’

‘Exactly. I didn’t want to go, and said so from the first. It would have been jolly enough in some ways, but I don’t like hotels, and I don’t want to miss the exams. What is the use of working all the term and then not getting a certificate? I want to get a First, to please daddy. I’d have been awfully disappointed if I’d had to go.’

‘You aren’t going, then?’

‘No. They were willing to take me, but I think they’d almost as soon not. It means lots more luggage and worry. They wouldn’t have been content without a governess or somebody, as they can’t go about with me. They’d have thought I needed looking after, and neither of them could do it. And it meant leaving school for three months; they won’t come back till April. So when I said I’d had so many changes lately that I’d rather stay at home, they were quite relieved. I honestly think daddy would want me to stop at school, for I missed all the first half of this term. So our entertainment to them is postponed.’

‘We’ll have all the more time to practise. Won’t you be lonely in that big house?’

‘Awfully. I’m not going to stay there. At first I wondered if you would come and live with me, but I knew your mother couldn’t spare you.’ Miriam shook her head. ‘So I begged and teased, and I’m coming back to Whiteleaf.’

‘That will be jolly! But you’ll find it very queer after Broadway End.’

Cicely laughed. ‘It will be a tight fit, but that’s part of the fun. So don’t tell anybody about Broadway End, Miriam; there’s no need now.’

She casually informed Marguerite that her grandmother had gone away for a while, and she would therefore be living in Whiteleaf as before. But she and Miriam still made use of the carriage to take them to Darley’s Bottom on Saturdays, and by allowing it to come no nearer than Speen, managed to keep their secret and save themselves a tiring walk.

It soon became known in the school that the Hamlets had a secret, and that Dorothy Darley was entertaining the club at her house on the Saturday before Christmas. The members of the club could not betray the secret, for they did not know it themselves; but the fact that there was a secret excited them all, and every one was eager for the great day to come.

The Town girls pretended indifference to the secret, and did their best to ignore the excitement. Moreover, they were so busy with their own end-of-term festivities that they had no time to spare for anything else.

‘There’s the Essay Club dance, and the Dramatic tea, and the hockey match,’ Marguerite explained to Cicely.

‘I thought the Dramatic gave a play?’

‘They’re having a little one at their afternoon tea, I believe; but their big time is at Easter. They try to do something really big then. Last year they gave *The Merchant of Venice*. They say that Maud made a ripping Portia, and Hilary was Shylock. Geraldine says it’s to be *As You*

Like It this time, and they'll have awfully pretty dresses. You'd have been in it if you hadn't insisted on being a Hamlet, you know.'

Cicely was quite aware of it, but to dwell on the fact would have been against the spirit of Rule No. 1. She said sturdily, 'We'll have a grand dance of our own at Easter. If I'd joined their clubs I couldn't have belonged to ours. Didn't you go to see the *Merchant*? Did Maud look jolly as Portia?'

'No; none of us went.'

'Oh? Did they charge for admission?'

'Oh no! It was just to pay them out,' said Georgie cheerfully; and Marguerite's black eyes watched Cicely curiously again. 'They wanted us to come. We were publicly invited; they wanted as big an audience as possible. Miss Macey lent the school hall, and heaps of parents and friends turned up; but they'd have liked to show off before us too. Alice was quite pleasant to me for a week beforehand, and kept asking if I wasn't coming. She was Launcelot, and Geraldine was Nerissa, and they fancied themselves no end. We talked it over, and decided not to go—just to spite them, you know.'

'They felt it, too,' Marguerite added. 'Of course, we had good excuses, Cicely,' as she noted the president's look. 'It's not easy for us to come into town for evening entertainments. I'm not sure if auntie would have let me come if I'd asked her. She doesn't like my going home alone at night. Kingswood is awfully dark, and it's so far round by Terriers.'

'The hockey match is the big event of this term,' said Georgie. 'The Essay Club dance we aren't invited to, of course. It's a big thing, but very strictly private. But the match is different. It's played on our ground, on the last Friday afternoon, and a team comes over from Aylesbury; it's quite a fixture.'

'And do you go to that, to cheer our girls?' asked Cicely.

'No,' said Georgie promptly.

'We didn't last year. Why should we, Cicely? They care nothing about us; why should we show any interest in them? They only want us when they think we'll admire them. It's not good enough.'

'It's not for their sake,' Cicely said swiftly. 'As I'm always telling you, it's for the sake of the school. It looks awfully bad if half the school stops away from a big match. We don't want to advertise our quarrels to everybody. Besides, it would be only decent. The match is a big thing, and it's rough on them if we take no interest in it. I shall go.'

'Oh, do you think you will?' Marguerite's tone was doubtful. 'Mirry will, of course. She was away last year, because Babs had measles; but she said we should have gone.'

'If some of us go and some don't, it will be rotten,' Georgie grumbled. 'It's only if we all act together that we can expect to make them feel it, Cicely. They're horrid to us; why shouldn't we give it them back now and then? This is such a ripping chance.—Dorothy, come and persuade her.'

Dorothy joined the group, and when she understood she said instantly, 'She's thinking of that silly old Rule No. 2. Well, I'm not going to cheer the Townies. Not much! Let's have our party that afternoon, and take all our girls away.'

'Hear, hear!' cried Georgie, in delight.

'No, we can't do that; it would be awfully mean,' Cicely cried, in quick distress. 'Georgie —Dorothy—I wish you wouldn't!'

Marguerite kept silence, and looked thoughtful.

‘You’ll have to come on the day I fix, if I’m inviting you,’ Dorothy said triumphantly. ‘If I ask you for Friday, you can’t insist on coming on Saturday, you know.’

Georgie chuckled.

Cicely looked thoughtful. Then she said defiantly, ‘But you can’t dance without me; it would break the “side.” If I’ve a previous engagement for Friday afternoon, you can’t have the party then. I only promised to keep Saturdays free for dancing.’

This time it was Marguerite who laughed.

Dorothy’s face fell. ‘Oh, Cicely, won’t you? Don’t be horrid! Can’t we have the party on Friday?’

‘No; I’m going to watch the Aylesbury match;’ and Cicely’s face was very determined. ‘Look here, girls, it’s only decent; we must think of the school. To fix a party for the same time as the match would be awfully shabby; I couldn’t agree to it. And it seems to me that this is a good chance for our club to be decent to the school clubs. It would be awfully jolly if we could all go, and give the Townies a real good cheer for the school’s sake. It’s much easier to play, you know; they’d be far more likely to win. I can’t make our girls go, of course; but I shall go myself, and Mirry will, and I believe you will too, Marguerite. I shall ask the rest to go, and if you or Georgie try to stop them, Dorothy, it won’t be playing fair. You’ll be traitors, and I’ll think you’re very mean.’

Dorothy shrugged her shoulders. ‘Oh, I won’t go behind you like that. They can go if they like, but I won’t. I don’t feel friendly, and I don’t intend to.’

‘I shall go; I think it’s the decent thing to do,’ Cicely said resolutely; and she was as good as her word.

She, Miriam, and Marguerite turned up on the hockey ground with a goodly following of Hamlets, much to the surprise of the Town girls, who had not expected them, in spite of Cicely’s ‘Oh yes; I shall come!’ when invited by Hilary. Hilary’s careless tone was intended to imply that nobody cared much whether the Hamlets came or not, and she raised her eyebrows in genuine surprise at the matter-of-course tone in which the president answered.

‘Of course I shall come!’ Cicely said again, seeing her surprise, but deliberately ignoring it. ‘I want our girls to win, and it’s only decent to support them. When one’s not playing, it’s the least one can do.’

‘It’s your own fault you’re not playing,’ Hilary ventured in a more conciliatory tone. She never quite knew in talking to Cicely what kind of answer to expect. As she sometimes said to Maud, ‘Cicely Hobart’s like a bomb; you never know when she’ll go off.’

‘Oh, I don’t want to play, thank you; I’ve something *much* more important on hand! I couldn’t possibly have come if the match had been on Saturday. We’re engaged every Saturday afternoon.’ Cicely’s tone was gravely mysterious. ‘We’ve important arrangements in hand; I’ve really no time for hockey, thank you.’

‘What *are* those Hamlets up to?’ and Hilary turned to Maud, curious and exasperated. ‘I’d give anything to know! They’ve something up their sleeve.’

‘They meet at Darley’s Bottom every Saturday. Georgie Gilks told me so, but I couldn’t find out what for. It’s all Cicely Hobart, whatever they’re up to.’

‘Yes; we made a tremendous mistake when we let her slip through our fingers. I wonder if they’ll turn up on Friday.’

‘Probably not; I expect it was only talk.’

Their surprise was therefore great when the Hamlets arrived in force, and cheered at every opportunity, from the first appearance of the school team till the last goal had been scored and

victory remained with the Wycombe girls.

'This is a change from last year,' Maud remarked as they rested at half-time. 'A complete change of tactics! What's the reason, do you think?'

'I don't know; but it's far easier to play,' replied Hilary. 'They make a ripping row. I believe we'd have won the Slough match if they'd been there to cheer.'

'Invite them to come regularly, then!'

'They can't; they're engaged every Saturday!' and Hilary laughed wrathfully. 'Whatever their "engagement" may be, they won't give it up for us.'

Conscious of having done their duty to the school, as put to them by their president, the Hamlet girls were now eager for their own excitement next day.

A surprise awaited even Cicely when she arrived, shoes in hand, for Dorothy had decorated the barn with holly, flags, and bunting, and spread hay, covered with rugs, round the walls for seats, and the scene was very gay. As the girls arrived they were led to seats by maids from the house, and sat wondering what was going to happen. The lanterns were lit early; Margia arrived, and tuned her violin, but refused to say what was coming; and all waited expectantly.

Then Margia struck up a processional morris, and, led by Cicely, the 'side' came dancing in, wearing their drill-tunics, white handkerchiefs waving in each hand. The Hamlets, unprepared for anything of the kind, gasped and stared; then the six took their places, Margia changed the tune, and Cicely and Miriam led off in 'Laudnum Bunches.'

Before a delighted audience, they went through their various dances, stick-tapping, dibbing, hand-clapping, and Georgie's favourite, the fighting 'How d'ye do, sir?' Cicely and Miriam advanced, shook hands cordially, and retired. Dorothy and Marguerite did the same, and then Georgie and Edna, each pair singing lustily the words of the title as they gripped hands, and the last two standing so for a long moment before they retired and the jigging dance was resumed by all. Then the first pair advanced with clenched fists, and the audience shouted in delight as Miriam's arm shot out and almost caught Cicely on the nose, and Cicely apparently tried to give Miriam a black eye, both singing as before, 'How d'ye *do*, sir?' Georgie's boxing was so vigorous that little Edna flinched, but the blow passed her harmlessly, and then they were all hopping in time to the music as before. The dance ended with a salutation, when all in turn shook hands after the fight, and then, forming a ring, threw up hands and feet and shouted in chorus.

During tea Cicely explained their willingness to teach the dances to all the members of the club, if they would arrange themselves into 'sides' and come regularly to the barn to practise. Before they went home she made them line up for 'Sir Roger,' and seven new 'sides' were enrolled and sworn to secrecy, Dorothy volunteering to train more than one set if they would come to her for lessons.

'There's one thing,' Cicely said thoughtfully as she drove home with Miriam. 'I wish we could have prettier dresses. Our drill-things are all right, but they're not pretty, and nothing like what people used to wear'——

'Oh, historically they're hopeless, of course! But they're so suitable. Don't suggest fancy dresses, Cicely! We don't want a lot of fuss and expense.'

'I know; but I'm thinking. Last time we danced at school—it was at the midsummer breaking-up revels—we all had fancy dresses, each "side" alike, of course. It looked awfully jolly. The three Gaynors and I and two others had Old English costumes, as simple as possible—costing about twopence each—the kind of thing girls probably did wear about James I.'s

reign, when they danced on the greens, you know. It was a plain gray dress, with a broad white collar and cuffs and short sleeves, and a little white hood. The other "sides" all had different country dresses—milkmaids, and haymakers, and so on; but people said ours were the prettiest. Now, my dress is packed away at the Gaynors', and so are theirs, and they're no use to any one. If I could get mine and borrow the others, we could easily make one or two more. It would cost almost nothing, and look heaps nicer. You're just about Nancy's size. She was two years older than I. Now, Mirry, don't be a pig, and say, if I take the trouble of getting the things, you won't wear a borrowed dress! I know you're awfully stuck-up and proud; but just think'——

'Cicely, you're horrid!'

'Then you will, and that's all right! For the sake of our "side," so that it will look nicest, as well as dance best; as of course it will! All right! I'll write to Nancy.'

However, the arrangements on which Cicely's grandparents insisted for the Christmas holidays made a letter to Nancy unnecessary. And Cicely's intention of training a set of small children to dance, with Bobs and Babs Honor as leaders, had to be postponed also, for Mr Broadway refused to allow her to spend Christmas in the cottage, though she protested that she would be quite happy and had heaps of invitations, and a welcome at Miriam's whenever she cared to go. But her grandparents did not like the thought; so to please them she consented to go to the Gaynors' for ten days. She went reluctantly, sorry to leave her friends, relieved to know she had won her First and made good her position in class, and full of plans for the future of the club, in which she intended to ask Nancy Gaynor's help, since the opportunity had offered.

While she was away her lieutenants set the new 'sides' to practising morris steps. In those country hamlets there were few entertainments during the winter, so much time was available for dancing, and the days went less slowly than usual. The barn at Darley's Bottom was generally busy, and the progress of the recruits was rapid.

They did so well, indeed, that it became evident there would be something to show their president when she returned. Thereupon Dorothy was seized with a desire to give her a surprise, and made a proposal to Miriam and Marguerite.

'Could we, do you think?'

'Why not?'

'It would be awfully jolly, and she'd love it; but'——

'I'm sure we could, and it would look heaps nicer than gym. dresses! Marguerite, you're clever; you'd help, wouldn't you?'

Cicely's return to Whiteleaf was delayed by a series of parties among her old schoolfellows. But she appeared at Darley's Bottom one afternoon with still a week of holidays before her, and a plan to propose on which her heart was set. She was going for a week to Broadway End; Margia Lane was coming to keep her company, and the original 'side' were all to come too. She broached the idea to Miriam and Dorothy, to whom the name of the house was familiar, though they had never visited it.

'Grandmother gave me leave to invite some friends, and the maids will just love it. They like something going on. We'll drive or cycle during the day, and Miss Lane can paint. At night we'll dance! I want you to see the dresses. There are four, and I've brought stuff for two more. Mirry and Marguerite can make them. They've got useful fingers; I haven't. Will you come?'

'I'd love it!' Both spoke together.

‘If mother can spare me,’ Miriam added. ‘I think she will, for a few days. But how about Georgie and Edna and Marguerite? They don’t know you live there.’

‘I’m going to call for them to-morrow in the carriage, and bring them back with me.’

‘Well, look here!’ Dorothy had been thinking. ‘We want to have another dance-evening before school begins, to show you how we’re getting on. Shall we come to you, or will you come here?’

‘I’d rather not ask them all up to Broadway End yet, if you don’t mind. It’s a long way; and besides, I’d rather they didn’t know, as long as I’m not living there.’

‘Then we’ll have dancing here on Tuesday evening, and each let our “side” know;’ and Dorothy’s eyes met Miriam’s significantly to remind her of their secret.

‘Come before lunch to-morrow, and I’ll fetch the others in the afternoon. You’ll cycle, won’t you, Dorothy? Send your bag when it suits you. Mirry, I’ll be driving over from the cottage, so I’ll call for you. Have you seen any Townies since Christmas? How did the dance and tea go off?’

‘I met Maud at a party over at Amersham,’ said Dorothy. ‘Oh, they had a gorgeous time! She raved about Hilary’s dress for the dance, and let us understand her own had been something out of the common too. The play went pretty well, but it’s nothing to what they’re planning for Easter. They’re full of it already, the parts allotted, and the dresses designed. It’s to be the biggest thing they’ve ever done, and they’re going to work for it all next term.’

‘I’m sorry for them, then. How they expect to get through matric. in June, if they’re going to spend this term preparing a play, I don’t know,’ said Miriam.

‘They won’t get through, and you will,’ Dorothy prophesied. ‘At least, our dancing doesn’t interfere with our work. They’ll certainly think of nothing but the play all next term, to judge from Maud’s talk. We’ll be sick of it before we’re done. They’ll talk about it in the hope of making us want to see it. *I* sha’n’t go.’

‘I’ll see when the time comes. If they talk too much about it beforehand perhaps I sha’n’t either,’ Cicely said. ‘Well, good-bye till to-morrow!—Come and walk home with me, Mirry! Is your brother at home? I haven’t seen him yet. I suppose he’s been home for Christmas?’

Miriam laughed. ‘You’ve missed him; you shouldn’t have stopped so long in London. He’s gone to spend his last week with a friend, and go back to school with him.’

‘Oh! and I sha’n’t see him at all? How mean! I’m curious to see if he’s like you.’

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to wait till Easter,’ Miriam laughed.

CHAPTER XXL
A SURPRISE FOR THE PRESIDENT.

Cicely welcomed her first two guests before lunch next morning, and showed them all over the house with much enjoyment. In the afternoon she left them to unpack the fancy costumes and try them on, and went off in the carriage to fetch the others.

She drove first to find Georgie and Edna, and leaving the carriage at the gate of the little farm, went in search of them.

'Georgie! Edna! Are you in? I want you to come and stop with me till Wednesday. Be quick! You're to come at once. I'll give you five minutes to pack, and I'll lend you anything you forget.'

'I say! I'll come just as I am!' giggled Georgie. 'Do you really want us, Cicely? Or are you only rotting?'

'To stop with you?' and Edna stared wide-eyed.

'At Whiteleaf? In that cottage?' Georgie was beginning to see difficulties. 'You've always said there wasn't room even to have us to tea! You said three people couldn't turn round at once!'

'We'll make room somehow,' Cicely laughed. 'Do get your things ready. I'm sure your folks will be glad to get rid of you and have a quiet house for a few days.'

The arrangements and packing did not take long. Georgie flung a few garments into an old portmanteau, and Edna packed a travelling-basket. Then the question of transport occurred to them, and they came flying down to ask how they were to carry their bags.

Cicely's off-hand explanation that her carriage was waiting at the gate was received with jeers.

'Your carriage! I say, what swank! Have you really brought a trap? Or is it a cab?'

'Come and see. I'll carry that, Edna. It's too heavy for you;' at which sturdy Edna laughed.

'I *say*! what a lovely carriage! Where did you steal it, Cicely? Are we really to go in that?' gasped Georgie; and Edna gazed in awed amazement.

'It belongs to an old friend of mine. He's lent it to me for the day. Yes, really! Jump in!'

They sank on the cushions with luxurious delight, scarcely able to believe their good luck in driving in such a stately vehicle.

'How did you manage it? This is doing it in style! I feel like the Queen at the Durbar. But why do you want *us*, Cicely? I should have thought Miriam—or even Dorothy'——

'Oh, they're coming too. They've arrived already. We're going to fetch Marguerite now. All our "side," you see.'

'What a joke!' and Georgie's eyes widened. 'But where *are* you going to put us? I'll sleep on the sofa, and an arm-chair will do for Ed. She can sleep anywhere, curled up like a kitten.'

'I'm going—prepare for a shock!—to give you—a bedroom *each*! There!'

'You can't!' protested Georgie. 'Are you crazy, Cicely? In that poky cottage? Why, our house is twice as big, but we've never been able to have separate rooms!'

'Wait and see!' laughed Cicely. 'We're going to dance every night. I've brought pretty dresses for you from London. There's a little one that will just fit Edna.'

'Dance! In that cottage? Why, you can't get us all in standing still, I believe! How can we dance? Or have you found a barn in Whiteleaf?'

‘What’s our quickest way to Penn?’

‘Oh, down the Wycombe road past the wood, and then straight to Tyler’s Green and Penn. Shall I tell the coachman?’

‘I expect he knows. If not, he’ll have to find out,’ Cicely said easily. ‘Now tell me about the holidays.’

Marguerite’s astonishment was equal to Georgie’s, and her questioning and incredulity quite as great. But Cicely carried her off, protesting, and in the carriage she found the other two, equally puzzled and eager to know how the cottage at Whiteleaf was to hold them all. They drove back by way of Terriers, Speen, and Green Hailey, and then, to the vast amazement of the visitors, passed through Whiteleaf and on in the gathering twilight towards Kimble. But Cicely only laughed and bade them wait.

‘I’m staying at my grandmother’s,’ she explained. ‘She’s away, and Margia Lane is coming to keep us company. She told me we might call her “Margia,” as Miriam does.’

‘Miss Lane, too! Then your grandmother’s house is bigger than the cottage in Whiteleaf,’ said Georgie.

‘Clever girl! It is—a little bigger. We’re just there now.’

It was dark as they reached Broadway End, but the door stood open, and on the steps they were welcomed by the prettiest pair of Puritan maidens any one could wish to see. For Miriam and Dorothy had tried on the dresses, and Dorothy had been so pleased with hers that she had refused to take it off, or to let Miriam change either. The dresses were of simple gray, with short sleeves and broad white cuffs at the elbow, and broad white collars at the low round neck. Dorothy’s white hood was laid lightly on bushy brown hair hanging loose about her shoulders; but Miriam had plaited her long yellow locks in two thick braids which hung over her shoulders on to her breast, and this new style of hairdressing suited her so well that Cicely insisted upon it whenever she wore her dancing-dress.

They stood laughing in the flood of electric light pouring down the steps, and the new-comers, tumbling out of the carriage, broke into questions and exclamations.

‘It’s all right! Come in, and I’ll tell you all about it,’ Cicely urged. ‘Don’t you see Mirry and Dorothy? Or don’t you know them as Old English maidens? Come along;’ and she persuaded them to enter.

‘But, Cicely, this can’t be your grandmother’s house! Where have you brought us to? Where are we?’ and they looked round the great hall with bewildered eyes; while Miriam and Dorothy laughed, and begged them to come to tea.

Cicely shut the inner door, dismissed the interested maid, and addressed her bewildered guests. ‘This is Broadway End’——

‘Broadway End!’ Georgie’s tone and the size of Edna’s eyes showed that they knew the house by name.

‘I stayed here for three weeks during last term, and drove down to meet Miriam every day. We used to drive to Speen, too, and walk from there to the barn for dancing, when you thought we’d walked all the way.’ Miriam laughed. ‘And I shall be living here for good as soon as my grannies come home from Nice. So I thought you’d better know; but don’t tell the others yet.’

‘And you mean to go on being a Hamlet, though you live *here*?’ Georgie’s tone was incredulous.

‘And you’ve kept it dark all this time!’ Marguerite marvelled. ‘Why, you’re more—you ought to be more stuck-up than Hilary herself! Her place isn’t in it with this.’

‘I hope I’ll never be like that,’ said Cicely. ‘I think all that kind of thing is hateful. Now do come and have tea. I’m dying for mine, but I can’t begin until you do.’

‘And we thought there wouldn’t be room in the cottage!’ Georgie began to giggle. ‘I was going to sleep on the sofa, and Ed. in a chair! We thought we’d have to dance in a barn! There’s plenty of room here;’ and she looked round the great hall appreciatively.

Cicely threw herself into a big chair before the fire. ‘Pour out, Mirry—do! You haven’t been driving all afternoon, rescuing princesses and carrying them off in your chariot to your enchanted castle! Give me a rest—do!’

Miriam laughingly went to preside, and Dorothy persuaded the new-comers to sit down. They had still hardly recovered from their surprise, and accepted tea and muffins in a dazed dream. But Marguerite presently began to question Miriam about her dress; and Cicely explained.

‘It’s for the sake of the “side.” It will look so much jollier than our tunics. Of course we can’t dress all the rest—we would if we could—but perhaps we can persuade them to keep to drill-things, or to dress alike in white. The “sides” mustn’t look patchy if we can help it.’ Miriam and Dorothy looked down demurely, and did not venture to meet Georgie’s dancing eyes.

‘Well, I agree with that. Those dresses are very dainty,’ Marguerite said; ‘but they’re not correct, you know. They’re Puritan, and the Puritans didn’t dance; they objected to all that kind of thing.’

‘Now, Marguerite! Mirry and I have argued that out already,’ exclaimed Cicely. ‘*Do* you suppose the Puritans sat down and designed fancy costumes for their girls? Of course they didn’t. They just wore the very plainest and most ordinary dresses going—the dresses people used every day. What they wouldn’t do was wear fancy, showy things, and dress up. Most likely these are what the village girls wore about that time, and therefore are the very things we want. Of course, in time the dress came to be associated with the Puritans, because they always used it; but they didn’t make it up.’

‘Oh, well, if you think so, it’s all right;’ and Marguerite’s scruples vanished.

Margia arrived while Miriam was still pouring out tea, and received a boisterous welcome. Her eyes wandered from Miriam to Dorothy, then settled on Miriam in delighted appreciation. ‘That suits you, Mirry; it makes you a real Old English village maiden at once.’

‘And Dorothy?’ demanded Georgie.

‘Dorothy too, of course,’ Margia said hastily; and Dorothy smiled and understood.

That week was a time of riotous enjoyment to all. Mornings and afternoons were given to driving and cycling; while Margia went off with stool and paint-box, and was happily busy till dusk. After tea the big hall was cleared, the fiddle tuned, and the girls gave themselves up to dancing; for Cicely had come back primed with new dances which only required two, four, or six. She taught them ‘Cochin China,’ which was danced in threes, and ‘The Parson’s Farewell,’ which only demanded two couples; and, at the request of Miriam and Marguerite, she taught them the minuet and ‘Rheinlander,’ which had delighted them so greatly. Georgie and Edna declared themselves too stiff for these more graceful movements, and when persuaded to try, proved very awkward. They much preferred the boisterous morris and country dances; so they were released from the more stately movements, and set to hem collars and cuffs for the two dresses which still had to be made.

One evening, as they sat before the fire, resting after a riotous time of ‘Shepherd’s Hey,’ bells still on their ankles and handkerchiefs thrown aside, Cicely demanded of Marguerite an

explanation of her name and reputed French origin. ‘Anybody can see you’ve some French in you; you’re so dark, and so clever with your fingers, and you speak French so well. Was your mother French?’

‘No; my great-grandfather! I’m a relic of the past. You’ve heard of the French school at Penn a hundred and twenty years ago?’

‘A French school at Penn? No. How queer!’

‘Oh, haven’t you heard? Burke—you know, the great orator—was awfully sympathetic with the French royalties and nobility at the time of the Revolution; and when so many of them were guillotined, he started a school for their orphan boys. He lived near Beaconsfield. You’ve seen his grave in the church? His house was Gregories, on the road to Penn, and he was to have been made Lord Beaconsfield when he retired. But his only son died, and he wouldn’t have the title. He didn’t care much about anything after that.’

‘It was awfully sad,’ said Miriam. ‘It just broke his heart; and the son wasn’t worth it, you know. He hadn’t any brains compared with his father; he made a mess of everything. But his father thought all the world of him.’

‘Perhaps it was as well he died, after all,’ said Margia, who, like the rest, was sitting on the rug in the firelight. ‘If he had lived, he would only have disappointed his father.’

‘Well, Burke started his school for French orphans up at Penn,’ Marguerite continued, ‘and used to drive out to see them. They were all dressed in blue uniforms, with white cockades in their hats, and on the cockade were the words “*Vive le Roi*.” If they’d lost their father, it was put on a red label; but if they’d only lost an uncle, it was on a black one. That’s what I’ve been told, anyway. Now, my great-grandfather was one of those boys. He had lost his mother, and both his father and an uncle—I don’t know whether he had more than one label!—but he had another uncle who managed to escape; and when all the boys were sent back to France in 1820, this uncle claimed him. But he didn’t want to go. He’d met a pretty Quaker girl called Margaret Verity, living in the village, and he liked her—rather more than usual, you know! So he ran away, rather than go back to France, and took service with Margaret’s uncle at Amersham. But his own people found him, and made him go back to France till he was of age. They thought he’d forget her, but he didn’t; and as soon as he could, he came back to England, married her, and settled in Penn. They had no son, so the French name died out; but their daughter married her cousin, John Verity, and he was my grandfather. So I have heaps of French cousins; and when my father was a boy he visited them, and lived for some years in France. He died three years ago, a little while after my mother; but while he was alive he used to make me talk French, and say he’d send me to my cousins some day. Of course, they have no titles in France now, so the family have dropped theirs; but they have a lovely old château near Lyons, and live there still.’

‘Would you like to go?’

‘I’d love to see it. I wouldn’t like to live there altogether.’

‘We’ll call you Marguerite of Valois,’ laughed Cicely; ‘except when I want to tease you, and then I shall call you Daisy. *Allons! Dansons, mes enfants!* Let’s try “Trunkles.” Corner-dance—handkerchiefs!’

On Tuesday afternoon they all drove or cycled to Darley’s Bottom for tea before the rest of the members arrived. Cicely had argued that they should not wear the new dresses, since the others could not dress up, and might feel disappointed. But Dorothy, who was unaccountably excited over this dance evening, begged that the dresses might be worn. She was sure the

others would like to see them. She did not think it would make them feel bad. So Cicely yielded, though somewhat against her better judgment.

And now came the surprise which Miriam and Dorothy had prepared during her absence in London. For when the girls arrived they were marshalled outside by their respective trainers, while Cicely sat alone in the barn. Then they all came dancing in to the music of 'Green Garters;' and she gasped, and then broke into delighted applause, for each party of six was dressed alike, but each was different from the last.

Dorothy's 'side,' girls from Speen, Hughenden, and Terriers, were dressed as boys, to their great delight, in green smocks and soft slouch-hats. Miriam's, from Risborough, Hampden, and Saunderton, wore white summer frocks, with white ribbons in their hair. Marguerite's, from Penn and Haslemere, wore cotton frocks of various colours, such as all possessed for summer use, but with the addition of little white aprons, dainty lace fichus, and sun-bonnets. Georgie's girls, from Kingshill and Prestwood, wore their drill tunics, as did the younger girls whom Edna captained, with some help from her sister.

The effect, as all came dancing in, waving white handkerchiefs in both hands, and took their places for the dance, was striking and pretty. Cicely, eager to know how it had been arranged, curbed her questions till the new dancers had shown what they could do. Then, applauding and shouting 'Bravo!' she took her place with her own gray-clad "side," and joined in 'Country Gardens' and 'Step Back.'

'That's ripping!' she said eagerly when they broke ranks to rest. 'You must have worked awfully hard. We can have a real good country-dance now. You'll love "My Lady Cullen." But do tell me how you managed the dresses! It was a jolly surprise. I'd never dreamt it would be possible, and here you've gone and done it!'

'Oh, when you think about it, they really cost very little—either trouble or money,' Dorothy laughed. 'We had to make the smocks, of course; but all the rest are just made up. Marguerite made those lace things for her girls, and you know how cheap sun-bonnets are. Miriam found that her girls had white frocks; they had them last year for the breaking-up concert. If we don't use them for practising, but only for great occasions, they won't suffer much, and when we want to show off to any one—your grandmother, for instance—we'll have them ready.'

'It's ripping, and awfully jolly of you to think of it! Now I want to see your girls and Marguerite's do a country-dance. What do they know? "Bonnets so Blue"? Good! Then line up, lasses and lads. And afterwards Dorothy and Mirry and Marguerite and I will show you "Rufty Tufty." That's for four. We've just been learning it.'

' "Rufty Tufty"! Did you ever know such a name for a dance?' laughed Miriam. 'All the names are quaint, but that one's positively weird. It's a pretty dance, though.'

'Dorothy's girls must be men, of course, since they're dressed like boys,' said Cicely. 'It will look fine. Now let's see "Bonnets so Blue." '

The result, when the six 'men' in dark green formed in one line, and the ladies in their coloured frocks and bonnets in the other, was very effective, and was received with great applause. Then Cicely chose the four best dancers among the 'boys' and the four best girls, and made them form up for a square dance, 'Dull Sir John,' and here again the blending of the green and coloured costumes was strikingly pretty. Then all the forty-two joined in 'Nancy's Fancy' and 'The Triumph,' under her direction, as both were new, and finished the evening with the usual rollicking 'Sir Roger.'

Margia closed the dance by striking up ‘Auld Lang Syne,’ and all joined hands in a big ring, and marched round singing heartily. Then, with three cheers for the Hamlet Club, they separated, to meet at school on Thursday, with meaning looks and eloquent laughter, and a new password, ‘Remember Darley’s barn!’ of which the exasperated Town girls, question as they might, could gain no explanation.

CHAPTER XXII.
CICELY'S ALLY.

But what was to be the use of all this dancing and merrymaking? Was it to be merely enjoyment, or would it have any practical outcome? In particular, could it have any effect on the difficult situation in the school?

Cicely and Margia talked it over one day soon after school had begun. The dancing gave keen delight to the Hamlet girls, was healthy and inspiriting, and could not fail to do them good. It had supplied them with an interest outside the school, to match the clubs which kept the Town girls so busy, and had given them a new self-respect, a consciousness that they too were of some importance, which was a distinct advantage to them.

So far, the Hamlet Club was doing well. But could it in any way affect the relationship of Hamlets and Town girls? Could it ease the difficult position and bring about a better state of feeling in the school?

Cicely was doubtful. At present she could not see how it could help. Matters would have to go on as they were. She could add to her friends' enjoyment, but she could not make them more friendly towards the Townies, nor the Townies more tolerant towards them. And this term the Town girls, and particularly the members of the Dramatic Society, were too deeply engaged in their preparations for the Easter play to have time to notice Outsiders. All their thoughts were filled with the play, with costumes, with learning parts, with scenery, and there was such constant talk of it that the Hamlets grew utterly weary of the subject, and did not scruple to say so.

Miriam was working steadily now with matric. in view. To her mind, Hilary, Maud, Madeline, and several others were risking their success in the exam. for the sake of the play. She could not tell them so, but she kept rigidly to her own work, and could only be persuaded to dance in Darley's barn on Saturday evenings. But Cicely and Dorothy expressed themselves freely, and informed Geraldine and Alice that they were sick of the very name of the play, and would certainly not come to see it if they heard much more about it. Cicely's opinion was that Hilary and her set were a little mad on the subject, and that if they allowed themselves to think so much about it something would be sure to happen at the last moment to spoil it all.

In her calculations and hopes, Cicely had not counted on finding an ally. But others besides herself had perceived the unsatisfactory state of matters and her fruitless efforts to help. Margia Lane, coming fresh to the school, saw its shortcomings more clearly than Miss Macey and the members of her staff could do. The state of things had come about gradually, almost unnoticed by those who had been there all the time. It was only to a new-comer that the division in the school was so clearly defined.

Margia saw, listened, and formed her own opinions. She had the full confidence of the Hamlet Club, and understood its president's hope that it might help to bring about a better state of feeling. When Cicely had done her part in organising the Hamlet girls, in giving them new life and a sense of their own position, Margia quietly did what she could to help.

She gave private painting lessons to Madeline Bradshawe, whose eye for colour and line was so true that the lessons were a pleasure to both herself and her teacher. As the spring days lengthened, Margia occasionally invited her to spend an hour sketching in the wood before taking the train home, and Madeline was delighted to take advantage of such an opportunity.

One day, as they sat painting in the outskirts of Kingswood, Margia said suddenly, ‘There’s something I very much dislike about our school, Madeline—something in which it fails terribly and comes far behind other schools.’

Madeline’s pride in her school was wounded to the quick. ‘What *do* you mean, Miss Lane? I thought we were a fairly decent school. We’ve an awfully good hockey record, and we always do well in exams., and you know how proud Miss Macey is of the Essay Club. What’s wrong with us?’

‘I know you won’t like me to say it,’ Margia said gravely; ‘but it ought to be said, so I’m going to risk it. There’s a want of public spirit, of school sentiment, which is a great pity.’

Madeline laid down her brush and stared at Margia blankly. ‘Miss Lane, we’re all as proud of our school as we can be; we’d do anything for it!’

‘No, you wouldn’t. Excuse my contradicting you, but it’s true. You won’t give up your personal prejudices, your class pride, for the sake of making the school a united whole. How can a school prosper, divided as ours is? Where’s the school spirit, when a third of the girls are shut out of everything from which you can exclude them?’

‘Oh!’ said Madeline, and reddened slowly, ‘is that how it strikes you? You’ve only come lately; is that how it looks outside?’

‘That, and a good deal more. I don’t want to say too much; but to make money, or birth, or position the thing by which you judge a girl is surely small and snobbish in the extreme. Those things are only accidents. You might have been born in Green Hailey or Terriers, with parents who had to struggle to feed and clothe you, and yet would make still greater sacrifices for the sake of your education. You might have had a mother who worked till late at night to make it possible for you to go to school, and had little ones to bring up as well. What right have you to despise girls because their circumstances are not as good as yours?’

Madeline said nothing, but sat staring before her into the green depths of the wood.

‘Some of them are quite as nice girls as some of those among your friends,’ Margia said gravely. ‘I know most of them, and there are several whom you would be fortunate to have as friends. A few are no doubt rough and untrained compared with yourselves; but surely you would take a higher stand if you met these few half-way and helped them, than in holding aloof as you do at present?’

‘You do make us out to be cads, Miss Lane,’ said Madeline in an injured tone. ‘You must admit it was rotten for us when all these other girls came into the school.’

‘It was difficult, no doubt; but I think you might have faced the situation in a different way. To turn your back on a girl like Miriam Honor because her parents are not wealthy is ungenerous and silly, and makes your position absurd.’

‘Oh, Miriam’s all right,’ Madeline conceded. ‘But she’s quite the best of them.’

‘She’s the oldest—that’s all. You hardly know the others. They are different from you in many ways; they have very different homes and interests, but you would find much in them that is good. They are intensely loyal to one another and to their club, and they are a plucky set, used to meeting difficulties and conquering them. Don’t you think those qualities might help the school, if they were devoted to it instead of merely to their club?’

‘What do they do at that club? We’ve tried to find out, but no one will give it away. I suppose you know all about it, Miss Lane?’

‘I can’t “give it away” either. They are very much in earnest, and very devoted to one another. The school ought to be united, Madeline. The division can’t fail to be harmful. These girls would be a strength to your clubs and to the school itself.’

‘I wouldn’t mind some of them—Miriam, and that new girl, Cicely Hobart, for instance.’

‘Cicely is not a Hamlet girl in your sense of the word, and neither is Dorothy Darley. It is purely a matter of choice in their case. But you won’t get any unless you open your doors to all and give up your exclusive ways.’

‘But *I* can’t do that, Miss Lane. I couldn’t make the others do it if I wanted to.’

‘You could do a great deal; that’s why I’m talking to you,’ Margia said coolly. ‘If you agree that the state of things is wrong, you could speak out and let your feeling be known.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t!’ Madeline cried sharply. ‘All the rest would hate me; they’d think me so queer! I couldn’t do that, Miss Lane.’

Margia went on with her painting in silence.

Madeline glanced at her doubtfully. ‘You don’t think I ought to, surely? Think how awkward it would be! You’re asking me to stand up for the Hamlets and get them decently treated. But how could I? Why should I?’

‘Then you admit they are not decently treated?’ laughed Margia.

‘I know you think they’re not. Well, why should I do it?’

‘If you see that the thing is wrong, it becomes your duty to fight against it,’ Margia said gravely.

‘You really think so?’ Madeline looked very serious. ‘Well, I’ve no intention of doing it. It would be very uncomfortable.’

‘Think it over carefully,’ Margia advised. ‘If you’re satisfied that things are all right, you can leave them as they are. But if you feel they’re wrong, can you still be content to leave them? Wouldn’t it be rather “rotten,” as you girls would say?’

Madeline’s lips tightened. She saw the point of view, but was not prepared to act upon it.

Margia gave her some instructions about her painting, and they worked in silence for a time. But suddenly she said, ‘The light is gone; we’d better leave it now. Madeline, I’m tempted to tell you something, but it will be betraying Cicely’s confidence. Yet I’d like you to understand. Will you promise to let it go no farther if I tell you?’

‘Of course I will. I won’t tell a soul;’ and Madeline listened eagerly as she put away her brushes.

‘Do you know these children’s motto for their club?’

‘Yes. “To be, or not to be, that is the question;” ’ and Madeline laughed slightly. ‘It makes their club-name a pun. Who originated it? Cicely Hobart, I suppose; she seems at the bottom of most of their plans.’

‘Yes, it’s her doing. But did you know the motto had a secret meaning, known to club members, but carefully kept from you?’

‘No?’ and Madeline grew interested. ‘What does it mean, Miss Lane?’

Margia very gravely explained the idea of choice which lay behind the motto, and Madeline’s eyes widened.

‘Is that Cicely Hobart’s doing too?’

‘Yes. Cicely knows what it is to choose, and so does Miriam. Their hero is Hampden, of course; they have a fervent admiration for him. He made his choice, didn’t he?’

‘Miriam was awfully pleased with last week’s essay-subject,’ Madeline said thoughtfully. ‘We’re doing the Stuart period, you know, and we had to write an imaginary incident in the life of some leading character in the war of 1648. Hilary wrote a soliloquy of Charles’s, the night before he was beheaded. Maud wrote Strafford’s opinions when he saw Laud being led to Tower Hill—that it would be his turn next, and so on. Mine was a scene in the Long

Parliament. Miriam Honor wrote a conversation between Hampden and his daughter Ruth—she trying to persuade him to pay the "Ship-money" for the sake of peace and quietness, he giving his reasons why he had to refuse, and all that he expected would result from it. It was rather well done. Miss Macey liked it awfully.'

'Oh, I heard about it!' Margia laughed. 'So did Cicely, and she worried Miriam till she got hold of it. Then nothing would do but that the rest of the club must hear it. So, as Miriam couldn't be at their last meeting, she allowed Cicely to read it, under protest, while the others were resting'——

'Resting? What did they want to rest for? Had they been running races? What *do* they do at those meetings, Miss Lane? We're all keen to know.'

Margia laughed in some dismay. 'Oh, well, it's a long way to Darley's Bottom for some of them, you know!' she said hastily. 'Well now, Madeline, I heard that essay, and'——

'Were you there? Do you go to their meetings? But you don't belong to the club, Miss Lane?'

'I do—unofficially. I'm certainly eligible. Totteridge is a hamlet, isn't it? In that essay Miriam expressed very fully the reasons why you'll find you can't keep silence once you are convinced the state of the school is wrong.'

Madeline looked at her with startled eyes. 'How?' she demanded.

'I'm only suggesting you should do what Hampden did. Give up your own way, your own ease and comfort, and stand up for those who need it, who are *not* being properly treated, who do need a champion. That's what I want you to do. It's possible, as you say, that Hilary and the rest of your friends may resent it, or may mock; but you have a grand chance now, if you'll only take it, to make a brave stand for the sake of these other girls. They are all younger than you, and you can help them. Even if you fail, you'll have earned their gratitude, and shown them there is one Town girl big-hearted enough to appreciate their position and wish to improve it. The club motto applies to you, as it does to everybody. Can't you rise to it?'

Madeline shook her head, her lips tightly compressed, and hurried on with her preparations for departure. 'I don't think so,' she said at last. 'I don't want to. It would be horrid, and they'd all hate me. Besides, they'd laugh, and I'd hate that. I may agree with you that things are wrong, Miss Lane; but I'm not the one to put them right. Thank you for the lesson. Good-night!'

'Now I wonder?' mused Margia, as Madeline went down the hill to catch her train.

CHAPTER XXIII.
A NEW CHAMPION.

'My Hamlets want something new!' and Cicely sat despondently down beside Margia one evening when dancing in the barn was over.

'Why? Have they learnt all the dances you know?'

'Oh *no*! We haven't had "Bluff King Hal" yet, or "Bobbing Joe," among the morris; and there are heaps of country-dances—"Step and fetch her," and "Brighton Camp," and plenty more. But they're all the same kind of thing. The girls aren't grumbling, but I'd like to give them something new before long. I do like starting new things!'

'Better than going on steadily with the old ones?' laughed Margia.

'Well, it is more thrilling, isn't it?'

Two days later Cicely greeted Margia with radiant face.

'I've had an idea! I've heard from my grannies, and they won't be home till May Day. Grandmother isn't strong yet, and they won't risk coming home to cold winds in March and April. So we'll have to put off our entertainment till after the holidays.'

'You seem very pleased about it.'

'Oh, well, I'm quite comfortable at Whiteleaf. But don't you see? We'll have a May Day dance for them—Old English revels, and a Maypole! It's just the new thing I was wanting.'

'A Maypole! You're getting ambitious in your old age, Cicely. The girls would like it, of course; but how could you manage it?'

'It's quite easy. We had one at school, and it could be fixed up in five minutes. It's on a stand, you know. Dorothy's awfully keen on it, and says their men will put it up in the barn whenever we want it. We'll have some morris days and some Maypole days. It will be a change.'

'Are you really thinking of it? Where is the pole to come from?'

'The Gaynors will send it from town. I'll see to that. And you'll be able to play "Come, Lasses and Lads," and "All Around the Maypole," and "Joan, to the Maypole away let us on!" We'll learn to sing them, and the rest can sing while the eight couples dance.'

'It would be very pretty. But aren't you a little extravagant? Do you feel at liberty to send for whatever you happen to want?'

'I feel at liberty to send for this, anyway,' Cicely said stoutly. 'The others will enjoy it too; it's not just for myself. We haven't spent so very much, Margia. The sticks and bells cost hardly anything.'

'And the fancy dresses?'

'Oh, that was Dorothy's doing! Besides, they only cost twopence.'

Margia laughed. 'Well, if you're going into it so thoroughly, why not have all the extra characters who belong to your morris? I've been reading it up, and I think we could manage it without too much trouble or expense, especially as we have the holidays before us.'

'What characters? I didn't know there were any.'

'The old morris men didn't go alone. They always had a crowd of followers—Robin Hood and Maid Marian, a fool, Friar Tuck and Little John, a bishop, a hobby-horse, a Jack-in-the-green, a beggar, and, I believe, a ragman, who carried any extra garments the dancers required.'

Cicely's eyes were eager. 'That's just what I want! There are quite a lot of Hamlets who don't belong to any of the "sides;" they couldn't come to practise, or they've joined the school since. I was afraid they'd think they ought to do the Maypole dance, and I'd rather give it to some who have practised more. It's a bit tricky, you know. We'll dress them up. What do they have to do?'

'Oh, march in a procession, and act about while the dancers are resting, and make fun, and supply a change from the dancing.'

'That's ripping! Now how can we manage the dresses? Dorothy's gardener will make us a Jack-in-the-green; he's most obliging. And their carpenter will make a hobby-horse if we tell him what it's like. The beggar and the ragman will be easy, but the others will need some making.'

'Suppose we leave them till the holidays. Robin and Little John will need green suits and bows and arrows, and Maid Marian some kind of milkmaid's dress. None of the things must be elaborate, or we'll spoil the whole effect.'

Cicely nodded. 'We're country dancers—village girls dancing on the green. Silks and satins would spoil it. Have you heard about the gorgeous dresses the Townies are having for the play? Maud is Rosalind, and she and Celia are going to have simply lovely costumes for the first act. Madeline Bradshawe is Celia, and Hilary is Orlando. They're making an awful fuss over their dresses.'

'You could borrow Touchstone's dress after she has done with it for your morris clown,' Margia suggested; 'and one of the foresters might lend you a green tunic for Robin.'

Cicely made a grimace. 'I'd rather not ask them. We'll try to make our own. They'd ask so many questions.—I say, Georgie, what's up?' as Georgie Gilks came flying up from the dressing-room and ran right into them.

'I've just heard Alice and Jelly talking,' Georgie panted. 'Have you heard—about the meeting of the school clubs last night?'

'No; what? What has it to do with us?'

'Nothing, as it happens, but it's interesting. I want to tell Mirry. Madeline Bradshawe called a special meeting; she's secretary of the United Clubs, you know, and Hilary's captain'—and at Madeline's name Margia turned eagerly to listen. 'Well, Madeline made a speech and proposed that all subscriptions to the clubs should be abolished, and that the clubs should be open to all members of the school—Hamlets as well as Townies. She said she thought it wasn't right that so many girls should be kept out of the clubs, and she'd like to see the school united, everybody joining in everything. Isn't she a brick?'

'Bravo, Madeline!' said Margia warmly.

'It was awfully plucky to stand up and say that to Hilary and Maud and the rest;' and Cicely's face glowed. 'I say! let's find Mirry and tell her.'

'That's how I felt too,' Georgie nodded. 'Where is she?'

'With Marguerite upstairs. But what came of it, Georgie? Did they agree?'

'Oh, no; the others wouldn't have it, of course. They voted on it, and two or three sided with her, but all the rest were against it. She argued that they didn't need the subscriptions, and had to spend the money on plays and dances at the end of the term; but they wouldn't make any change.'

'They're a horrid lot,' Cicely said lightly. 'But we don't care—now. We've got our club. We shouldn't have time to join theirs if they wanted us to. But it's shabby of them, all the same. It's nice to know that Madeline spoke up for us.'

‘It can’t have been easy,’ Margia said thoughtfully.

‘No; it would be horrid. She’s jolly good sport. I do like plucky things,’ Cicely said heartily.

Madeline’s action had no direct result at the moment. Her friends found her too valuable to lose, so they allowed her to keep her ‘weird opinions,’ while disregarding them completely. But the fact that she had spoken as she did won her the esteem of the Hamlet girls, and brought about a friendship between Miriam and herself, which they both shared with Margia, and which was helpful to them all.

During this term the division in the school was particularly acute, though fairly amicable, both parties being too busy with their own interests to care what the others were doing. The Town girls would much have liked to know what took place at the meetings in Darley’s barn, and tried hard to find out. But no Hamlet would betray the secret, and soon the Dramatic Society’s play absorbed all thoughts, and the Hamlets and their secret were forgotten. Rosalind, Celia, and Orlando were busy learning their lines or discussing their costumes all day long, whenever an interval in classes permitted, and many of the others were taking part as foresters, courtiers, or shepherdesses.

The Hamlets, on the other hand, were busy with their Maypole, which had given a fresh zest to the dance evenings, and ignored the elaborate preparations of the Town girls. A Maypole suggested a queen; so one evening voting-papers were distributed, and the result showed an almost equal number in favour of Miriam and Cicely. No one else stood any chance.

As soon as this was discovered Cicely sprang to her feet. ‘Girls, thank you awfully for voting for me, but I really can’t be queen, and I’ll tell you why. I’m master of ceremonies and managing director, and that’s enough for one person. Besides, I’m not old enough yet. We can have another queen next year, and there’ll be several more chances for me before I put my hair up. We couldn’t have a grown-up queen. But I do want Mirry Honor to be queen. She’ll be grown-up in a year or two; she’s over sixteen now, so this is her last chance.’ Miriam laughed. ‘And she’ll look the part far better than I should. I’m sure a May Queen ought to be tall and fair, and she’s both. I don’t say you should choose the queen just because of her looks, but I do think a yellow-haired queen is the proper thing, if you can get one reasonably. We’ve got one, and we must have her. Besides again, she’s the oldest of us, and you’ve known her far longer than you have me. You really want her, but you’re asking me out of politeness. It’s very nice of you, but I’d rather not this year, thank you. Now don’t let Mirry make a speech, or she’ll argue all I’ve said. Shall we call it settled? Then three cheers’——

‘Cicely, that *isn’t* fair! I protest! I’d much rather not, please.—I was only waiting till she’d finished, girls. I’ve heaps of reasons’——

‘Very good ones, no doubt. But keep them to yourself, my dear. We’re all quite satisfied. You ought to be pleased and proud. It’s an honour to your hamlet’——

‘Won’t you let me speak?’ cried Miriam, in mock indignation.

‘Not just now. Afterwards, as much as you like.—Girls, catch hold!’ And they caught hands and formed a cheering ring round the laughing queen.

Miriam blushed and protested to no purpose. There was much truth in Cicely’s words that many had voted for her chiefly because they felt the club owed so much to her. At heart they were all pleased to do homage to their original leader, and Miriam might say what she would, but could not shake their resolve. She was formally chosen to be queen when the time came, and was informed that on Maypole evenings she might stay at home and work for matric., as

she would not be required to dance. All she would have to do would be to sit on her throne and look pretty, said Cicely mischievously.

'Oh, but I want to dance; I love it!' cried Miriam ruefully. 'And it will spoil our "side." '

'Well, we'll give our morris and country dances first, so that our "side" can join with the rest. Then we'll crown you and bring in the Maypole, and you shall watch and look regal while we plait it and show what we can do with the ribbons. Now don't make any more difficulties. Dorothy and I are going to see to it all. But keep it dark from the Townies; we don't want them asking questions. Don't tell even Madeline Bradshawe.'

'I haven't told her anything. Our girls are so pleased to have secrets. They just love being questioned by the Townies,' Miriam laughed. 'But I shall feel an awful idiot, Cicely. I'd far rather it had been you. You wouldn't let me say so.'

'You think it would be more suitable for me to feel an awful idiot, I suppose? Thank you. But you needn't. You've got to pay for being the oldest, and the nicest, and the most liked, and the pret—— Oh, well, I won't say it, then,' as Miriam threatened Cicely with her morris staff. 'But it's true, and everybody knows it. I'm awfully glad we've settled it so nicely. It's just what I wanted.'

'Nicely! It's not what I wanted at all.'

'Besides, Mirry, there's another reason;' and Cicely spoke earnestly. 'You're a real Hamlet, and some people might say I am not. If they heard about it, and heard that I was queen, they might think I'd been chosen for—well, for horrid reasons, you know. Our girls don't know, but people might not believe that. I'm awfully glad it isn't Dorothy or I. We don't want anything of that kind even hinted at in our club.'

'I'd have enjoyed it all far more if it had been you,' Miriam insisted. 'Of course, it's not an important thing. It's only for your grandfather and grandmother and ourselves. There won't be any one else, will there? You'll promise? I shall feel funny enough as it is, but I couldn't stand it if there were other people present.'

'I don't know of any one else,' Cicely assured her.

'Well, if you invite any one I shall funk it, and you'll have to be queen yourself. So just remember,' Miriam warned Cicely.

CHAPTER XXIV.
DANCING IN THE WOOD.

The May Queen elect walked briskly through the wood, singing at the top of her voice, 'The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington.'

'Yet she was coye, and would not believe
That he did love her soe;
Noe, nor at any time would she
Any countenance to him showe.

And when he had been seven long yeares
And never his love could see:
"Many a teare have I shed for her sake,
When she little thought of mee."

—Oh, how you made me jump!'

The president of the Hamlet Club stepped out from behind a big beech-tree. 'Now, Mirry Honor, you'll sing that to my grannies on May Day. We'll need something between the dances. Only dancing would get stale. You'll sing that, and "Why are you wandering here, I pray?" That's pretty, and real Old English.'

'Cicely, I couldn't! I've never sung to people. I'd be awfully nervous.'

'Then it's time you began. Nervous? Nonsense! My grannies will love it. Marguerite will sing, too, after you're sitting on your throne, and Dorothy will play.'

'And what are you going to do? Don't say you're trying to get out of doing anything, you fraud!'

'Oh, I'll recite some Robin Hood ballad. I can't sing for anything, if any one's listening. I say, Mirry'—and Cicely's eyes danced—'I've made up a ballad. Would you like to see it? Here you are, then. You know that air we're so fond of, "Early One Morning"? It may have words, but I don't know them, so I've invented some. See if you don't think they're just like a real old ballad;' and she tossed a notebook to Miriam, and sat down on the projecting roots of the old tree.

It was Easter Saturday, and the Hamlet Club was celebrating the return of spring by a dance-meeting in Hampden Woods—their first open-air dance since the winter. The woods in spring had filled Cicely with rapture. A carpet of violets and primroses, delicate wood-sorrel and anemones, had sprung up in some, while others remained red-brown below but took on wonderful shades of misty green above. Birds were calling from every tree, larks carolling over every open field. The honeysuckle had budded in January; but now, late in March, every bush was touched with green, and even some of the trees showed colour. The ground was still wet in many places, but there were dry glades in the woods, where pine-needles lay thick, and in one of these the club had planned to meet. The early Easter had necessitated a few days' holiday, but there still remained a fortnight of school before the last evening, when the much-hoped-for play was to be given.

Miriam read the scribbled words, laughing now and then.

‘Early one morning, as I alone was roaming,
Out in the beechwood green, I met a maiden fair.
“Good day, fair maid!” said I.
She curtsied in reply.
Thus out in the beechwood green, I met my lady fair.

Early one morning when all the birds were calling,
Down in the primrose dell, I met my lady fair.
“Say, do you love me, dear?”
“Not yet, kind sir, I fear.”
Wand’ring in the primrose dell, I met my lady fair.

‘I should hope not, indeed! He was in a hurry. I wonder she answered so politely.

‘Early one morning, when all the woods were sunshine,
Close to the lonely pool, I met my lady fair.
“Dear, do you love me yet?”
“Kind sir, I’m glad we’ve met.”
Waiting by the lonely pool, I met my lady fair.

‘Cicely, you’re a wretch! What do you know about this kind of thing—what *he* said, and what *she* said? “I’m glad we’ve met,” indeed!’

‘Well, you were singing about love, and shedding tears, and being coy,’ Cicely protested. ‘And look at your “maiden fair” that you’re so fond of. I think it’s disgraceful—“Who will say but maidens may kiss for recreation?” ’

‘Oh, well, the poor man was feeling rather bad just then! And I didn’t make it up. Your lady’s getting on pretty fast. I see she was waiting for him, too,’ Miriam laughed; and read on:

‘Early one morning, when larks on high were carolling,
High on the grassy hills, I met my lady fair.
“Dear, do you love me well?”
“Sir, I can hardly tell.”
Walking on the grassy hills, I met my lady fair.

Early one morning, when red the sun was dawning,
Out on the windy heath, I met my lady fair.
“Will you be mine?” said I.
“Kind sir, I’d like to try.”
Riding on the windy heath, I met my lady fair.

Early one morning, when all the leaves were reddening,
Close to the bramble hedge, I met my lady fair.
“Dear, will you marry me?”
“Yes, please, kind sir!” said she.
Hiding by the bramble hedge, I kissed my lady fair.

‘Cicely!’

‘Well, why not?’ the poetess protested in an injured tone. ‘They were engaged. Why shouldn’t they? It was quite proper. In fact, I rather thought he’d have done it the verse before.

But as they were on horseback, perhaps it wouldn't have been very comfortable. I don't know. I've never tried. Still, I think he was very good to wait so long.'

'I like your rhymes,' Miriam mocked. 'Morning and dawning and roaming and calling are pretty awful; but reddening is hopeless, Cicely.'

'Quite good enough for a ballad. Their rhymes are always groggy. And anyway, the second and fifth lines *always* rhyme.'

'Very brilliant!'

'And the third and fourth. I think a good deal of it rhymes,' Cicely said indignantly.

Miriam laughed. 'There's a lot of it,' she said; and read on:

'Early one morning, when dark the snow was falling,
Down in the sheltered vale, I met my lady fair.
"Dear, when shall we be wed?"
"When you please, kind sir!" she said.
Sheltered in the lowly vale, I met my lady fair.

Early one morning, with song and feast and dancing,
Up in the ancient church, I met my lady fair.
"Will you be mine?" said I.
"I will!" was her reply.
Thus up in the ancient church, I wed my lady fair.

'Well, I'm glad they managed it at last. I was afraid it was going to end with tears or a funeral, as they so often do.'

'Oh no; I think that's horrid. You see, it goes right through the year, bringing in all the seasons, and all the country about here—woods, and hills, and heath, and blackberries, and old churches, and primroses. "The lonely pool" is in Penn Wood, you know. You can go on as long as you like—as long as you can think of new places for them to meet, and other things for them to say. It's like Consequences, or "When I was a schoolgirl," going on and on.'

'It will fit the tune all right, but it sometimes sounds funny to read.'

'So do all these ballad things. They're frightfully irregular. You have to fit the tune to the words. Look at that one you were singing just now!

'She pulled off her gowne of greene,
And put on ragged attire,
And to faire London she would goe,
Her true love to inquire.

And as she went along the high road,
The weather being hot and drye,
She sat her downe upon a greene bank,
And her true love came riding bye——

As he would in a story, of course. But look at those lines! You have to sing them. They sound cracked when they're read.'

'Yours goes more evenly, I admit,' Miriam laughed. 'I like your ballad. May I copy it?'

And Cicely unsuspectingly gave her leave.

They danced among the beech-trees, and Margia, coming up the path fiddle in hand, applauded the pretty scene. Shafts of sunlight filtering among the gray-green stems fell on the bare heads and tumbled hair of the 'morris men,' and made a brilliant mosaic of the rich red carpet under their flying feet.

'That's the real thing—better even than the barn,' she said. 'It will lose a great deal by being shown in a hall, Cicely. In the woods or on a village green is the proper place.'

'But it was danced indoors, too. When mummers and morris men came to a big house they used to be invited to dance in the hall.'

'I suppose so. But it's prettier out of doors. How is your baby "side" getting on?'

'First rate. They're as smart as anything. They've picked it up even more quickly than I thought they would. Bobs is a fine little dancer, and Babs is another.'

'They love it, anyway,' Miriam laughed.

'Are you girls going to the Dramatic Society's play on the tenth?' Margia asked. 'They're working very hard over it. They were going to rehearse both to-day and Monday, as they won't have much time once the exams. begin.'

'I don't know; we haven't decided;' and Cicely dropped on the fallen leaves to rest. 'Some of them don't want to, but I think it would be only decent. They're counting so much on it, and they want a big audience. I think we ought to go and clap, and make a good show for the sake of the school. They've made us all sick of it, of course, and talked of nothing else all term, and it's rather shabby when they know it means nothing to us. But, all the same, I think it would be only decent to go. They were pleased when we went to the match.'

'We don't want to please them. Why should we?' argued Dorothy.

'Well, perhaps we needn't, but we needn't be mean, and I think it would be mean to stop away from such a big thing as the play. Besides, it would look so bad, and there'll be heaps of strangers there. And I'd like to see the play! I'm curious about Hilary's Orlando. She ought to do it rather well. Celia will be all right, too, but I know Maud won't make a good Rosalind. She's scornful enough; *that* will be all right! But Rosalind is nice at times, and I don't believe Maud can do it.'

'Who is taking Jaques? He wants some doing.'

'Violet—Maud's sister in the Fifth. She's rather good. I've heard her at elocution. I shall go, Margia; the rest can do as they like. I want to see it.'

The rest of the Hamlets had still not made up their minds when the end of the term came. The exams. told the tale of overmuch attention to the play, for several girls in the Sixth had to be content with second-class certificates, and Miriam easily left them behind. Hilary, Maud, and Madeline ruefully decided that next term they must work in earnest till matric. was over, and Miriam, hearing them, looked dubious. Matric. called for more than two months' steady work, in her opinion.

The play was, of course, to be the crowning event of the term. School was to break up in the morning, and the performance to take place in the evening. Miss Macey had lent the large school hall, and was to be present with her staff. Friends and relations had been invited by the Dramatic Society, and a number of tickets had been sold to outsiders as well. The Hamlet girls had been invited to fill the gallery, joining those Townies who were not taking part, and the performers were keenly anxious that they should be present.

For the last few days nothing was talked of but the play. The Hamlet girls grew so weary of the subject that they began to hint they would boycott the performance.

It was on the very day before the great evening, the last day of the term but one, that Dorothy went flying upstairs before school, and hurled herself on Cicely and Miriam as they stood talking in the hall.

'I say! have you heard? What *do* you think?'

'Whatever's up, Dorothy? You look quite scared!'

'Well, I am! It's the most awful thing. You evidently haven't heard;' and she dropped, panting, on a form. 'Oh dear! I'm getting too old to run upstairs!'

'You shouldn't do it, then. Suppose you tell us what's the matter?' Cicely said unsympathetically.

'Maud's got measles! *Rosalind!* And the play's to-morrow! And all those people coming!'

'Oh, I say!' gasped Cicely. 'What will they do? How awfully awkward!'

'That is hard lines! Poor Hilary!' Miriam exclaimed.

'She's crying like anything in the Sixth room.'

'Hilary *crying*?'

'No end. Miss Macey had a letter, and told her and Madeline as soon as they arrived. She's awfully worried, too. I heard Alice telling Geraldine. They all looked like collapsing. You see, it knocks out Violet too. She can't come, of course.'

'Rosalind and Jaques! They can't have the play, that's all. No one could take Rosalind at a day's notice; and then there's Jaques as well. Oh, it is hard lines, after all their planning! They'd hoped so much from the play. Well, I am sorry!' Miriam said soberly.

'Even if any one could take the parts, they haven't got the costumes, for Maud had taken them home, and of course Miss Macey wouldn't hear of any one wearing things from an infected house. Oh, they'll have to give up the play altogether—for the present. They may give it at midsummer.'

'Yes; but what about to-morrow night? Will it be possible to put off the people?'

'How can they? It's not as if they had a week. And they've sold tickets to outsiders. If only relations were coming it might be possible to stop them; but I heard Miss Macey say it would be quite out of the question. They'll have to get up some kind of concert. Won't they feel awful?'

'It's dreadful for them,' Miriam said soberly.

'It does serve them right, you know, for the way they've fussed about the play,' Cicely remarked. 'But I'm sorry for them, all the same. They'll need to have something, but it will fall frightfully flat. I think we'd better not go! It would only make them feel worse;' and as the bell rang for prayers they took their places, looking very sober, and noting Hilary's red eyes and Madeline's distress as they appeared.

A heavy depression settled upon all, and even the Hamlet girls felt subdued and worried. Nobody cared much about exam. results or class places. What was to happen to-morrow night? How were the guests to be entertained? That was the all-important question.

At midday Hilary appeared in the Fourth Form room, looking white and anxious, her eyes swollen with crying again, a paper in her hand.

'Look here, girls! You've heard about this awful business. Can any of you help us? We've got to get up some kind of concert for these dreadful people. I wish they'd all refused. We'll put off as many as we can, but some are sure to turn up. It will be a wretched fizzle, anyway; but we must do the best we can.—Cicely Hobart, you recite. You'll help, won't you? For the sake of the school, you'll help us out of this awful mess?'

A startling idea occurred to Cicely. She looked round hurriedly, but saw that neither Dorothy, Marguerite, nor Georgie had had the same thought. Would it be possible? It would save the situation, and be a glorious triumph for the Hamlet Club, if it could be carried through.

She looked up at Hilary, her eyes ablaze.

'Would you like us to do the whole thing for you—to provide two hours' entertainment for your visitors?'

'*Cicely!*' cried Dorothy.

'What *do* you mean, child?' and Hilary obviously thought Cicely demented.

'Just that. Would you like the Hamlet Club to give you an entertainment instead of your play? I don't promise it, mind! I don't say they will, but I could ask them, if you like.'

'You couldn't! You and the Hamlets? What could you do?'

'That is the question! I can't tell you. You might not want it, and then our secret would be told for nothing. But if you say you'd like it, I'll consult the others. You'd better ask Madeline Bradshawe,' as Hilary stood uncertain and bewildered. 'And ask Miss Lane if she thinks you should accept the offer. She knows all about it. But tell her we haven't told you what we mean to do.'

'I'll ask her, and tell Madeline,' Hilary said slowly. 'But it sounds simply weird! Do you really mean that you Hamlets would undertake the whole evening? And would it be as good as the concert we could get up at a day's notice?'

'Ask Miss Lane. Ask her just that,' Cicely advised. 'But let us know as soon as you can, for we'll have heaps to do if we take it on. Ask Miriam Honor what she thinks too.'

'Now, girls, will you?' she demanded as soon as the door had closed on Hilary. 'Come here and talk to me!' for Alice and Geraldine were all attention.

'I will, ma'am!' said Marguerite promptly. 'I think it's a ripping idea, and would get the school out of this hole better than anything else. Mirry will say the same.'

'Unless she funks her part! She didn't bargain for *this*!' jerked Dorothy. 'Cicely, why should we? It gives away our secret and makes the whole thing known. Why not let them have the concert? Besides, how could we'——

'Townies present, Dorothy!' Marguerite sang out.—'Keep back, you girls, or the proposal is off, and you can have your concert without any help from us. We've the right to talk it over without any of you listening.—I'll keep them back, Cicely. You convert Dorothy and Georgie. I'm with you all through, and I'll bring Mirry up to the scratch if she wants to funk. But she won't; she's sporty. She'll play up, though she never expected anything like this;' and Marguerite kept the interested outsiders at bay, while Cicely argued and pleaded with her Hamlets.

In the midst of the discussion Miriam arrived, startled and eager to hear the truth for herself. 'Cicely, what a splendid idea! Can we really carry it through?'

'If we can get the girls! Help me to work them up to it; they're shy.'

'Well, so am I! You won't expect me to'——

'Townies present!' sang out Marguerite.

'Of course we'll expect you to, Mirry! Now don't be silly!'

'Oh, but I can't! I couldn't, Cicely. I'd feel an awful freak.'

'Oh no, you won't! But help me with these girls. Does Hilary really want it?'

'Miss Lane told her she'd be lucky if she could get us to do it, and they've gone to consult Miss Macey. Hilary's getting quite keen, and Madeline says she'll love us for ever if we'll

only get them out of this mess,' Miriam laughed. 'But our secret will be gone, Cicely.'

'I know. I'm sorry; but we'll have to sacrifice something for the sake of the school.'

'Bother the school!' grumbled Dorothy. 'I don't see why we should do so much for the Townies.'

'Only because we can,' said Cicely, 'and if we can we ought to;' and Miriam nodded. 'Besides, it's what we'd like them to do for us if we were in a mess. And it isn't for them only. It's to help the school. You haven't a scrap of school spirit, Dorothy. I know you've only been at school a few months, but you ought to be picking it up by this time. You ought to be ready to do anything to help the school.—Come and interview the others, Mirry!'

'But could we be ready? Wouldn't we need a lot of preparation?' argued Georgie.

'This afternoon's a holiday, for the match against that Uxbridge team,' Cicely reminded her. 'We could meet at Darley's and arrange everything.—Well, Hilary?'

'Miss Macey would like to see you and Miriam, Cicely. And Madeline and I think that if you really will do the evening for us, it will be jolly decent, and we'll be forever grateful. Miss Lane says she knows you can, and it's just a question if you will. If you will, we'll be awfully obliged to you.'

'I can't say till I've seen the girls.—We'd better go to Miss Macey, Mirry. I guess we'll have to explain to her, but we won't tell any one else. It must be a surprise.'

'Look here, Cicely,' Miriam said anxiously as they ran down to Miss Macey's study, 'must you have all that May Queen business? Couldn't we do without it? Oh, don't look like that!' as Cicely's face expressed her horror. 'But couldn't we'——

'Why, Mirry, it will be the grand climax! We couldn't have anything better; people will just love it.'

'*I* sha'n't! I didn't know you were going to let me in for anything like this! Before the whole school—it makes me shiver with fright!'

'Oh, don't be a goose! I didn't know either; but we must play up and do our share.'

'Well, there's one thing I want. I shall be awfully uncomfortable, but I won't back out. I'm not looking forward to it; but I'll do my share. But I'd like mother to come, Cicely. She was awfully pleased when she heard you'd chosen me, and she'd like to see the dancing. We'll all be taking part, and she'd be left alone at home. Would it be possible, do you think?'

'Why, of course! We'll give her a seat on the platform.'

'No, she wouldn't like that. But if she might be in the crowd somewhere—it won't be evening dress, will it?' in sudden dismay.

'Oh no, not for everybody. A few may dress; they would have done for the play. But most won't. They won't think it's important enough. Yes, Mirry, of course she must come. I'm sorry I didn't think of it. I'll tell Miss Macey. Now I wonder what she'll say?'

CHAPTER XXV.
THE HAMLETS TO THE RESCUE.

‘An exhibition of morris and country dancing?’ and Miss Macey began to look less worried. ‘Yes, Cicely, that sounds very nice; but can you do it, my dear? Aren’t you promising rather much? Who has taught you?’

‘I learned at my other school, and I’ve been teaching the rest. We dance every Saturday in a barn at Darley’s Bottom. Really, Miss Macey, we can do it! Ask Miss Lane. She plays for us, and she knows.’

‘Indeed, Miss Macey, it will be quite all right!’ Margia said eagerly. ‘The dances are exceedingly pretty, and the girls know them thoroughly. You can leave the evening to them with perfect confidence. The question to me is rather whether Cicely and her club are willing to make their secret public for the sake of helping the school out of this dilemma. They have kept it to themselves all winter, and I know some of them will be unwilling to surrender it.’

Miss Macey looked at Cicely, who said at once, ‘I know. I haven’t got them to agree yet. But I’ll do my best, and I think they’ll come round. Miriam and Marguerite and I can do a good deal when we work together. Georgie won’t refuse if Mirry asks her, and she’ll bring Edna in. That only leaves Dorothy, and she’s too sporty to stand out and spoil the “side.” And if our “side” is willing, the others will probably give in, even if they grumble.’

Miss Macey raised her eyebrows. She recognised the technical terms of the morris-dance, and realised that Cicely knew what she was talking about.

‘But you can’t dance for two hours, Cicely; you’ll all be dead!’ Margia remonstrated.

‘We haven’t enough of dances either. Oh, I’ve thought of that, and I see how we can manage. But I thought we might have an interval to rest, and perhaps the girls out of the play would like to provide refreshments, as they’ll be taking no other part.’

‘I’m sure they would do that. I’ll speak to Hilary about it. Then, if you really think you can carry it through, Cicely, we’ll leave the whole evening to you gladly. It will be a great relief. You’re sure you can undertake it?’

‘If the others will agree. I can’t promise till I’ve asked them, Miss Macey. But if we may have a meeting in the library, I’ll let you know in half-an-hour.’

‘Very well; tell us as soon as you can. Certainly you may have your meeting, if you can collect your girls. Say I gave orders you were not to be disturbed.’

As Cicely was hurrying away, Margia called her back. ‘Cicely, you could borrow Touchstone’s dress for your clown, and a forester’s for Robin. They won’t be needed now. Shall I arrange it for you?’

‘Oh yes, if you will! I’d rather have had our own; but any one will understand we’ve had no time to make things. Couldn’t we have Celia’s shepherdess frock for Maid Marian too? I haven’t seen it, but it must be just the kind of thing.’

Margia nodded, and went off to interview Madeline; while Miss Macey consulted Hilary as to refreshments. With all the spirit taken out of them by the disaster, the Town girls had no heart for the concert they had proposed, and were glad to wash their hands of the whole affair. The evening was sure to be a failure, anyway. What the Hamlets could do, nobody but themselves seemed to know, and Miss Macey was careful to keep the secret. But if they could do anything—why, let them! That was the general attitude of those outside the Hamlet Club.

The positions in the school were reversed, and the Town girls found themselves emphatically the outsiders, with nothing left to them but the care of the refreshments. Outside the closed library door all was vague, uncertain, and very disheartening.

Inside there was excitement and heated discussion. The sacrifice of the secret touched the Hamlet girls to the quick, and they were at first unwilling to make it. Dorothy argued vehemently that the Town girls deserved no such consideration, and a section of the club agreed, and cheered her loudly. Cicely let them have their say, then made a spirited appeal to their school loyalty and pride, feelings she had been struggling to foster among them.

'For the sake of the school—not for the Townies, nor Miss Macey, nor any one else,' she insisted. 'The school's in an awkward corner, and we can help it out. If we refuse, we sha'n't be worth anything;' and, backed strongly by Miriam and Marguerite, she gained their consent at last.

'Edna, run and tell Miss Macey it's all right!—Now, girls, we've heaps to arrange!' and the decision once made, they were all eagerness and excitement, full of questions as to method.

They separated for dinner, and the Hamlets gathered to picnic in groups and discuss the plans put before them. Miriam and her friends talked them over as they lunched in the dairy, and Cicely and Dorothy went in to dinner with inscrutable faces, and refused to answer any questions.

'It will be quite all right,' Cicely said coolly. 'You needn't worry; just leave it all to us!' And they could get no more from her.

While the hockey-team played their visitors from Uxbridge, and their friends crowded into the field to cheer them on to victory, the Hamlets met to draw up their programme, and be sure that everybody understood. The heaviest burden of organisation lay upon Cicely, the task of transporting the necessary properties fell to Dorothy, and Miriam went home looking extremely sober over her share. It seemed to her that she had far too much to do; but Cicely would not let her off any item she had promised, and Miriam was, as Marguerite had said, not one to back out of a bargain. But she was dreading it, and neither her mother's pleasure nor the delight of the little ones could comfort her or relieve her nervousness. It was a relief to find, when the following evening came, an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation abroad, which helped her to face the ordeal.

The big carriage from Broadway End, with Cicely inside, called at Green Hailey to pick up Mrs Honor and all the family, Miriam wearing her long school coat over her gray dancing-dress, as did Cicely.

'There's just one thing I'm sorry about,' Miriam said as they waited for Mrs Honor. 'We're expecting Dick home this evening for the holidays, and it's rotten for him to come and find everybody out. At first mother said she wouldn't come; but I begged her to. But we feel bad about leaving Dick.'

'Wouldn't he come too? Miss Macey would be delighted.'

'He hasn't arrived. I've left a note telling him where we are, and he may get here in an hour; but'——

'He could come after us. It would be jolly for him to see you crowned!'

'Oh!'—Miriam shivered—'don't talk about it! I'm as nervous as I can be. If I disappear at the last minute you'll know I've run away.'

'I'll hold on to you, then! Mirry, you goose, you don't really care, do you? There's nothing to be frightened of.'

‘That’s all very well! You aren’t going to be made a silly of before the whole school!’

‘Well, of all the ungrateful things! But I wish your brother could come. It’s hard lines for him to be the only one of the family left out. Couldn’t he cycle after us? He might be late, but he’d see some of the fun.’

‘No bike,’ said Miriam briefly.

‘Mine’s at Mrs Ramage’s. Would he care to ride it? Mirry, add a postscript telling him to fetch my bike and come after us. But if he arrives in the middle of a dance, you mustn’t get flustered and put us out, you know.’

Miriam laughed. ‘I don’t know that he’d come.’

‘Give him the chance, anyway.’

So a line was added to the letter, and then they climbed into the carriage and drove away.

‘Did you spend the evening ironing your collar and cuffs and hood?’ Miriam laughed. ‘I guess most of our “side” did.’

‘No; I got Mrs Ramage to do them, while I rubbed up my recitations. I hadn’t expected to need them for a fortnight, you know. It’s rather hard on us altogether. I shall ask Miss Macey to explain.’

Bobs and Babs were in a state of excitement, which the long drive increased. But Cicely, true to her resolve, insisted on leaving the carriage in Wycombe and walking to the school. Her connection with Broadway End was still a secret to all but her own ‘side,’ and it would not do for a Hamlet girl to drive up in a carriage and pair.

When the guests entered the big hall that evening they found the seats ranged round the walls, instead of in rows across, much to their surprise. More than one row of chairs was needed, for curiosity as to the mysterious entertainment by the girls from the villages had brought almost as big an audience as would have come for the much-vaunted play. The Town girls, in white evening dresses, hung over the gallery railing, wondering what the Hamlets were going to do, and hoping the evening would not be a failure, but rather expecting it. Miss Macey had said she knew all about it, however, and she seemed fairly happy, they decided; while Miss Lane, wearing a white dress and tuning a violin, appeared to be actually looking forward to what was coming.

‘I didn’t know you played, Miss Lane!’ and Madeline paused beside her.

‘I don’t; I only fiddle. I’m not a violinist, but I can do this kind of thing.’

‘What kind of thing?’

‘You’ll soon see,’ laughed Margia.

Madeline sighed. ‘You’re all so jolly mysterious about it!’ and she went to help Hilary with the refreshments.

A class-room opening off the hall had been set aside as refreshment-room, and here were prepared cakes and sandwiches, coffee and lemonade, awaiting the interval later in the evening. Another big class-room had been claimed by Dorothy, and each Hamlet girl was directed thither by Georgie, who, wearing her hat and coat as usual, waited to catch them as they arrived. Miriam Honor, bareheaded, but wearing her long coat also, stood at the door and refused admittance to any but Hamlets.

‘What are you doing in there, Mirry?’ and Geraldine and Alice addressed her inquisitively. ‘Are you Hamlets dressing up? I say, what a joke! You’re not going to give a play, are you?’

‘Why have you done your hair in two plaits, Miriam? It suits you. You should always do it like that,’ Geraldine said approvingly. ‘You’ve got too much for one, you know.’

Miriam laughed. ‘Thank you for the advice. Now you’d better go back to your gallery, or you won’t get seats. We’re going to begin.’

‘Let’s have a peep, Mirry; there’s a duck! Don’t be mean! We won’t tell! I can hear bells tinkling—heaps of bells! What *are* you going to do with bells, Mirry? Won’t you let us look? Well, show us what your dress is like!’ And Miriam was thankful that Margia saw her difficulty, and came and drove them off.

‘Please tell Miss Macey we’re almost ready! And—Margia, wouldn’t you like to sing those horrid songs instead of me? I’m feeling awfully bad!’

Margia smiled and shook her head. ‘Don’t worry, Mirry; you’ll get on all right. But don’t be nervous; it’s silly.’

‘I’m so nervous that I’m positively shaky!’ and Miriam laughed tremulously, and slipped into the room to lay aside her coat and put on her white hood and bells.

The hall was very full when Miss Macey rose. The platform held the particular guests of the staff and several officials connected with the school; but one chair, next to the head-mistress’s, was carefully reserved, for whom not even Miss Macey knew. In the dressing-room Cicely switched off the light, and cautioning her troop to silence, opened the door an inch so that they could hear.

In a brief speech, to which the excited and now somewhat nervous Hamlets listened breathlessly, Miss Macey explained the disaster which had befallen the play prepared by the Dramatic Society. Some of the guests had not heard the news, and looked at one another in dismay. They would not have come for a mere schoolgirl concert, which seemed the only substitute they could be offered at a day’s notice. But Miss Macey’s explanation half-reassured them, while stimulating their curiosity to the highest pitch.

‘In this awkward predicament one of the school societies, known as the Hamlet Club, has very generously come to our help,’ she said, and Cicely flashed a look of triumph at Dorothy and Georgie. ‘One of the school societies!’ That was good to hear, after the assumption by the Town girls that their clubs alone were worthy of the name. And from Miss Macey herself!

‘I know very little about the entertainment they will offer you,’ Miss Macey continued. ‘But under the circumstances we have thought it best to accept their offer. Their president tells me’—and the girls in the dark class-room giggled and nudged Cicely—‘that the proceedings will take the form of Old English village revels. This, I think, sounds promising, and is certainly suited to our position in a town which is the centre of so large a village district. The girls who will entertain us to-night belong to the villages and hamlets scattered over the hills and valleys which lie so close to us. To many of us the hill-country is only a delightful picnic ground for our summer outings, nature rambles, and excursions in search of the picturesque and the historically interesting, with which we are so richly favoured in this neighbourhood. But these girls of the Hamlet Club claim the hills as their home, and are proud of the fact. It is fitting that they should show us their idea of old village revels, and I look for a very interesting and enjoyable evening. I now invite the Hamlet Club to take possession of the hall and show us what they can do.’

‘Isn’t she a dear?’ murmured Cicely. ‘If we’d made up every word ourselves it wouldn’t have been different.’

‘How did she know just what we wanted?’ Miriam whispered in reply. ‘Margia Lane has been talking to her, I expect.’

‘Girls, are you ready?’ as the applause died away; and, in the expectant silence which followed, Margia stood forward and sounded the notes of a processional morris. ‘Bells firm?

You've all got handkerchiefs? Then remember—any order you like. And no muddles or mistakes.—Now, Mirry, don't be nervy; there's no need. They'll love it;' and Cicely threw open the door and led the way down the passage left for them between the chairs.

They circled the hall in single file, a long line of waving white handkerchiefs, jingling bells, and many-coloured costumes. To the spectators there was at present no reason or order in the dresses; and though the girls were greeted with hearty applause, they knew that the general feeling was one of bewildered anticipation. So far the audience merely perceived that the girls were apparently going to dance and that they were in fancy dress.

First came a dainty gray-clad Puritan maid, with a white hood on her loose dark hair; then a 'boy' in green smock and slouch-hat; then a girl in white, with white ribbons in her hair; then one in dark-blue gymnasium dress, with white blouse and tossing green girdle; then a girl in a coloured dress and sun-bonnet, with white lace fichu and little apron; another in gym. costume; and one in a coloured print frock and white pinafore, with a wreath of flowers in her hair—Dorothy's second 'side.' Because the dresses were dainty and the effect pretty and bright, and because the girls were obviously excited and enjoying themselves, the audience clapped sympathetically and wondered.

The music broke off suddenly; there was a moment's kaleidoscopic confusion, when colours and costumes seemed hopelessly mixed up, and then each girl found her place, and the seven 'sides' stood revealed, each set dressed alike, every girl with bells jingling on her ankles and a white handkerchief in each hand.

The applause broke out again, hearty and delighted, as the spectators began to understand. The various 'sides' were discussed—the Puritans, the green 'boys,' the white girls, the sun-bonnets, the gym. set, the pinafores—and the first was generally held to be the daintiest costume, if not the best for dancing in.

'Bravo! Very pretty! Now let's see what they can do!' Margia played the air of 'Laudnum Bunches,' and the 'sides' stood waiting, ready to jump on the last beat. Then Cicely and Miriam danced forward, hopping and jigging, handkerchiefs waving; then Dorothy and Marguerite; and then Georgie and Edna, and their counterparts in the other 'sides.'

'Go it! Dance up!' cried Cicely. 'Capers! Higher, Marguerite. All in!' And as each 'side' formed a ring, raised the right foot and threw up both hands, and shouted, round after round of delighted applause broke out.

'Good! Good! Let's have that again! Give us some more!' shouted one and another. The last of Miss Macey's anxiety vanished, and she settled down to enjoy herself.

The 'sides' fell into column again, and as Margia struck up 'Blue-eyed Stranger,' the handkerchiefs waved once more, and the second dance began.

CHAPTER XXVI.
ALL AROUND THE MAYPOLE.

'I'm enjoying this down to the ground,' said a beaming father in the front row, as Margia led the dancers into 'Country Gardens.'

'Very pretty; very pretty indeed,' a lady agreed; and Mrs Honor, watching Miriam proudly, heard and smiled.

The last of Miriam's nervousness vanished during 'Trunkles.' The hand-striking movements of 'Country Gardens' had roused the audience to enthusiastic applause, and the girls were flushed and delighted with their appreciation. As Cicely and Miriam advanced in the first movement of 'Trunkles,' stamped, and struck their feet smartly together, Cicely glanced at her 'opposite's' face and murmured, 'Not feeling bad any more, Mirry?'

Miriam laughed and shook her head, and when the other pairs had advanced and retired, and she and Cicely had to change places, meet, and cross again, she replied, 'Not a bit now; it's all just a joke.'

'Yes, a big joke. They're enjoying it. We'll have some sticks next. It is a bit of fun, isn't it?' And then they had to give place to Dorothy and Marguerite. The slow and then the quick capers, and the usual ring, brought the dance to an end, and the 'sides' broke ranks and ran to throw down their handkerchiefs at Margia's feet and catch up their staves.

During the 'dibbing' movements of 'Bean-setting,' while the staves were thumping the floor in time to the music, a fair-haired schoolboy of fifteen slipped through the crowd and found a place by his mother's side. Mrs Honor smiled a welcome, and his hand sought hers.

'This is ripping!' Dick murmured, under cover of the music. 'Where's our Mirry? I say, I wouldn't have believed she could dance like that.'

'She's very fond of it, and so are the babies. You'll see them presently.'

'Are the kiddies to dance too? What a joke! And which is the president, whose ripping bike I've borrowed?'

'There, with the dark curly hair; the leader of the Puritans.'

Dick nodded, and watched the pretty scene intently, as 'Bean-setting' gave place to 'Rigs o' Marlow.'

'How have the Hamlets learned all these jolly dances?' murmured Alice, as she and Geraldine hung over the gallery railing, wide-eyed and astonished. 'Who taught them? How do they do it?'

'They're going off!' cried Geraldine. 'What will they do now, I wonder?' as Cicely led away her 'side' to the tune of 'Morris Off,' and each set in turn fell into line.

Flushed and panting, they dropped on the floor to rest, and all began to strip off the bells from their ankles. Then a laugh and a murmur of questions, and a giggle from the gallery, heralded something new, and from the class-room came the motley horde of miscellaneous characters, who, as Margia had said, always accompanied the old morris men. Miss Macey raised her eyebrows in astonishment. She had not expected the idea to be carried out with such thoroughness.

First came a sword-bearer, dressed in Lincoln green, and carrying aloft a rich pound-cake impaled on his sword-point, sword and cake decorated with coloured ribbons.

‘It’s that girl Maggie Puddiphat, from Terriers,’ murmured Geraldine. ‘Doesn’t she make a jolly boy? I suppose that’s one of the foresters’ dresses from the play?’

The sword-bearer was followed by Robin Hood and Maid Marian arm-in-arm, he wearing green doublet and hose and a feathered hat, and carrying a bow; she in a short-skirted pink-and-white shepherdess’s costume, with a big straw hat tied with ribbons. Then came Jack-in-the-green, invisible inside her wicker-cage covered with holly and ivy; and then Little John, a very tall, fair-haired girl in green, and Friar Tuck, wearing a monk’s robe and cowl. A ‘beggar’ and ‘ragman’ in tattered garments, and the fool, in Touchstone’s borrowed suit, brought up the rear, while the hobby-horse pranced up and down the procession. The fool carried a switch with a small bladder on the end, and belaboured the mummers and the hobby-horse, whose quaint form, with horse’s head and tail, and flat framework supporting the trappings which concealed the feet of the rider, caused much amusement among the girls upstairs.

The procession circled the hall, amid the cheers of the spectators. Then the cake was lowered and cut by Maid Marian, and slices distributed among the girls in the gallery by Robin Hood, Little John, and the fool.

‘It’ll bring you good luck. Oh, you mustn’t eat it! You must keep it for a year. It’s very lucky,’ Robin remonstrated.

The sword-bearer and Maid Marian handed round the cake among the guests on the platform, and Miss Macey and Margia accepted their slices with gratitude, and promised to keep them for luck.

‘Why are they taking off the bells?’ asked Madeline. ‘Why don’t they keep them on? They’re so pretty.’

‘Yes; but this is a country-dance. You only use bells for the morris,’ Robin explained.

The ‘sides’ were mixed up this time, as the dancers formed in two long lines; but there was some method in the arrangement, for six green-smocked ‘boys,’ six girls in gym. tunics, and six Puritans took the men’s parts, and the eighteen girls from Miriam’s, Marguerite’s, and Dorothy’s ‘sides,’ the women’s. Margia struck up a rollicking country-dance, and ‘London is a fine Town,’ ‘Flowers of Edinburgh,’ and ‘The Triumph’ went with a swing.

For ‘Gathering Peascods’ several rings of ten were formed, and Miriam Honor and her partner, a white-frocked girl with flying red hair, fell out to rest. The rings swung round, broke up, clapped hands in the centre, swung their partners, formed a small circle inside the large one, and broke up finally, and dropped on the floor to rest.

The music changed suddenly from violin to piano, from dance to ballad, and the astonished audience saw a slim, yellow-haired Puritan rise and stand beside Miss Bates. A hush fell, and Miriam, nervous again and rather white, began to sing, ‘The Bailiff’s Daughter.’ Her voice was untrained but very sweet, and after the first verse she gained confidence and sang the quaint old words bravely and clearly.

‘Is that our Mirry?’ murmured Dick Honor, in genuine amazement. ‘I didn’t know she could sing.’

‘She’s always singing about the house, you silly boy,’ said his mother.

‘Oh, well, of course. But not like *that*.’

The tumult of applause astonished Miriam, and Cicely murmured, as she returned gladly to her place on the floor, ‘You’re ripping, Mirry. Have you got an encore? They’ll want it, you know. What will you sing?’

Miriam's eyes danced. She saw a chance to pay Cicely out for forcing such prominence upon her. 'I've something here, if you think I really must,' she said demurely, and in answer to Margia's raised eyebrows went forward to the piano and pointed to one of the Old English airs. 'I'll sing that, please, Miss Bates. I have the words here;' and she took a slip of paper from the book.

At the first note of the accompaniment Cicely raised her head suspiciously. She caught Miriam's laughing eye, and the colour rushed into her cheeks. 'Mirry, you wretch!' she murmured, and sat with bent head, wishing she could escape.

But so long as nobody knew, it did not matter. No one could possibly guess. Nevertheless, she felt, as she confessed afterwards, 'very funny' as the words of her ballad rang through the hall. As a joke she had thought it quite passable; but sung before an audience it seemed childish and silly, the rhymes even more feeble than before. She was relieved when it was over, and Miriam bent to say a word to Miss Macey before returning to her seat.

Then Cicely wished herself still farther away, as Miss Macey rose to make an explanation. She understood, she said, smiling, that the words which had just been sung had been written by the president of the Hamlet Club, which, the singer would like to explain, accounted for the 'groggy rhymes.' And there was a ripple of laughter and then a round of applause.

'Mirry, you *mean* thing! You wretch, to give me away like that!—Come along, Dorothy; give them something else to think about.' And Cicely and Dorothy caught hands and ran out into the middle of the floor, paused in a graceful attitude, and then danced off in the pretty movements of 'Rheinlander,' and the ballad was forgotten, as all attention was centred on the two dainty figures. 'Rheinlander' was followed by a minuet danced by Miriam and Marguerite, with all the grace which the sturdy morris lacked; and then Cicely's 'baby side' stood forth and danced a morris-dance by themselves, to the great delight of the spectators. They were all tiny children of seven or eight years, dressed in white smocks and white slouch-hats, and their dancing, in 'Shepherd's Hey' and 'Constant Billy,' was loudly applauded.

Then Cicely stood up and recited the ballad of Robin Hood's rescue of Will Stutely, and Miriam followed with her second song, 'Why are you wandering here, I pray?' followed, since an encore was again demanded, by 'My lodging is on the cold ground.'

'I never knew Miriam Honor could sing like that,' Hilary murmured.

'She ought to have her voice trained; it's really good,' Madeline agreed. 'It seems to me we've been keeping some good things out of our clubs, you know.'

Hilary said nothing, but watched with sombre eyes as the 'morris men' put on their bells again and formed up for 'Bluff King Hal,' with its quaint little nod, its more serious movements, its marching with linked arms. 'How d'ye do, sir?' with its boxing, singing, and vigorous dancing, made a fine finish to the first part of the programme, and, as usual, proved a favourite.

The dancers were more than ready to rest, so the Town girls hurried down to hand round refreshments and to wait on the tired but happy Hamlets.

'Miriam, your songs were ripping;' and Madeline brought lemonade and sandwiches to the Puritans squatting in a ring on the floor. 'You ought to train your voice, you know. It's awfully jolly.'

'I'm glad you liked them. I was horribly nervous; but the lady president wouldn't let me off.'

'I should think not. And did Cicely really write that ballad? It was jolly good.'

‘Wasn’t she a rotter to give me away like that? Mean thing; it was an awfully shabby trick!’ Cicely grumbled.

‘Are we to have more dances after the interval? They’re very pretty; I liked that last one best, where you all sang.’

‘The second half of the programme will be *quite* different from the first,’ Cicely said solemnly, and winked at Miriam, who laughed and reddened, and went to speak to Dick.

Then Miss Macey came up to offer congratulations. ‘Have you really taught the others all these charming dances, Cicely? But where have you practised them?’

‘In a barn at Darley’s Bottom. We’ve danced every Saturday all through the winter, Miss Macey—by lamplight, sometimes. It’s been great fun.’

‘It sounds most romantic. I had no idea you were preparing such a surprise for us.’

‘Nobody knew. That’s the only thing we’re sorry about, that we’ve had to give up our secret. Please, Miss Macey, will you make an announcement for us before we begin again?’ And Cicely rapidly made some explanations in an undertone.

Miss Macey raised her eyebrows again. ‘But aren’t you rather ambitious, Cicely? Can you carry this through?’

‘Well, I’m rather afraid myself! But we’ll do our best, if you wouldn’t mind explaining, Miss Macey.’

So Miss Macey mounted the platform again. ‘I understand that we are now to see a representation of an Old English May Day. This sounds rather ambitious, I confess, and I really know nothing of how it is to be carried out. I will ask you to remember that our young friends have only had one day in which to make their arrangements, and as they had naturally not expected to celebrate May Day for a fortnight yet, their plans may be pardoned for being in a somewhat unfinished state. They are anxious, however, to provide as varied a programme as possible, so they have decided to venture on the further items we are now to see. I am sure your judgment will be lenient if anything should go wrong.’

The applause was sympathetic and appreciative. The audience had only looked for a continuance of the morris-dancing, and were delighted to know they were to be offered more novelties. Did a May Day imply a queen? Who would be chosen? But surely a Maypole would be necessary! How could the Hamlets set up a Maypole in the hall? How could they have a May Day without one?

Cicely and Dorothy, guided by Margia, had made simplicity their aim in their preparations, realising that anything formal or elaborate would be out of place. The result was an ease and spontaneity which made the next hour’s festivities seem to come on the spur of the moment, unrehearsed and unprepared.

Two long lines were formed, bells and handkerchiefs discarded. Margia gave the first notes of ‘Bobbing Joan,’ and couples danced up and down, swung and turned, ‘women’ curtsying, ‘men’ bowing gallantly. But suddenly the dance ended, and all gathered in an excited group, talking and laughing without restraint, paying no heed to the fool and hobby-horse, who pranced about outside the crowd. A name was shouted by some one and taken up by all, and the girls joined hands in a big ring, and danced gaily round a Puritan maiden, left alone in the centre.

Miriam, blushing and laughing, seemed to protest. Then, catching up her gray skirts, she dropped a curtsy towards each side of the moving ring. The dancers broke into lusty cheers, hats and hands and sun-bonnets waving, and the audience began to understand.

‘Apparently we’re to have a queen, anyway. Who is she? Why, it’s the yellow-haired girl who sang!’

‘Mirry Honor! Mirry Honor! She’ll make a pretty queen!’ And Mrs Honor blushed with pleasure, while Dick’s eyes grew round.

Miriam, with a gesture, seemed to beg the dancers not to leave her so much alone, and they clustered round her again. The ‘ragman’ pushed her way in, and then the spectators could hardly see what followed. Miriam herself only knew vaguely how matters were to be arranged. Before she knew it, her hood was snatched off, and somebody had taken possession of her long plaits, and was hurriedly unwinding them. The ‘ragman’ produced a brush, and without asking leave brushed out her thick tresses.

‘You can’t be a queen in pigtails, Mirry,’ Marguerite argued, when the victim remonstrated. ‘Now don’t say a word. No, you won’t look untidy—or silly. Take my word for it, you’ll look the part, that’s all.’

Unnoticed in the confusion, Cicely and Dorothy had disappeared. As the crowd acclaimed the queen, they had caught hands and run off to the dressing-room, followed by Robin Hood, Little John, and Maid Marian. Now they came hastening back, all bearing burdens.

‘Whew!’ whistled Dorothy, ‘if I had shiny hair like that I wouldn’t wear it in a plait. What heaps you’ve got, Your Majesty!’

‘If she feels shy she can hide in it; she doesn’t need a veil,’ Cicely laughed. ‘She’s got three times her proper share.—Now, Mirry, here’s your robe.’

They had brought a soft white robe, which looked very dainty, but had cost ‘about twopence,’ as Cicely said, and had been made by the sewing-maid at Darley’s Bottom. By the greatest good fortune it had been finished. Otherwise, as Dorothy said, they would have had to borrow Rosalind’s wedding-dress. It fell to the queen’s feet, covering her gray gown, but left her neck and arms bare, as the Puritan dress had done. A girdle was added, and a long white train from the shoulders. Then the crowd fell back in a big ring once more, and Robin Hood advanced and presented a sceptre twined with flowers. Little John brought a great bunch of daffodils, and Maid Marian a wreath laid on a cushion.

‘Kneel down, Mirry; you’re so long,’ said Cicely; and Miriam obediently knelt on the cushion placed before her.

Cicely, as president of the club and master of ceremonies, took the crown, of white narcissus since the hawthorn was not yet in flower, and laid it on her hair. Then she caught Dorothy’s hand, and Dorothy caught Marguerite’s, Maid Marian and her companions sprang to their places in the circle, and the ring danced cheering round the queen, who looked and felt much abashed, but stood bowing graciously and trying to seem as if she liked it.

‘Is that our Mirry?’ murmured Dick again. ‘Why, mother—I believe she’s pretty!’

Mrs Honor laughed. She had made the discovery long ago. A lady sitting near him heard and smiled.

‘I believe she is, Dick.’

‘I never knew that before!’ and Dick gazed at his sister in frank surprise. ‘I say, she looks ripping! I’m jolly glad I came.’

The audience and the girls in the gallery joined heartily in the cheers which hailed the queen, and applauded again as the ring broke up and the girls formed two lines leading to the platform. Bobs and Babs Honor, and their tiny white-smocked companions, ran forward with baskets of primroses and violets from the woods, and strewed them before the queen as she

came slowly up the hall, bowing to right and left. As she passed, the girls curtsied to the ground, and the green-clad 'boys' flourished their hats and bowed.

Miss Macey, understanding the reason of the empty chair now, rose to the occasion. She came forward, greeted the rosy queen with a kiss, and led her to the throne by her side. Miriam, very shy and almost overcome, turned and, sweeping her train aside, bowed to the cheering crowd below, to the audience, to the gallery. Then she sat down and buried her hot face in her flowers.

'I do feel a freak, Miss Macey. But Cicely wouldn't let me off. She's a frightful bully sometimes. I hadn't bargained for this when I promised. It was to be just for ourselves and her grandparents. But she made me stick to it.'

'She was wise. It has been a very pretty ceremony, dear, and you should feel proud. But what are they doing now? Whatever is happening over there?'

'They're going to dance, and I'm out of it. I can't have any more fun,' sighed the queen.

'The penalty of greatness,' laughed Miss Macey. 'Is this really a Maypole? Well, I never would have believed that could be done so easily! But who are the men?'

'From Darley's Bottom. They always put it up for us. They were to bring it in a hay-cart with the other things this afternoon, and keep it somewhere in the town till the last minute.'

'Well, well!' and Miss Macey watched and marvelled as the men from the farm carried in the Maypole and set it upright on its stand, its many-coloured ribbons flying. Then, amid cheers from the astonished audience, sixteen girls ran forward, caught up their ribbons, and stood ready to dance. Four were 'boys' in green smocks, four were Puritans in gray. With the 'boys' as partners, danced four girls from Miriam's 'side,' clad all in white; while four from Marguerite's, in coloured frocks and sun-bonnets, faced the gray Puritans. All the rest of the girls caught hands in a ring again and danced gaily round the pole, then stood grouped before the platform, but facing the dancers. Margia gave an introductory chord, and they began to sing 'Joan, to the Maypole,' 'Come, Lasses and Lads,' and later, 'All Around the Maypole.'

Cicely, the only Puritan not dancing, made her way through the singers and sat on the edge of the platform at Miriam's feet.

'I daren't look! *I'm* nervous now! There's going to be an awful hideous muddle in a moment,' she groaned. 'They'll never keep those ribbons right. Tell me when it happens, Mirry. I don't want to see it.—Miss Macey, you won't mind? We didn't expect to need it for a fortnight, you know, and they aren't nearly perfect yet.'

'It's all right so far, Cicely;' and Miriam watched intently. 'I believe they'll get through. They're being very careful. Edna never takes her eyes off her ribbon.'

'It's very pretty,' Miss Macey said warmly. 'The colours are quite orderly so far, Cicely. Don't be unhappy about it. Every one will understand if anything goes wrong. But I see no difficulty yet.'

'I can scarcely believe they'll manage to plait it properly. It's too much to hope for. But the farther they can get before the awful muddle comes the better, of course;' and Cicely sat with lowered eyes, in obvious dread of disaster.

A burst of applause made her spring up to look, and then she drew a quick breath of relief, for the 'plaiting' had been successfully accomplished, the ribbons were neatly folded round the pole in their correct pattern, and the girls stood in triumph.

'Bravo! Well done! Exceedingly pretty! Mayn't we see it again?'

But the girls would not risk a repetition of so difficult a venture, and Cicely had been too nervous to suggest it. A different dance around the pole followed, ribbons twisting gracefully

till they were wound into a brilliant canopy. Then they were successfully unwound, the big ring danced around the pole again, and the dancers threw themselves down to rest.

Several girls who had been singing now came forward, and forming in threes, danced 'Cochin China' and 'Three Meet.' Cicely, standing by the queen's chair, recited part of 'The May Queen,' and Dorothy tuned her violin and played a selection of Old English airs. Marguerite sang the Somersetshire folk-song, 'No, John; no, John; no, John, no!' and 'Drink to me only with thine eyes;' and a couple of fancy dances followed, 'The Glory of the West' and 'Cheerily and Merrily.'

'How tired those girls must be! You are working them too hard, I'm afraid, Cicely,' said Miss Macey.

'We tried to arrange so that every one should get time to rest. They're used to dancing, you know.'

'But it's getting late. Isn't it time to—— Ah! Is this the close?' as Margia struck up 'Sir Roger.'

Cicely nodded and laughed, and ran to claim Maid Marian for her partner, and lead her to their place at the head of the long lines. Miriam's foot was tapping in time to the music.

'I want to dance! I *don't* like being left out. I love "Sir Roger" so.'

'Wouldn't they let you and me join in?' laughed Miss Macey sympathetically. 'I find it hard to sit still myself.'

'Oh no! They wouldn't like it. Besides, I couldn't in this hateful—I mean, this silly long dress and train.'

'Then you'll have to be content to be an onlooker for once. This is an excellent finish to a very excellent evening,' Miss Macey said heartily. 'You and your club have given us a very great treat.'

'I'm glad we've made no awful muddle, anyway. We had so little time to prepare.'

'Yes; I think you were very plucky to face such an undertaking at a day's notice. I shall say so presently;' and Miss Macey waited for the romping dance to end.

When at last Cicely and Maid Marian found themselves in their places again they faced inwards suddenly and took hands. The others did the same, and the big ring was formed once more. The president led them in a farewell cheer; then they all dropped on the floor to rest, and Miss Macey rose.

It was late, and her speech was short. Many of the Hamlet girls had long distances to go, and she was anxious not to keep them longer than was necessary. She was relieved to hear from the May Queen that arrangements had been made for them to go in parties so far as possible, and all would have company for the greater part of their lonely roads.

'But I could not let them or you go without expressing our warm thanks for this delightful and most original evening. We have had many surprises and a very pretty ceremony.' Here the queen blushed again. 'Considering the short notice we were able to give—only one day, let me remind you once more—it seems to me marvellous that there has been no hitch in the proceedings. I understand that the entertainment we have been privileged to see to-night has been prepared for a private celebration of May Day; but as our friends naturally expected to have a fortnight still for preparation, they might well have been excused an occasional failure. That there has been no failure says much for the advanced state of their arrangements, and I am sure we all congratulate them very heartily. I would like to emphasise one point, which seems to me worthy of particular mention. All we have seen, the dancing and merrymaking, has been the treasured secret of the Hamlet Club all through the winter. The secret has been so

jealously guarded that though it was known to so many within the club, no whisper has reached any one outside. We did not know what they were doing. I am afraid some of us never inquired. This secret has been generously yielded up for the sake of the school, and I am sure you will appreciate the public spirit thus shown. In your name I tender our thanks to the president and members of the Hamlet Club. Will you join me in three hearty cheers?'

'Three cheers for the May Queen!' shouted Marguerite shrilly at the first opportunity.

'Three cheers for Miss Macey!'

'Three cheers for the school and all of us!' and it seemed that the 'morris men' had plenty of breath left in spite of their exertions.

Then the crowds broke up, and there was confusion indeed, and much talk and laughter. The Town girls crowded round the excited Hamlets, begging to be allowed to examine the Maypole, the costumes, and the accessories for the morris-dance. The May Queen would have fled into retirement, having had quite enough of her prominent position; but Miss Macey detained her, and she had to stand and receive compliments and congratulations which made her cheeks burn and set her looking frantically for Cicely to come and share her honours. But Cicely and Dorothy were hard at work urging their triumphant 'sides' to disperse, and Miriam had to carry her weight of honours alone.

'I didn't know you, Mirry,' was Dick's greeting when at last he was allowed to rescue her. 'I'd no idea you could look so imposing.'

'Imposing! I've felt a perfect freak all evening,' was the queen's ungrateful rejoinder.

The big hay-cart which had brought the Maypole was crowded with girls, and sent off, with a parting cheer, on a round of visits to distant hamlets. Marguerite's aunt had come down from Penn to take her home in a cab, and several more from that neighbourhood were packed in, on condition that they walked up the hill to Terriers. Margia undertook to convoy the girls for Haslemere and Totteridge, extending her own route slightly for the purpose. Dorothy was driving home, and could give several friends a lift; and Georgie and Edna, in a big farm wagon from Kingshill, carried a large and very noisy party.

Mrs Honor had disappeared as soon as 'Sir Roger' was over, with her little ones and the rest of the babies, and Dick cycling alongside. The carriage from Broadway End awaited them at 'The Red Lion,' and she reached Green Hailey some time later with only one out of the six still awake, and that one of course Babs. At each home a sleepy baby was lifted out and handed to its mother, and the carriage drove back to the station to fetch Cicely and Miriam, who were coming by train.

Miriam sank on the cushions with a tired sigh. 'I'm glad that's over. It was rather an ordeal, but Miss Macey seemed pleased.'

'Everybody was pleased. It was worth giving up our secret for. I don't think even Dorothy regrets it now.'

'It ought to make the Townies more friendly,' Miriam said thoughtfully. 'If they keep us out of things after this it will look rather bad. I should think they'd be ashamed to.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' Cicely said soberly. 'Yes, of course, it ought to help.'

'I thought perhaps that was partly why you did it.'

'No; I was thinking of the school and the mess they were in, and that we could help if we would. I really never thought of what might come of it. Once we'd decided, there was no time to think of anything but our plans. There seemed so much to arrange. It was just a rush. We'll see if anything comes of it. At least, we've shown them we can do something. They can't

despise us now. And we've made the club known and well thought of. Oh, I'm glad we did it! But I'm jolly tired. I'm going to sleep all to-morrow to make up for it.'

'And on Saturday we meet in Darley's barn to talk it over.'

'I'm coming to hear what your mother thought of it, too. She may have heard what the people round her said. I'd like to know if she was pleased. Good-night, Your Majesty!'

CHAPTER XXVII.
THE SUB-COMMITTEE.

It was the last day of April, and Margia sat at her cottage door putting finishing touches to a sketch of the entrance to Kingswood, where the green shade of opening buds was beginning to show among the smooth stems of the beeches. School was to begin on the 2nd of May, but she was not expecting to teach this term. Her sister had returned from her long holiday in good health, and was in Wycombe to-day making arrangements with Miss Macey. Margia was looking forward to summer days in the woods, which were growing into greater beauty every day. Miriam had shown her and Cicely where the primroses were biggest, where wild hyacinths spread under the trees, where the earliest hawthorn would be found. On every hand Margia saw studies, and was eager to get to work.

But to-morrow was May Day, and she had promised to spend the afternoon at Broadway End. To-day Cicely expected her grandparents home; to-morrow the Hamlet Club would meet to celebrate May Day. Margia laughed as she thought of the surprise awaiting them at Broadway End, for the secret had been kept, and the girls only knew that they were to meet at Darley's Bottom or Green Hailey, and go together to the scene of the revels. They were to dance and crown the May Queen for their own amusement this time, and for the entertainment of their president's relations, who had been away from home all winter. They knew no more, and speculation was busy as to where the celebrations would take place. Some looked for another barn, others for a garden or green, till a heavy shower on May Day morning put an open-air dance out of the question.

Margia looked up at the sound of horses' feet, then laid down her brushes in surprise, for Hilary and Madeline, on horseback and attended by a groom, were coming towards her gate. She had heard that Madeline was to spend some days with Hilary during the holidays; but what had brought them to call on her she did not know. Then she laughed, for Cicely had promised to see her that morning, and had said perhaps she would ride, as the roads were too muddy for cycling. She had made progress in her riding lessons during the holidays, and was hoping to ride with her grandfather when he came home. Margia found herself hoping Cicely would arrive while the others were there.

She met them at the gate. 'Good morning! Are you looking for me?'

'Yes, Miss Lane. We want to see Cicely Hobart, and nobody seems to know exactly where she lives. We were told to go to a cottage in Whiteleaf; but the woman said Cicely had left a week ago, and she wasn't at liberty to give us her new address. So we went on to Green Hailey, but Miriam was out. Then we tried Dorothy Darley, and she wouldn't tell us either. She said she'd have to ask Cicely's leave. You know where she lives, don't you? Why does she make such a mystery about it?'

'For reasons of her own, no doubt. I'll tell her you want her, but she's busy just at present. Her grandparents, with whom she is now living, are expected home to-day, and to-morrow the Hamlets are celebrating May Day. Perhaps she would invite you. Or you could see her at school on Thursday.'

'We want to see her before school begins. We're a deputation from the school clubs to the Hamlets; but we supposed we must see Cicely. She represents the rest.'

‘Undoubtedly. I’m expecting her here this morning, but I don’t know what time she’ll come. She wants to give me some final instructions for to-morrow’s revels. They are making a few changes in their programme. I’ll tell her you want to see her, and ask her to arrange for some time to-morrow. This afternoon she is going to meet her grandmother.’

‘We have to be in town to-morrow,’ Hilary said ruefully. ‘We’re going to lunch with friends, and won’t be back till five. Would to-morrow evening be possible?’

‘Are you on the ’phone? Then if Cicely doesn’t come this morning, I’ll ring her up when I’m in town this afternoon and see what we can arrange.’

‘Ring her up? Is Cicely on the ’phone?’ cried Hilary.

Margia laughed in some dismay. ‘She uses it, anyway! I’ll do my best for you, Hilary.’ And Hilary and Madeline rode away, puzzled and unable to forget those careless words.

Before they reached the corner, however, they heard Margia calling them, and, looking back, they saw a sight that filled them with amazement—Cicely Hobart, in neat brown habit and cap, seated on a brown pony, riding up to the cottage, followed by a groom. An incredulous look flashed from Hilary to Madeline, and, speechless with amazement, they turned and crossed the green to meet her.

Cicely was greeting Margia gaily. ‘I’ve had a glorious gallop down the Amersham road! We struck it near Holmer Green, and had it all to ourselves—not a soul in sight. The gorse is in full flower, Margia. You should go and paint it. I’m going to beg grandfather to ask you to paint some sketches for my bedroom, like those on the staircase. I’d be awfully proud of them.’

‘Cicely, here are some friends who have been inquiring for your address,’ said Margia.

Cicely turned quickly. At sight of the elder girls’ astonishment her eyes danced, and she knew her secret could not be kept much longer. But she was determined not to tell any Town girl until her Hamlets understood.

‘You didn’t give it them, I hope? Thanks awfully!’ as Margia shook her head.—‘Good morning, Hilary! That’s a jolly horse. I like Madeline’s better, though.’

‘They’re both Hilary’s,’ Madeline laughed. ‘I’m staying with her. You look as if you were enjoying the holidays, Cicely.’

‘I’ve had a jolly time,’ Cicely admitted, her eyes dwelling approvingly on the horses; for, thanks to the groom’s comments on every horse they met, she was beginning to form opinions on the subject.

‘We didn’t know you could ride!’ Hilary’s remark was almost a question.

‘Didn’t you? Ah, well, you see, some people don’t know everything!’

‘Oh, Hilary, don’t set her off! You know what she is!’ cried Madeline; and Margia shook her head reprovingly at Cicely.

‘I really didn’t mean to say anything rude that time,’ Cicely said hastily. ‘But honestly, Hilary, you do know very little about some of us Hamlets. Did you want to see me to-day?’

‘Yes,’ said Hilary swiftly, to cover her unfortunate remark. ‘We’re a deputation from the United School Clubs, Cicely, to ask if you and the others of the Hamlet Club will join us and make yours one of the school clubs, too. We’re going to adopt Madeline’s suggestion and abolish our subscriptions, if you’ll open your membership to any of our girls who care to join. We hope you’ll join some of our clubs.’

‘On equal terms?’ Cicely asked bluntly. ‘You won’t make our girls feel uncomfortable and outside things? You’ll be friendly?’

‘If you welcome us, we’ll welcome you,’ Hilary said frankly. ‘I see now that the way we’ve behaved must have seemed pretty mean. Miss Macey’s been talking to us. But it was jolly awkward for us, and I suppose we took the wrong way at first. Miss Macey says the way you helped us the other day gives us a good chance to make a fresh start and try to have things pleasanter all round. She says it will be better for the school, too, and we care a good deal about the school, you know. It was when I saw you were willing to give up your secret to help the school that I began to feel we wanted your help in our clubs. You’d refused to help before, and it made me wild, for I knew you could do it—play hockey, and act, and so on. It riled me to think you’d stand aside and let the school go without your help. But now’——

‘It was on principle!’ Cicely said quickly. ‘You were keeping half the school outside. You had no right to pick and choose whose help you’d have. I knew the best thing—the only thing—was for the school to be united, and I decided not to help until it was.’

‘Well, will you join in now? If we throw open the tennis and cricket and swimming clubs, will you join and play up, all of you, and let us pick our teams from the best players? And if our girls want to join your Hamlet Club, will you let them?’

Cicely looked at Hilary thoughtfully. ‘It’s a big thing. I can’t possibly answer for the others. And I’d have to talk it over with Miriam before proposing it to the club. She’s our queen, and we mean her to have a kind of authority all this year. I’ll consult her, and let you know.’

She looked at Margia and laughed. ‘I suppose all our secrets will have to go now! If I tell the Hamlets everything, there’s no reason why other people shouldn’t know. But the Hamlets must come first. That’s only fair. Margia, don’t give me away, please! I’ll tell them myself and in my own way.’ She turned to Hilary. ‘Could you come to our May Day revels to-morrow afternoon? I could consult the others as soon as they arrive, and tell you then.’

‘Where?’ asked Hilary ingenuously. ‘For we’ve a luncheon engagement in town, and won’t be back till the afternoon. Where would we have to come to?’

Cicely’s eyes danced mischievously. ‘Could you be at Risborough station at three o’clock?’

‘No; not till after six, I’m afraid. We’re coming home by the five o’clock train. It goes on to Risborough.’

‘Bother!’ and Cicely looked thoughtful. Then she said quickly, ‘Well, it can’t be helped! You’ve seen it all, anyway. I’ll consult the others, and I’ll keep Miriam and Dorothy and Marguerite till you come. You come by that train, and we’ll meet you, and you can talk it over with us. Then we can have things settled before school begins.’

‘Well, we’ll do that, then,’ Hilary said reluctantly.

‘And you won’t tell us where we’re going?’ Madeline asked, with eyes full of amusement. ‘You expect us to come without leaving word where we’re going? Suppose we don’t get home safely? They won’t know where to look for us!’

Cicely laughed. ‘I won’t let anything happen to you! Now I can’t stop any longer. I have to get home to change for lunch, and then go to the station.—Margia, I’ve seen Georgie and Edna, and they’ll rise to the occasion—*you* know! Mirry hasn’t guessed. No one’s said a word about it. But they’re all awfully pleased with the idea.’

‘Would you like to see my—— But better not, perhaps. If it waits till to-morrow, she can show you herself.’

Cicely nodded. ‘I’d love to see it, but it will be jollier if every one brings a surprise. Well, good-bye till to-morrow!’ and she rode away towards Wycombe.

Hilary and Madeline went thoughtfully homewards. There was evidently something not yet understood about Cicely Hobart. No ordinary Hamlet girl rode a pony like that. They were deeply puzzled, but realised that the next evening would bring an explanation.

At Cicely's suggestion, but unknown to the May Queen, some changes had been made in the programme for the celebration. One of these gave opportunity for another pretty ceremony, which so overwhelmed Miriam that she hardly knew where to look or how to face her loyal subjects.

When the queen, crowned with hawthorn and carrying a great bouquet of white and purple lilac, had taken her seat on one side of the big hearth, opposite Mr and Mrs Broadway, the dancers disappeared into their dressing-room, and returned bringing gifts for presentation to Her Majesty. Miriam had known nothing of this, and was taken aback and almost overcome.

Cicely, with the coming summer in her mind, brought a handsome tennis-racket, Dorothy a book, Marguerite a collar of beautiful old lace from among some treasures left her by her mother, Georgie a rabbit, and Edna a basket of fresh eggs. Margia presented a framed sketch of Hampden Woods, at sight of which the queen gave a cry of delight. The other girls brought gifts of various kinds, many mere trifles, but no one had consented to be left out. Those who had nothing else brought flowers, till the throne looked like a bower, with wood-hyacinths, lilac, and early roses heaped about it.

When all the gifts had been presented, Mr Broadway produced his own and his wife's offerings, explaining that if the ceremony were repeated next year, the same would be given to the queen then chosen. On Mrs Broadway's behalf, he laid at Queen Miriam's feet a volume of Tennyson's poems, and on his own he presented her with a gold medal and chain, the locket inscribed on one side, 'May Queen, 191-,' and on the other, in tiny lettering, 'Queen Miriam was crowned at Broadway End by the Hamlet Club as its First Queen, 1st May 191—.'

'A little memento of a very enjoyable afternoon, and a delightful welcome home to England;' and he cut short her shy thanks, for, taken by surprise, she hardly knew what to say. 'I beg you to wear it continually, my dear. It will remind your subjects of your authority. When your year of office is over, we will present a similar gift to the next queen, if you will permit us to see the coronation.'

'Mirry will have to crown her—and be crowned with forget-me-nots herself, of course!' Cicely added. 'Now here comes the Maypole! Girls, three cheers!' And they caught hands and danced around the pole; while Miriam sat nursing her rabbit, surrounded by flowers, the racket at her feet, her eyes continually wandering towards the lace, the books, and the picture.

On the wall above her throne hung a large framed photograph of the queen in her robes and crown. It had been a surprise to the Hamlet girls when they arrived, and had been much admired in the intervals of the dances. It was an excellent likeness, and made a very pretty picture.

'That's another of grandfather's jolly ideas,' Cicely explained. 'He wrote and told me to make Mirry go and be taken in all her grandeur, and he's had three done—one for us, one for her mother, and one for Miss Macey to hang in the school-hall. And he says he'll have the same done every year, and present one to the school and one to the queen's mother, so that by the time we're old and gray there will be a regular gallery of them, and all the old May Queens will be able to bring their grandchildren to see what they were like when they were young!'

'It suggests a procession of bath-chairs!' laughed Dorothy.

Hilary and Madeline reached the station in a state of curiosity, and even excitement. Where was Cicely? She had promised to meet them. But she was not to be seen, and no one was waiting except a handsome carriage and pair. As they hesitated, the man came up and inquired if they were guests of Miss Hobart's. Hilary could only stare, but Madeline had presence of mind enough to answer. As they sank on the cushions she murmured, 'It's all to match—the pony—the 'phone—this carriage! Did you see the livery? And the ripping horses? Miss Cicely has been having a joke with us, it seems! I wonder how she's managed to keep it dark so long!'

'And why!' said the astounded Hilary.

'Oh, that's obvious! She'd taken up the Hamlets, and didn't want to scare them. I wonder where we're going.'

They could only wait and guess; and as Whiteleaf and Kimble were left behind their curiosity deepened into excitement. It was dusk when the carriage reached Broadway End, and they looked at one another in amazement.

'Where are we? What house is it? It's a huge place! Oh, Cicely has had her joke, right enough! She's humbugged us all. Cottage in Whiteleaf, indeed! Isn't she a little wretch?' murmured Madeline. 'I wonder what the Hamlets thought when they arrived this afternoon. She said they didn't know.'

'There's Miss Lane on the steps,' said Hilary. 'We'll ask her where we are. Where's Cicely herself, I wonder?'

Margia welcomed them in the doorway with a smile at their bewildered faces. She shook her head in response to Hilary's question, and opened the door leading into the big hall.

The only light came from the wood-fire on the open hearth. The Maypole stood with drooping ribbons; relics of the festival were scattered about—flowers, bells, morris staves and handkerchiefs. But the dancers had gone home as twilight fell, and the hall was very quiet.

Mrs Broadway had been tired out, though she had thoroughly enjoyed her introduction to Cicely's friends. She had gone to her room to rest, and Mr Broadway was upstairs also, dressing for dinner. Only Cicely's most intimate friends were left, and they were talking over the celebrations, the holidays, and the future of the club.

Miriam sat beside the fire, still wearing her white robes and nursing her rabbit, her loosened hair drooping on each side of her face as she leaned forward gazing into the flames. On the other side of the hearth, Dorothy lay in Mr Broadway's big chair, utterly spent and weary. Cicely and Marguerite, still wearing their gray gowns and white hoods, were on the hearthrug, Cicely sitting at Miriam's feet, clasping her knees, Marguerite stretched at full length to rest.

'Tableau!' murmured Margia in the doorway. 'It's an accident, however. We didn't arrange it.'

As soon as the last of the dancers had gone, Cicely had thrown herself down at the queen's feet, with an eager, 'Now tell us, Mirry! You said you wanted our advice about something as soon as we had a chance to talk it over quietly.'

Miriam's colour rose, and she stared into the fire. 'Miss Macey sent me a card asking me to go and see her this morning; so I went, though I had to hurry back. She says Miss Bates wants to give me singing lessons, and asked how we could arrange it.'

'Good old Batey! I don't wonder, though. It would be wicked if you didn't make something of your voice.'

‘I thanked her, of course, but said I didn’t think it would be possible. We’ve no piano at home, and no room for one. If a piano came into one of our rooms we should have to wait outside. I told her I only know the songs I’ve heard mother sing; though lately I’ve practised at Dorothy’s. She said I could practise at school; and then—this is what I want to ask you about—she asked if I would be willing to give some of the little ones lessons in morris-dancing in exchange for singing lessons. She says’——

‘What a jolly idea!’ Cicely cried eagerly.

‘Well, she says several parents have asked her to start classes; but no one in the school, except ourselves, has been trained in that kind of dancing, and she wondered if I would be willing to teach it. I said I’d have to ask you first; but I thought I could do it if you were willing.’

‘Willing!’ Cicely stared. ‘Why shouldn’t I be willing? It would be very jolly, and I’m sure you could do it. You’ve taught your “side” already. You surely didn’t think I’d object? But why, Mirry?’

‘Well, it’s your idea. We’ve all learnt it from you. I said she ought to ask you first.’

‘How very like you, Mirry Honor! Now, how could I? You know very well I’d get sick of it in a month. I haven’t your sticking-power. Did Miss Macey say that?’ as Miriam laughed.

‘She said something of the kind, and that she would prefer some one older.’

‘Naturally. I’m sure she would. You’re Sixth, after all. It makes some difference. And you’ll soon be putting your hair up—oh, you’ll have to! You needn’t shake it like that!’ as Miriam shook her head in vigorous protest, then pushed back her long loose locks. ‘It will be an awful pity, though; but I suppose you’ll have to. You’re getting so frightfully old, you know. You can teach the kiddies well enough, Mirry; and as for asking my leave, that’s a silly idea; though it’s very sweet of you, of course. I wouldn’t take on the job for anything, but I’ll be delighted if you will. And when you’re a world-famous soprano, you can remember that the Hamlet Club gave you your start.’

‘I’m very much obliged to the Hamlet Club—which means you, Cicely. But I’m not going to be a singer; so don’t expect it, or you’ll be disappointed. I’m going to take my B.A., and then teach; but the singing lessons will be a great treat, and may come in useful sometime. Mother’s very pleased about it.’

‘I think you’ll be a singer yet. Wait and see. But will you have time to teach dancing?’

‘Not till after matric.; but then I can begin.’

‘You aren’t going to leave? That would be too awful, Mirry.’

‘Not yet. It would mean going to town to study, and I don’t want to do that. Miss Macey has the right to grant senior scholarships, and she wants me to stay on till I’ve passed my Inter., anyway.’

‘What a relief!’ Cicely said fervently. ‘We could never get on without you.’

‘Without Mirry?’ cried Dorothy, and she and Marguerite threw themselves down to rest—Dorothy in the big chair, Marguerite on the rug beside Cicely. ‘What nonsense! We couldn’t exist. Marguerite would wither up at once, like a squashed daisy. Who’s suggesting anything so awful?’

‘Nobody, you goose. Don’t try to come into a conversation when you’ve only heard the tail-end. We were discussing Mirry’s future career, that’s all.’

‘It was far too good of you all to give me those lovely presents. I had no chance to say “Thank you.” I was so surprised, I didn’t know what to say; you’d kept it dark so well.’

‘Oh, a queen ought to have gifts at her coronation,’ Cicely said lightly. ‘I knew there was something left out that evening at school, but I couldn’t think what it was. The girls liked the idea. They were all pleased, Mirry. Do you like the medal? I had to see to it, as grandfather was away; but he told me where to get it.’

‘I love it! I shall wear it night and day.’

‘It’s all very well for Cicely. She knows she’ll be the next queen,’ said Dorothy.

‘So she ought to’——

‘I don’t know anything of the kind,’ Cicely said swiftly. ‘Any one may be chosen next year. It may be a Town girl, for all we know. We can’t arrange that it will be a Hamlet—I mean one of the original Hamlets—if we’ve thrown open the club to the whole school. Hilary might be chosen, or Madeline, or Maud.’

‘Oh, I say!’ and Dorothy looked up in blank dismay. ‘That would be too awful. Can’t we insist that only a real, proper Hamlet girl’——

‘No, I’m afraid we can’t. We’ll have to take the risk.’

‘What an appalling prospect! I’m not sure that it’s worth it.’

‘You’re forgetting the tennis and cricket clubs. You know you’re keen on both, Dorothy.’

‘Yes; but the thought of having a Towny for May Queen is too horrible!’

‘Oh, well, the queen must be chosen out of the Hamlet Club, and I don’t suppose all the Townies will rush to join us. We must hope for the best. Our own girls will want to have one of ourselves for queen, you know.’

The discussion had reached this stage, when Margia switched on the lights, crying, ‘Visitors, Cicely!’

Cicely sprang up and came forward to welcome her guests. ‘We’re very pleased to see you. I am sorry you couldn’t come for the afternoon, though. We had a jolly time.’

‘Cicely, you are a fraud!’ cried Madeline. ‘Do you live here? Why have you cheated us all this time?’

‘Oh, for reasons,’ Cicely said airily. ‘I haven’t been here all the time, you know. I’ve really been in Whiteleaf until just the other day. But I shall be living here now my grannies have come home.’

‘And where are we? We haven’t the slightest idea.’

‘At Broadway End. I had to keep it dark until the club was fairly started.’

‘Broadway End!’ said Hilary slowly, a new note in her tone; for, in spite of Miss Macey’s pointed advice, she had great respect for wealth, and the house was one of the largest in the district. ‘Is Mr Broadway your grandfather? And you’ve kept it dark for six months!’ That was a thing she would never be able to understand. In Cicely’s place she would have sought to win the allegiance of the Hamlet girls by means of those very facts which Cicely had concealed so carefully.

‘Did your club really not know?’ and Madeline looked down at Cicely in amusement.

‘Not till this afternoon. Our morris “side” knew, of course. They stayed here in the Christmas holidays. But the rest didn’t know until to-day that there was a secret. I was living in Whiteleaf, you see.’

‘Well, you have cheated us all!’ and Madeline looked round the great hall. ‘What did the other Hamlets say when they arrived?’

‘They were a bit stunned at first,’ Cicely laughed. ‘But they got over it, and then they began to ask questions. It was some time before we could settle down to our revels. Come and speak to Queen Miriam;’ and she brought chairs towards the hearth.

Miriam rose, and swept her train aside in a graceful, laughing curtsy.

Dorothy looked up lazily. ‘I really can’t get up. Mirry must do the polite for me. I’m exhausted. She hasn’t been dancing for the last two hours;’ and she nodded to Hilary and Madeline.

‘I’m glad to see you here, Hilary.’ There was meaning in Miriam’s tone. ‘Here’ meant much more than Broadway End, and Hilary knew it. ‘Have you had jolly holidays? I haven’t seen you since that last evening when we danced. How is Maud?’

‘Better; but Violet’s down with it now, of course. They say Maud nearly cried her eyes out over the play.’

‘How stately you look, Mirry!’ said Madeline. ‘Is it the long dress?’

‘Cicely wouldn’t let me change. She says we’re to wait till after dinner,’ Miriam explained. ‘Then Dorothy’s going to drive Margia and Marguerite home, and you two and I can go together. Cicely will lend us the carriage.’

‘You’ll stop to dinner, won’t you? Oh, you really must!’ Cicely urged. ‘Grandfather will enjoy it awfully. He’s had such a quiet time for years that he says he’s going to make up for it now, and I’m going to help him. Grandmother has gone to bed, as she isn’t very strong yet and the journey tired her yesterday. So we six and Margia have to entertain grandfather. I wanted Georgie and Edna to stay too; but they had to get home. I think they were shy.’

‘And what is your club’s decision?’ asked Madeline soberly as they sat down. ‘We all ought to be friendly, Cicely. I hope you’re willing.’

‘I was willing from the first. I always said the state of things in the school was wrong. They’re not very keen, but they’re willing to try it for the sake of the school’——

‘And to please Mirry and Cicely,’ put in Dorothy, from the depths of the big chair. ‘They’re both so awfully keen on it that the poor Hamlets hadn’t much choice.’

‘You can’t wonder if they hesitated,’ Cicely said gravely. ‘They don’t feel sure you’ll all be friendly. You’ll have to alter that. We can’t do it. It has been horrid for them, and they can’t forget it all at once. It’s not as if they were still outsiders, with no club of their own. They’re quite satisfied now, and not half so keen on the school clubs as they were. They’re not very anxious to have a lot of new members in our club either. But we’ve decided to try it, and see how it works. You must do your best with your girls, and we will with ours, and we’ll all try to get them to work well together out of school as well as in. We can’t expect everything to be perfect all at once, when things have been so much the other way for so long. But we see it will be best for the school, and we’ll all help in every way we can. What do you say?’

‘I’ll do my best,’ Madeline said soberly. ‘I see the difficulties, but it ought to be possible to get over them.’

Hilary said little, but thought much. She had come prepared to yield, but feeling that she was granting a favour. She had never doubted that the offer would be accepted with eagerness and delight. She had made a great concession, and had expected corresponding gratitude. Cicely’s report, ‘They’re not keen, but they’re willing to try it for the sake of the school,’ had been a revelation and something of a shock. It was not the attitude she had expected from the Hamlets. They were more independent-minded than she quite approved of. The honour of being admitted to the school clubs had evidently failed to impress them duly. She felt rather crushed, and hardly knew what to say.

Dorothy read her feeling in her face, and chuckled inwardly, but knew better than to rouse Cicely’s wrath or worry Miriam by expressing herself aloud. Marguerite, gazing into the fire, looked too innocent to be natural. Cicely eyed them both severely.

Queen Miriam disregarded them, and addressed the visitors. ‘If we all try together, we ought to be able to make things go. Couldn’t we form an unofficial strictly private sub-committee to help matters on and smooth over difficulties? You two and I in the Sixth, and these two and Cicely among the younger girls? We might supply the—the grease to make the wheels go round! Don’t you see what I mean? It would have to be a secret, of course, but I think we could help. We might make this term the best the school has ever had.’

‘Your Majesty of the May, you’re ripping! I’ll be a wheel-greaser, if the others will,’ Cicely said enthusiastically, and, in spite of the imperative ringing of the dinner-bell, would not permit any adjournment till a solemn pledge had been taken by all.

‘All the same,’ she said, as she helped Miriam out of her robes and into her coat after dinner, ‘we’ve got some queer members on our unofficial strictly private sub-committee. You and Madeline are all right, and I hope Marguerite and I can be trusted to play up for the sake of the school. But Hilary and Dorothy—well, we’ll see! It’s the best we can do, and we’ll hope it will turn out well. Good-night, Queen Mirry! I’ll see you in Whiteleaf to-morrow morning. You won’t mind going to school with me, perhaps? Then good-night, Lady of the May;’ and, with a parting hug, she let her go.

CHAPTER XXVIII.
RESULTS OF MANY KINDS.

'Who is your partner for to-night, Dorothy?' Cicely asked as they wheeled their cycles along the Hughenden road, Georgie walking at their side.

'Marguerite,' said Dorothy promptly.

Cicely pursed her lips. 'And have you promised any one yet, Georgie?'

'Edna,' said Georgie, with equal promptitude.

'Then I think it's mean of you both!' and the president's wrath flamed up. 'Why can't you dance with Geraldine and Alice and the rest? Do you call that keeping your promise? We all agreed to let the division be forgotten, and they've admitted us to the tennis and cricket clubs and joined in ours; and now you won't dance with them! You mustn't dance together; it's not right!'

'I'm not going to dance with Alice. She weighs at least a ton.'

'And Geraldine's so *soft*, Cicely.'

'It wouldn't hurt you to dance with her. She's really quite decent at "Rheinlander" and the minuet. Dorothy, you ought to take her for your partner to-night. And Alice has taken up the morris and country dances splendidly. She'll soon be less podgy if you dance her hard. Girls, there was some excuse for us at first if we preferred to dance together, since it was so new to the others and they didn't even know their steps; but they've worked hard for two months, and they're really getting on well. We ought to forget that there were two sets in the school, and all mix up properly. I do think you might help.'

'It will need time,' Dorothy argued. 'The other kind of thing had been going on for years. It can't be undone in a month.'

'But you could try to help it on! I know things can't be perfect all at once. But you and Georgie aren't playing up as you ought to, Dorothy.'

'Is Mirry coming to the dance to-night?' Georgie asked thoughtfully. 'Or is she too busy?'

'No; she's coming. Miss Macey told her she didn't believe in last-minute-before-the-exam. work, so she'd better stop working now, and take the week-end as a holiday. So she's coming to me for tennis to-morrow, and she'll be at the dance to-night. And, girls, this is what I think! It's our first big dance for the term, for the Townies have been learning'——

'There!' said Dorothy triumphantly. 'What about forgetting it all now? I thought we weren't allowed to call them Townies any longer?'

Cicely frowned. 'I forgot,' she acknowledged, in much annoyance. 'It isn't easy to remember; but I only used it to describe them. Well, they've been learning several dances; and you've been decent about helping to teach them, but'——

'Oh, we rather enjoyed that! I like bossing Townies, telling Alice to jump higher when I can see she's out of breath, and pulling Jelly up in the middle of a morris because she's on the wrong side.'

'But now that we're to have a big dance in your barn, I think we all ought to join and dance with them, not with one another. Do you suppose Mirry won't notice, if you and Marguerite are partners, and Georgie and Edna? She'll see, and be indignant, and it will bother her, and she'll get thinking that you aren't being friendly, and she'll worry over it and wonder

what she can do to help, and her exam.'s on Monday, and she'll fail, and it will be your fault for upsetting her at the last minute!'

'Oh, I say, Cicely! Do you think she'd really mind?'

'I'm sure she would. She cares a lot about the school, and she's awfully anxious to see us and the Townies really friends. She feels responsible, as she's queen, you know. I'm quite sure it would upset her to be shown so plainly that we prefer to keep to ourselves and leave them alone; and just before her exam. I think it would be *mean*!'

Cicely knew the strength of her position, and made the most of it. She argued with them resolutely, and at last won a grudging promise that they would do their share that evening.

'I'll dance the minuet with Jelly, if I must,' Dorothy groaned. 'But I will not spoil "Rheinlander." I must have a kindred spirit for that, and she isn't one. I'm not going to take Jelly in my arms; not if I know it! Marguerite's my "Rheinlander" lady—if I can't have you.'

'Then I shall take Jelly. I can be gentleman for once. And you'll take Alice for the country-dances, Georgie? We're having "Lady Cullen" and "Peascods" and the "Triumph," and she knows them all.'

'Oh, well, for Mirry's exam.'s sake I will! You change partners so often in a country-dance that it really doesn't matter.'

One Saturday morning, about a month later, as July and the term were drawing to their close, Cicely and Miriam walked down to Risborough and took the train for Wycombe. They paid a brief visit to the school, then separated, both radiant and excited—Miriam to hasten home to her mother, Cicely to seek out Margia and tell her the good news. She had left her cycle at school the evening before in preparation for this event, and after a few hurried words of congratulation to Miriam, and with no time to spare for any one else, she mounted and rode off at top speed to keep tryst with Margia.

They did not often meet now that Margia's time was given up to painting, and the classes at school were taken by her sister. But Cicely had begged to be the one to bring Margia the exam. result as soon as it was known, and Margia had told her where she would be found on that particular morning.

'I'm working on rather a big thing,' she had written, in answer to Cicely's note. 'I'll show you something you haven't seen yet, if you care to come so far.'

So Cicely rode through Beaconsfield and across the common at Gerrard's Cross, suffering much from the dust of the continual stream of motors, but appreciating the level surface after the ruts and steep ascents among the hills. Following Margia's directions, she left her cycle at a wayside inn and entered a wood by a stile. The trees were all pines, which was unusual in the neighbourhood, and under their sombre branches the path was dark and shadowy; but as she hurried down the velvety track they became mixed with gray-green beeches, and the red carpet of last autumn's leaves took the place of the green bramble undergrowth.

'It's rather like Penn Wood. It's jolly big!' she said to herself. 'How am I to find Margia here? But she said if I went on I'd come to her;' and she followed the path towards a clearing in the heart of the wood, where a gray misty shade seemed to suggest a sudden hollow.

At the edge of the trees she stopped short with a quick, breathless cry of amazement and rapture, for the gray mist had become water, and she stood on the margin of a great lake, stretching away among the trees. In the centre it was the deep blue of the summer sky, but round the brink was dark with shadows, as pine and larch, beech and chestnut, leaned over to mirror themselves in the depths. Here and there the white stem of a silver birch cut across the dark background like a streak of light, and was reflected below. Every shade of green was

there; what it must be in autumn Cicely could hardly imagine. She gazed and drank it all in, then turned eagerly to Margia, sitting at her easel on the bank.

'Isn't it perfectly ripping? I had no idea there was so much water anywhere near us. It's the one thing I've missed, you know. We have woods and hills and valleys and fields and farms, but no water, not even streams. All the water's in wells, and you can't look at it. I've often wished there were lakes or big rivers, or that we could see the sea. This is glorious, Margia! How did you find it? What is it called? Oh, I do like your picture!'

'I'm glad of that. It's the Black Park.'

'Black? What a shame! It's the most lovely colours!'

'Yes; but only when you get inside. It looks black in the distance, because of the pines. Well, what news?'

'Oh!' Cicely's face lit up. 'Mirry's got Honours, and distinction in history!'

'Bravo! That's splendid! I thought she'd get through, though I hardly dared to hope for Honours; but she has worked hard. And the others?'

'Oh, Hilary and Madeline have passed, but only in the second class. I think they're rather disgusted. Maud and the rest have failed altogether, and they're feeling awful. Maud's trying to put it down to the measles, but everybody knows that's all rot. She only missed a week.'

'No, that would hardly account for it. Her illness was mostly in the holidays, wasn't it?'

'It's the way they slacked last term, while they were preparing for the play. That's what did it, and they know it, too. I guess they're sorry now!'

'Then Mirry is the only one to get Honours?'

Cicely nodded. 'Her Majesty was quite overcome when Miss Macey read it out. She looked almost as much taken aback as when she was crowned.'

'And how are things going?' Margia asked. 'It's a long while since we had a chat. How do the new arrangements work?'

Cicely dropped on the moss at her feet, close to the edge of the water.

'We-ell! I can't truthfully say everything is perfect yet, you know.'

Margia laughed, glancing up quickly at the still lake and shadowy trees, and painting rapidly. 'I suppose not. It will take time, no doubt. But are they improving?'

'I think so. Oh yes, I'm sure they are! You can't undo in two or three months what had lasted for two years. But things are much better, Margia. Nominally, there's no division in the school now. We Hamlets have joined the tennis and cricket and so on, and lots of the Townies have joined us and are learning our dances. And, honestly, I think they're finding us valuable members of the clubs! Dorothy's far and away the best bowler in the cricket team. She took five wickets last Saturday. And Mirry's turning into a splendid tennis-player. She'll be champion one of these days. It's been her only change from exam. work all summer. She comes to Broadway End to practise with me on Saturdays, and she's really awfully good.'

'And who was it that carried her bat and made sixty-five in the last match? I've heard of your doings, you see.'

'Oh, well, their bowling was rotten. I don't often achieve anything like that! But I do think we've been some use in the clubs already; though it's only on the surface that things are all right, you know. The division's still there underneath, and I think it will be some time before it's forgotten. The girls are still Hamlets or Townies, though Mirry and I are trying to stop them using the names. But we don't always remember ourselves, and then it's awkward. The two sets don't mix very well yet, you see. The Townies aren't chummy with us even at cricket and tennis. They just put up with us because they have to. And our girls know it, and aren't

very keen on them either. I've had a regular flare-up with Dorothy and Georgie once or twice, because they won't dance with Geraldine and Alice and the rest. They think they'll go on learning new dances and let the Townies learn the old ones; but I'm not going to have that any longer.'

'How will you stop it?'

'I've heard from Nancy Gaynor of some jolly new dances, and in the holidays I'm going to stay with her and learn them—unless daddy comes home; but I think that won't be till October. There's a country-dance where you stand in two long lines, and twiddle your first finger round and point it at your partner as if you were poking her eye out—awfully funny! It's called "Sweet Kate," and our girls will love it. And there's another that Nancy calls the "Dahl," and says is a lovely thing. And I'll only teach it to the girls if they'll take the partners I choose for them. I'll make Dorothy take Geraldine, and Georgie Alice, and so on, or they sha'n't learn it at all.'

Margia nodded. 'You may do some good that way; but it will chiefly be a question of time, Cicely. You and Mirry will have to be patient and go slowly.'

'I know. It's a great improvement on last term already. And there's another thing. Hilary and Maud and Madeline are all leaving this term. That will make some difference. And there'll always be new girls coming, who won't know anything about Hamlets and Townies. In time it will come all right, Margia. Now I ought to go home. The queen's coming to play tennis with me this afternoon.'

'I'll come and see her as soon as I can. In the meantime, give Her Majesty my love and my heartiest congratulations on her splendid success.'

'Yes!' said Cicely. 'We're all jolly proud of her. She's a credit to the Hamlet Club.'

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THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Girls of the Hamlet Club* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]