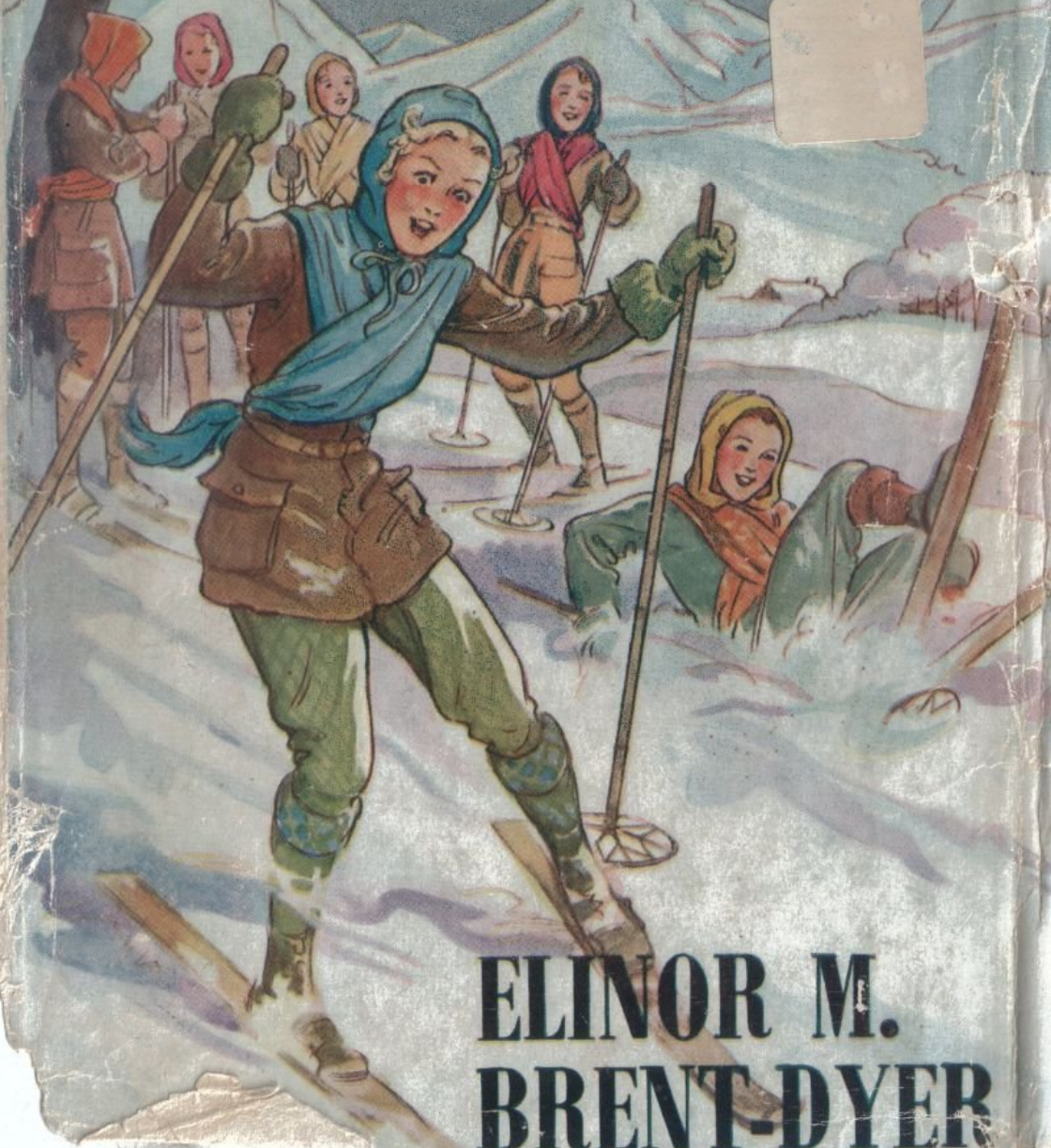


CHALET SCHOOL IN THE OBERLAND



**ELINOR M.
BRENT-DYER**

Author of the CHALET SCHOOL SERIES

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THE CHALET SCHOOL
IN THE OBERLAND



“Listen, Elma,” she said, “Do leave the Purden girl alone!”

THE
CHALET SCHOOL
IN THE OBERLAND

By
ELINOR MARY BRENT-DYER

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*This book is for
SUSAN HILL
with love from
Elinor Brent-Dyer*

Chapter One

A BIG EXPERIMENT

“I think that’s the last.” Miss Wilson sat back in her chair and pushed her hair off her face with a sigh of relief. “Well, Gillian, what do you think about it all?”

Her secretary finished writing the details of the last girl and slipped the card into its appropriate place in the filing cabinet before she replied, smiling at the Head as she said: “I think it’s going to be lots of fun.”

“*Fun?*” Miss Wilson gave her a look of mingled incredulity and aggravation. “My good girl, that’s the last word I’d have used to describe it. We never, for one moment, expected to have anyone but our own seniors and Nell Randolph, who is almost like one of them by this time. Eighteen to twenty was the most I bargained for; and quite enough, too, in the circumstances!”

“I can see your point,” Gillian said thoughtfully. “Still, when Nell was coming, it was quite natural that the mother of her great chum at Branscombe Park should want to send Lucy along, too.”

“Exactly! And then Mrs. Hughes heard of the idea—how, I don’t know—and when she arranged for Olwen to go to St. Briavel’s, asked if we would take Gwynneth for the Oberland branch. That meant requests from Mrs. Wren and Mrs. Marriott for Elizabeth and Susan, also from Red Gables——”

“Yes,” Gillian interrupted her. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. Why hasn’t the younger Hughes gone to Red Gables? It always seemed to me a very decent school. I remember Gwynneth, by the way. She was in the hockey eleven when they played us. Their captain, Thelma Lord, pointed her out to me as a kind of infant phenomenon. I know she was awfully young to be in the eleven, but she was a fairly hefty wench for fourteen and there isn’t a doubt that she was a demon player. But what’s happened to Red Gables?”

“Didn’t you ever hear? Of course, I’d forgotten it was four years since you left us. And we’ve been on the island for more than a year now. My dear Gillian, the Head died and there was no one to take over, so the school had to close down. Gwynneth goes to Chelsea next year and her mother didn’t want her hanging about at home, so she begged us to take her for the year. It was the thin end of the wedge, of course. They came thick and fast after that—or fairly so, all things considered.”

“And now I should like to know exactly who Nell Randolph is. Apart from the fact that, outside school, she seems to be Peggy Bettany’s special chum, I haven’t a clue about her.”

“She’s the young daughter of a cousin of Miss Annersley’s. She and Peggy are great chums—get them to tell you how they first met. It’s quite a story!”^[1] Miss Wilson chuckled as she recalled the incident.

[1] See *Peggy of the Chalet School*

“I will—definitely! It’ll be fun to see Peggy and all that crowd again. That reminds me, Miss Wilson, do I *have* to be ‘Miss Culver’ to them, or may they call me ‘Gillian’?”

“Miss Culver in public, please. What they call you in private is your own concern.”

Gillian Culver’s face fell. “I was afraid you’d say that!”

“Oh, my dear girl! Do use your common sense!” Miss Wilson retorted. “If it had been our own crowd it wouldn’t have mattered—not this year, at any rate. But with all these strangers added, we can’t have Peggy and Co. shrieking Gillian at you in public. No; I’m sorry, but for official purposes, you must be ‘Miss Culver’.”

“They’ll call me ‘Gillian’ in private, anyhow.”

“As I said before, that’s your own concern.”

“I couldn’t possibly be ‘Miss Culver’ to a bunch of girls I knew most intimately when they were Middles and I was Head Girl,” Gillian pointed out. “I do see your point, so they can be official when the rest are around and matey when they aren’t. That’s settled!”

“Have it your own way. And now to get back to work. About the bedrooms. Have you typed those lists for Matron? Good! It’s a blessing we were able to get the Annexe finished or I don’t know how we could have managed. There certainly isn’t room in this place for thirty-nine girls *and* all the staff! Not even if we crowded them in six to a room. You can take the slips up when you go to tidy for Mittagessen. Ask her to arrange them as we discussed last night. Now is that everything? The girls will be here to-morrow, remember, and there won’t be much time after that.”

“I think that’s all. What time do you expect the—the invasion?”

“Peggy Bettany some time during the morning. She and Daisy Venables have been staying here, but I shooed them off at the end of last week to visit Lugano. I knew that you and Daisy, at any rate, would want to spend half your time gossiping, and it couldn’t be done! Daisy goes back to her hospital to-morrow and Peggy will see her off at Interlaken and then come on up here by the railway. She should be here about eleven, I think. Daisy’s train leaves somewhere around nine. As a matter of fact, I rather expected them to give us a ring this morning,” the Head added, “but so far——”

The telephone bell interrupted her and Gillian Culver sprang to the instrument. “You said you hadn’t told them it was me. I want to give them a shock!”

“I should think I *didn’t* tell them you were coming as my secretary!” Miss Wilson retorted. “I couldn’t have got rid of Daisy, at least, without a cart-horse and a couple of stout ropes! It mayn’t be them, though!”

“I’ll bet it is!” Gillian returned, as she lifted the receiver from its cradle.

Miss Wilson laughed. Then she fell silent, for Gillian was speaking. “Hello! Yes, this is the Chalet School—Oh yes?—I see—Thank you—Yes; I’ll tell Miss Wilson—*No!* Do you really?” She stopped and smothered a chuckle. Then she added: “*Wouldn’t* you like to know?—Oh, Daisy, you idiot! It’s Gill Culver!”

Daisy’s screech at this piece of information reached Miss Wilson, seated at her desk at the opposite side of the room. She laughed softly, jumped up and came over to the telephone in time to hear that damsel’s cry of: “Gill Culver! What on earth are you doing up at the new school?”

“I’ve come to be secretary to Bill,” Gillian explained, forgetting that she was speaking of her Head until Miss Wilson coughed a gentle, “Ahem!”—she really could not resist the temptation!—and Miss Culver turned a brilliant red. Luckily, Daisy was demanding to be told everything, so Gillian had to attend to her.

“There isn’t time for that. I hate to think what this call must be costing you—a small fortune, I should imagine! If you’re as anxious as all that to see me and hear my news, what about coming up with Peggy to-morrow morning for a day or so? You can share my bed.”

“If I only could! But I can’t. My leave of absence is up—more than up. That’s what I’m ringing up to say now. I made a mistake in the dates and I’ve got to go haring back to England pronto. If I go to-day, I *may* just manage to do it by the skin of my teeth. Look here, Gill, you explain to Bill, will you? I must ring off now or I shall miss my train. We’re going straight to the Bahnhof from here and Peg will see me off. She’ll get the next train up the mountain—whenever that is. I just wouldn’t know!”

“Then you can’t give us any idea when to expect her?”

“Not I! When she arrives is the nearest I can manage. Write to me, will you? Bill has my address, you can get it from her. I must ring off now. Mind you write! Auf Wiedersehen!”

There was a click as Daisy hung up and Gillian, her colour more or less normal again, relayed the message about Peggy to the Head.

Miss Wilson nodded with one of her low chuckles. “Very well; you can let Matron know, seeing this is a day earlier than we expected Peggy. Luckily, it’s all in readiness.” She chuckled again. “It really is most awfully like Daisy Venables. She always was a harum-scarum and her added years and diplomas haven’t made much difference that way. By the way,” she added, “has anyone told you that Daisy is engaged?”

“Engaged! Daisy! No; I never heard a word about it. Who is he? I hope,” Gillian added, “that he knows what he’s in for!”

“He’s a young doctor at her hospital—at least, he *was* there. He’s a very nice boy with plenty of ballast and he’ll keep Daisy in as much order as is necessary. The wedding should have taken place last month, but Daisy has always vowed that she wouldn’t be married unless she could have her whole family there.”

“Well, can’t she? What’s preventing it?”

“You know that the Russells and the Maynards are all in Canada at the moment, and they constitute the major portion of Daisy’s family, with the exception of her young sister. You remember Primula, don’t you? She’s been spending the summer holidays with the Russells and they’re keeping her until they all return next spring. Madame said Canada had done Primula a tremendous lot of good.”

“Couldn’t they all have come home for a week or so just for the wedding? Well, no; I suppose they couldn’t. It would be too jolly expensive with all that crowd,” Gillian said.

“In any case, Joey Maynard couldn’t have come—and Madame would never have left her then,” Miss Wilson replied, gazing out of the window thoughtfully.

“Oh? Why not?”

“Jo had twins on the tenth of this month—boy and girl.”

“*What?* Oh, no! But my goodness me, that means that she has”—Gillian counted up hurriedly—“*eight children!*” She gazed with horror at the Head. “Why, the Trips——”

Miss Wilson nodded. “Yes; I know—ten in November. But do remember that they *are* triplets. She’s only had three boys since then, and all singletons, to quote herself. Michael is past two now and there are four years between him and Charles; and the girls were three when Stephen arrived. I admit that Steve is a bare fourteen months older than Charles, but apart from that, they’re well spaced.”

Gillian broke into peals of laughter. “It’s awfully like Joey Maynard! She always did go at things in a headlong way!”

“You don’t have to tell *me* that! I’ve known her since she was fourteen and just Joey Bettany, one of the wickedest Middles that ever adorned the Chalet School. She has tamed

down quite a good deal since then, I admit; but ‘wholesale’ still remains the word that best describes her.”

“Oh, I don’t know that I’d call it tamed down, exactly,” Gillian murmured demurely. “Well, you’re certainly right about Daisy’s wedding in that case. It just had to be put off! Poor old Daisy! What’s she doing now, by the way?”

“She’s taken an appointment at the Encliffe Children’s Hospital. The entire family—the Russells and the Maynards, plus young Primula, I mean, are coming home next spring—April, I think—and the wedding is fixed for the first week in June. In the meantime, Dr. Rosomon is partner to a doctor in Devonshire and has gone to take it up. He will spend what spare time he has in looking for a house. Daisy will go to stay with Joyce Linton, whose husband has just been preferred to a living in the same place, for week-ends and so on, and will help in the search while she is there. Primula is to make her home with them in the holidays. I’m glad of that,” Miss Wilson added pensively. “No one could have been kinder to those two than Madame and Joey, but, as Daisy said, it wasn’t the same as having a real home of their own.”

Gillian nodded. Then she said unexpectedly: “I’m glad she’s marrying a man with a decent name. Her own is such a pretty one.”

Miss Wilson gasped. “Well, really, Gillian! You don’t marry a man for his name but for what he is—at least I hope so!”

“Oh, I know. Still, if I fell in love with a man called, say, Scroggs, I think I’d suggest it would be a good idea if he took my surname instead of my taking his.”

“You’re talking a lot of nonsense,” the Head told her severely. “Instead of standing there talking of things you don’t understand, you’d better run along and let Matron know that Peggy will be here some time to-day. Also, please give her those lists and my message. When you’ve done that, you might finish off the register. You’ll have plenty of time for that before Mittagessen. Oh, and you might go to the kitchen on your way back here and ask Karen to hold back the meal until I tell her. I’ve no doubt Peggy will be here round about half past twelve. There’s a train from the valley which reaches Lauterbach about then and it’s only ten minutes from the station at the rate Peggy goes. Will your German hold out?”

“Oh, I can manage that much,” Miss Culver assured her. “Very well, Miss Wilson. But the register is nearly done. Less than half an hour will finish that up. What else can I do?”

“Nothing. You’ve been working since Frühstück and can do with a rest. You can walk down to meet Peggy, if you like.”

With the last words, Miss Wilson departed and her secretary, picking up the sheaf of slips she had just finished typing before Daisy Venables had rung up, ran upstairs to deliver them to Matron Rider who was busy in the small room dedicated to household linen. Then she raced off to the kitchen to speak to Karen, the big, jolly woman from the Tierenthal in Tirol, who had been one of the cooks at the Chalet School in the days when it had been situated on the shores of the beautiful Tiernsee.

Karen had known Peggy Bettany since the days when she, a tiny of three, had been left together with her twin brother to live with her Aunt Madge, now Lady Russell and the “Madame” of Miss Wilson’s talk, since their parents had to return to India. She was devoted to the twins, and she beamed when she heard that Fraülein Peggy would be coming back that very day. She assured Miss Culver that it was a pleasure to do anything for such a gnädige Fraülein, and it would be very easy to wait a little longer before she served Mittagessen.

Gillian Culver was overwhelmed by the spate of low-German that Karen hurled at her, and thankfully escaped as soon as she could to the study, where she sat down to finish the register

and think over all the news she had just heard.

She herself had been three years at the Chalet School when it was carried on at Plas Howell, the great Palladian mansion in the Golden Valley of Armishire, one of the Welsh border counties. She had wound up by being Head Girl and a much-loved Head Girl. After leaving school, she had gone to stay with a married sister whose home was in Kenya and had rather lost touch with the school. On returning home, she had taken a secretarial course, since there was a long family of the Culvers, and Godfrey, the eldest brother, had a wife and two small children to provide for already.

Just as the course was coming to an end, one of the few school friends with whom she had kept up, had written to tell her that the Chalet School had decided to open a finishing branch for girls of sixteen to eighteen up here in the beautiful Bernese Oberland.

"I don't know how they're off for staff," Gay Lambert had written, "but they're safe to want a secretary, anyhow. I'd write if I were you and ask. They can only say, 'No thank you', and you know how they like to have Old Girls back to teach and Miss Dene is another Old Girl and she's Head's secretary in the present establishment, so I should think you'd have a good chance."

Gillian had taken Gay's advice and had been offered the post with a warmth that had been delightful. On the Monday of the present week, she had come out to Das Haus unter die Kiefern, the big Chalet that another Old Girl—one of the very first of the girls—had offered her beloved school when she heard that they were thinking of this plan. Now it was Thursday and she had been hard at work ever since her arrival, so there had been little time for gossip about old friends and acquaintances. She should have been there a fortnight earlier, but the small nephew and niece at home had started chickenpox and as she had never had it, she had had to be quarantined. Luckily, she had escaped it, but it certainly had meant a rush, once she *had* arrived at the chalet.

"But Peggy will be able to bring me up to date," she thought cheerfully, as she closed the big register and laid it away in its cupboard. "I wonder how she's grown up? She was a charming youngster I remember, and out-of-the-way pretty with those silvery fair curls of hers and her perfect features! There! That's done, thank goodness! Now to wash my hands and find a hat and then I'll be off to meet Peggy. Blessings on good old Gay! If it hadn't been for her, I might never have known of this and then I'd have been out of all this fun—for fun it will be! Of that, I'm certain! Experiments are generally fun and this is a big one—and an adventure, too. I'm all for adventures when I can get 'em! Gill, my lass, you're a very lucky girl. You might have been pounding away at a typewriter in some beastly city office instead of being here among all this beauty and with old friends and at the very beginning of a new branch of the Chalet School!" She was outside by this time, and running lightly along the rough grass pasture. Then she took a path that led down the mountainside to Lauterbach, the little village where the station was. She paused once to sniff the fresh, strong air and repeated to herself: "Yes; you are a lucky, lucky wench and here's to adventure!"

Chapter Two

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

A crowd of girls stood on the platform of the main Bahnhof of Interlaken. They were all girls between the ages of sixteen and eighteen; most of them nearer the last than the first. With them were a vivacious little French lady and a tall, serious-looking Englishwoman. All were talking hard, but at a sign from the French lady, one or two of them began hushing the rest and presently they were standing silent, looking at the two grown-ups, most of them with curiosity and interest, though one big girl wore an indifferent air and a pair of the youngest looked mutinous.

“Tenez, mes enfants,” the little lady said, speaking for the most part in excellent English, but with just enough intonation and odd French phrases to remind one that she was not English. “We must now make our way to the Berner Oberland Bahnhof. Have you all your cases and other possessions? Yes? Then as there are so many of us, we will, for this once, form what you call a crocodile, or we may incommode other passers-by. Anthea and Nell,” she turned to a pair of very tall girls, both on the verge of eighteen, “you must lead, please. I think, Anthea, that you have been here before and know the way. That is right, n’est-ce-pas?”

“Yes, Mdlle,” Anthea, a very pretty girl, fair and English-looking, replied. “I know the way quite well.” She picked up a suitcase and a violin case and turned to the other girl. “Come along, Nell! We’re blocking the fairway, not to speak of creating a sensation. Allons, mon chou!”

The rest fell in quietly enough and presently they had left the station and were marching two by two through the busy streets, where people glanced at them with unconcealed interest.

“I call this the limit!” grumbled one of the girls to her partner. “We aren’t kids now. Why on earth couldn’t we just go in small groups?”

“I suppose because we don’t know the way. And anyhow, with such a pack as ours you’d have to do something,” her friend replied. “Don’t grouse, Elma! It’s only for once; Mdlle What’s-her-name said so. Anyhow, judging by what I can see, we haven’t far to go.”

Elma shrugged her shoulders pettishly. She was a tall, strikingly handsome girl, with black hair parted down the centre of her head and brushed severely back into a big knot behind; a complete contrast to her partner who was merely a pleasant-looking girl with mousy-brown hair, grey-blue eyes, and a pink-and-white face.

“Oh, you’re a regular Polly-Anna, always playing the Glad Game!” Elma retorted, as they turned a corner and found themselves nearing the Bahnhof or station from which the railway ran which crossed the narrow plain and then climbed up the mountainside. The train was in and two or three people, obviously tourists, were already sitting in one of the little carriages. Mdlle directed her flock into the front ones and quickly had them settled.

“Help! Do we have to go up there?” someone demanded, pointing upwards. “I say! It’s all right, isn’t it?”

“All right?” A small slim girl of just eighteen raised her black eyebrows. “What *are* you talking about, Daphne? Of course it’s all right! Thousands of people go this way every day during the season. Isn’t that a fact, Mdlle?”

Mdlle, who had paused beside them in passing down the aisle, gave a smiling nod. “Mais oui. That is quite true, Nita. Why do you ask, chérie?”

“Daphne wondered if it was safe,” Nita explained.

Mdlle laughed. “Oh, yes; it is perfectly safe. Have no fear, Daphne. These funiculaires are always kept well inspected and there is not the slightest need for you to fear an accident. Now let me go, my children. I must be sure that all baggages are safely in and the train departs in one little minute.”

They let her go and presently the little mountain train was running across the valley and then beginning to climb slowly and steadily up the slope. The girls watched with interest. One big, sturdy young woman proceeded to make several people’s flesh creep by speculating as to what would happen if anything went wrong with the couplings.

“Would we dive straight down, or would we go rolling over the side?” she wondered aloud.

“Oh, Dickie! Taisez-vous!” exclaimed Daphne, who was near enough to have overheard this. “You make my blood run cold.”

Dickie subsided with a chuckle and the others gazed out of the windows with absorbed interest.

The two mistresses watched their charges. Mdlle Berné knew the original Chalet girls, of course, and also Nell Randolph. The rest were strangers to her. As for Miss Norton, who was to be responsible for English language and literature, all were unknown to her, except in so far as they had become acquainted during the journey from Paris. But for them, quite as much as for excited Gillian Culver, it was an adventure and an experiment and little Mdlle had wondered aloud in the staff sitting-room the night before just how the whole set would shake down together.

So far as could be seen at present, they were all in cliques with the exception of the four from Branscombe Park. They, led by Nell Randolph, had tacked themselves on to the Chalet School group from the beginning. Nell was an old acquaintance of all the Chalet girls there and her Branscombe Park chum, Lucy Holmes, had heard so much about them and about Peggy Bettany in particular, that she was prepared to join up with them. She was a small, fair girl, with light, wavy hair cut short, very blue eyes, and a face that was most attractive despite a nose that tilted skywards. Nell, on the contrary, was a long-legged creature, brown-eyed, brown-haired, with a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her short straight nose. Despite her almost eighteen years and the fact that her long plaits were swung round her head, she still looked a mere schoolgirl. She and Nita Eltringham both came from homes where money was perpetually short, and neither would have been able to come, but Miss Annersley, Head of the school in England, had offered to pay her young cousin’s fees, an offer thankfully accepted by Nell’s widowed mother; while Nita had been awarded what was to be known as “The Josephine Bettany Scholarship” which was open to girls of the original school. Most of the others were the daughters of rich or well-to-do folk who could afford this year abroad easily for their girls.

Mdlle knew all this, though Miss Norton did not. Miss Wilson had decided that, for the present, it might be as well for the girls not to learn about it. It would not have mattered at the school in England where there were always a certain number of places kept for girls whose people could not afford the full fees. With this new venture, however, she thought it might be as well to say nothing until they knew more about everyone.

“Here we are!” Miss Norton suddenly exclaimed, as the little train came to a stop at a long, rather narrow alp. “Pick up your belongings, girls, and hurry along! The train won’t wait all day!”

The girls tumbled out hurriedly, Middle following the last one after making sure that all luggage was out, and then the row of small carriages moved off and they were left standing, sniffing the fresh, sweet air that came to them from the great mountains.

The Bahnhof, so-called, at Lauterbach consisted of a kind of sideless shed on either side of the line. At the gate at one end stood a man in loose blue blouse and peaked cap, ready to take the tickets, and beyond, dancing up and down excitedly, was a girl at sight of whom at least a dozen voices cried, "Peggy Bettany!"

The moment they were through the gate, Peggy was mobbed by her old school friends, everyone trying to talk at once, and the noise they made was enough to scare the birds flying about. Peggy tried to answer everyone and there was a joyful hubbub for a minute or two.

Elma and her friend, Pamela, looked across at the gaily chattering throng, and the former's lip curled scornfully.

"Everybody's blue-eyed boy, I see," she said disagreeably. "Who is she, anyhow, that they make such a fuss of her?"

The last part of her speech was overheard by Hester Layng, a girl who owned placidly that her besetting sin was laziness. She grinned slowly as she heard it.

"Peggy?" she said in her indolent voice. "Peggy is—Peggy. You'll know all about it in a week or two, I expect. I shouldn't worry, you know. Worrying makes you thin and scraggy." And she glanced down at her own plump person complacently.

The next moment, Peggy herself was flying up to her, grabbing her hands and shaking them fervently. "Hester! My dear, you're fatter than ever! What *have* you been doing during the hols?"

"Oh, loungin' round and sufferin'," Hester replied. "*You* haven't even grown in length, let alone width! Peggy, you're a scrap!"

"Hester, you're a lump!" Peggy retorted, before she whirled off to greet someone else.

She was certainly small, being built on a miniature scale. Long almost silvery fair hair tossed in wild curls down her back, tied off her face by a black ribbon of mammoth proportions. Her features were cut with the delicate precision of a cameo, and her vividly blue eyes danced under arched black brows and long curling lashes. The sun, which freckled Nell's creamy skin or burned others, had no effect on her roses-and-milk colouring, and there was some excuse for Pamela's exclamation.

"I say, Elma, she really is lovely! She looks rather a sport, too. She isn't all just fairy-tale princess prettiness—not with that chin!" Wherein, she was to find that she was quite right.

Elma drew her straight black brows down in a sharp frown. "I never was fond of dolls, pretty or otherwise," was all she said, however.

"Peg, how is your mother?" Nita asked, coming up to her.

The laughter left Peggy's eyes as she replied: "Not too fit. She hasn't been well all the hols. How's yours?"

"Better, thank goodness! And Rosamund is growing into a perfect duck! I'm sorry about Auntie Mollie, though. It isn't anything serious, is it?" They were standing a little apart from the others now and there was real anxiety in Nita's grey-green eyes as she asked.

A look of worry came into Peggy's charming face. "I don't know, Nita. She and Dad wouldn't say much. But she's been awfully breathless and easily tired. I think if Doc at home doesn't get something done about it soon, Dad's taking her to see a specialist."

"Peggy—Nita! Come along! We can't stand here or we'll be late for Mittagessen." The call came from Miss Wilson, who had come down with the rest to welcome her pupils.

“Peggy, take three or four of them and lead the way. We walk this last part, girls. It isn’t very far and most people are thankful to stretch their legs after the journey. Off you go, Peggy!”

Peggy and Nita went off with Nell, Dickie, Lucy and two or three more and the rest straggled after them in pairs or groups. Miss Wilson and Miss Norton brought up the rear behind Elma and Pamela and the other three who came from the same school, Dulverley High School, but who were a good year younger than the two elder girls.

It was a pleasant walk, up a twisting path worn in the limestone of the mountain. Bushes grew on either side, with late-blooming flowers nodding in the breeze which blew down with a chill in it that told of the high snows and icy glaciers from which it came. Here and there were clumps of stone pines and close at hand, but unseen, they could hear the gurgling of a little stream.

It took the long procession about twenty minutes to climb up but at last they reached the top and found themselves standing on rough pasture, dotted here and there with chalets, some little more than huts, others larger. Straight ahead of them was a big one set in a garden where roses still bloomed bravely.

Peggy waved her hand towards it. “Das Haus unter die Kiefern,” she announced. “Our school! It’s rather wizard, isn’t it?”

“What does the name mean?” Elma demanded.

“The House under the Pines. As you can see, pines grow all round it. For once, the name fits!” Peggy laughed.

A figure appeared at the open door and came to stand at the top of the steps which led to a wide verandah, at present open to sun and breezes, though, as the girls learned later, in the winter it was fitted with storm windows so that it could still be used and also to prevent the rooms opening on to it from being darkened more than was necessary.

At sight of her, at least half a dozen people set up a shout of delight. “Gill! Gillian Culver!”

Nita broke from her group and went flying up to her. “Gill Culver! Are you teaching here? But how simply priceless!”

“Hello, Nita!” Miss Culver gave a chuckle. “I *thought* you people would get a shock. No; I’m not teaching. I can’t imagine anything I’d like to do less. I’m here as secretary to Bill—I mean,” with a quick blush, “Miss Wilson. And that, my good girl, means that in public, at any rate, you have to address me as ‘Miss Culver’. I’ve been in Kenya, staying with my sister whose husband works at the big agricultural research station out there. Then I came home and did a course in shorthand, typewriting and book-keeping. Now I’m here. These the rest of your crowd? Welcome to Welsen, everyone. That’s the name of this hamlet, though our postal address is Lauterbach. Come in and you shall have a wash-and-brush-up. Then we’ll have Mittagessen, after which your afternoon will be spent in interviewing the Head and unpacking. In the intervals, we can make up for lost time and you shall give me all the news. This way!”

She led the way into a square hall from which ran a narrow passage to the back of the chalet. A cross passage went from side to side of the house like the top stroke of a T. Miss Culver took them to the right-hand side at the end of which were six doors, standing ajar.

“These are our cloakrooms and splasheries,” she explained. “The door at the other end leads to the covered way which, my loves, has been specially built so that those of you sleeping in the Annexe need not be out in bad weather. You’ll find out all about that after Mittagessen. At present, find your pegs. They’re all labelled. I put in a whole afternoon on the

job. Hang your caps and coats up; wash your hands and tidy your hair and then come along. Karen is just beginning to dish up.”

She went round among the others and ten minutes later they were all in the Speisesaal, sniffing the savoury odour that was wafted through the buttery hatch.

It was a large, sunshiny room, panelled in pine which glowed with wax and hard rubbing. The floor was like it and one or two unwary folk skidded as they entered. It had wide lattice windows which were open to let the exhilarating air pour in. Curtains of blue-and-white checked material blew gently to and fro, and the square tables to seat four had matching cloths. There were no flowers on them, but they did not lack for ornament, for the tall, quaintly shaped glasses were in shades of ruby, blue, green and yellow. Wire stands filled with flowering plants stood before the windows which gave a charming view of the little alp. There were twelve of the sturdy little tables, but the room was so large that there was any amount of space between them. The chairs were carved pine, made in the peasant style. There was no fireplace, but one corner was dominated by a towering porcelain stove. A cuckoo clock hung on one wall and half a dozen prints of famous pictures decorated the others. Under the clock ran a long side-board where all serving was done. That was all and though it seemed rather bare to some of them, it was, in spite of that, a very pleasant room.

“Isn’t it quaint?” Pamela said, as they ate their soup. “You could tell it was foreign in a moment.”

“I like it,” a Scottish girl, Valerie Herriot, replied. “And aren’t these bowls simply charming!”

“The soup is really excellent,” the fourth at their table, a girl from the same school as Valerie, remarked patronizingly.

Elma gave a contemptuous look at the bowls of gay peasant ware. “I must say I don’t see why we should have basins as if we were babies,” she observed. “We aren’t likely to spill if we have plates—we’re all more or less grown-up, after all.”

Valerie laughed. “Even the mistresses have them,” she pointed out, in her pretty Scots voice. “I suppose it’s a case of ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’. Anyhow, it does keep the soup hot and that’s something. For you’re right, Edna; it is simply delicious.”

Elma sniffed; but a red-cheeked maid came to clear away at that moment, so she said nothing. The soup was followed by plates of roast veal with a savoury stuffing. Baked potatoes and a white vegetable fried and quite new to everyone accompanied it.

“There’s caraway in it—I can just taste it!” Pamela exclaimed. “What on earth is it?”

Miss Wilson, sitting at a table two or three yards away, overheard her. “It’s white cabbage served with a sour cream sauce,” she said, with a smile at her new pupil. “We propose for the most part to keep to the dishes of the country and we hope you will like them.”

Pamela blushed violently at thus drawing attention to herself. Valerie helped her out, however, by remarking that she thought it was delicious and Miss Wilson, out of mercy, turned back to her own table and went on with the conversation Pamela’s remark had interrupted.

The sweet was an apple roly-poly, but much nicer than any they had tasted before. Currants and raisins were mixed with the apple which was in a kind of cinnamon-flavoured caramel, the whole enclosed in a rich, flaky pastry that just melted in your mouth. No one declined a second helping and when the maid brought hers, Valerie demanded to know what it was.

“Bitte, mein Fräulein, ’zist Apfel Strudel,” Marie replied, beaming. “Sehr gut, nicht wahr?”

Valerie, whose German was a very minus quantity, just managed to realize that she was being asked if she thought it good. She nodded violently and said: “Oh rather! Simply wizard!”

Marie’s knowledge of English did not include slang, but she guessed that the dish was being praised, so she beamed more widely than ever and then scurried off to serve someone else.

When she had gone Elma, who had been eating more or less in silence since her remark about the soup bowls, suddenly gave tongue, though, remembering what had just happened to Pamela, she was careful to keep her voice down.

“Well!” she exclaimed. “I think they might have provided a better trained table-maid. The idea of joining in the conversation like that!”

“She didn’t. She merely answered a question I asked her,” Valerie retorted. “I think she has delightful manners—so friendly and pleasant. Apfel Strudel! I must remember that. I wonder how they make it?”

“Better go and make love to the cook for the recipe!” Elma said in her most disagreeable voice.

Valerie was too well bred to reply and Pamela kicked her friend gently under the table. Elma was making an ass of herself, she thought. There was no point in *trying* to make enemies at the very beginning of things. What on earth was wrong with her?

After the meal, Miss Wilson stood up. “I have a few things to say to you, girls,” she said. “First of all, service is almost as difficult to get here as in England. Therefore, certain tasks will be yours. You must help clear the tables at the end of meals; and, of course, you must make your own beds and keep your cubicles tidy. Also, you are requested to keep your own sitting-room dusted and in order. You will see it presently, and I hope you will like it.

“Most of you, I know, are new to Switzerland and we all hope you will enjoy being in one of the loveliest countries in the world. I won’t keep you any longer now. After you have had coffee, Matron wants you for unpacking and I want a short visit from each of you, so our afternoon will be well filled. Kaffee und Kuchen, which takes the place of afternoon tea here, will be at four o’clock. After that, I thought you would like to explore and begin to know your surroundings a little. Now please stand for grace and then Peggy Bettany, who came early and knows her way about, will take you to the Saal, as your own private sitting-room is called. Coffee will be brought to you there.”

They all stood while she said a short Latin grace. Before Peggy could lead the way out, she had one thing more to say to them.

“One more thing, girls. You are all over sixteen—most of you are well over seventeen. You will not, therefore, be treated as ordinary schoolgirls and you will find that there is little supervision during your free time. That means that we trust you to behave like responsible beings. Certain rules there must be, but we have kept these down to the minimum. All we ask is that you will respect the few there are. That is all. Lead on, Peggy!”

Peggy left her table, went to the door and said in her clear, silvery voice: “This way, everyone!” and led the way to the back of the chalet, where she threw open the door of a long, rather narrow room which had nearly as much sunshine as the Speisesaal, for the three windows running along the side faced west.

Here the girls found that a number of comfortable basket chairs had been provided for them. There were two or three tables, one with a scatter of magazines and illustrated guides on it. Under each of the five windows was a comfortable ottoman and both ottomans and chairs were piled with gaily coloured cushions. Again there was no fireplace, but a big porcelain stove. They also found more wire stands and flowering plants set against the west wall between the windows. Opposite, bookcases filled with books of all sorts and in the three official languages of the school—English, French and German—offered an inviting selection to readers. Bowls and vases filled with autumn flowers stood on the tables and window-sills. All in all, it was a really delightful room.

Peggy went over to one of the west windows and perched herself on an ottoman. Daphne followed her and Nell Randolph collapsed into a nearby chair and stretched out her long legs.

“Well,” she said, after an appreciative look round, “I like this place so far. What do you say, Luce?”

Lucy, who had pulled up another chair beside her, nodded. “This is a really lovely room. There’s only one snag.”

“What’s that?” Peggy demanded.

“Well, what do we do when we want to dance. There simply won’t be room, even if we push everything back against the wall.”

“There’s no piano, either,” someone else pointed out.

“That’s O.K.,” Peggy said easily. “We dance in the salon which is in front of this. You’ll see later. We’re supposed to be there after Abendessen. Here’s the coffee! After that, we’d better go to our cubeys and then Matey will be on the job!”

Chapter Three

ANCIENT HISTORY

After coffee, the girls sat for a minute or two, exchanging views. Presently Elma came up to the window where Peggy and her clan were still sitting. "Look here," she said abruptly, "why do we have to use German names for meals and rooms and so on?"

"Because we'll talk German or French for the most part," she said. "Also, we're in one of the German-speaking cantons—not that it's what a Berliner would call German, either!—and it really is better to stick to local customs in things like that, don't you think?"

Elma paid no heed to the last part of Peggy's speech. "Do you really mean that we have to talk French or German *all* the time? In lessons as well as everywhere else?"

"Well, what did you expect?" Peggy asked mildly. "One reason why we're here is so that we can learn to speak decently. I don't know just what the arrangements will be; but I'm certain we shan't be allowed to talk English all the time."

Elma looked blank; and so did a good many other folk, for they were all listening to Peggy by this time.

"How simply awful!" Valerie gasped. "I thought it would just be during those lessons. Mind you, I expected we'd get much bigger doses of them than we've had before," she added hastily.

"Well, but," Daphne took it up, "that wouldn't be much use really. I mean, I imagine most of us have been taught by direct method, but how many of us can chatter *fluently* in either language?"

A dead silence met this. Then a slim dark girl with sparkling black eyes said demurely and in a voice that left no chance of mistake about her nationality: "But me, I speak le français very well indeed."

There was a blank silence, then everyone burst out laughing.

"Mais Gabrielle! Que tu es méchante!" cried one of a pair who were so alike as to be plainly sisters if not twins.

"Well," Peggy said placidly, "I expect then, that we'll have two days a week of each of the three and on Sundays we shall probably talk what we like."

"At that rate," Pamela said in half-rueful tones, "my throat will be worn out on Sunday night, for I'm certain I shan't be able to talk much all the rest of the week."

"*You will!*" This was big Dickie Christy. "When you hear nothing but French all round for a whole day with people helping you to put what you want to say into whatever language it is, and making you go over it again and again until you say it just exactly as they want, you just can't help absorbing *some* of it—and the same goes for German."

"You sound," Valerie said with a grin, "as if yours had been a long and sad experience of just exactly that."

"Oh, it has," Dickie told her. "You see, 'way back on the island where I first joined the Chalet School, we had just that arrangement, and there was I with the usual High School knowledge of French and none at all of German—I took Latin instead. You can imagine what a hectic time I had of it at first! I'm bound to say," she added, "that I wasn't the only one by a long chalk. But I'm like Mrs. Gummidge there—I felt it most!"

"Not much of Mrs. Gummidge about you!" Nita Eltringham retorted.

“Isn’t there just! That’s all *you* know!—*Peggy Bettany!* You sugar baby!”

Peggy reddened and laughed. “Idiotic, I know, but it’s such years since I’ve seen these lovely slabs of sugar—not since I was a tiny of five or six and we lived in Tirol.”

“Did you live there when you were small?” Pamela asked with interest.

Peggy nodded. “Yes. As a matter of fact, this school began there. My Aunt Madge started it, you see, and——”

“But I say! I thought it belonged to Lady Russell, wife of Sir James Russell, the big doctor?” Elma interrupted.

“So it does. She’s my Aunt Madge. She wasn’t Lady Russell then, though—not even *Mrs.* Russell. She was plain Miss Bettany and she started the school in a big chalet on the shores of the Tiernsee with just her sister, my Aunt Jo, and one other girl. She got a lot of other pupils, though, and then Uncle Jem opened a sanatorium at the Sonnalpe on the opposite side of the lake. They’d met by that time and after a bit they married, so Aunt Madge couldn’t do a lot of teaching. My cousin, David Russell, was born the next year and she was busy, besides living up at the Sonnalpe. But it still belonged to her and she wanted it to go on, so she appointed a Head, Mdlle Lepâtre who was her partner, anyhow. Then Mdlle became awfully ill and had to give up, so Miss Annersley was appointed with Miss Wilson as co-Head. Now Miss Annersley is running the English branch alone and we have B—— I mean, Miss Wilson.”

“But why did you leave the Tiernsee?” Valerie asked.

“Because of that beast Hitler and the Anschluss. No one was going to send their girls to a Nazified country. The school packed up and went to Guernsey. Then the war started and we had to clear out, so we went to Plas Howell in the Golden Valley of Armishire. And *then,*” continued Peggy, intent on getting the whole story in before Matron arrived to interrupt, “the drains went bad on us and we had to skip out and we went to St. Briavel’s, a tiny island off the coast of Wales, and there we still are. Dickie’s father let us have the Big House and they moved to a smaller one——”

“And jolly good job, too!” Dickie put in. “No help and a huge old house! It wasn’t good enough. That was about a year and a half ago and, as Peggy says, the school’s still there and likely to be for a while yet, from all I can hear.”

“How did they come to open up here?” asked a very pretty girl, who had come from an exclusive boarding school not far from Bournemouth. “I’m June Amery, by the way,” she added.

Peggy nodded. “We’ll get to know who we all are in time, I suppose,” she said. “As to why this branch has started, well, you see, everyone has always hoped we could go back to Tirol sooner or later, only it can’t be done just yet. Then one of our first girls was left this big chalet by her aunt and she doesn’t want to use it, so she wrote and suggested that the school might start a finishing branch here, just for elder girls who would be leaving school in a year’s time or so. So we came.”

“There’s reams more, of course. Peg has just given you the barest outline of it,” Nita Eltringham added. “If you want the whole yarn, you should ask Miss Wilson.”

“Please—I know some of it.” This was Gabrielle. “May I name myself? I am Gabrielle Fournet, and I and these other four all come from Notre Dame Convent School in Paris. My mother’s cousin was at the Chalet School when it was in Tirol——”

“Name?” Peggy demanded excitedly.

Gabrielle looked puzzled for a moment. Then her face cleared. “Oh, I see. You wish the name of the cousin. She was Yvette Mercier. She is now Yvette Le Marchant, and she has

three little boys.”

“I’ve heard of her—and her sister, too,” Peggy replied.

“The poor Cousine Suzanne! She is dead!”

“Oh dear! Auntie Jo will be awfully sorry! She always said they were such a jolly pair!”

“She is dead during the Occupation. Her baby boy was just a week old and they were turned out of their flat by orders of the Germans who wanted the whole building. Suzanne s’enrhumis—I mean,” as she saw some of the English girls looking puzzled, “she caught a cold and she died, for she was still very weak.”

“Oh, poor Suzanne. I can just remember her,” Peggy said earnestly. “She was a big girl and I was only a wee thing, but she was awfully kind and I remember her lovely hair. She had quantities, and most awfully long.”

Gabrielle nodded at her. Then she went on with her story. “Well it is that ma tante has heard of this new part of the Chalet School from a friend of hers and she told my mother and said: ‘You must send Gabrielle for a year. So she will learn good English and German, and when she goes to the Sorbonne to study for her Bachot, she will do well.’ Maman was pleased for she has heard so much from Cousine Yvette about her dear school in Tirol. Also, she spoke to some of her friends and that is why we are all here.” She turned and beckoned to the others. “May I present to you Madeleine de Lisle who is also a cousin of ours? This is Marie-Thérèse de Maurignac, and these two are the St. Georges twins—Ghiselaine and Lesceline.”

“What awfully pretty names!” June exclaimed. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard them before.”

“Ghiselaine se nomme—I mean she calls herself for Grand’mère,” Lesceline explained. “I am named after the Comtesse de Lesceline who was cousin to your Guillaume le Vainqueur _____”

“Our *who*?” Dickie asked, startled.

Lesceline tried again. “It is that you call him——”

“She means William the Conqueror, you goop,” Nita interjected. “Go on, Lesceline. What else about her? I know she is famous or well-known, anyhow, because her name rings a definite bell in my brain though I can’t quite fix it.”

Lesceline looked perplexed. “But how a bell? And yet, perhaps a bell would be connected with her, for she founded the Abbaye des Benedictines at Lisieux where Ste Thérèse de l’Enfant-Jésus went to school as a little girl. We come from Lisieux, you understand. My second name calls himself Thérèse.”

“I knew I’d heard of her somewhere,” Nita said with satisfaction. “Dad has Frances Parkinson Keyes’ book, *St. Teresa of Lisieux*, and I read it when he bought it. Wasn’t the Comtesse Abbess of the convent herself?”

“But yes! She was; and there have been so many more great and good Abbesses there, too,” Ghiselaine took her turn.

“Who was this Ste Thérèse you speak of?” Elma demanded.

But that story had to wait, for at this moment the door opened and Matron appeared. However, later on Elma and the rest heard of it, and several of the girls were interested enough to struggle through the autobiography of the saint who is best known as “The Little Flower”—*La Vie d’une Ame*.

“Now,” Matron opened fire, “I’ve come to tell you about your rooms. Your trunks have been taken to them and I want you all to unpack and put your things away. When you have finished, those of you who are at the Annexe must carry the empty trunks to the outer door

and pile them up there. They will be put into the trunk-room later on. Not you, Peggy; you've finished, haven't you?"

"Yes, Matron; but my trunk is still in my cubicle."

"Very well, then. Get someone to help you to carry it outside. Then you can go to Miss Wilson in the study in ten minutes' time." She turned to the rest. "I'm going to read the lists. The following girls are all over at the Annexe." She read out a list of some twenty-five names. "Peggy can show you the way and I'll be over in a few minutes to show you which are your dormitories and cubicles. The rest of you remain over here. Nita Eltringham, you are in the dormitory above this room with Judy Rose, Valerie Herriot, Barbara Smith and Josephine Bellenger. Patricia Binney—which are you?"

"That's me, please, Matron." A tall girl of nearly eighteen stood forward and Matron looked closely at her and nodded.

"Thank you. You are next door to Nita's dormitory and have June Amery, Madeleine de Lisle and Gabrielle Fournet with you. The remaining five are in the room over the Speisesaal. Frances Coleman, you are the head of that dormitory. Do you think you can find your rooms? Your names are pinned to the curtains, so once you know your room, you should have no difficulty. Off you go! I'll come along as soon as I have settled the people in the Annexe." She whisked off after Peggy and the crowd which had followed her.

She arrived there almost as soon as they did, and found them all standing outside the Annexe, laughing and chattering about it.

It was a long, one-floored building, part of it evidently fairly old as these wooden buildings go in the Alps; part of it as obviously new. Peggy was explaining about it as Matron reached the throng.

"You see, they found this little chalet here and they thought it would be a good notion to build on to it, for there are a good many more of us than they had expected at first. It's rather decent, isn't it?"

Dickie surveyed it and grinned. "It looks all right now. But if an avalanche landed on it, I should think it would be well flattened out in half no time!"

"Do you, indeed, young woman?" This was Matron who butted in at once, for she saw that one or two of the girls were looking rather alarmed at this. "Well, you needn't be afraid. For one thing, we have an old pine wood behind us," she pointed, "and these old woods are a great protection against avalanches. That's why no cutting down is permitted except where it is absolutely necessary for the sake of the trees themselves. Anyone who takes a fancy to chopping down a tree in one of them is liable to heavy penalties by law."

"No, really?" Pamela exclaimed.

"Yes, indeed. So don't try playing the George Washington game, any of you. We don't want to have to go and bail you out of prison!" Matron chuckled at the thought. "Well, now you have seen the outside. Unless Dickie has any more bright ideas to curdle the blood in our veins, suppose we go in and examine the inside."

Dickie went scarlet while the others laughed, and they all trooped in after Matron, and found themselves standing in a long narrow passage with another running across the end of it, showing six doors standing open.

"Those are the bathrooms," Matron explained. "At the other end is the door opening into the covered way. You won't use that at present unless we have any bad weather. In winter, you won't use anything else. There are pegs here for your coats and caps and you can hang them there, ready for daily use. They have your names underneath, so suppose you hang up your

coats and hats before we proceed any further. Peggy, you'd better get that trunk moved and then run along or you'll be late."

Peggy nodded. "Yes, Matron. Joan, you're ready. Come and help me like a lamb! I'll do as much for you when I come back."

Joan, a plump, capable-looking person, who had been Games Prefect at the school the previous year, went off with her and they disappeared down the long corridor and through a door near the end.

"Dickie, you and Daphne Russell are in the same room," Matron said, as Dickie turned from hanging up her coat and cap. "Off you go and begin your unpacking."

They ran off and Matron set to work to settle the rest. Before long the girls were all in their cubicles, unpacking and calling to each other over the six-foot high partitions of matchboarding that separated them. Curtains hung across the front of each cubicle, leaving a very narrow passageway for the girls to pass to and fro.

Presently Elma appeared in Pamela's abode. She found that young woman standing before her mirror, brushing out her hair.

"I hadn't time to do it properly before lunch," she explained.

"We call it Mittagessen here," Elma snapped.

"Oh, well, the midday meal, then. That suit you?" Pamela picked up her hand-mirror and twisted round. "How d'you like my hair?"

"Quite decent for you. Have you had a perm?"

Pamela nodded, laid her hand-mirror away and began to unpack the tray of her trunk. "I didn't want to put it up—too much bother. So I coaxed Dad to say I could have it cut, and *then* I got a perm out of him. Mother was all against it until I left school for keeps, but he said I was only three months short of eighteen and might as well have it now. When she saw how tidy my head looked after it, she was quite reconciled."

Elma, with a vivid recollection of her friend's rats'-tails before this, was inclined to believe her. Her own long, waveless locks had never given her any trouble. In England, she had worn it in a long pigtail which never seemed to be ruffled. During the holidays when she had celebrated her eighteenth birthday, she had practised pinning it up into its present thick knot on the nape of her neck and was quite expert at it now.

"It's certainly an improvement," she said. "Well, I'd better go back and see what I can do about crowding my frocks and coats into the stand-on-it's-end coffin they've given me for a wardrobe!"

Pamela laughed. "It's not as bad as all that! I've plenty of room in mine, and so will you have, once you begin. After all, we're rather lucky to have wardrobes at all. In some places they give you only a cupboard between three or four, I believe. We're better off than that, anyhow!"

"Polly-Anna!" Elma said; and went back to her own cubicle to go on with her unpacking.

It really wasn't so bad as she made out. The wardrobes were small and narrow, but quite large enough. The beds were wooden, made rather like old-fashioned sofas, with a low wooden head and back. In the daytime, they were covered with a loose cretonne cover and there were cases to match for the pillow and bolster, turning the whole affair into a little settee. A wicker chair and a bedroom one fitted into the corners opposite, and a table-bureau stood before the window. One end lifted up and showed a mirror, and a shallow locker for brush and comb and other oddments. Three drawers made up the other end. Besides these, there was also a narrow chest of drawers, about five feet high and on this the girls could put their

photographs and any vases they had brought. Pretty curtains to match the bedcover hung at the lattice window, and a jar of flowers stood on the broad sill.

Elma finished clearing her trunks, laying away her possessions with a certain daintiness that was part of her nature. When she had hung up her dressing-gown on the peg near the bed and put her slippers beneath it, she shut the trunk and dragged it out to the passage where another girl from Dulverley, Alison Power, was doing the same thing.

“Give me a hand with this, Elma,” she said, “and I’ll help you with yours after.”

“O.K.,” Elma agreed, seeing that she could not get rid of her trunk until they had dealt with Alison’s.

By the time they got the two outside, they found quite a pile there, and the girls were now strolling about the gardens, chattering gaily. Peggy Bettany had come back and Dickie Christy had been across and so had Pamela and two or three others. Elma’s own summons arrived shortly and she found that Miss Wilson wanted only to tell her what class she would be in —“We won’t call them forms as you girls won’t have lessons, but lectures,” the Head said— and also to ask if she wished to take anything extra, like wood-carving or gardening. That settled, she was sent back to the garden where she was speedily joined by the other three girls from Dulverley. Miss Wilson, coming to the door on an errand, looked at the groups and wondered how long it would be before they would be one school and all of them Chalet School girls instead of, as now, different sets from different schools.

“Hardly this term,” she thought. “And yet, I don’t know.” Her mind went back to Tirol days when another school had joined the Chalet School.^[2] They had become one inside of a term. Perhaps this would be the same thing. She very much hoped so.

[2] See *The New Chalet School*

Chapter Four

THE SCHOOL SETTLES IN

By the Saturday, the school was beginning to feel more or less like a school. Cubicles had been adorned to suit the varied tastes of their owners. Each girl knew in which class she would be. Mistresses and pupils were starting to know each other.

“All the same,” Peggy said wisely, to a select company of four, when they were sitting in the garden on Saturday morning, supposed to be writing letters home, but actually gossiping, “we aren’t anything like one school yet.”

“How d’you mean?” Dickie demanded, as she broke up a slab of milk chocolate. “Here you are, folks! Help yourselves. What d’ye mean, Peg?”

“Well—thanks, Dick—look at us!” Peggy waved sweepingly round and the girls gazed about them. “Us five—all Chalet School. That crowd over there—Dulverley High. The lot under the chestnut—more Chalet School.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?” Daphne Russell asked. “You surely don’t expect us all to fall on each other’s necks at the word, ‘Go!’ and amalgamate like—like fruit and sugar into one kind of jam, do you?”

“Lovely simile!” Joan Sandys commented with a grin. “No one would ever expect anything so sweet and—er—sticky. I see what Peg’s getting at, though. You’ll have to give us time, Peg, my pet. I suppose,” she went on more seriously, “if we were all three or four years younger, it would be much easier.”

“*Would* it?” Nita had swallowed her chocolate and was ready to speak. “I should imagine it would be a lot more like introducing a whole set of strange cats to each other. There’d be cliques and sets before you could say ‘knife!’ and you know what they’re like at that age—they’d be running feuds and squabbles like fun.”

“Do you think so? Well, perhaps you’re right and I should have put it at six or seven years younger.”

“Daisy talked to me about that,” Peggy said thoughtfully. “She said probably every last one of us would come expecting to find the sort of thing we’d been used to. She said our lot would be specially liable to that because it *is* a kind of continuation of our old school.”

Joan nodded. “I think I see. Daisy’s afraid that we may try to rub our own ideas and ways of doing things into the new folk and it won’t do.”

“That’s exactly what she said,” Peggy replied eagerly, “I do see her point, of course. That’s one reason why I think it’s rather a good thing that Bill cut out forms and gave us classes—with saints, too. And I suppose it’s also the reason why we’re not having any sort of prefects apart from heads of dormitories.”

“Who don’t have any more authority than anyone else, really,” Daphne added. “The idea, I suppose, is that we’ve more or less come to years of discretion and must be responsible for ourselves.”

Peggy nodded, her mouth being too full of chocolate for speech.

Dickie took a turn. “We’ll have to wait and see what happens. I’m rather wondering how the lecture business will turn out. Well, if I’m going to manage three letters home *and* a note for young Gaynor, I’d better get down to it. Aren’t we supposed to be taking a stroll after mid-morning coffee? Then pipe down, all of you, and let me get on.”

There was an end to chatter after this and the five scribbled away industriously. Meanwhile, other people were also discussing the arrangements Miss Wilson had announced after Frühstück that morning.

She had told the girls that they would take needlework and such things as appreciation of music and art together. For the rest, they would be divided into three classes. The first of these would be St. Ursula's and would contain eighteen girls. Next would come St. Barbara's and it would have ten people. The last was St. Agnes and this would be made up of the eleven remaining.

St. Ursula's main lectures would be on languages and literature though they would have geography and a certain amount of botany. St. Barbara's was for the girls who preferred maths and science. As for St. Agnes, the youngest girls would be there and it would form a preparation for those who were likely to remain two years at the new school.

"Supposing we aren't all at the same level, Miss Wilson?" Pat Binney from St. Anne's had asked.

"You must all do your best. Apart from that, it won't matter so much. For one thing, there will be no marks here. You will have remarks written at the end of your essays and exercises, but as you aren't having marks, there will be no form order and you will be judged on your own standard."

"Oh, I see," Pat had murmured.

No one having anything else to say, the girls had been dismissed to see to their chores, and when they were done they had either taken their letters into the garden like Peggy and her gang, or else settled down at the tables in the Saal.

Anthea Barnett, having finished the air-mail sheet she was sending to her mother in the West Indies, shut up her writing-case and went to put it away. She met Elma who had also finished and was going on the same errand. These two were the oldest in the school though Nita Eltringham was not many months younger. Anthea paused to speak to Elma.

"Finished your letter? So have I. Mother's in Jamaica, and an air-mail doesn't give you much room to spread yourself."

Elma nodded. "My people are in Ireland, so I'm sending an air-mail, too. I only hope they get it. They're moving about just now and the only address I have is a Dublin one." She fell in beside Anthea. "I say, do you think this lectures arrangement will pan out? For I don't!"

"Why ever not?" Anthea asked in surprise.

"Well, I imagine that most of us in St. Ursula's are at very different standards. For instance, I'm pretty sure that you and I are miles ahead of those two from St. Anne's. I'm certain *I* am! It may be a frightfully super place, but they don't seem to do an awful lot in the way of work—or not what *I* call work."

Anthea laughed. "My dear girl, that has nothing to do with it. Besides, girls who go to that sort of school don't want the things that those of us who expect to have a job and keep ourselves later on need. When they leave school, the majority of them go home to live. Oh, they'll take on voluntary things, like helping with the Red Cross, or the W.I., but you don't need yards of maths and science for that sort of thing; or even reams of information about Shakespeare and dates for history and so on. I rather like those two, by the way. Pat Binney says she means to take a secretarial course later on as she wants to act as secretary to her father; but it isn't a case of have to. As for June Amery, she is to go home and help her mother who seems to be one of the folk who go in heavily for philanthropy of various kinds. June will be fairly busy, I imagine, but she won't need a degree for that sort of thing."

Elma nodded. "And she's awfully pretty if you like that type. She'll probably marry before she's twenty-one."

"She may," Anthea agreed.

"What about you?"

Anthea flushed. "Well, I'm one of the folk who needn't take on a job. I'm awfully keen on languages, though, and when we heard about this new branch, I begged to be allowed to come to learn French and German thoroughly." She paused and glanced at Elma.

"Why?" that young woman asked curiously.

"I'm rather keen on translating," Anthea explained.

"Oh? Well, I'm another of the people who needn't work. Dad runs a chain of beauty-shops and does it pay! He's 'Amanda Antrobus!'" Elma giggled appreciatively. "Some name, isn't it? He really was an analytical chemist and he got on to a good thing before they were married. He tried it out, and it went like hot cakes. Now he has the factory—it's only a small one—and then he opened first one shop and then another, till now he has branches all over the place. I'm the one and only, so there's no need for me to get a job."

"How awfully interesting!" It was all Anthea could find to say. She did not feel in the least drawn to Elma and that young woman's way of expressing herself did not make her feel any the more fond of her. Luckily, they had reached the Annexe and they parted. When they had put their cases away, Elma found that Anthea had vanished so she went across to Das Haus unter die Kiefern to seek Pamela, who had elected to write her letters in the Saal.

"Come on, Pam!" she said impatiently. "Haven't you finished that screed yet? What on earth you can find to say about a grassy shelf stuck half-way up a mountain, I can't imagine! Why on earth couldn't they have got a place somewhere near the town?"

Edna Purdon from Moray House was sharing Pamela's table and as she finished her speech, Elma's gaze happened to fall on her.

"It's because they are going to build a new sanatorium on the shelf farther up the mountain," she said in her rather affected, high-pitched voice. "Sooner or later there will be people there who will want their children near them. That's where this school will come in. I've heard my people talk about it. My father does research on tuberculosis," she added.

"Oh, really?" Elma assumed a tone that was an absurd caricature of Edna's stilted speech. "How quite too interesting!"

"You asked me and I was only telling you," Edna said.

"Oh no, I didn't. I happened to be speaking to my friend."

Edna went very pink. "You looked at me when you spoke and I thought——"

"Oh, I shouldn't bother to think," Elma drawled in her natural tones. "Not if I were you, at any rate. You might injure your brain. Come on, Pam! Let's go for a stroll."

Pamela had been scrambling her possessions together. Now she jumped up and she and Elma left the room. Edna stayed where she was, the end of her long nose quivering at Elma's studied rudeness.

She was an only child, brought up in a tiny village among the Cheviots. Her mother had refused to part with her until she was fifteen and, being a former Oxford don, had taught the child herself. There were no children of the same age near them and the result of Edna's upbringing had been to turn her into a very good specimen of the genus prig. At fifteen, the girl had been sent to Moray House, where she had contrived to make herself thoroughly disliked by her didactic manner and stilted way of speaking. She had been very miserable, lost weight and colour, and alarmed her parents.

Then Dr. Purdon, meeting an old schoolfellow at a meeting of the B.M.A., had heard of this new venture up in the Alps. He had gone home full of it, with the result that Edna was entered and had arrived with the rest.

When Elma and Pamela had gone out, leaving her alone, she stayed where she was for a few minutes.

“*Why* don’t other girls like me?” she pondered. “I honestly thought Elma was asking me and I only told her. Why was she so rude to me? Why am I always the one left out?”

As she had not yet realized that her own manner was largely to blame, she could find no answer. She sat down dejectedly, wondering if this new school was to be Moray House over again. Luckily for her, Peggy Bettany arrived at this moment, in quest of her Kodak. It was not in Peggy to ignore anyone so patently miserable and she came up to Edna at once.

“What’s up, Edna? Have you been to the buttery for your chocolate? Not? My good girl, scoot, vamoose, *scram!* Matey will have yards to say if you miss. And then, what about coming out?”

Edna got to her feet. Small as she was, she overtopped Peggy’s five foot two by at least an inch and a half. She stood looking down into the friendly blue eyes smiling at her.

“Peggy,” she said abruptly, “what’s the matter with me?”

“The *matter* with you?” Peggy repeated. “How do you mean?”

“Well, everyone leaves me alone——”

“Oh, nonsense!” Peggy interrupted. “You’re imagining it!”

“But I’m *not!* Listen, Peggy! Truly, I’m not!” And then, while Peggy listened as patiently as she might, since she was longing to get back to the others, out it all came tumbling—her unhappy life at Moray House and how wretched she had been. She finished up with “And if it’s going to be like that here, I don’t know what I shall do!”

“It won’t be,” Peggy assured her. “The Chalet School doesn’t allow such things—never has.” Then she looked doubtfully at Edna. “Look here—may I say something?”

“Yes—anything! Only tell me what I can do,” Edna said eagerly.

“Well—and I don’t mean it unkindly, only you did ask me to help you—I think if you’d try to talk a little less as if you were certain you were right whatever you say. You see, people don’t like that sort of thing and it aggravates them and then they say, ‘Oh, better leave her alone!’ Do you see, Edna?”

Peggy was very red as she finished. Edna went even redder as she grasped the inwardness of this. “But if I *am* right?” she said.

“Even then, it’s better not to seem too awfully sure,” Peggy told her wisely. “As for Elma, I think it’s more her manner than anything else. Don’t you see? You talk to her like—like her own granny, which annoys her; and she talks to you snubbingly and that annoys you.”

Edna thought this over. “I must take time to meditate on it,” she said at last. “Perhaps you are right.”

“Well, you can’t do it this minute,” Peggy informed her. “Come on now and get your chocolate or you’ll have Matey foaming at the mouth at you! Then come on out with me and the rest and we’ll take a stroll down to Lauterbach.”

Not giving Edna time for any more of her weighty remarks, she pulled her out of the room to the buttery-hatch where she saw that the girl drank her chocolate, rich and sweet and crowned with thick cream on top. That done, she demanded to be told if Edna had a Kodak of her own.

“Oh yes; my father gave me one for my last birthday,” Edna said.

“Then scam and fetch it. It’s much too lovely a day to waste indoors. And apart from that,” she added, “if Switzerland is anything like Tirol, we shall have more than enough of the house later on. When it snows in the Alps, it *snows*, you know, and no error!”

“Yes; so I should think,” the irrepressible Edna responded. “One expects that in mountainous areas.”

Peggy suppressed a groan. “No wonder she gets left!” she thought. Then she glanced up and saw the unhappiness in Edna’s eyes. “Oh, never mind that! You go and fetch your camera and come and let’s see who can find the loveliest views to snap,” she coaxed. “Where do you keep it?”

“In my cubicle. Will it be breaking rules if I go?”

“Of course not. Didn’t you hear Miss Wilson say there would be no rule against that sort of thing as she thought we were all old enough to be sensible about it and not be haring up and downstairs at all odd intervals during the day. I’ll come with you, shall I?”

“Yes, please do.”

Together they ran upstairs to the long room over the Speisesaal which had been divided up into cubicles exactly similar to those over at the Annexe, only here, the colours were pale yellow. Edna’s little abode was immaculate, much more so, as Peggy rather guiltily realized, than her own domain. On the shelf built in for the purpose were two photographs set at mathematical distances from a vase. The narrow standing bookcase in one corner was filled with books, but they were all level with the outer edge of the shelves. These were the only signs that the place was inhabited, whereas Peggy’s shelf was crowded with photos, tiny wooden bears and other bric-à-brac and her own little bookcase had the books shoved in higgledy-piggledy.

“I say!” she exclaimed, as Edna opened a drawer and took out the Kodak. “You *are* a tidy object! *You’ll* be Matey’s blue-eyed boy all right if this is the way you go on!”

“I like to have my things neat,” Edna said simply.

“Gosh! I should say it sticks out a mile that you do! I thought I wasn’t too bad, but this beats it into a cocked hat!”

Edna shut the drawer and Peggy took the hint.

“Come on! The rest will be ready to eat us for keeping them waiting like this! I’ll show you my realm some time,” she added, laughing as they left the dormitory and went downstairs.

In the garden, a little group was waiting for them. Peggy had contrived to make a face at them in warning without Edna seeing, so all that anyone said, came from Dickie.

“Well, I hope you’ve been long enough! Did you have to *make* the thing?”

“Edna had to go upstairs to fetch hers,” Peggy explained, with a look that dared them all to make any comments. “Sorry, everyone. Shall we start off? We’re all ready now. Oh, half a sec! Have I got my purse? We might be able to buy chocolate or something at Lauterbach.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake buck up!” Nita groaned. “You’re getting as feather-headed as your Aunt Jo, Peggy Bettany!”

Peggy felt in the pocket of her old school blazer which she had pulled on against the fresh breeze. “O.K.! It’s here. Now I’m ready.”

“And not before time, either!” Dickie told her. “Got all *you* want, Edna?”

“Yes, thank you,” Edna said in her prim voice.

“Then let’s get cracking! Come on, Nita!” And Dickie set off through the garden.

The girls had done some wandering about the little grassy alp of Welsen, but so far they had not seen the wider one of Lauterbach since the day they came. Already most of them had gone down the winding path between the stone pines and the birches. Peggy and her crowd followed them, the girls laughing and chattering gaily, though Edna remained more or less quiet. To tell the truth, she was wondering to herself about Peggy's sudden friendliness. She knew well enough that Peggy Bettany had as many friends as any girl could wish, and she was honest enough to realize that if she wanted any more there were at least half a dozen others who were much more her own type than Edna herself.

"But it's kind of her," she thought, as she followed Peggy down the last narrow turn of the path where they had to go single file. "Perhaps this place will be better than Moray House. Perhaps I can be happy here after all." And then she thought of what Peggy had said about her manner of speaking and behaving. "Is it really partly my fault? But I don't see how I could ever talk as they do—all that slang, and teasing each other and yet not losing their tempers over it. Girls are very queer!"

Dickie was making much the same remark to Peggy as they dropped down on to the sunny, grass-covered alp with its scattering of chalets and two fair-sized hotels and the Bahnhof at the far side.

"Peg, you *are* the limit! What possessed you to ask that girl to join us? She may mean well, but she does rile me, she's so darn sure of herself in every possible way."

"I couldn't help it, Dick. She was all alone and she looked so awfully miserable. You know as well as I do that the school has never allowed any new girl to feel off on her own, at first, at any rate. We must keep *that* tradition going here, anyhow."

"She's such a queer thing—and you're almost as queer," Dickie grumbled. "In fact, if you ask me, it's a case of 'Everyone's mad but thee and me and thee's a little mad!'"

Peggy shrieked at this. "Where on earth did you get that? I'll talk to you later. 'A little mad', indeed! What next, I wonder!"

"A snap of all this crowd," Dickie retorted promptly. She turned back to call, "Hi, Edna! Hurry up! I want a snap of this lot!"

Edna, scrambling awkwardly down the last of the rocky path, nearly went headlong over a snag as she reached the end. Joan was there, though, and caught her arm to steady her.

"Mind your feet!" she said, laughing. "This isn't the sort of path to run a marathon down! Now then, Dick, hurry up with that snap of yours. Where do you want us?"

"Just here. Nell, you and Anthea squat down on that fallen log. Peg, you and Nita and Daph stand behind, and Lucy and Gwynneth can squat on the ground in front. Edna, you'd better go beside Peggy." Dickie moved back several paces and began to focus her camera. "Move in a little, Edna. I can't get you all in." She peered into the view-finder and then looked up indignantly. "What *are* you squirming like that for, Lucy? Have you got fleas by any chance?"

"Well, *something's* biting me!" Lucy jumped up and began to rub her ankle, and Gwynneth followed suit.

"Something's got me, too!" Nell wriggled round and examined her seat. The next moment she was on her feet with a yell. "Oh, my only aunt! It's *ants*! We're sitting on an ant heap! And the wretched things are chewing me to pieces. Ow!"

The girls were all rubbing themselves in available places by this time, for what Nell had said was only too true. Ants swarmed all round, and, resenting this invasion of their colony, were showing fight savagely. Their bites were vicious and the girls wriggled and twisted and

cried out, though Peggy in the midst of her contortions managed to gasp: “Don’t yell like that! You’ll—startle the natives!”

People whose ankles and legs were all that was affected were able to rid themselves of the pests; but the unfortunate Lucy and Gwynneth, who had been sitting on the ground, and Anthea and Nell were attacked all round, and even stately Anthea forgot her dignity and she writhed and slapped herself all over to try to stop the bites anyway.

It was not to be expected that such a scene could escape the notice of their own schoolfellows at least, and, before long, most of the others were gathered round them, offering suggestions, or else actively trying to help them.

“Il faut baigner,” Gabrielle announced dramatically. “On ne peut se delivrer de ses pestes mais d’un bain!”

“Where on earth d’you imagine we shall find a bath down here?” Nita demanded. “Girls! The only thing to do is for you and some of us to go up again and a little way into the trees. Then we can stand round while you undress and rub yourselves down.”

No less a person than Edna, who had escaped fairly lightly, offered the next suggestion. “I believe ants detest the odour of paraffin. Could we buy some and—er—sprinkle it on your legs and—and so on?”

“It might help.” Peggy had cleared herself of her share. “Nell—*Nell!* You’ll break your neck if you wriggle like that! You aren’t a contortionist!”

“They’re crawling up my back! I can feel them running up and down my spine!” Nell gasped.

Deliverance was at hand—mercifully. One of the inhabitants of Lauterbach had come to see what the crowd and cries meant. She promptly offered to take the afflicted four to her own house, let them undress there and rub down while she shook all their garments to rid them of any lurking ants.

The sufferers were only too thankful to accept. Twenty minutes later, they appeared, reclad and in their right minds. But it was a very long time after that before any of them would sit on either the ground or a log before she had carefully examined the area for ants!

Chapter Five

THE SCHOOL GETS INTO ITS STRIDE

On the Sunday, the Protestant girls went up to the high alp known as The Dorf, where an English service was held in one of the hotels, while the Catholics trooped down to Lauterbach which had a tiny Catholic chapel. Miss Wilson informed them that they were expected to attend one or other of the services once on Sundays unless the weather or something of that kind prevented. Otherwise they could please themselves about the matter. In the event, some fifteen or twenty went again in the evening, escorted by Miss Culver on the one hand and Mdlle Berné on the other. The rest sat about the garden and read or wrote letters. It was a hot day, even at that height, and they were thankful not to be asked to do anything strenuous.

Miss Wilson said nothing. She was watching her pupils keenly and learning to know them. The various members of the Chalet School and those from Red Gables and Branscombe Park did not worry her. With the girls from St. Briavel's, she already knew exactly where she stood. She also knew both Red Gables and Branscombe Park by reputation. Red Gables was not far from Plas Howell, the school's real home in England. Nell Randolph was an old friend, since she was the cousin of Miss Annersley with whom the Head of the new branch had hitherto been co-Head.

"And don't I wish she was here with me now!" Miss Wilson thought rather forlornly, as she sat up in bed and sipped her early tea. "This isn't going to be an easy job by any means. I'm almost sorry that we decided against having a Head Girl and prefects. And yet, when they are all on the verge of being adults, how could we? Oh, well! I suppose it will all come out in the wash!"

With this philosophic reflection, she set aside her tray and jumped out of bed. Time was passing and, from the Saal and the salon, she could hear the playing of scales on the pianos while from other rooms issued faint strains of strings and a flute.

The practice time-table had been put up on Saturday evening and the girls had been told that it must be rigidly adhered to or it would be impossible to get in all the practice required. A third piano in Das Haus unter die Kiefern was in a tiny room at the farthest end and there was another over at the Annexe in an equally tiny room. When Miss Wilson reached her study, she heard that all four at hand were going hard. Rippling notes came from the Speisesaal where Marie-Thérèse de Maurignac was struggling with her flute. The violins and 'cellos were distributed among the three lecture rooms, the laboratory and Miss Culver's office. Valerie Herriot was practising her harp in the Speisesaal.

As the Head sat down at her desk and pulled out the notes of her geography lecture, Miss Culver herself came in from the garden looking very business-like in her well-cut skirt and pretty jumper. She had wrapped herself in a painfully shabby Chalet School blazer and she shivered exaggeratedly as she entered.

"Chilly?" the Head asked with a smile. "It's early yet. You'll find it cold up here first thing in the morning, I'm afraid."

"You're telling *me!*" Gillian spoke ruefully. "I went down to Lauterbach to see if the mailbag had come up on the early train, but no luck. However, I have a rather funny yarn for you, so lend me your ears!" And she related the story of the ants which she had heard from Frau Heinersch, the Good Samaritan of Saturday and also the postmistress.

Miss Wilson chuckled over it. “Well, that should teach them to think twice before sitting down on the ground regardless! As for the postbag, you’ve been here a week now. I should have thought you’d have realized by this time that it never arrives until the second or third train—and usually the third.”

“You never know your luck. I’ll slip along after Prayers and collect it.” Gillian leaned out of the wide-open window and snuffed the air luxuriously. “Glorious day, cold or not! Just look at that *golden* sun! What a treat after yesterday’s mist!” She turned back: “Hadn’t you better give me my orders for the morning? You won’t have a second to spare once school actually begins, you know.”

Miss Wilson laughed. “Any amount for you to do, my dear! To begin with, there are all those lists of books for England. Type them off and get them ready to post. I vetted them on Saturday, so it’s all straightforward. After that, I wish you’d write to Madame and Joey for me. They’ll be longing to hear how we’ve begun and I shan’t have time for more than a postcard before the middle of the week at soonest. Tell them that, by the way, and say I’ll send a volume along when I have a little more time. They shall have all my news as soon as I can get down to it. At the moment, my hands are rather more than full!”

“That ought to keep me going up to Mittagessen,” Gillian said, discarding her blazer now that she was warm again. “This afternoon I’m going down to the valley to meet Herr Freibach and bring him along. Let’s hope he can speak a little English, for my German is more than a little shaky.”

“He speaks fluently, though with an accent. We’re lucky to get him. Everyone says he’s a fine violin master. If only we can get fixed up with someone as good for piano, I shan’t have to worry about the music. Frau Lehmann is excellent, but she warned me when I engaged her that she couldn’t come after this term.”

“Oh well, at least it gives us the whole term to find someone,” Gillian responded consolingly. “We really have been lucky to get all the music fixed up as we have. Flute and harp aren’t awfully easy to settle, I imagine. There goes the bell for Frühstück!”

Sitting at the table she shared with Mdlle Berné and Miss Norton the Head watched the girls as they sat down to the usual Continental breakfast of coffee, hot rolls, butter and jam. She had noted discontent over it the morning before, but in Tirol the school had followed the custom of the country and it had been decided to do the same here. The girls would have a substantial meal at half past twelve and another in the evening, besides Kaffee und Kuchen, which meant milky coffee and rich sweet cakes and pastries round about four, so they had no reason for complaint, though she made no doubt that there were at least two or three young Joanna Bulls among them who would object vigorously at first.

She saw two or three faces fall as the girls realized that there was to be no bacon, fish or eggs; but most of them held their tongues. Only Mary Wormald, youngest in the school and formerly an ornament of Dulverley High School, voiced her dissatisfaction.

“I don’t call *this* brekker,” she grumbled, as she sweetened her coffee liberally. “Is this *all* we’re to have?”

“Mais pourquoi pas?” Gabrielle Fournet demanded. “One would not wish a heavy meal at this hour.”

“I would,” Mary assured her. “Pass the honey, please, Edna, and don’t hog it all to yourself!”

Flushing pink, Edna pushed the dish across the table. Miss Wilson’s voice cut across the soft babel of voices at the same time.

“Girls! Please don’t forget this is a French day. You may not speak English at all.” She spoke slowly in French so that they should all understand her and the girls, many of whom had forgotten, were stricken into momentary dumbness.

Mary, in particular, who knew that this was largely meant for her, rivalled Edna’s blushes and said no more until the meal was ended. When she wanted anything, she made signs—and some of them were peculiar.

“That must stop!” the Head thought; but she said no more at the time.

After the reminder, a good many of the girls thought before they said anything. The French girls, of course, were not disturbed. Their turn would come on Wednesday when English would be the order of the day; and on the morrow it was likely that most of them would find it difficult to chatter, since that was dedicated to German. The girls from St. Anne’s had been well trained in French; and so had the Chalet girls, though some of them, and notably Dickie Christy, spoke with good British accents. For the rest, they found that talking is very different from writing and the meal continued quietly.

“We shall soon have that corrected,” Mdlle Berné observed, with a twinkle at her Head.

Miss Norton laughed. “Too soon for our comfort,” she agreed. “Miss Wilson, what are we to do with girls who keep forgetting?”

“Cut out their days for English conversation,” Miss Wilson replied cheerfully. “We’ll deal mercifully with them for a fortnight. After that, no excuses from anyone! They must learn to remember. The same applies to German, of course. One reason why the girls are here is so that they may learn to speak fluently and correctly.”

Under the eyes of the staff, the girls did their best. Once they were in their cubicles, making their beds, however, it was a different matter. Matron, coming over to the Annexe with an armful of fresh roller towels for the splasheries, was interested to hear someone saying heatedly, “Oh, raspberries to that! There’s no one to listen in to us here and if you think——”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Matron said with stunning effect, since no one had heard her come through the doorway from the covered passage. “Who was it speaking English? Oh, you, Elma! Did you not hear what Miss Wilson said at Frühstück?”

She spoke in rapid, fluent French and Elma stared at her blankly. “Je ne comprends pas,” she said at last.

Matron repeated her speech more slowly and then added: “If you are wise, you will do your best to keep the French up. That’s one reason why your parents sent you here, you know. For your own sake I advise you to try to remember.”

Elma said nothing and Matron turned away and left the dormitory. When she had gone, the girl turned to Pamela Burton who was standing beside her and deliberately sniggered.

Anthea Barnett, to whom she had been speaking when Matron had appeared, looked at her thoughtfully but said no more. She went back to her own cubicle to finish setting it to rights. All the same, the covert insolence had not escaped her and when she and Peggy, who was in another dormitory, walked across the garden together to Prayers, she told the story, winding up with: “That girl Elma is going to be a thorough nuisance if you ask me!”

“Oh, we’ve had nuisances before,” Peggy said airily. “They generally come into line in the end. Don’t worry, Anthea.”

“It was different before,” Anthea pointed out. “If any girl made a real pest of herself, we could bring her before a prefects’ meeting and generally put a stop to it. I know when I was a kid I’d have done almost anything to avoid being lugged before the whole body of prees to answer for my sins! But we don’t have them here.”

"I know that; but most of us will keep the rules considering how few they are. General opinion will probably do the rest," Peggy said soothingly.

By this time they were in their lecture room, where they found Nell, Lucy and Nina Williams all sitting before folding desks.

"Hurry up and choose your desk," Nell advised, with a strongly British accent and a giggle hitched fore and aft of her remark. Then she added impressively: "La première d'entrer est la première d'être servie."

Peggy and Anthea likewise dissolved into giggles at this remarkable effort at proverbial advice, but they chose their seats. When they were settled, Anthea looked round the big, sunny room approvingly.

"J'aime beaucoup cette salle de classe," she observed. "C'est bien gentille."

"Oui; j'agréé avec vous," Nina, whose French was *not* her strongest point, agreed.

The others began to come in and soon all the window-seats were taken while Dickie, a canny young person, seized on one nearest the big stove, pulling Nita Eltringham down beside her with the remark: "Dans l'hiver c'est meilleur de s'asseoir près de—er—what's—I mean, dites-moi le français pour 'stove', s'il-vous plaît."

"Poêle—fourneau?" Anthea suggested.

"Merci bien. Alors, près de la poêle—if the thing's a she!"

Elma, Pamela and another of the Dulverley girls, Alison Power, arrived at this moment. They looked round and saw that all the best seats had gone. However, they had seen Mdlle coming along, so they said nothing, but took the first desks that they saw vacant.

As they sat down, Mdlle entered. She glanced round the room and evidently counted, for her first remark was: "Not all of you are here yet. Who is absent?"

As if in answer to her question, Joan Sandys and Natalie Mensch came hurrying in, followed a minute later by Hester Layng, famed for being one of the laziest girls the school had ever known, and the nineteen were complete.

"Come, come, Hester!" Mdlle said in her quick Parisian French. "I trust that you do not intend always to be late here!"

Hester reddened. "I beg your pardon, Mdlle," she said. "My watch has stopped and I was in the garden and did not know the time."

Mdlle was a good-natured little person. "Ah, in that case, we will say no more. But hasten to sit down, my child. Have you all notebooks and pencils? You will need them to take notes. To-day, we discuss the French poet, Lamartine."

She proceeded to give them a comprehensive lecture on Lamartine, speaking rather more slowly than usual for the benefit of any who were shaky in French. Now and then she paused to inquire if they had grasped her points and when one or two confessed that they had not quite understood, she went over her remarks again. Half-way through she stopped and told them to make quick notes on what she had said. She scribbled a few dates and names on the blackboard to help them out, but otherwise she left them to make their own notes, only warning them that these must be in French when they copied them into their proper notebooks. When she considered they had had long enough, she went on.

Even those girls who had difficulty in following her language contrived to understand a good deal, for Mdlle used her hands as she talked. She was an interesting speaker and most of them enjoyed the lecture. When she had finished, she asked them to hand in an essay on "Lamartine est l'enfant de son siècle" the following Monday and then, gathering up her belongings, left the room and they were alone for the next five minutes or so.

The instant she had gone, Elma dropped her pencil, leaned back in her chair and yawned. "Oh, comme je m'ennuye," she said.

Alison, who was sitting beside her, raised her eyebrows. "I enjoyed it," she said in careful French. "She is an interesting lecturer. I shall like this course in French literature, I think."

Elma gave her a queer look. At Dulverley High School, Alison had been Head Girl, but rather a lax one. Elma and her clique had taken full advantage of this and it was rather a shock to her to hear Alison talking like this. She had the wisdom to say no more. Instead she got up, strolled across the room to the notice-board and studied the time-table.

"Musical Appreciation next," she said. "What is that?"

"What it says," Dickie told her, after hurriedly thinking up the French for this. "We listen to gramophone records and discuss them."

"Discuss them?" Elma repeated. "But how?"

Peggy chipped in. "We are asked whether we like them or not and give reasons for our answers—sensible reasons, too. Sometimes whoever teaches us explains what we should look for and why certain phrases of music or harmonies, or—or modulations are good or bad."

Elma looked at her with real curiosity in her face. "How *do* you manage to do it?" she demanded.

"Je ne comprends pas," Peggy replied, startled.

"I mean, how do you talk French so well," Elma explained. "Have you lived in France or had a French *bonne* when you were small?"

Peggy shook her head. "No; but I lived with my aunt and she—well, Aunt Jo as well, of course—speaks French and German almost as well as English. And then, in the English Chalet School, we always had French or German days each week, the same as we have here."

"Yes; but your French is like *Mdlle's*. Dickie talks like us."

Dickie grinned. "I was at the Chalet School only a year and a term. Peggy's been there almost since she was born."

"No—only since I was five," Peggy contradicted her.

"Oh fiddle!" Pamela suddenly broke into the conversation. "Look here, what sort of records do they give us? Is it all highbrow stuff; or do they let us have a spot of swing for a relief?"

Her French was not equal to all this, so she contrived a queer polyglot language which drew giggles from Nina Williams, Judy Rose and two or three others, while Natalie Mensch, a slim, dark Tirolean of seventeen, lifted her eyebrows in surprise. However, no one was able to answer the query, for the door opened to admit Miss Nalder and Miss Culver. Miss Culver was carrying a portable gramophone and Miss Nalder had a case of records.

Dickie jumped up and went to bring a small folding table set against the wall. The gramophone was placed on it and Miss Culver left the room while Miss Nalder opened her records case and then began her lecture.

She was very musical and had attended various courses at both the Royal Academy and the Royal College of Music. Even in French she managed to interest even Elma and Pamela in her discourse on music of the seventeenth century, which she illustrated with records from the works of Lulli, Monteverdi, Purcell and Scarlatti. Elma, indeed, was really keen, for she was a musical girl and could have been a brilliant amateur pianist if she had only practised properly. Now, when she had to give stated periods to it, she was beginning to find that the work was not as boring as she had hitherto found it. Pamela, on the other hand, rather disliked it than otherwise. Still, even she gave her full attention to jolly little Miss Nalder.

When she had finished what she wanted to say, the mistress found that she had ten minutes to spare, so she invited questions from the girls, warning them that they must remember to speak French.

“I will help you if you cannot find words for what you want to say,” she concluded. “Soon you will find that you do not need help. It really is just a matter of continual practice. Yes, Peggy?”

“Was Monteverdi the first composer to write opera?” Peggy asked.

“No; though the Italians may be said to have made the first attempt on it,” Miss Nalder replied. “I suppose the first known opera was a drama on the Apollo and Daphne legend. However, of that, only two very small fragments remain which were composed by Jacopo Corsi, though most of the music was written by Jacopo Peri. You might call it a co-operative venture,” she added, laughing. “It was the work of a group of musicians and writers who were in the habit of meeting at the house of Count Bardi of Florence for discussions on art of all kinds.”

“Which is the first known complete opera, then?” Elma asked.

“An opera written by the poet, Ottavo Rinuccini and set by Jacopo Peri on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.”

“Were *all* the early operas about Greek legends?” Nell demanded, with real interest.

Miss Nalder laughed again. “It does sound like it, doesn’t it? I think what one might say is that the Italians and French chose stories from the classic myths. But you remember that I told you that Purcell’s great opera was composed about one of our own English legends—I mean the ‘King Arthur’. Before his time, Matthew Locke set the librettos of the English court poet, Sir William d’Avenant.”

Natalie Mensch looked up. Like Elma, she was really musical. Unlike her, she had worked seriously at her piano for a good many years and she played exceptionally well. Later on, she was to go to the Royal College of Music and work for her diploma. Then she hoped to teach.

“Yes, Natalie? What is it?” Miss Nalder asked.

“It is just that I have heard that the English composer, Dr. Blow, also composed an opera, though it is seldom performed in these days. What was it called, please?”

“*Venus and Adonis*. Yes; that is quite right. Blow, however, called it a masque. It is a true opera, though, for the words are set to music throughout. Actually, it served as a model for Purcell’s *Dido and Æneas* which is, perhaps, the earliest English opera that is not simply a museum piece.”

“Have you any records of any of the music from it?” Lucy Holmes put her oar in. “May we hear them if you have?”

“I’m afraid not, Lucy. I might be able to get one of the best arias. I must make inquiries. By the way, girls, this will interest you. *Dido and Æneas* was composed for performance at a girls’ school in Chelsea. As you may imagine, it would hardly play well in a great theatre like Covent Garden or l’Opéra Comique in Paris!”

“Do they do ordinary operas there?” Anthea asked.

“Oh, yes; both grand and comic opera.”

The bell rang then and Miss Nalder had to leave them. Miss Norton came to take her place and discoursed brilliantly to them on the development of the periodical in England. She gave them various quotations to look up for her next lecture and suggested that they should prepare to give further illustrations of the topic which she had not mentioned.

That was the end of the morning lectures. In the afternoon, those girls who were going on in science would have two hours with Miss Wilson while the others spent the time in reading aloud in French.

Miss Nalder had left them with an essay for her on the early days of the opera.

“Just a brief one, please,” she had said. “I don’t want to have to wade through pages and pages of stuff you’ve copied, more or less from some encyclopedia. I want your own ideas and comments.”

Peggy looked up. “What exactly do you mean by brief?” she asked.

“Oh, from two hundred and fifty to five hundred words. At least keep within that limit, please,” Miss Nalder had replied, as she left the room.

Now that they were alone, the girls returned to this.

“Five hundred words!” Joan Sandys exclaimed. “Heavens! I might be able to manage two hundred and fifty if I try very hard, but I couldn’t do more if you bribed me with all the tea in China!”

Peggy chuckled. “Once I counted up the words in an essay of mine,” she said. “I had written seven pages and I imagined it would be at *least* seven hundred words.”

“And was it?” demanded an interested chorus.

Peggy shook her head till her long thick curls were tossing like a banner. “No fear! I found that I wrote between seventy and eighty words to a page and that wretched essay was well under four hundred!”

“Sapristi!” exclaimed Dickie, sublimely ignoring the fact that this is not an exclamation used by the well-trained *jeune fille*. “That means that I shall have to write at least ten pages, for my writing’s considerably larger than yours. How on earth can I spread myself to the extent of ten pages on the beginnings of opera? I don’t think I like Miss Nalder’s idea of a *short* essay!”

Neither did a good many of them. They could have managed that much for an English essay; but to have to write two hundred and fifty words of free French composition was going to mean hard work!

“I suppose we’d better find out the average number of words we write to a page,” Gwynneth Hughes said. “That would be some sort of guide, anyhow.”

“And in the meantime,” Anthea put in, “it’s more than time that we went to change for Mittagessen or we shall be late. Stop talking, everyone, and let’s be off. We’ve got a week to do it in and we ought to be able to manage something in that time.”

Thus recalled, they hurriedly scrambled away their books and went off to change for the afternoon, Dickie making up her mind that the only thing *she* could do was to write the essay in English and then translate it into the best French she could manage. It would take twice the time, but she knew well enough that free composition of the kind demanded by Miss Nalder was beyond her in any other way. Nor was she the only one. Most of the essays finally handed in were done that way and Miss Nalder squealed with indignation at the stilted sentences when she read them and forthwith issued a ukase that all her essays in future must be written straight into French and not translated!

Chapter Six

A STAFFROOM CONFERENCE

By the end of the first fortnight, the school had got well into its stride and, on the surface at any rate, things were going smoothly enough. The girls still tended to stay in groups and cliques, but that, as Miss Wilson truly said, was only to be expected.

"It isn't as if we had been established some time and taken in girls from other schools to add to our numbers," she said, when she was holding forth after Abendessen one evening to her colleagues in the staffroom. "They are all seniors. They have all started together at almost exactly the same stage. As a result, their former schools still have a hold on them."

Miss Norton set her coffee cup down with a thoughtful look. "It's early days yet, but has anyone noticed as I have that there seem to be two distinct parties growing up in the school?"

"I did rather wonder," the Head owned. "As you say, it's early days yet, so I rather set it down to my own fancy. What have you noticed that makes you think so?"

"Oh, just little things here and there," Miss Norton said vaguely. "No; no more coffee, thank you."

"Not definite enough, my dear! Give us an example."

"Well, that tall dark girl from Dulverley—Elma Conroy, I mean, seems to be inclined to be up against Anthea and Peggy Bettany. I've noticed that she's barely civil to them at times—especially in their free time and when she thinks they are alone. Haven't any of the rest of you noticed it?" she added, appealing to the rest.

Middle nodded. "But me, I have often wondered how Peggy and Anthea and some of the others keep their patience with her. As for the way she speaks to Edna Purdon and my own compatriotes, I had intended speaking to you about that myself." She turned to the Head.

Miss Wilson raised her black brows, which made such an odd contrast with the mass of curly white hair that gave her a poudré look especially when she was in evening dress as now. "I hadn't noticed so far as Edna is concerned; but I *had* wondered what Anthea and Peggy had done to upset Elma."

Miss Nalder made a gesture of tearing her hair. "Oh, my goodness! Is that wretched girl up to her old tricks *again*? I *had* hoped that when she came here—though I nearly passed out when I heard that she was coming!—she would try to behave herself. I do wish my former Head had held her tongue about my future destination when it became known that I was leaving Dulverley. But trust the fair Emmeline to gossip! Talk of a leaky cistern!"

Miss Wilson laughed. "Poor you! But tell us what you mean, Phyll."

"If Elma Conroy had not been leaving school, anyhow, her parents would have been politely requested to remove her. I know that much!"

"Good heavens! But why?"

"Because she's always been a stormy petrel all the way through and the term before last she outdid herself by starting a rebellion against some alterations the governors saw fit to make. She's an attractive creature in her own way, especially to dunderheads in the early teens, and she had quite a following in the school. Practically all the girls were furious about the changes, but Elma's crowd went the limit. There was a terrific row in the end. Elma was out of that as it happened. She had been away for a fortnight with a nasty attack of flu. But everyone knew she was at the bottom of it all. The Head suspended three in Lower Fifth,

including the girl who would have headed every list in the form, and that was where everything came out. Angela's father made his own inquiries at home and then he came to see the Head and there was a *worse* row. However, Miss Bliss stuck to her guns and Angela had to lose the three weeks like the other two and, of course, came down with a wop to midway in form positions. *But* no one saw why Elma should go scot free when she had set the light that started the fire. Miss Bliss sent for Mrs. Conroy and there was an unpleasant interview, at the end of which Mrs. Conroy got in first by announcing that Elma would leave at the end of term. I must say Miss Bliss was awfully peeved about that. She'd intended to say we couldn't keep her, but Mrs. Conroy got there first."

"What started all the trouble?" Miss Culver asked curiously.

"Oh, my dear! Two new governors were appointed and they both have the idea that emulation is all wrong for children and there should be neither prizes nor marks nor form positions in school. They talked the majority of the others round to their point of view and the result was that after last term there were to be no more marks or prizes or form-positions—only remarks on reports. The girls raged about it and a good many of them either did no work at all or else worked so badly that they might just as well have left it alone. Elma was the leader and kept the rest up to it with inflammatory speeches. She didn't do anything to call work herself—I'll say that much for her. The climax came when some of Lower Fifth—including that little ass Angela Morton, gave in no prep for three days running, and when they were asked why, said they weren't going to bother as it wasn't worth it if there were no prizes to work for and not even form places."

"I see." Miss Wilson looked interested. "Well, it's all very well to try to cut out any sort of emulation, but schoolgirls are schoolgirls. It's only here and there that you'll find one who will work for the sake of working. The rest do it either because they don't want to get into trouble or because they have a prize ahead. I can quite well see that girls in the early teens would object strongly to being deprived in that way."

Miss Norton was looking thoughtful. Miss Nalder glanced at her.

"What's wrong with our Norty?" she asked gaily.

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't call me that!" her colleague protested. "They started it when I went to school and it got to 'Snorty' and Snorty I still am whenever I meet any of my old crowd!"

The staff shouted. Miss Norton flushed; then she laughed, too.

"It's all very well, but you must admit it's a horrid nickname! I'm afraid we all did it just then, though. I'd rather you folk didn't begin it again. My Christian name, I regret to say, is Violet, after my mother's youngest sister who died a month or two before I was born. I'm usually known as Vi at home, though, if you could bear that."

"I've met worse," Miss Wilson said. "As a staff, we've always rather tended to Christian names among ourselves. I'm sure you know all ours by this time, so we'll take it for granted. And now tell us why you were looking so pensive just now."

"I was just thinking what a pity it is when cranks get the upper hand anywhere—especially where youngsters are concerned. I do feel that elder girls ought to manage without any incentive, though, human nature being what it is, I know that the majority of them do work much better if they're going to gain something tangible in the end. Where younger girls come in, I agree with prizes every time!"

"Well, we aren't having prizes here," Miss Wilson stated. "So far as Juniors and Middles go, I agree that they do work better when they know there's some sort of extra reward at the

end of it.”

“But,” protested Gillian Culver, who had been very silent up to then, “the government is always talking about giving incentives to people to get them to work better. If you have to do it for grown-ups, I don’t see how you can expect boys and girls to be any wiser or—or more disinterested. It just doesn’t make sense!”

Miss Wilson nodded at her. “As you say, my dear. However, let’s get back to our original topic. Do you really think, Phil, that Elma is deliberately setting herself to form a party against some of the others? You do?” as Miss Nalder nodded. “Dear me! How interesting! I wonder what her object is?”

“What will you do about it?” demanded Matron, who was with them.

“Nothing, for the moment. I must wait and see how the other girls deal with the situation. After all, they are here for a *finishing* year. That means that we help their characters to develop along right lines, as well as give them good French and German accents. In any case, nothing has happened so far that I can take any official notice of. If anything does, I shall step in at once.”

“Then heaven help them!” murmured Matron, who was a former colleague of Miss Wilson’s and knew that lady to be possessed of powers capable of quelling any sort of rebellion that Elma or any other girl in the school was likely to start. “They’re in for a time!”

“My dear Gertrude! What a thing to say! Do you realize the sort of reputation you’re saddling me with!” Miss Wilson protested with mock plaintiveness. “Miss Norton—I beg her pardon! Vi, I mean—will think I’m a complete monster!”

Matron chuckled. “No worse than you deserve, my dear. I have *not* forgotten that your classes were generally the quietest and best-behaved when we were all in Tirol, and I don’t suppose you’ve altered much if at all in that direction. When you could deal with young demons like Corney Flower and Evadne Lannis, you could tackle even a problem like Elma Conroy.”

“I suppose it’s a compliment, if a rather left-handed one.”

“You might take it that way,” Matron agreed. “But about Edna Purdon and the French girls! So far as Gabrielle and the twins are concerned, Julie, I imagine they’re quite able to look after themselves and the other two into the bargain. But Edna! You know, I do feel she rather asks for trouble. How on earth did we ever get such a prunes-and-prisms specimen wished on to us, Nell?”

“Through a girl called Kathie Robertson who left the Chalet School a year ago for Edinburgh University. Her cousin, Elspeth Henderson, teaches at Moray House, Kathie told her all about our new venture with the result that Elspeth’s young sister Jean was sent to us and also Valerie Herriot, who is another of the clan. Dr. Purdon knows Professor Herriot and that is how we got Edna, who was also at Moray House, but, according to her mother, hadn’t settled there very well. They decided to send her to us. I hope,” Miss Wilson added, with some concern, “that the child will do well here. I gather that she was anything but happy at her last school.”

“If only she could lose some of her appalling priggishness!” Miss Nalder said. “She really is an outsize in prigs, Nell, and you can’t say she isn’t!”

“If that’s all that’s wrong with her, the school has dealt with prigs before this and got the better of them? Do you remember, Phil?”

“Meaning Eustacia Benson?^[3] Well do I remember her! But I hope and trust we shan’t have all the trouble with Edna that we had with Eustacia. I wonder all our hair didn’t turn

grey!”

[3] See *Eustacia Goes to the Chalet School*

“How was that?” Miss Norton asked curiously.

“There isn’t time for the whole yarn now. Eustacia came to us as the result of parents who had brought her up to be a prodigy of classical learning, though she hadn’t the first idea about how to live with other people. She got across a good many people, including Jo Bettany, and made herself so unhappy, that she finally tried to run away. She was stopped by a flood—there was a mountain stream running nearby and it frequently flooded during the spring thaw—and in scrambling up the mountain side to save herself from drowning she injured her spine and had some years of invalidism as a result. It turned the scale and she grew into a really nice creature; but I’d rather be excused from a similar experience, thank you!”

“Good heavens! I should think so!” Miss Norton looked rather horrified.

“That’s the barest outline,” Miss Nalder said. She suddenly grinned. “I’ll fill in the details later. Eustacia gave us a doing! I haven’t yet forgotten the shock I got when she objected to doing apparatus work at gym because it was most unladylike! There’s one thing, Nell,” she turned to the Head, who had chuckled at the memory, “her people never blamed us at all. She was an orphan when she came to us, Vi, and had been living with an aunt and uncle who had five boys. Eustacia was a horrid little sneak and—well, you know what boys are! She’d told tales endlessly about them and they loathed her.”

“So I should think! And I suppose she also told tales at school?”

“You suppose right! That’s one thing we can say for Edna. So far as I know she hasn’t shown the slightest sign of sneaking.”

“No; but I can imagine how that Prissy Prim manner of hers riles the others,” Matron said. “Let’s hope she gets rid of it shortly!”

“She definitely will.” This was Gillian Culver. “I just know about Eustacia Benson, of course. But we had a treat in my time of our very own. I suppose Verity-Anne Carey is still at the school?”

Miss Wilson laughed. “Oh, yes; very much so. She and Mary-Lou Trelawney are bosom friends yet. She has lost her very prim notions, but she still looks the complete angel-child on occasion.”

“If she’s bosom friends with Mary-Lou, it’s *only* looks, then!” Gillian said decidedly. “If ever there was an imp!”

“But a very nice imp,” Mdlle said, smiling. “I am fond of the little Mary-Lou.”

“Not so much of your ‘little’!” Miss Wilson protested. “She’s a well-grown young woman and will soon overtop you, Julie, ma chère! And now,” she added, extinguishing her cigarette and rising, “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m off to my bed. It’s past eleven o’clock and to-morrow we take our flock for a first mountain expedition. I admit it doesn’t really entail much climbing; still, I think we’d better call it a day, considering we start out shortly after eight.”

Matron bounded to her feet. “Why didn’t you remind me? I always forget the time when we start reminiscing. I’ve got to be up at six to-morrow morning to see to the sandwiches and other eats. Good night, everyone!” And she departed in short order.

Her going was the signal for the break-up of the party. Miss Norton and Miss Culver slept over at the Annexe, so they hurriedly muffled themselves in big shawls and went off, Mdlle going down with them to let them out and lock up after them. Miss Wilson tidied away the

oddments and set chairs straight before she switched off the staffroom light and shut the door, while Miss Nalder ran off to make sure that all lower windows and doors were secured.

“Though why we should make so much fuss about it here, I can’t imagine,” she said. “We aren’t likely to get much in the way of burglars in these parts!”

“Never mind! Better be safe than sorry,” the Head said, as she turned to go to her own room.

Twenty minutes later, the last light had gone out and Das Haus unter die Kiefern was wrapped in darkness and sleep.

Chapter Seven

EXPEDITION!

“Clang—clang—clang!” went the bell, and sleepers all over the school turned over, roused up and rubbed their eyes, some with a grumble, but the majority in a fine state of excitement. This was the day which was to see their maiden efforts at climbing. Even Peggy and Natalie, both Tirolean babies, had been so small when they left the Tiernthal that neither had done any climbing other than the stairs.

There was a rush to the windows to see what the day was like and a sigh of relief went up as they realized that it promised to be a beautiful day, though down in the valley the autumn mists still lingered.

“Not,” Peggy remarked over the partition of her cubicle as she pulled on her thick, hand-knitted stockings, “that it would matter so much if it were just grey so long as it stayed dry, though we shouldn’t have much of a view. It isn’t as if we were really doing what you could call a climb. Mdlle told me yesterday that the Wengernalp is babies’ work. She is a member of the Alpine Club, you know, Dick. I believe she and Mdlle de Lachenais spend their time flying up and down snow peaks during the hols.”

“Giddy sort of business from the sound of it,” Dickie replied from her side.

Giggles came from the rest of the room at this dictum. Both Mdlle Berné and her friend and compatriot, Mdlle de Lachennais, left behind at the school on St. Briavel’s Island, were small and dainty. Only last term Peggy had remarked that little Mdlle de Lachenais reminded her of a bird when she walked.

“I don’t mean that she hops, you—you guffins!” as a derisory chorus greeted this statement. “But she seems to *skim* along the ground almost as if her feet barely touched it.”

“Let’s hope the fever doesn’t seize our own lady and bear her away to some far-off peak and we’re left lamenting!” Daphne called from the opposite corner, where she was brushing her hair. “I say, Peg, what do we do about our wigs?”

“What you usually do, I imagine!” Peggy stood up and began to pull on her climbing-breeches. “I’m just tying mine back as usual, anyhow. I should just leave your daily pigtail if I were you.”

Joan, whose smooth brown hair was short, gave a chuckle. “I have the best of it. Peg, you *were* a goop to let yours grow!”

“Mother asked me to,” Peggy said defensively. “The only thing is it doesn’t grow awfully far.”

“What do you mean? It’s just a couple of inches or so above your waist.”

“Yes; but that’s as far as it gets. I’d love to have a mane like Dickie or Daph!”

“I believe curly hair like yours is often on the short side,” Daphne said. “Never mind, Peggy. At least when you have to put it up it won’t be much bother. I don’t know how I’m going to manage with my mane. It’ll be a perfect pest!”

Peggy was pulling her forget-me-not blue pullover down at the moment, so she made no reply. Then, as her head emerged and she settled the high neck, she said: “It needn’t. All you’ve got to do is to copy Auntie Jo’s coiffure—plaits and earphones.”

“What’s that about earphones?” Miss Nalder asked, as she suddenly appeared at the door. “Hurry up, girls! It’s just on ten past seven and Frühstück is at a quarter past. What were you

saying about earphones, Peggy?”

Peggy appeared in the doorway of her cubicle, very trim and businesslike in her smart climbing-breeches and pullover with her pretty curls tied back as usual with a gigantic black bow. “I was just telling Daphne that when she has to put her hair up she can do it like Auntie Jo and it won’t be any bother. You never see Auntie with an untidy head—or not often, that is.”

Miss Nalder stared at her and then went off into peals of laughter which brought the other three out to find out what the joke was.

“Don’t you indeed!” she said, when she had recovered. “Well, it’s a good many years since I last saw Jo, but how well I remember what happened when she first put her hair up! It was a joke with everyone!”

“How was that?” Peggy demanded, as she fell in with the mistress and they led a long line across to Das Haus.

“Well, to begin with, she only let it grow during her last four terms at the school. When it came to putting it up, it was almost always a mass of little tails and I shudder to think how many hairpins she ended up the day with! Whenever anyone suggested that she looked as if she’d been dragged through a hedge backwards, she used to groan loudly and ram in a few more pins until her head was a complete porcupine’s back of hairpins!”

“Then there’s hope for me,” Daphne remarked, as they entered the main building and made for the Speisesaal.

“*Still* only coffee and rolls!” Mary Wormald grumbled to Elizabeth Wren, as they met in the doorway. “I did think we’d have something a bit more *filling* this morning!”

“I wouldn’t have minded some bacon myself,” Elizabeth agreed. “However, I expect we’ll have a jolly good supply of eats with us. We *are* going to picnic when we get there, aren’t we?”

“Yes; but it’s *now* I want it!” Mary retorted, as they parted to go to their own tables.

“What’s that, child?” Elma asked, as they sat down after the brief Latin grace that was never omitted at any of the three main meals. “What is it you want now?”

Mary reddened, but she said: “I only said I thought we ought to have something more solid to begin a day like this on than just coffee and rolls.”

“How you do love your tummy!” Pamela said scathingly. “Anyhow, you haven’t any cause for grumbling for here come boiled eggs.”

“Eggs this morning, girls,” Miss Wilson said. “Half are hard-boiled and the rest are ‘just set’. Those who want hard-boiled hold up their hands, please.” Then she added in rapid German to one of the waiting maids: “Serve all the young ladies whose hands are raised, please, Gertiebl. Marie, will you see to the rest?”

The eggs were quickly served and the girls fell to. They made a good meal, and when grace had been said they were dismissed to make their beds before they assembled in the garden.

“All those with long hair please roll it up and tuck it into your caps,” Miss Wilson said. “Bring your knapsacks, raincoats and alpen-stocks. Don’t forget to change into boots. I know we’re doing no real climbing, but we shall have a rough walk and stout boots and stockings are a great help in such circumstances. Be as quick as you can. We don’t want to be late starting out.”

They fled to get through their chores in record time and were all assembled in the garden at the back of the house in under ten minutes. They carried their short, crook-handled alpen-

stocks and dangled their empty knapsacks in their hands.

Matron was waiting before a loaded trestle-table, looking curiously unlike herself without her uniform and angels'-wings cap. She called the girls one by one and proceeded to dole out to each three large packages and a thermos flask and cup.

"What are they, Matron?" Dickie asked, as she received her share.

"Sandwiches, meat pie, fruit pie, cake," Matron replied briefly. "Coffee in the flasks. Pack them into your knapsacks, girls, then roll up your raincoats and tuck them in on top. Then get into your knapsacks. Hurry!"

The mistresses arrived at that moment and several of the girls saw that they were burdened with much larger packs. Like the girls, they wore climbing-breeches and high-necked pullovers with close-fitting caps pulled down on their heads.

"Are you taking the first-aid kit, Mdlle?" Nita asked laughingly.

Mdlle joined in her laughter. "Me, I carry something much more pleasant. But Matron will bring bandages and iodine in case of accidents."

"'In time of peace, prepare for war', in fact," observed Dickie. "I've stuck in a bottle of anti-midge lotion myself. The wretched things seem to love me dearly."

"It is your thin white skin," Mdlle said, with a glance at Dickie's pink-and-white skin, lightly freckled here and there.

"Well, I've painted oil of lavender round my wrists and ankles and under my chin. I should think you could smell me a mile off! But I'm hoping that at least the brutes will leave me alone to-day!" Dickie spoke feelingly. On the previous Saturday, they had gone down to the valley and picnicked beside Lake Thun. The mosquitoes had found out Dickie's face and on the Sunday morning she had appeared at Frühstück covered with lumps, as she said. Matron had produced lotion to relieve the irritation, but Dickie had no notion of suffering that way again if she could help it.

"Now are we all here?" the Head was demanding, as she looked round. "Where is Miss Culver? Find her, someone!"

"I'm here!" Miss Culver arrived, breathless. "I just dashed to the telephone to ask about the weather. They say it will be a lovely day, Miss Wilson, though the mists may come down after nightfall. Anyhow, we shall be back by then, so that's all right!"

"Good! Well, now are we all ready? Then get your partners, girls, and remember you are not to ramble too far away from the main pack and not less than four girls together at any time. We'll go two and two until we reach the turn. Anthea, you and Natalie lead, please. And remember, girls, don't try to rush. You'll only tire yourselves before we've gone an hour. Keep a slow, steady stride, and when we're going uphill bend your knees a little. It will save your shin muscles quite a lot. All right! Forward!"

The girls knew their direction for the first quarter of the way or so, for they had all pored over maps the previous evening. Anthea and Natalie led the way from the chalet garden, across the short, rough grass, now beginning to look dull and brown, and across the stout wooden bridge over the little Einach stream, one of the many that help to make of the Oberland the verdant country it is. From there they turned right and began to climb a long, steep ascent of no real difficulty except that it went steadily and somewhat sharply upwards. One or two of the weaker members of the party began to complain of aching legs by the time they reached an enormous projecting rock, whence a magnificent view of the valley far below could be seen. Here, Miss Wilson called a brief halt out of mercy for the unaccustomed climbers.

“Only ten minutes,” she said. “You’ll stiffen if you rest too long, apart from which we can’t have too many halts or we shall have to turn back before we reach the Wengernalp.”

The girls squatted down and feasted their eyes on the scene whence the night mists had already cleared as the sun, amazingly strong for the end of September, poured down his radiance. The opposite slopes were still veiled from sight but, as Miss Nalder observed to Elma and Pamela who were nearest to her, it was quite plainly going to be a glorious day.

“Ouf! I’m boiling!” Pamela said, as she pulled out her handkerchief and mopped her face. “Is it always as hot as this in autumn?”

“You’re hot because we’ve been doing hard work,” Peggy told her. “I’m hot enough myself,” she added. “Miss Wilson, we’re all wearing blouses under our pullovers. Can’t we take the woollies off for a few minutes, at any rate?”

“Certainly *not!*” the Head said with emphasis. “What has become of your common sense, Peggy? Do you *want* us to have a batch of pneumonia cases?”

Peggy went red. “I hadn’t thought of that,” she said.

“Then for goodness’ sake use your wits! No one is to take off anything—except your caps if you like.”

Off came the caps and the girls sat revelling in the puffs of fresh wind that ruffled their hair and cooled their hot faces. But Miss Wilson was keeping her eye on the time and, all too soon for some folk, she ordered them onwards and they scrambled to their feet and set off again.

This part of the way lay past various hotels and pensions until they reached the shady pastures and meadows of the village of Wengern, making for the great Tschuggen.

“Do we have to climb up there?” Daphne asked, with a fearful look at the precipitous ascent of the mighty rock.

“No *thank* you!” Miss Nalder, who was with her and Peggy at the moment, replied emphatically. “We’ll wait for that sort of thing until you folk are a little more experienced—if ever we tackle it!”

“Well, thank goodness for that!” Daphne was even more emphatic. “I can’t imagine how ever anyone could get up there short of a goat!”

“Oh, it has been done,” Miss Nalder said, laughing. “Not by complete tyros, though.”

“Then which way do we go?” Elma, who was walking near them, asked.

“Turn to the right in a minute or two and past the auberge. There’s quite a good path there with easy walking.”

“And how much farther on than that?” demanded lazy Hester, who was no walker and found this first expedition very tiring.

“On until we reach the Wengernalp. There we’ll find somewhere to picnic. That should be round about noon, I imagine, at the rate we’re going. You’ll have a chance to rest then, Hester, for we aren’t going any farther to-day. You must remember that you have to get into walking trim gradually and it’s no use wearing you all out on your first real walk. At the same time, we mustn’t stay too long or we shall be doing the last part of the journey home in the dark. But I expect we’ll be able to have an hour and a half or two hours at the Wengernalp and that will give you time to get your second wind and be fresh again. Now come along.”

“Shall we have many more expeditions?” Dickie asked, as they tramped along. “I mean, we’re almost into October. When do the snows begin?”

“Usually not until December. October is often a lovely month so we ought to be able to put in a couple more at least. November is generally rainy and long walks aren’t much fun in

the rain, let alone the fact that it's thick mud underfoot. But after Christmas, the snow will be thick and firm and we'll probably be able to do some ski walks. That's good fun!" Miss Nalder laughed reminiscently.

"Oh, shall we be able to do ski-racing?" Nell Randolph asked eagerly. "I can walk on skis a little. I learned two years ago when we were living near Buxton and there was heavy snow. It didn't last long, unfortunately; only about a week, but I did manage to learn not to cross my toes."

"Cross your *toes!*" Pamela exclaimed. "What *do* you mean?"

Nell gurgled infectiously. "That sounds rather mad," she admitted. "Why, when you first begin, your skis seem to be fatally attracted to each other and before you know where you are, they rush into each other's arms, so to speak, and over you go! It's great fun, all the same," she added cheerfully. "Once you get control of them they say you've got it for keeps—like learning to hold up when you ride a bicycle or milk a cow," she concluded vaguely.

The rest shrieked with laughter at this unexpected ending and Miss Wilson, who had come up with them in time to overhear it, said drily: "I didn't know you had to learn to balance yourself to milk a cow, Nell."

Nell grinned. "I didn't mean that, exactly. What I wanted to say was that once you've got the knack you've got it for keeps."

Meanwhile Miss Culver, who had spent part of the previous day in reading up the route, was informing the crowd she was with that before long they would come to an inn famed for a remarkable echo.

"What kind of an echo?" Patricia Binney asked.

"I haven't the remotest idea. We'll find out when we get there. All I know is that all the guide-books say it is famous."

"What is there to see at the Wengernalp?" Valerie Herriot asked.

"Lots! Wait till you get there and you'll see," Miss Culver returned tantalizingly. Nor could she be induced to say anything more, though they beset her with questions until they reached the auberge where the famous echo is best heard.

Some of the advance party were there already and Miss Wilson was telling them about it. As Gillian Culver and her set came up, the Head suddenly lifted her voice and yodelled sweetly and clearly, thereby raising herself immensely in the estimation of quite a dozen of her pupils who had no idea that she owned this accomplishment. As she ceased, musical and fairylike came back the echoes of her notes over and over again until they died away into silence.

"Oh, lovely!" Peggy cried. "I'll try, shall I? Auntie Jo taught me to yodel ages ago when I was a small kid," she added.

"Don't I know it! She taught you and you taught all your little playmates and life was made hideous at Plas Gwyn for at least a fortnight by the weirdest sounds rising from various points in the garden whenever you were free. Most of you produced noises that would have done credit to an entire zoo suffering from measles!" Miss Wilson said ruthlessly.

"What's that about a zoo suffering from measles?" Miss Norton had just arrived with the last group of girls. "It sounds lurid!"

"I was alluding to the efforts of Peggy and her young friends at yodelling in the dim and distant past. Go ahead, Peggy, but spare our ears as far as you can!"

Peggy, crimson with embarrassment, darted a furious look at her tormentor which produced a peal of laughter from Miss Wilson. Then she took a step forward, raised her

silvery voice and produced a very creditable yodel which was echoed.

After that, most folk wanted to try their luck and they would have wasted a good hour at it if the Head had not put her foot down firmly and insisted on their moving on.

“Just one more shot!” Miss Culver pleaded. She waited for no permission, but standing upright, whistled a few bars of blackbird notes and the echoes brought back to them the song of a celestial blackbird.

“Oh, how simply lovely!” Elma exclaimed in delight. “Do it again, Miss Culver! Please do it again!”

But Miss Culver had caught a look from the Head and she refused firmly. “Not now, or we’ll have no time for a rest at the Wengernalp. When we come back, perhaps. Move on, girls!”

She stalked ahead and the girls had, perforce, to follow but wicked Dickie stayed behind, unnoticed by anyone, and as the rest went round a bend, they heard a noise that sounded as if an elderly bull was dying in great agonies and the echoes came streaming back transmuting even that awful noise into fairy sounds. Then Dickie appeared, grinning and breathless, and asked demurely how they liked *her* little effort!

“If I weren’t so stunned at your impertinence, I’d tell you,” Miss Wilson retorted. “Off you go and join your crowd! Heaven knows what the people at the auberge may have thought was happening!”

Dickie was wise enough to say no more, but her grin widened as she joined up with the others and she kept having fits of the giggles all the rest of the way to the Wengernalp.

The path skirted the slopes of the Lauberhorn and then they passed through a shady pinewood from which they turned left up an easy slope. The slope, however, soon increased in steepness and when at last they came out to the sun-warmed pastures of the Wengernalp, they were all hot and breathless and thankful for permission to fling themselves down under a nearby chestnut tree and rest before they finally crossed the sun-browned grass towards the village and found a place where they could sit down and have their Mittagessen.

Karen had, as Peggy remarked, done them proud. Little meat pies with the meat set in a stiff rich jelly were followed by sandwiches of thinly cut rye bread with slices of Swiss cheese and lettuce between. Then came little plum pies, honey-sweet and melting in the mouth. Lastly there were two slices of her best chocolate cake. Even the ever-hungry Mary rolled over on her back when she had finished the last crumb and observed: “I couldn’t eat another bite if you paid me!”

“That’s a pity,” Miss Nalder said briskly, as she unfastened her own big knapsack. “Sure you couldn’t manage an apple, Mary?”

Mary considered. “Well, just one, perhaps. But I really do feel—crowded!”

Miss Nalder laughed and handed out the big, rosy apples she had brought. “You have half an hour to digest your meal. Then we’ll go to the bend and you’ll see what you’ll see!” She exchanged a mischievous glance with Mdlle as she spoke, and that lady gave her a placid smile.

“What is it?” Elma demanded, before she bit into her apple.

“All in good time. Just hold your horses for another half-hour,” was all she got.

During the walk, the girls had found the staff amazingly friendly, but it spoke well for them that no one ventured to argue the point. They ate their apples and remained where they were, resting and getting their second wind.

Presently Miss Wilson glanced at her watch. "Time to make a move," she said briskly. "Pack up, girls, and we'll go to the bend."

At once all was bustle. The girls packed away the paper in which their food had been wrapped. The thermos flasks followed, and the raincoats on which they had been sitting were rolled up and tucked in. Then they shouldered their very much lighter burdens and, led by Mdlle and Miss Nalder, crossed the meadowland, down a narrow path and then, at the command of Miss Wilson, stopped and looked.

Before them rose, in all their majesty and glory, the great glacier-gemmed cliffs of the Jungfrau, and as the girls gazed at the unsullied whiteness of the eternal snows shrouding the summit of the Maiden, they were silent in the presence of so much sheer loveliness. From the pastures came, sweet and distant, the notes of the cowbells, mingled with the distant roar of the tremendous Trummelbach as it forced its way, battling and raging, through the narrow bottle-neck of its outlet, to burst forth into the rock-basin below, where the tormented water swirled and tossed in a mighty, everlasting war with the rocky confines before it flung itself down, down, down to join the hurrying river far below.

The girls were too far away to see this, but they heard the crashing of the water far away in the distance, in strange contrast with the tranquillity and peace of the great mountain.

"Oh," whispered Peggy at last. "Now I know why King David wrote, 'I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence doth come my strength'. It—it's all there!" With outflung hand, she pointed to the Jungfrau.

Miss Wilson let them gaze their fill before she turned them homewards. But time was hurrying on and she had no wish to be caught, even on that easy path, with all these tyros after dark.

"Come, girls," she said at length. "We must go now. I want you to see the woodcarvers' shops. We shall come again another day." And she firmly shooed them all round the bend past the trees which shut out the Jungfrau from sight. "Before we go there," she continued, when they were on their way to the village, "I want to warn you to ask prices before you buy anything. At one time, Swiss carvings were very cheap; but nowadays, prices have risen to keep pace with the price of living. Two and two here, please, and don't talk at the tops of your voices. Remember that we are strangers here and we want people to have a good impression of us. Lead on, Elma."

They were keenly interested in the woodcarvings, but they found that Miss Wilson was right about the prices, and little mementoes of their first sight of the Jungfrau were all they could afford. When the shopping was done, the Head insisted on their setting out on the homeward way. She knew that by the time they got back to Lauterbach most of them would be stiff and aching and progress would inevitably be slowed down. She kept them going at a steady pace, even refusing to let them pause and try the echoes again as some of them begged to do. How wise she was, they found out when at last they emerged on the little alp at Welsen just as the last light died away, leaving them to reach home with only the pale starlight to help them.

Chapter Eight

ELMA BREAKS OUT

“Elma Conroy! You’re *smoking!*” Edna Purdon’s voice was full of horror—almost exaggerated horror, and there was some excuse for Elma’s sharp return.

“Well, what if I am? It’s not a deadly crime. A good many folk do smoke nowadays. And what has it to do with you, in any case?”

“But it isn’t nice! And I’m sure Miss Wilson wouldn’t allow it,” Edna protested. “It’s all very well for grown-ups, but we’re still schoolgirls and no Head in her senses would allow her pupils to smoke at school.”

“Better run along and tell her, then!” Elma retorted. “Since you’re so shocked, you’d better get it off your chest at once. We’re also playing cards—contract bridge, if you want to know the exact game. You can sneak to her about that while you’re about it.” And she picked up the cards and began to shuffle them expertly.

“I certainly shan’t tell tales,” Edna said slowly, “but—this is *Sunday!*”

“O.K.! The better the day the better the deed!” Elma suddenly stopped shuffling and laid the cards down on the little rustic table at which she and her three partners in crime—Pamela, June Amery and Muriel Abbey—were seated in the little summer-house at the far end of the garden. “Now look here, Edna,” she continued, in a bullying tone, “what we do in our own free time is no affair of yours and I’ll thank you not to interfere! Got that? Oh, bother! My cigarette’s gone out! Lend me your light, Pam.”

With a nervous giggle, Pamela produced a lighter and Elma proceeded to relight her cigarette, keeping an eye on Edna all the time. She blew a smoke ring neatly and then turned to the younger girl again. “Just you listen to me. This is no business of yours and I’d advise you to toddle off and forget all about it. You’ll be sorry if you don’t!” she added, in a tone that reduced Edna to instant subservience and sent her scuttling away.

“Think she’ll blab?” Pamela asked inelegantly as she dealt her cards, while Elma, picking up her pack, finished shuffling and put them down beside Muriel, who was looking very uncomfortable.

“Not if she knows what’s good for her,” Elma returned shortly.

June gave a nervous giggle. “Do you think she will? I mean, she seems a complete ass—one of the kind with an outsize in the way of a conscience. Oh, I know she *said* she wouldn’t sneak, but that’s not to say that she won’t once she’s had time to think it over.”

Elma had picked up her cards and sorted them. Before she replied, she surveyed them carefully. “As I told her,” she said, “she’ll be sorry if she does. I’ll see to that! Hurry up and declare, Pam.”

“Two no trumps.” Pamela had given it up as a bad job.

Elma made a grimace, but June was already calling, “Four hearts!” so she had to concentrate on the game. “Five spades!”

“Help! What can I do about that!” Muriel demanded.

Before anyone could reply, Pam hissed: “Cave! Someone’s coming!”

“Oh lord! Who is it now?” Elma demanded in exasperated tones.

The four girls laid down their cards and turned to the door of the summer-house. It was a very warm day for October. The girls were free to do as they chose in the afternoon, though all

of them understood very well that there were limits to that, and they all four knew that none of the staff was likely to smile on cards on Sunday. June prudently dropped hers into her lap, an example followed by Muriel. Pamela, after a glance at her leader, laid hers on the table though inwardly she felt that Elma was rather overdoing it. There would probably be something said about their cigarettes in any case.

It was no mistress that appeared, however, but Peggy Bettany and Daphne Russell, who had come to the summer-house to share a letter from Peggy's Aunt Jo which had come the day before. At sight of the four cigarettes going, they stopped dead.

"Hello!" Elma said with supreme effrontery. "Have one?" And she held out her case to them.

Peggy shook her head. "No thank you. I don't smoke—don't like it. And I say, I don't know if the Head allows it for us, either. Hadn't you better ask before you do? I mean, there's no sense in getting into a row if you needn't."

This was mild compared with the correct Edna's unmitigated horror but Elma was not inclined to take the good advice.

"Oh, I don't think so," she drawled. "You see, she might say no, and that would be a pity, for I shouldn't heed her, you know."

But Daphne had seen the cards and she took a turn. "I don't know how Bill feels about smoking. She may not mind an odd one or so. But I do know that she won't allow card-playing on Sundays. So do you, Muriel!" she added, with a glare at Muriel Abbey who had also come from the Chalet School, and who turned scarlet.

Before she could say anything, however, Elma had taken matters into her own hands again. "Now see here, you two. This isn't an ordinary school—it's supposed to be a finisher. I'm eighteen and when I'm at home I smoke *and* play cards on Sunday if I like. I see no reason why I shouldn't do both here if I want to. Sunday's a boring day at best. One's got to get through it somehow. That's what my dad says, and he should know what's what quite as well as you do—or Miss Wilson, either, if it comes to that."

"You may be eighteen, but I jolly well know Muriel isn't," Peggy returned. "She's not even seventeen yet—or are you?" She looked at Muriel, who was looking horribly discomfited.

"The day before we came to school, Peggy," she replied, with a meekness that was very different from Elma's aggressive manner. But then, Peggy had been Head Girl at the Chalet School during the previous year and what she said *went*, as any Chalet girl could have told you. Muriel was still too near the English school days to defy her openly as Elma was doing.

"Anyhow," Daphne chimed in again, "you know quite well what our traditions are. We mayn't keep all of them going here; but certain ones we definitely will. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Muriel reddened again, but she said nothing. June, who had kept quiet during all this, suddenly tossed her cards down on the table and stood up.

"We'd better chuck it," she said brusquely. "After all, Peggy and Daphne are right. It *is* Sunday. I don't suppose there's a Head alive who would approve of contract on a Sunday. So far as that goes," she added, turning pink, "neither Father nor Mother would, and I'd hate them to hear I'd been at it. We've plenty of time during the week, Elma. Let's turn it up and go for a stroll instead."

Elma kept her seat. "Good little parson's daughter!" she sneered. "All right! Run along and be a little angel!"

Pretty June might be careless and rather empty-headed, but she was well-meaning enough. Her biggest fault was that she was too easily influenced by any stronger character who happened to attract her and she had found Elma very attractive at first. At this taunt, though, her temper rose.

"I intend to do so," she retorted. "You'd better come, too, Muriel. Your father's as much a parson as mine, and you know he'd hate to hear you were doing this sort of thing." She turned to Peggy and Daphne. "We've been idiots," she said frankly, "but I just didn't think and I don't suppose Muriel did either. Sorry!"

But Elma had had time to think while June was speaking. Now she spoke. "I'm sorry, June. I'd no right to talk like that, only—well, Edna riled me and when Peggy and Daphne came along, I lost my temper. That's all. Sit down again, do, and don't be silly. You're a bad child, Muriel, not to have let me know that I was contaminating one of the very young! You should have told me!"

That hit on the raw as it was meant to do. Elma had been accustomed to a string of adoring followers at the High School and she was not minded to lose those she had contrived to collect here. She was clever enough to see that, while June was easy-going and might be placated, Muriel was most likely to answer to a sting. She proved right in that, for Muriel kept her seat and her lips set.

"O.K., Elma. *I'm* no puritan, anyhow. June, it's your turn to call again."

Peggy and Daphne were not sure what to do in these circumstances. They had no real authority here, and could hardly order the other girls to obey them. However, that particular game seemed to be fated. There came the sound of light steps and a pretty laugh which everyone recognized as Mdlle's. The next moment, she and Miss Norton came along and paused at the sight before them.

Miss Norton acted at once. "Nothing has been said to me as to whether or not you girls may smoke occasionally," she said in her rather cold, well-bred voice. "What I do know is that card-playing is not permitted on Sundays. Gather those cards together, Muriel, and give them to me, please."

Muriel was not yet so far under Elma's influence as to dare to refuse. She gathered up the cards and gave them to the mistress.

"And the other pack—and your markers," Miss Norton said. "Thank you. I will speak to Miss Wilson about the smoking and I expect she will let you know what the rule is. Peggy, I heard Miss Culver asking where you were. I think you may find her on the path to Lauterbach. She was going there to find you."

Peggy fled at once, thankful to be out of the present mess. Daphne stayed where she was. Miss Norton turned to her. "Were you and Peggy cutting in, Daphne? I notice that neither of you seems to have been smoking," she added.

Daphne shook her head. "I hate cards. And as for smoking, Peggy doesn't like it and Father made me promise not to begin until I'd left school. He said I'd find my allowance wouldn't stretch to much of it and I'd better not waste my money in any case."

"I see. Then you had better go and find something to do."

Exit Daphne, as thankful as Peggy to be done with the situation!

Miss Norton dealt with the others. "I know you girls are nearly grown-up," she said with a slight smile, "but as long as you are at school, I'm afraid you must realize that there are certain things that may not be done there. One is playing cards on Sunday. That is all. June,"—she fixed unerringly on the weakest member of the party—"I wonder if you would

mind taking some letters down to Lauterbach for me. I forgot to put them in the postbag and I don't want to miss this post. If you'll come back in the house with me, I'll give them to you. You'll find a good many of the others down there, I think. Come along, dear."

She turned away, Mdlle still silent at her side and June following, rather thankful on the whole to get out of an unpleasant position, since she knew that having said what her parents would think—her father was a bishop!—of their Sunday proceedings, she must stick to her guns or despise herself for her own weakness.

The three left behind, looked at each other once they were alone.

Pamela was the first to speak. "Those two arrived very much on time, didn't they?"

"If young Edna has said anything, I'll soon find out," Elma said meaningly. "Heaven help her if I find she has!"

Muriel gave her a startled look. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Elma laughed unpleasantly. "Best not ask and then if anyone says anything to you, you can say you don't know. But I can assure you, my dear, that if I do find out that Edna Purdon is to blame for those two landing so conveniently, I'll make it my business to teach her such a lesson on sneaking as will make her see she never does it again—or not about my doings, at any rate! Well, our game seems to be at an end. I haven't any more cards here and goodness knows when the Norton will return the ones she looted just now! I vote we go for a stroll. Coming, Pam—and you, Muriel?"

Pamela stood up slowly, her face troubled. "Elma," she said, "you've no reason to think that Edna did blab. If I were you, I'd let it go in the circs."

She spoke with a meaning in her tone that Elma evidently understood though it was Greek to Muriel, for she went red though she only said: "Oh, raspberries to that! I'm not going to let that little prig think she can get away with sneaking about me and my fun. Once let her start that and we'll have her running to a mistress about every little thing she objects to! However," she added more lightly, "I don't mean to do anything about it to-day, so there's no need to look like a long wet week! Come on! Let's go for that walk the Norton so highly recommended!"

They left the summer-house and sauntered out of the garden to the alp, where they found quite a number of the girls strolling about. Miss Nalder had gone off with half a dozen, including Anthea Barnett, Nita Eltringham, Nell Randolph and Nell's faithful shadow, Lucy Holmes, for a walk up the mountain road, taking a picnic meal with them. Three or four of the youngest girls were hanging over the wooden bridge across the stream, fishing for the gleaming pebbles in the bed, someone having told Elizabeth Warren that rhinestones might be found occasionally with any luck. Ten or twelve had gone down the path to Lauterbach and they could see June just disappearing among the trees, evidently bound for the same place.

"Shall we take a saunter downwards?" Pamela suggested. "I'd like to see what it's like lower down beyond Lauterbach. We've never taken a walk that way, and I should say it might be awfully pretty."

Muriel shook her head. "I've just remembered I didn't finish my home letter. Mother will go ravers if she doesn't get it on time and be cabling to ask if I'm ill or something. You two go on, and I'll try to catch you up after I've taken it to the post. The mailbag doesn't go down till the six o'clock train, does it?"

"O.K.! Please yourself by all means," Elma said indifferently.

Muriel turned and ran back to the house and Elma and Pamela went on together. Pamela, who was not without plenty of common sense, resolved to make hay while the sun shone, and she had her friend to herself.

"Listen, Elma," she said urgently, once they were among the trees. "Do leave the Purdon girl alone! You don't want another crashing row this year, do you? I honestly don't think she did blab. I expect Miss Norton and Mdlle just happened to stroll that way. I didn't mean anything when I spoke, and I wish I'd held my tongue now. It's a nuisance they found us, but it can't be helped and we did know it might happen. We said so and agreed we'd take the risk. I should let Edna Purdon alone unless you definitely catch her at it. Then we'd have to do something, of course."

"I mean to do something anyhow," Elma said abruptly.

"About Edna, do you mean? Elma—*don't!*"

"Dear me! I'd no idea you were so fond of the little dear!"

"I'm not! I haven't the faintest use for her. But I don't want you to get into any more trouble."

"Very kind of you, my dear. However, you needn't worry at the moment. As a matter of fact, I was referring to all this fuss about what's done and what's not done here. The fact of the matter is that those Chalet girls seem to think they can run this show on the same lines as their old place and it's high time someone told them they can't! We're not interested in what was or was not thought good form at their old school. This is *not* the Chalet School——"

"But it *is*! It's a branch of it," Pamela stated simply.

"Will you let me say what I want to say before you go butting in? What I mean is that this is quite a new affair. A lot depends on us who are here at the beginning, as to what it'll be like later on. They seem to have some precious stupid notions and I don't propose to let them carry on like that here. We aren't children now. My mother was only six months older than I am when she and Dad were married——"

"Are you thinking of getting married?" Pamela giggled. "Which is it—Jack Ramsey or Peter Mullins?"

Elma flushed with annoyance as she said: "As it happens, it's neither. They're both too young."

Pamela stopped and stared at her, wide-eyed. "Elma are you—are you in *earnest*?"

"Why not?"

"While you're still at school? Elma, you can't mean it!"

"Can't I? Well, you just wait and see!"

"Who is he? Do I know him?"

"Not personally, though you've heard plenty about him. Look here, Pam! If I tell you, mind, you're to hold your tongue about it. Mum and Dad would have fits if they knew I knew him so well."

Pamela looked very serious. "I won't say anything You'd better tell me. Who is it?"

"Very well. That's a promise! It's Stuart Raynor."

The laughter died out of Pamela's face completely. "*Stuart Raynor?* Elma, do you—I mean, you know all the talk there's been about him. He's awfully lazy and won't work at anything though he's had a dozen shots at various things. He has nothing but what his father allows him. And he plays cards for money and all that sort of thing."

"I know; but I like him. I can manage him all right," Elma said confidently. "Besides, Dad will give me an allowance and I have Aunt Mabel's money when I'm of age."

"But I didn't know you knew him."

"I didn't before last holidays. He and his people were staying at the same hotel as us. We played tennis together sometimes; and we went dancing nearly every night."

“But—what do your people say?” Pamela was not nearly so grown-up as her friend, and she knew very well that if she had struck up a friendship with the notorious Stuart Raynor, her parents would have taken her away at once.

“They know nothing about it, of course!” Elma spoke more lightly than she felt. There was something disturbing in Pamela’s wide-eyed gaze.

“*What?* But that’s nonsense! They were bound to know if you danced together nearly every night and you were staying in the same hotel!”

“Oh, don’t be such an innocent! Of course we didn’t dance at the hotel—or only occasionally. There *would* have been a row if we had! No; I used to slip out and meet him after I was supposed to have gone to bed. He had his car and he used to drive me to a roadhouse a few miles out and we danced there. My people knew nothing about it. They imagined I was safely tucked up in bed. The hotel was packed and my room was miles away from theirs, so it was quite easy.”

Pamela was silent. She was not a particularly scrupulous girl herself, but Elma’s disclosures really had shocked her, though she was too much under the influence of the elder girl to say so. In fact, she did not know what to say, and she was thankful when a bend in the path brought them face to face with Valerie Herriot, Pat Binney and three or four other girls who were coming back from Lauterbach. They all stopped to chat for a minute or two and then Pat suggested that as it was nearly four o’clock, they should all return so as not to be late for Kaffee und Kuchen. Elma was not anxious to get into hot water with the authorities just then, so she agreed and the talk with Pamela ended perforce.

Chapter Nine

BAD NEWS FOR PEGGY

Kaffee und Kuchen was served in the garden. The girls carried it out themselves, set up little tables and dragged their deckchairs into groups. When everyone was served, they sat down to laugh and gossip.

“Where’s Peggy?” Dickie Christy said suddenly. She stood up and looked round the groups of laughing girls. Then she turned to Daphne. “Daph! What’ve you done with Peggy? You and she went off for a stroll after Mittagessen. Where’s she gone?”

Daphne sat up, looking startled. “I haven’t the foggiest! We didn’t go far. Then we came back to read a letter Peg’s had from her Aunt Jo and we met Miss Norton and Mdlle by the summer-house and Miss Norton said Gill Culver wanted Peggy. Peg went off to find her and I haven’t seen her since.”

“That’s weird. I mean, what could Miss Culver want with Peg?”

“Perhaps she invited her out to tea at one of the other villages,” suggested Nina Williams.

“Wouldn’t she have asked Daph as well? She knows Peg and Daph hunt in couples and she’s known the pair of them equally long, hasn’t she?”

Daphne nodded. “Oh yes. Peggy and I are almost foundation stones—and Nita. We three joined the school when it was in Guernsey. As for Gill, she didn’t come till she was nearly fifteen and Peg and I were well-grown juniors of ten——”

A chuckle from Hester interrupted her. “Oh, come, Daph! You can’t say Peg was ever ‘well-grown’! I came before Gill did and she was a mite for her age just as she is now.”

“Oh well, you know what I mean. Anyhow, Gill knows us three since those days. Peggy and I were fourteen when she left and Nita was just fifteen. Gill was Head Girl that year. She was a jolly good Head Girl, too, and everyone liked her. You know, it’s the hardest thing in the world to remember to call her ‘Miss Culver’ in public!”

“Shouldn’t be! Look at all the Old Girls who came back as staff, like Miss Linton and Miss Burnett and Hilary Burn. You never seemed to have much trouble about ‘Miss-ing’ them.”

“They left while we were still mere infants. In fact, I never knew either Linny or Burnie as anything else *but* mistresses. We were Middles—on the verge of being Senior Middles—when Gill departed from our midst.”

“Oh, stop yattering, you two! All this isn’t telling us where Peggy is at the moment.”

“Why the sudden anxiety about her whereabouts?” Nina asked.

“I want to finish my home letter after tea and then are one or two details about our expedition I’m not sure of. Peggy’s sure to remember and I wanted to ask her.”

“Well, if Gill’s taken her out to tea, we aren’t likely to see either of them much before Abendessen. You’ll have to finish your screed without Peg’s assistance. Can any of us help out?” Daphne asked obligingly.

“Well, you might. I’ll bring it along after we’ve finished eating and we’ll see.” Dickie sat down again “Miss Culver always makes such a fuss if you shove in a letter at the last minute on Monday mornings. Of course, she *has* rather a rush to get off to the valley, I suppose.”

Dickie proceeded with her Kaffee und Kuchen and when they had cleared away, brought her letter and contrived, with the united aid of Daphne and Co., to fill in the details that had

slipped her memory. So that was all right. What became all wrong was the fact that Abendessen brought Miss Culver to her usual table, but Peggy was still missing from her place. She wondered aloud where her friend was, and Daphne and Joan, who shared the same table, also began to ask questions. No one could tell them, however, so after the meal, Dickie and Daphne took their courage into their hands and went in search of the secretary.

Miss Culver had guessed that this would happen and had taken measures to protect herself from them by joining the rest of the staff in their own sitting-room, whither the pair could hardly intrude, as she very well knew.

In their hunt, they ran across the Head and Dickie promptly blurted out the question that was worrying her: "Please, Miss Wilson, is Peggy Bettany ill or anything? She wasn't at sup—I mean Abendessen—and no one seems to have seen anything of her since the middle of this afternoon when Miss Culver sent for her."

Miss Wilson was looking worried herself. She frowned sharply at Dickie's question, but she saw that the girls were really anxious so she said: "No, Peggy isn't ill. You'd better come to the study and I'll explain to you. Come along!"

She led the way to her pretty sitting-room which was also the study, and gave them seats before she told them anything. Then she said abruptly: "Peggy has had some bad news, I'm sorry to say."

"Oh, what's wrong?" Daphne exclaimed. "Not Bride or young Maeve ill, I hope?"

"No; it's worse than that. This afternoon, Mr. Bettany rang us from England to say that Mrs. Bettany is very ill and they are afraid that she may have to undergo a major operation. In that case, Peggy would have to go home at once to be near at hand in case her mother wanted her. The others are all fairly getatable, luckily; but if Peggy has to go, she must fly and that will mean sending someone with her. Her father wanted us to prepare her, for if she *is* sent for, it will be immediately and it will mean that things are very bad indeed."

"Oh, how dreadful!" Dickie cried. "Poor Peggy! She simply adores her mother, you know, Miss Wilson!"

"What is wrong with Mrs. Bettany?" Daphne asked hesitatingly. "May we know, please?"

"Does either of you know what goitre is?"

"Yes, I do," Dickie answered readily, while Daphne looked blank at the question.

Miss Wilson explained. "It is a kind of growth in or on the throat at the base. It is caused by something going wrong with the thyroid gland which lies there. I believe the majority of cases are external and the growth is quite obvious. Then, unless people are silly, it is attended to at once. But sometimes it grows internally and presses on the windpipe. If it is allowed to go on it can cause death by suffocation. Or it may become cancerous. Either way, it is very dangerous. Mrs. Bettany's is internal. They have been trying to remove it by treatment, but it hasn't yielded to anything they've tried. Now she is going to London to one of the biggest men there for examination. If he decides that the growth must be removed by surgery, it will be done at once. I think you will understand, girls, that constant pressure of that kind on the windpipe affects the heart, so it is a very serious operation indeed."

Miss Wilson stopped speaking and the girls sat silent for a moment. They both guessed what it was she had refrained from saying—that the operation would be kill or cure and that if it had to be performed it was because it was the only thing left to do.

"If Peggy has to go, will it be at once—I mean, will they know to-morrow or next day?" Dickie said at last.

"I don't really know—perhaps not until Wednesday. Peggy is badly upset, naturally, and Matron has put her in sick-room so that she can be quite private. She will come to lectures tomorrow, of course, unless they send for her then, as they may do. But she asked if she might be quite alone for a few hours. Bride goes home on Thursday for half-term and so does Maeve, so the three girls will be together then. I expect the boys will be there, too. I want to impress one thing on you two. What I have told you is in confidence. The others are not to know of it yet. Further, if Peggy comes in to lectures to-morrow, don't try to talk of it to her. Leave it to her to say anything. Try to be your ordinary selves if you possibly can."

Again there was silence. Then Daphne asked: "I don't want to be a bother, but do you think I might see Peggy for a moment before we go to bed?"

"I'll ask her if she would like to see you; but she is one of the people who can best draw strength from solitude and she may not wish to talk to anyone—or not to-night, at any rate. In that case, my dear, we can only be kind and do as she wants."

Daphne nodded. "Yes; I see that." She stood up, an example followed by big Dickie. "Thank you very much, Miss Wilson. If Peggy doesn't want to see me, just tell her I'm thinking of her and give her my love, please."

"Me, too," Dickie said gruffly.

"And praying for both her and her mother, Daphne?" The Head spoke quietly.

"Oh, that, too, of course!" Daphne said quickly. "I do know it's the best thing of all we can do for them."

Dickie gave a quick nod of assent. "Me, too," she said again in the gruff voice that meant she was deeply moved.

"I'll tell Peggy," Miss Wilson promised, as she rose to intimate that the talk was ended.

Just before bedtime, she sought out the pair to tell them that Peggy sent them her love and thanks and she hoped they would understand, but she would rather be alone until the morning.

"She's being very brave," Miss Wilson added gently. "But I know she feels she cannot talk about it. I hope," she added, looking thoughtfully at the two girls, "that she is sent for almost at once. Matron has packed a case for her so that she can go down by the first possible train. When she is at home, she'll feel that, as the eldest girl, she must see to the rest and it will make it easier for her. I'll let you know, Daphne."

"Th-thank you," Daphne said. Then she was silent. She and Peggy had been friends from the time they were kindergarten mites of six. There was nothing silly or sentimental about their friendship, but those who had seen them grow up together knew that what affected the one affected the other.

The Head was well aware of it, and her keen grey eyes softened as she read in the girl's face what she felt, but she said no more. Next morning, Peggy appeared at Frühstück as usual. She was very quiet; but Daphne and Dickie, knowing what had happened, recognized a new strength about her. Those long hours when the girl had faced the fact that the mother she loved so deeply was fighting for her life had taken the last of her childhood from Peggy Bettany and she would never be quite so carefree and irresponsible again.

Miss Wilson having warned Daphne and Dickie to say nothing to the others, they held their tongues, but the sudden growth in character was too great not to be felt, however vaguely, by the other girls who had grown up with her, and when they dispersed at the end of the morning, several of them wondered what had happened.

"She's—she's—she seems definitely grown-up all of a sudden," Joan Sandys said. "Oh, I don't mean that Peggy was childish, you owl!" as Nina Williams protested at this. "But she

was just one of us. Now she seems to have taken a step forward that we haven't."

"Except Nita," Natalie Mensch observed. "Nita's always been much more grown-up than most of us for years now."

"But there was a real reason in Nita's case."

This was German day and they were all doing their best to speak German though it must be admitted that some of them, at least, had to help it out with English at times. "Have you forgotten how ill her mother was about then? And she's never been really strong since. Haven't you ever noticed how Nita just *rushes* at her letters when they come and how anxious she always looks until she's read the first page or so?"

"But Peggy's mother is all right, isn't she?" Hester Layng asked—Peggy had vanished after lectures and they were out in the garden until Mittagessen.

"I hope so!" Joan spoke with sudden gravity. "Do you remember that she said something about her not being very well during the holidays? I hope it isn't that."

"I wasn't there and I hadn't heard. Oh, *poor* Peggy if it's her mother being ill! She's had so little of her when you come to think of it. All those years when Mr. and Mrs. Bettany and the twins were in India, you know! Oh, I do hope it isn't that!" Hester spoke with fervour. She might be lazy, but she was a warm-hearted girl and very fond of Peggy, as all the old Chalet School girls were.

When they came in for their meal, both Peggy and Miss Culver were missing, and before they left the room Miss Wilson, speaking gravely, told them that a summons had come for Peggy during the morning and she and Miss Culver had set off at noon for the nearest airport, where the Head had been able to book seats on the afternoon plane for them. As Peggy normally had a violin lesson during the last lecture, they had all concluded that she had gone to it and no one had missed her until they were in the garden. When Miss Wilson added, still more gravely, "Peggy's mother is desperately ill and is to undergo a serious operation almost at once," even those to whom the girl was a comparative stranger felt shocked—including Elma.

"Miss Culver is flying with her to England and they will be met by Mr. Bettany at Heathrow," Miss Wilson added. "Miss Culver will bring us the latest news when she returns. Meantime, girls, the best thing you can do for Peggy is to pray that her mother may come safely through. That is all. Will you all prepare to go down to the valley by the two o'clock train? We thought of going to visit Unterseen, a very lovely suburb of Interlaken. At one time it was a separate town, but nowadays Interlaken has sprawled out and engulfed it. After that, I propose that we walk part of the way round Lake Brienz—perhaps to Iseltwald—and have Kaffee und Kuchen there. Coats and skirts and hats, please, and wear your walking shoes."

She and the staff had decided on this plan as soon as Mr. Bettany's message had arrived, in order to take the minds of the girls off the trouble.

"Girls are given to brooding over such things and that will help no one," the Head had pointed out to her colleagues. "It only makes them sentimental and I won't have that. We'll see what an afternoon in the open air and quite new sights will do for them. By the time we get back, the first shock will have worn off and we may hope that they can take it sensibly."

"Apart from that, Peggy and Gillian should have reached London by that time, and Gillian may be able to send us the latest news." This was Miss Nalder. "I wonder when they will operate?"

That was something no one could tell her and, in fact, it was not until the Friday that Mr. Bettany informed them that the surgeons had decided to operate on the Sunday morning. He

would let them know the result as soon as possible. His wife was anxious to get it over and Grafton Mann, the great throat specialist, had agreed that the sooner it was done the better.

“Madge is here,” he added, speaking of his twin sister, Lady Russell, to whom the Chalet School and its Oberland branch belonged. “She and Jem have flown over. They’ve brought the twins with them and they’re staying for the present. If all goes well, Peggy will return, for Bride and Maeve and the boys will go back to school and it would mean leaving poor Peg on her own. I shall be all right, for I’m staying in London until Mollie is out of danger, anyhow; and even then I shall be here as much as possible. Trevarn, my bailiff, is a good man and can carry on without me quite well.”

“Is Madge staying long in England?” Miss Wilson demanded.

“A few weeks, at any rate. She wants to get back to Toronto before the November storms set in, of course. Jo’s looking after the family, but Jem says he doesn’t want her to have that responsibility for too long, though their Sybil is a host in herself these days. Still, Jo’s own twins aren’t six weeks old yet, and her young Michael is one person’s work at his present stage. From all accounts, he’s running true to form where all the boys of the family are concerned. Jo’s Charles is the only exception to *that* rule! Considering what she was like herself, it’s a miracle.”

“It is,” Miss Wilson agreed. “Look here, Dick, shall I leave Gillian Culver to stand by? We can do without her for a week or so if you’d like to have her.”

“Good of you, Nell, but we can manage. I’m sending her off to-morrow. If—*when* Peggy comes back, you can get Miss Culver to meet her at the airport. Jem or I will see her on to the plane at this end, so she’ll be all right.”

Late in the evening of Sunday, Peggy herself rang to say that her mother had come safely through the operation, which was entirely successful in itself. She was still in danger from weakness and shock, but the doctors said that if she weathered the next two days, all would be well.

“It’s *over*, anyhow,” she added, “and it’s successful.”

“And that’s a big thing gained,” Miss Wilson agreed.

“It’s only the next two days,” Peggy said. In spite of her courage, her voice shook. “She—she’s terribly weak, Auntie Nell. She hasn’t seen any of us yet, not even Dad. They say he can have a look at her to-morrow when she’s asleep, if—if it’s all right; but no one must see her for two days as she has to be kept absolutely quiet.”

“I’m sure it will be all right,” Miss Wilson said, mustering up all her courage to throw it into her voice and try to hearten the frightened girl. “They can do so much nowadays, Peggy. So long as she has come through the operation itself, I think we can safely hope that she’ll weather the next bit safely. It’s only a question of waiting patiently until her strength comes back.”

“I know!” Peggy dared not voice aloud the dreadful thought that lay at the back of her mind. Supposing her mother’s strength did *not* come back! She knew that the next two days were vital. If anything happened—if her mother weakened ever so little, she would not be able to pull up again and would just slip away from them all. “And we’ve had so *little* of her—Rix and Bride and Jackie and I,” thought poor Peggy. “It’s really just this last four years or so!”

Then she heard Miss Wilson bidding her good-bye, for time was almost up. “Good-bye, Peggy. Remember, that when you come to the bottom of things it is God and only God Who can save your mother for you. Keep up your heart for the sake of the others and never stop praying. We are all thinking of you and praying for you here. Good-bye, darling!”

Then it was over and two long days wore away before England called them again, this time Lady Russell herself with the joyful news that the doctors said all would be well. Mrs. Bettany had made it, and though it would be a long time before she was well again, and a very long time before she would be her old self, the doctors and surgeons all agreed that, humanly speaking, they might confidently hope for it in the end. Bride and Maeve and the boys had already returned to school and Peggy was flying back next day.

“Thank God!” Miss Wilson said with all her heart.

“Thank God indeed! My poor Dick! If you had seen his face when we first met! He looked twenty years older. However, the shadow has lifted and all will be well. Be good to Peggy, Nell. This has been a heavy strain for her, though she has said so little.”

“Peggy’s not the chattering kind. We’ll be good to her, but I rather fancy the best thing for her will be plenty of work and we’ll see that she gets that. Incidentally, my dear, she’ll have plenty to do out of lecture hours, I can tell you. I’ve written you a long screed already and will finish it to-night. I was holding it up until I heard that Mollie was safe. I shouldn’t have bothered you with it if—well, if things had gone the other way. No; there isn’t time to tell you now. You’ll know all about it when you get my letter. But I assure you most solemnly that Peggy simply won’t have a moment to brood once she is back with us!”

Then their time really did come to an end and she hung up, leaving Lady Russell frantically questioning herself as to what could have happened at Welsen and even wondering if she ought to fly out with Peggy for a brief visit to her new venture. Nor could Peggy herself explain when her aunt tackled her about it later. Madge Russell had to wait until she got her friend’s letter before it was explained.

Chapter Ten

ELMA IN TROUBLE

As Miss Culver was still absent in England on the Tuesday, Miss Wilson suggested at Frühstück that two of the girls should go to meet the little mountain train from the valley and collect the postbag. Nell Randolph and Gwynneth Hughes were the chosen ones. When they arrived with it, the Head asked them to sort out the letters into three piles, the staff's, theirs, and her own. The three piles were to be left on her desk in the study when they were done so that she could glance over them. The girls' letters were not read, of course, but it was necessary that some check, however slight, should be kept on them, and Miss Wilson generally looked over them before she handed them over for distribution.

On this occasion, coming back to the study from Prayers, she skimmed rapidly through the score or so awaiting her, decided that there was nothing she need worry about and gave them to Miss Norton with the request that she would let the girls have them.

Gillian Culver usually spread them out on the long refectory table standing in the big, square entrance hall and the girls took their own at the end of the first lecture when they went to the dining-room for their milk or chocolate and biscuits. Miss Norton, however, was an ultra-conscientious soul and she delivered them purposely. She was also very keen-sighted and she did not miss the very conscious blush with which Elma received her only letter.

"Oh, bother!" she thought. "Is the silly child indulging in boy-fever? Well, I suppose at her age it's natural; but I'm certain they ought not to be corresponding. I don't believe either Miss Wilson or the Conroys have ever given leave for that sort of thing. Besides, it isn't done in a decent boarding-school. I must think this over."

Having plenty of work on her hands, since she had offered to help with the school correspondence that was generally Miss Culver's business, she let it go for the moment. Someone else, however, had seen Elma change colour and, at the first opportunity, Pamela sidled up to her friend to ask a question.

Elma flushed again and looked annoyed, but she only replied: "And if I have? What about it?" in a tone that warned Pamela to let the matter drop.

She did so for the time being; but later on, when they were all sitting in the Saal with their needlework while Mdlle read aloud to them from *La Chaussée des Géants*, which was their current French novel at the moment, she contrived under cover of a slight scuffle caused by Frances Coleman losing her thimble, to ask: "Was that letter really from Stuart, Elma?"

"Yes, it was! I told you so this morning!" Elma snapped.

With one eye on Mdlle, who had stopped reading until Frances had recovered the thimble from under someone else's chair, Pamela replied: "Does the Head know who it's from? Have you had permission to write?"

"Of course not! I wish you'd try to mind your own business!"

But that was just what Pamela had no intention of doing. No one knew that better than Elma and she was moved to wish that she had held her tongue about the affair. It was too late for that now, and she knew that the first moment they were together, Pamela would be at her again. She spent the rest of the needlework period thinking out what she had better do about it and heard no more of Pierre Benoît's masterpiece.

As it turned out, Pamela had no chance to speak of it again until they went to bed. Elma had taken care to stay with one group or another the whole time and her friend could never get her alone for a minute. However, half an hour after they were all supposed to have settled down to sleep, the curtain across Elma's cubicle was pushed aside and Pamela came in, well wrapped up in her dressing-gown, for the nights were sharp now. Elma was not asleep; she was not even undressed. On one of the occasions when they had been down visiting Interlaken she had contrived to invest in a tiny battery reading-lamp and a dozen of its batteries, and she was perched on the window-sill with the lattice open, smoking a cigarette and re-reading Stuart Raynor's letter. She looked up with a smothered exclamation as Pamela slipped in and let the curtain fall behind her.

"Pam! What in heaven's name do you think you're playing at?"

"I've come for a talk," Pamela returned, in cautiously lowered tones. "Do chuck that thing away, Elma, and close the window! The ventilators are all open and it's horribly chilly."

"Go back to your own cubey, then. No one asked you to come here!" Elma retorted ungraciously.

But Pamela could be stubborn when she chose. Also, she was genuinely fond of Elma and she knew very well that if it was ever found out that the girl was carrying on a correspondence with the man she had been forbidden to be more than civil to, there would be what the school at large called "an outsize in rows"! It would not be just the school, either. The Conroys were devoted to their handsome daughter, who was also their only child now, her brother and sister having died in babyhood. They had united in spoiling the girl to the top of her bent, but there were some things that even they would never pass over, as Pamela knew, for she and Elma both came from Dulverley itself and had more or less grown up together.

"You've got to listen to me," she said obstinately. "If you don't, I'll talk until someone hears and then there'll be questions asked. I won't blab as I promised; but I should think Miss Wilson or Matron, fr'instance, would soon get what they wanted out of us. Come on, Elma! Listen to me and don't be an ass!"

"Oh, hang you!" Elma tossed the end of her cigarette out on to the mist-wet grass and closed the window softly. "Now then, what is it—and keep your voice down! *I* don't want a row, if you do!"

"Look here!" Pamela spoke urgently. "You were in an awful row last term at Dulverley. You know what you told me your father said then. If it ever gets out that you're writing to Stuart Raynor *and* getting letters from him, there'll be an even worse one, and you know what your dad said that would mean. Elma, do be sensible! Write and tell Stuart that he's not to write to you. It'll only get you into trouble. If he really thinks anything of you, he won't do it."

"And let him think I'm still just a school kid under orders? Oh no, thank you! What do you take me for?" Elma's pride was up in arms on the instant.

"But you *are*—under orders, I mean," Pamela said incautiously.

"Oh, indeed! Well, perhaps that won't last as long as you think."

"Elma, do think it over!" her friend pleaded. "You don't want to leave here and all the fun we can have and have to go into an office and do office work all day and then go to night school at night to learn shorthand and typewriting and book-keeping of all ghastly things! You told me yourself that your father said that was what would happen if you got into another big row, and if ever this comes out, there'll be a *gargantuan* row!"

"Oh, don't be such an idiot! How *can* it come out? *You* won't sneak; you promised me you wouldn't. Who else is to know?"

“You can’t tell. Things have a habit of coming out. Elma, please let it drop, at any rate during the term. And tell Stuart Raynor to do the same, too. I won’t give you away; I promise you that. But other people might notice something and then you’d have had it!”

In her earnestness, Pamela raised her voice and there came a murmuring from the cubicle next door. Evidently Barbara Henschell who slept there had been roused. The two girls froze at once; but the murmuring died away. It was clear that Barbara had been only partly roused. Elma laid her hand over Pamela’s mouth to warn her to be silent for a minute or two. When she felt that it was safe, she released her friend and said in her lowest tones: “This isn’t the time to come and natter about anything. I’m saying no more. I’m going to bed and you’d better do the same.”

“I’ll go if you’ll give me your word to put a stop to it!”

But Elma had been frightened by Barbara’s murmurs. She was also irritated by Pamela’s persistence. She was old enough to feel herself fully grown-up and the silly flirtation at the hotel during the holidays had confirmed her in that. Her naturally quick temper suddenly flared up and, heedless of consequences, she said in a harsh undertone: “Kindly mind your own business and leave me to mind mine! Do you understand? I won’t listen to another word on the subject from you. It’s no affair of yours and I’m sick of your nattering! That’s once for all! Now go!”

Pamela stared at her friend with wide-open eyes as if she were really seeing her for the first time. Then she turned and left the cubicle without saying another word. Elma watched her go. Then she folded up the letter, put it safely away among her handkerchiefs and got into bed, after she had shed her garments in short order. She switched off the little lamp, snuggled down under the blankets and was soon fast asleep.

Pamela lay awake long enough, though. While they were at Dulverley High School she had made a heroine of Elma. The elder girl was handsome, clever in a superficial way, good at games and, when she chose, possessed of fascinating ways. For ten years Pamela had looked up to her and been proud of the fact that Elma had chosen her for her special friend. If she had owned the truth to herself, she must have confessed that there were certain things about her friend that she did not quite like. Unluckily, Pamela was very much the weaker character and she had deliberately closed her eyes to those things.

Never until now had she been forced to see that Elma had a side to her that no well-trained girl could really admire. But then, never before had Elma spoken to her in quite that insolently harsh way. They had had their spats on occasion, but they were soon ended and there had been no malice on either side. But to-night, the other girl had spoken with intent to hurt and Pamela recognized that at the end. It was a great shock to her, and while Elma was sleeping peacefully, the girl she had called her friend was tossing miserably from side to side, only just not crying.

“She spoke to me as if she were a queen of the Middle Ages and I was the lowest and dirtiest creature in her kingdom!” Pamela thought desolately. “I thought she liked me! She can’t if she can speak to me like that! Oh, what shall I *do*?”

Hard on the heels of this thought came another. “I’m not going to be talked to like that! I’m as good as she is and I only said what I did to try to save her from another bad row. If that’s the way she’s going to behave when I try to help her, I shan’t bother about her any more, she can jolly well go her own way and get in *fifty* rows for all I care! I risked a row myself for visiting after lights out, but she doesn’t seem to think of that! Very well, then; I’ll chuck her

and that's that!" And with this final thought, Pam turned over for the last time and finally fell into an uneasy sleep from which she awoke headachey and unrefreshed.

When they left the Annexe next morning, she hurried off before Elma had left her cubicle, and when that young woman, who had wakened early and done some intensive thinking, looked round for her, she was gone. Nor could she be spoken to when the elder girl finally found her, for she was practising in the salon when Mdlle was also busy at a cupboard she was turning out in search of some fancy-work materials she wanted, and Elma knew that she would soon be called to order if she interrupted practice.

At Frühstück they shared a table with Nell Randolph and Lucy Holmes, and those two were chattering away so hard about the sudden change in the weather that the silence of the two Dulverley girls passed almost unnoticed by them. The school had wakened to find a heavy grey mist shrouding the windows and all the lights burning. They had been fortunate so far in their weather, but now that October was almost ended, the heavy day-mists had come and, so Nell declared, the snow couldn't be very far off.

"And that will mean ski-ing and all sorts of fun!" she announced exultantly. "I'm simply yearning for it!"

Just at the end of the meal Nell roused up to the fact that Pamela had scarcely opened her lips, and glanced at her.

"Pamela!" she exclaimed. "Are you not well? You look very white. Have you a headache? I'll speak to Matey for you, shall I?"

This was a French day, so Nell's natural loquacity was rather constrained and her remarks were short and primly phrased.

"I am all right, thank you," Pamela said shortly. "Please do not trouble."

Nell had no chance to say anything else for, at that moment, the Head's table bell sounded for silence, and when she had it she rose to her feet and announced that no one was to go to the Annexe without wearing her mackintosh and overshoes.

"And please pull the hoods of yours macs well over your heads when you do go," she finished. "This mist is very wetting and Matron does not want a batch of colds to deal with. I hope the passage doors will be put into order soon and then it won't matter."

When Frühstück ended, the girls who slept at the Annexe hurried to the cloakroom to get ready to go across and make their beds. They would collect all they were likely to need for the morning, too, since the mist seemed to be thickening steadily. Pamela was first out of the Speisesaal while Elma was delayed by dropping her napkin ring and having to find it. By the time she reached the cloakroom, Pamela had already gone.

She would have gone to the other girl's cubicle, but Matron was in their dormitory, accompanied by two of the maids. They were giving out the great plumeaux which would be part of the bed-coverings during the cold weather. Matron had ordained that it was quite time they were in use and had already attended to the dormitories at Das Haus unter die Kiefern. She went from cubicle to cubicle giving instructions as to how they were to be put on the beds. Elma could hear Anthea and Barbara laughing at them as she went to attend to her own bed.

"Honestly, Matron! Do we *have* to sleep under minor feather-beds?" she heard Barbara say in English and a voice of amused dismay.

"En français, s'il vous plaît!" That was Matron, who spoke French and German as fluently and well as any other member of the staff. "Mais oui, ma fille. Et quand l'hiver arrive en vérité, on trouvera un plumeau une véritable consolation, je vous en assure!"

The next minute Matron had arrived in her own cubicle and was collecting her eiderdown and showing her how to manage the plumeau. She had already been to Pamela, that young lady's cubicle being the first in the room while Elma's was the last, Barbara's and Anthea's coming between them. Matron finished with her and went off to deal with Hester's dormitory. Elma finished her bed and tidied her room. Then, arrayed in her raincoat and overshoes and carrying the books and other oddments she would need for the morning, hurried as well as she could through the thick mist, back to the main building, intent on trying to have a word with Pamela.

By the time she reached their lecture-room, however, at least half the others were there and there was no chance to speak to Pamela. Elma knew she had been very unkind the night before and she had seen the deep dismay in Pamela's face before the younger girl had left her. She had no mind to invite a public snub and she guessed that her friend would be feeling very sore. She did smile at her as she went to her own seat. To her consternation, Pamela gave her a sullen look before dropping her eyes to the essay she had to hand in that morning.

"Oh, hang!" Elma thought aggrievedly, as she sat down and took out her own essay. "I was afraid of that. What on earth does she want to go off the deep end just now for? Surely the silly little ass isn't going to lose her wool over a few sharp words when I was tired to death and she had provoked me as hard as she could!"

She had no chance to find out, for Miss Nalder arrived for the musical appreciation lesson and she never demanded less than their whole attention. Not that Elma gave it; but she sat still and kept her eyes on the mistress, and it passed muster.

It went on like that the whole morning, by which time it was quite clear to the rest that Elma Conroy and Pamela Burton had had a quarrel of some kind. Meanwhile, the good news about Mrs. Bettany having relieved their minds, Miss Norton was considering what she ought to do about Elma's correspondence. She had no doubt in her own mind that that particular letter had been contraband. At the same time, she had a natural dislike of making trouble. She had really very little proof to offer—just that conscious look and the hot blush when she had handed the girl the letter. She wondered if she ought to speak to Elma herself. Then she decided that it wouldn't do. Miss Wilson was responsible for the girls. If Elma was conducting a silly correspondence with a boy, which seemed almost certain on the face of it—Miss Norton was no fool and she knew that a letter from a girl-friend was most unlikely to have called up that look on Elma's face—then she ought to know about it, and at once.

And then matters were taken out of Miss Norton's hands altogether. Matron, having finished with the plumeaux, had offered her services as secretary until eleven o'clock. Her first job had been to sort out the letters and the postmark on one for Elma caught her eye. With an exclamation of surprise, she turned it over to inspect the back of the envelope. Then she set it to one side, and when Miss Wilson came into the office she handed it over to her.

"Look at this, Nell," she said. "It's in this morning's post for Elma Conroy."

Miss Wilson took the letter casually and looked at the address.

"Typewritten," she said. "Is she writing about make-up samples or sweets or what?" She spoke laughingly. Then she looked again. "No; it isn't that. This has a Berne postmark."

"Yes; I noticed that," Matron replied. "And there's no address on the back, either."

Miss Wilson turned it over. Even better than Matron did she realize that very few Continentals ever post a letter without writing the name and address of the sender on the back of the envelope. The lack of this proved that it came from an English or American correspondent.

The Head eyed the harmless-looking envelope with deep dislike. “What has the wretched girl been doing, I wonder?”

“I suppose it isn’t from her father?” Matron suggested.

“No; it couldn’t be. I had a note from Mrs. Conroy yesterday saying that they were going over to Ireland for a few weeks and enclosing a circular note for Elma in case she ran short of money while they were away. Goodness knows what sort of laws she was contravening by sending it! In any case, that girl has far too much spending money, so I’ve suppressed it for the time being.”

“Can she have been sending an order for anything? But no; in that case, the name of the sender would certainly be on the envelope!” Matron looked at her Head and old friend. “What about it?”

Miss Wilson thought quickly. “I think you’d better send Elma to me, Gwyn. I’m going to the study, so send her to me there. I am *not* going to open and read their letters, but when something obviously contraband arrives for any of them, I must be sure there’s no harm in it.” She drummed with her fingers on the secretary’s desk, at which Matron was sitting, while she thought again. “Look here, Gwyn, I’m going to tell you something. When the Conroys interviewed me about Elma, they told me that one reason why they wanted to send her to us was because they had discovered that she had become far too friendly with a man they dislike and disapprove. I gather Mrs. Conroy found it out through a friend’s gossip. She asked me to be specially careful about Elma’s correspondence. I really felt she’d have been pleased if I’d said that all letters would be inspected! I don’t approve of that, so I didn’t; but *this*”—she tapped the letter she held—“must be inquired into without delay. Go and send her, like a good soul!”

Matron jumped up. “Of course! I’ll send her at once!” And she hurried out of the office, while the Head passed through the communicating door into the study.

Elma arrived five minutes later. She closed the door behind her and walked up to the desk. Miss Wilson, standing behind it, leaning against the bookcase, looked at the tall, handsome girl with her air of complete self-assurance. That air, if she had but known it, was very much put on for the occasion.

She waved her hand to a chair. “Sit down, Elma,” she said.

Elma sat down on the chair at her side of the desk and promptly felt at a disadvantage. Standing, her eyes were on a level with the Head’s. Seated, she was well below that lady’s vision. She would have stood up again but hardly liked to do so. Instead, she assumed an air of nonchalance she was far from feeling, for Miss Wilson’s face warned her of trouble ahead.

Miss Wilson laid the letter before her. “You girls have a good deal of liberty, Elma,” she said quietly, “but we can’t have bills or things of that kind coming here for you. Please open that and read it at once.”

Elma had gone first red and then white at sight of the missive. She made no attempt to look at it. Miss Wilson waited a good two minutes before she spoke again.

At last: “Please be quick, Elma,” she said. “Open that letter and read it and let me know what it means.”

There was something in her voice that enforced obedience. Elma picked up the letter, opened it and drew out the sheets of paper it held. A burning flush spread over her face as she skimmed the contents. Quickly she crumpled it up in her hand.

“It—it’s nothing but an advertisement, Miss Wilson,” she stammered, saying the first thing that came into her head.

“An *advertisement*? Let me see what kind of advertisement it is that makes you reddened like that.” Miss Wilson held out her hand, but with a quick movement Elma moved hers away. “It really is nothing, Miss Wilson.”

“Then you can have no reason to mind showing it to me.” Elma made no move. “Come, Elma; I am waiting!”

Not for worlds would the girl have let her Head read that note if she could avoid it! Stuffing it into her blouse, she said as she sprang to her feet: “We aren’t children, Miss Wilson, and you have no right to make such a demand.”

For reply, Miss Wilson took up a letter from her desk, opened it and selected one of the pages which she held out. “I *have* the right, specifically given me by your parents. Read that page, please.”

Elma went white again as she took the paper and read what her mother had written.

“I want to emphasize what I said to you when we settled that Elma should come to you. Please watch her correspondence. We are very anxious that she should have no letters from a man called Stuart Raynor whom we neither like nor approve. A chat with a friend recently shows me that Elma is far too friendly with him. She is much too young to know what she is doing and I want to put a stop to it without letting her father know if I can. He would be very angry with her and I want to avoid that.”

Elma was about to turn the sheet over, but the Head took it from her. “The rest does not concern you. I should not have shown you this, but you question my light to censor your letters. Now, Elma, you tell me you are not a child. That means you know something of what you are doing. I must therefore ask you either to read that letter aloud to me or else give it to me to read for myself.”

Elma went cold at the prospect of reading that very silly letter aloud to anyone. Neither did she dare to let Miss Wilson read it. So she thought; but she glanced up and got a glare that took all the resistance from her. Sullenly, she handed it over and Miss Wilson read it slowly and carefully. When she had finished, she laid it away in a drawer.

“I will reply to this myself,” she said. “Have you heard from this man since you have been here—apart from this rubbish?” Then, as the girl remained sulkily silent, she said in a tone that would have made a hardier person than Elma shake in her shoes, “Answer me!”

“Yes—once,” Elma muttered.

“Where is it?”

“In my handkerchief-case.”

Miss Wilson rang her bell and Matron appeared. “Yes, Miss Wilson?”

“Would you mind going over to the Annexe for me, Matron? There is a letter in Elma Conroy’s handkerchief-case. Please bring it.”

Matron vanished and Miss Wilson went over to the window and stood gazing unseeingly at the thick mist. She had realized that in dealing with girls of this age this trouble might crop up, but she had hoped that the first term, at any rate, would be free of it. She meant to deal drastically with the offender in the hope that it would be less likely to recur, at least among the present set of pupils.

Matron came back with the letter and went back to the office. Miss Wilson opened and read it. When she had done so, she turned to the miserable girl now crouching in her chair.

“So you knew this man might come and were prepared to go off to join him for the day?”

Elma said nothing. She was beyond speech.

“Did you ever think,” went on Miss Wilson, “what would be the end of it when you returned?”

Still no reply. Miss Wilson glanced down again at the letter she still held. “Tell me this, Elma. Are you engaged to him?”

Elma pulled herself together. “N-not yet,” she said.

“I am glad to hear it. I am horrified to think a girl of your age should have so little sense. I must think it over. Until I have made up my mind what to do with you, you had better go to your own cubicle and stay there.”

Miss Wilson rang her bell again and Matron appeared, to be asked to take the girl to the Annexe and leave her there. She would have sent her to sickroom, but Mary Wormald and Edna Purdon were there with bad running colds.

Elma got up and went with Matron without another word. She had it in her mind to run away, but when they were out in the garden, the mist pressed so heavily on them that she knew she would never dare to venture beyond Welsen, if she got as far as that. As it was, Matron held to the fence running down the path the whole way across. The doors of the covered way had swollen with the damp of the last two days and were stuck fast, or they would have used that. As it was, by the time they were safely under cover again, Elma felt that nothing would induce her to go out into that horrible thick blanket by herself—not if Miss Wilson condemned her to all sorts of pains and penalties for the rest of the term.

Matron switched on the lights, saw Elma to her cubicle after she had hung up her raincoat and put her overshoes away. Then she made sure that the hot pipes were all right and finally left the place. Elma sat down in her wicker chair by the window and wondered what they would do to her and what her parents would say if she were expelled.

Chapter Eleven

PEGGY RETURNS

“Very quiet, Peggy! The rest are all asleep—or ought to be by this time! Come in here, dear, and drop your things and sit down. I’ve a meal keeping hot in the oven. Here’s a cup of coffee to keep you going until I fetch it from the kitchen.”

Miss Wilson ensconced a very weary-looking Peggy in the most comfortable chair in the study, gave her a cup of steaming milky coffee and then went off noiselessly to bring in the promised meal.

Peggy lay back in her chair and heaved a sigh of relief. It had been a tiresome journey from Berne, where she had left the plane. Twice the train had been held up, and when she reached Interlaken it was to find that she had missed the last train up the mountain and must hire a car or else make up her mind to spend the night at a pension or hotel.

“And I didn’t want to do that,” Peggy mused, as she sipped her coffee gratefully. “Just as well the wires were down and I couldn’t telephone, for then I just had to get up here somehow. Auntie Nell would have been running up the walls if I hadn’t turned up! But she promised Gill Culver should meet me and she never did. I wonder what’s happened while I’ve been away?”

The Head entering with a big tray at that moment, Peggy jumped up to help her and when she was finally eating her soup, she repeated her question. “What’s been happening while I was away? And how on earth did I manage to miss Gill?”

“You didn’t,” Miss Wilson said as she sat down. “She was all set to come to Berne when she had one of her old bilious attacks. You remember how they used to seize her suddenly? By the time we had attended to her and rearranged things, someone discovered that it was impossible to meet the plane on time. That was why the message was sent to the airport——”

“Message? What message?” Peggy interrupted her. “I had none!”

“You had no message? But Miss Nalder rang up the airport and asked them to tell you as soon as you landed. Someone has slipped up!”

“What did you tell them about me?” Peggy asked, as she set aside her soup bowl and tackled a plateful of creamy scrambled eggs.

The Head stared. “What do you mean? I gave them your name and description and said you would be arriving by the plane that reached there around four.”

“Then that accounts for it.” Peggy gave her a grin. “You see, all direct planes were grounded, thanks to a storm, so I took the Paris plane and came on from there. We didn’t get in till nearly eight. Didn’t they tell you at the airport?”

“Not a word. Oh, well, that accounts for it.”

“Yes. Auntie Nell, did Dad ring up this evening? He said he would.”

“Yes, dear. He rang up about seven and said he had just left your mother. She is making steady progress and the doctors are very pleased with her. He had been allowed to sit with her for an hour. She still can’t say more than two or three words, but she was very happy to have him with her.”

Peggy heaved a sigh of thankfulness. “Thank God for that! They let me see her this morning before I left London. Just five minutes and I could only kiss her and tell her to buck up and get well; but I *saw* her! Oh, oh, Auntie Nell! Her face is so white and *tiny* now! But she smiled at me and when I held her hand, she pressed my fingers—just a little, you know.

But she felt so *weak*! It—it doesn't seem possible that she can ever come back to what she used to be. The doctors all say she will, though," she added.

"So she will," Miss Wilson said comfortably. "Do go on with your eggs, Peggy! They won't be fit to eat if you play with them like that. While you finish them and clear that dish of fruit and cream, I've one or two things to say to you that may help you through the next week or two, I think."

"Yes?" Peggy said as she turned back to her plate.

"You know, don't you, that this operation was a case of kill or cure? That if it hadn't been done, there was no hope for your mother?"

Peggy nodded, her mouth being too full of egg and toast to talk.

"But," the Head went on, choosing her words carefully, "it has been done, and Grafton Mann told your Uncle Jem who told me yesterday that as she has weathered the worst of the storm now, humanly speaking, she will not only come back to what she was, but will probably be stronger and better than she has been for years. That growth has been going on for quite a long time, you know. A thing like that doesn't come all at once. Now it's gone, she won't have it draining away her strength, and once she is able to be up, I expect—and your uncle declares—that she will make rapid improvement. You must remember that it is only four days since the operation was done and she's bound to be terribly weak for the first few days. But I expect that when you go home at Christmas you'll find that she's much more like herself."

"Do you honestly believe that?" Peggy demanded.

"I honestly believe it. I mean it, Peggy."

Peggy had been sitting erect. Now she relaxed, pushed her empty plate away and began on her fruit and cream. "Oh, this is good! I knew I was dead tired, but I didn't know I was also famished. I say, Auntie Nell!" And she gave a sudden giggle.

"What's the joke?" the Head demanded.

"Well, it's just something Mummy said the day before she went into hospital. She'd asked Mr. Mann if he thought she'd be slim again after the op, and when Bride and I were going with her to the hospital, she said: 'Well, if this thing is going to mean that I can buy clothes of a decently normal size again, sure it'll be well worth all the bother and expense! It's myself will be thankful when I can go into a shop and *not* have to ask for out-outsize!' Mr. Mann had told her that she would certainly lose a lot of weight and she has so hated being stout! When we were tinies, she was as slim as—as a blade of grass!"

Miss Wilson laughed as her mind went back to the days when Peggy and her twin brother Rix had been delightful babies of four and Mollie Bettany a slender creature of twenty-three. Of late years she had grown abnormally stout, and though she had said little about it, she had definitely resented it and all the limitations it had imposed on her. The Head could quite well imagine how she would rejoice if she lost two or three stones of her superfluous flesh!

"There'll be one snag to that," she said, as she refilled Peggy's coffee-cup.

"Thank you, Auntie Nell! What's the snag?"

"That she'll probably find that she has either to buy a completely new outfit, or else set to work to remake everything she owns."

"We'd thought of that one. Bride and I told her we'd help her alter her frocks and things in the Christmas holidays. Dad told us that Mr. Mann said she wouldn't be likely to need anything more than a dressing-gown until then. I expect Dad will get Auntie Madge to choose one or two things for her, though, just in case. Did you know Auntie Madge had flown back from Canada to be with Dad? Uncle Jem brought her—and their twins!"

Thankful for something that would take the girl's mind off her mother's illness, Miss Wilson promptly said: "So you folk have been the first to see those marvellous twins! Lucky you! What are they like, Peggy?"

"Oh, lovely! Kevin is like Uncle Jem and Kester is the image of David. They're such jolly babies, too—just like Auntie Jo's young Michael."

"Let's hope they don't resemble him in wickedness or your aunt will be demented before they reach school age!" the Head laughed.

"So far they seem to be very good babies. I only wish *we* had a baby or two again. We never saw Maeve and Maurice until they were eight, you know. I'd love to have a baby in the family when I leave school and go home for keeps."

"That's not very likely at this late date." Miss Wilson was encouraging Peggy's chatter all she knew. She wanted the girl to sleep quietly, once she was in bed. "Aren't those younger twins of yours nearly thirteen?"

"Six months ahead. Their birthday's in May. We all come so close together. Auntie Madge has spread *her* babies over sixteen years."

"With boys at either end," the Head added. "Well, you never know your luck and your family may yet end with an afterthought. Finished, Peggy? Then you must go to bed at once. I've put you in the guestroom for to-night—couldn't have you tumbling over your own feet in the dark and rousing everyone in the Annexe!"

The outraged Peggy was breathless. "Auntie Nell! You *know* I never do that sort of thing!" she cried at last.

"Don't you? Well, perhaps you don't. All the same, come along as quietly as you can. You'll hear all the rest of the news in the morning. 'To-morrow is also a day', as the Spanish say."

Peggy picked up her case and followed her Head quietly upstairs to the pretty guestroom next door to Miss Wilson, and when that lady looked in half an hour later the girl was fast asleep.

It was noon before she woke up, Miss Wilson having given orders that she was to be allowed to "have her sleep out". The weary girl had slept so deeply that she never heard any sounds until eleven o'clock in the morning, when she roused up just in time to see Matron opening the door very softly. She sat up at once.

"Hello, Matron! Here I am, back again!"

"So I see. I'll run and bring your tray. It's all ready." Matron vanished, to return presently with coffee and rolls.

"That's all you'll need just now. Mittagessen is only about an hour away," Matron said, as she settled the tray on Peggy's knees. "Pull that woolly more closely round you, Peggy. It's very cold this morning." She went and drew back the cretonne curtains over the window as she spoke, and Peggy looked out.

"So it's still pouring!" she sighed. "It was when I came last night. I sometimes wondered if the car would ever get here! If you ask me, it's even worse now than it was then. It looks like a second flood, in fact!"

"Judging by the sky there's any amount to come down yet," Matron said, with a glance out of the window at the heavy sky that seemed to press down on the peaks at the opposite side of the valley. "However, they tell me that November is always wet in Switzerland and this isn't anything out of the ordinary."

“What on earth is all that banging going on?” Peggy asked, as she spread her roll with the sweet, cream butter.

“We’ve had some heavy mists while you were away, and then this rain. All the damp has made the doors to the Annexe from the covered way swell and stick. The men are trying to get them open and then they will have to be shaved. You girls mustn’t have to go through the garden if we’re going to have downpours like this.”

“We’d have to swim—or paddle at the very least,” Peggy said with a chuckle. “Was it as bad as this in Tirol? I don’t remember.”

“Every bit as bad on occasion. Sometimes much worse. And now, my dear, tell me about your mother. I needn’t tell you how glad we all are that she is making such good headway.”

Peggy repeated what she had already told Miss Wilson and then Matron turned to the door. “Well, I’ve any amount to do. Two people in sick-room with flu colds on top of everything else! If you still feel tired, Peggy, when you’ve finished that, lie down again and have another nap.”

“Oh, but I don’t!” Peggy said, in some alarm. “I *was* nearly dead when I got here last night, but I’m as fit as anything now. Miss Wilson gave me a *wizard* supper—and then she talked to me. When I came to bed, I just tumbled in and I don’t even remember lying down. I doubt if I’ve moved all night! I’ll get up as soon as I’ve had this and get dressed. *Please* don’t say I must stay in bed any longer, Matey!”

Matron laughed. “You cheeky brat! Who gave you leave to call me that, I should like to know?”

“I was only speaking in affection,” Peggy said demurely.

“Oh, was that it? Well, I don’t mind in private, but don’t use it before the other girls. Now I really must go!” And Matron whisked out, leaving Peggy to finish her meal and then bathe and dress, after which she went down to the Saal where she met with a vociferous welcome from her own crowd, who had just finished their last morning lecture and were sitting about, waiting for the bell to call them to Mittagessen.

“Peggy! At last! Oh, my dear, how is your mother?” Nita cried.

“Getting better every hour now,” Peggy said joyously. “Hello, everyone! What’s been happening while I was away? Oh, and I’ve seen Aunt Madge’s twins. She came over from Canada to be with Dad and brought them with her. So,” with much satisfaction, “I’ve beaten you all.”

“Madame in England? And the twins?” Daphne exclaimed. “Oh, tell us about them, Peg!”

From then until the bell rang, Peggy was kept busy answering questions, but all the time they were talking, she was taking things in and her mind was busy wondering what had happened. Where was Elma? She had learned by the way that Mary and Edna were Matron’s patients in sick-room, so they were settled. But why was Elma not in the Saal? And why did Pamela Burton look so miserable?

There was no time for anyone to tell her what had occurred, and for the most part, all that any of them knew was that Elma Conroy was in serious trouble and confined to her own cubicle. None of them was allowed to go to her or even speak to her and, when once or twice some of them had met her accidentally, she had looked stonily at them and gone on without sign.

Peggy heard this after Mittagessen, when she and her own little circle of friends were sitting together in a corner of the Saal, sipping their coffee and bringing each other up to date with events.

“What on earth has Elma been doing?” Peggy demanded.

“No idea! But it’s something pretty awful when she’s sent into solitary like this,” Dickie said soberly.

Peggy glanced across at Daphne. “Anything to do with smoking?”

“I shouldn’t think so. No one’s said anything to us about it and they certainly wouldn’t treat her like this for doing something that there’s no rule about,” Daphne replied.

Miss Nalder appeared just then. “St. Barbara girls, you ought to be in the studio,” she said. “Mdlle will be coming for her French lesson with St. Agnes and she won’t be pleased at finding you all here like this. The bell rang two minutes ago. St. Ursula, I saw Miss Norton going to your lecture-room when I came down. Off you go!”

They went on the word. Miss Nalder was a dear, but she did insist on being obeyed the moment she spoke! So no one was able to say anything more on the subject of Elma and her evil deeds, and when they had had Kaffee und Kuchen, Peggy had to collect her case from the guestroom, pull on her coat and cap, and run across to the Annexe to put her things away.

The Head had said earlier in the afternoon that it was so cold and miserable that the girls would not change for the evening, but keep on their afternoon frocks for once, so Peggy was alone. She changed from her skirt and jumper into her pretty blue woollen dress, tied up her curls afresh and then went out to get into her outdoor things again, for the Annexe door was still firmly stuck and the men were coming to free it to-morrow.

She was always very light on her feet and quiet in her movements and her dormitory was at the far end of the Annexe, away from the one where Elma was a prisoner. She had taken down her raincoat and was about to pull it on, when her quick ear caught the sound of sobs coming from Elma’s direction. Peggy stood stock still and listened. Never in her life had she heard any other girl cry like that, with such dry, heart-broken sobbing. It wasn’t in Peggy Bettany to ignore such distress. She dropped the coat and turned and ran along to Elma’s cubicle. Cautiously, she lifted the curtain and peeped in. Elma was lying on her bed and she was shaking with her crying.

That was enough for Peggy. She slipped in, letting the curtain fall behind her, and went over to the bed.

“Elma,” she said gently, “what *is* the matter? Don’t cry like that. Tell me what’s wrong and see if I can’t help.”

Elma lifted a face ravaged with crying, though her tears had ended before Peggy arrived. She looked at the younger girl for a moment. Then she gasped: “Go away! You’ll get into a row! Go away and let me alone!”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Peggy said firmly, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “You tell me what’s wrong and I’ll see what I can do about it.”

“*No!* It’s—decent of—you, but—th—there’s—no use two of us—getting into a row!”

“Too late, my dear! If I’m in a row for coming to you, I’m in it now.” Peggy got up, rummaged in the drawers, and finally produced two clean handkerchiefs which she tucked into Elma’s hot hand. “Mop up, and try to pull yourself together enough to tell me. If you don’t,” she added, “I’ll go to Bill about it.”

Thus urged, Elma scrubbed her face. Peggy found her sponge and towel and applied them, and the chill of the damp sponge helped her to regain a little self-control. But she shook her head at the other girl’s reiterated question.

“I’ve broken—all sorts of laws. I’m in solitary confinement. You’ve no right to be here and you’ll get into a fearful row.”

“As I’ve already told you, I’m in it *now*. Get that! And get this as well. I’m not going until you tell me what’s wrong and that’s flat!”

Elma was so exhausted by her crying that her pride had vanished for the time being. Under Peggy’s firm but gentle questioning, the whole story came out. When she had finished, Elma lay more quietly though she still shook with the aftermath of the storm.

Peggy was silent at first. To tell the truth, she was rather shocked by the whole thing. Mature in many ways, she was as little boy-conscious as could be expected of a girl of her age. Elma’s confessions showed her something she had not fully realized before. Finally, she looked down at the elder girl.

“Elma, tell me one thing. Do you—do you really——” She hesitated, rather at a loss what to say. For her, it was a delicate subject, and one she had rarely discussed, even with close friends like Daphne, Dickie and Nita.

“If you mean am I in love with him,” Elma said bluntly, “I don’t think so—now. Oh, I suppose I was a fool! I liked being singled out by him and I liked the fun of breaking out unknown to my people and getting letters from him. I suppose you might say a lot of it was pure vanity.”

“Then what on earth have you been crying for?” Peggy demanded.

“I—don’t know.” Elma spoke in a low tone.

“Are you sorry you did such a stupid thing?”

“I don’t know that, either. Bits of me are, I think.”

Peggy thought this over. “Well, I’m going to Bill.”

“Peggy! You mustn’t! You’ll only get into a row!”

“Oh, heaven send me patience! I’ve told you twice already that I’m *in* it—up to the neck, if Bill likes to make a fuss about it. You don’t suppose I’m going to hide it from her, do you? I knew what I was doing all right. I’m going to her at once.”

“What are you going to say?” Elma demanded.

“Tell her I came to you though I knew it was forbidden.”

“And—what else?”

Peggy looked puzzled. “I haven’t really thought about that one yet,” she confessed. “I’ll just have to wait and see how the spirit moves me, I suppose.”

“Do you—do you think—she’ll—expel me?”

“I shouldn’t think so. Bill’s strict, but she’s always just. She would never be so cruel as to let you go on wondering about a thing like that. Anyhow, Elma, I’m going to see her now. I expect she’ll want to see *you* when I’m done. You’d better make yourself fit to be seen. Have a good wash and change. You’ll feel pounds better then.”

With this piece of practical advice, Peggy went off to make her confession and do what she could for Elma. Miss Wilson heard her out in silence. She said nothing for a minute or two after. Then she looked at the girl.

“I’ll discuss your side of it with you later. In the meantime you’ve missed most of your literature lesson. You’d better run along and make your excuses as best you can to Miss Norton.”

“Yes,” Peggy said meekly. Then she added, greatly daring: “Would you like me to go and tell Elma you want to see her first?”

Miss Wilson bit her lips. Then she shook her head. “No; I’m going to her. We can be more private over there. Off you go—and Peggy!”

“Yes?”

“Say nothing about all this to anyone else.”

“No.” Peggy took her departure then and the Head went over to the Annexe, where she had a long talk with Elma which left the girl feeling much happier in some ways, but also considerably ashamed of her deceit and silliness.

Finally, Miss Wilson told the girls after Prayers that night that Elma would be joining them as usual next day and she asked them to say nothing about what had happened.

“Elma was both wrong and silly,” she said. “She’s paid for it and now we’ll wipe the slate clean and start again. That is all. It’s still raining, so will the Annexe people please use the covered way in future. The men succeeded in putting the doors right this morning and I hope we shall have no more trouble that way.”

Then she dismissed them and retired with the staff for a well-deserved hour of recreation.

Chapter Twelve

THE JOYS OF THE SNOW

November seemed determined that year to do what it could in the way of rain. Day after day it came down, with only brief intervals when it was possible for the girls to go out. The school took advantage of every moment of this, but even so, they had comparatively little outdoor exercise. Then came a day in late November when they woke to find that the rain had ceased and a pale sun was shining out of an equally pale blue sky.

The Head promptly seized on it and warned them all to be ready for a trip to Interlaken as soon as they had finished Frühstück and attended to their usual chores.

“According to the radio, to-day will be fine,” she said, “but they prophesy a fall in temperature towards evening and that will quite probably mean snow. So we’ll make the most of it. You can’t possibly go for a tramp up here. You’d bring half the alp back on your boots. In the town, the streets should be comparatively clean, though. So we’ll call all lectures off and spend the day down there. Hurry up, and we may catch the nine-twenty down.”

She had no need to say more. Everyone was ready by nine o’clock and Das Haus unter die Kiefern was deserted until the five o’clock train up from the valley. Even the maids were given the time off.

“Isn’t it cold!” Daphne shivered, as they left the little train and set off across the Lauterbach alp, making for the path between the trees. “Thank goodness for my furs! I shan’t be sorry to be back in a warm house again!”

Dickie, who was with her, since Peggy had elected to join Elma for once, laughed. “If you didn’t keep on thinking how cold you are, you wouldn’t *be* so cold,” she said unsympathetically. “You make yourself worse by harping on it. Snap out of it, Daph! It’s not Greenland’s icy mountains yet by a long chalk!”

“It’s quite bad enough for me!” retorted Daphne, who was one of the unlucky mortals who suffer from poor circulation.

Climbing up the path, slippery with mud, proved fine exercise and even chilly Daphne arrived at the top glowing and warm. Then a run across the narrow shelf of Welsen and they were in the house, which was summer warm from the great porcelain stoves in all the lower rooms and the central heating all over.

Next morning, they woke up to find that the first snow had fallen, and though there was only a scatter of it as yet, the heavy sullen skies pressing down on the mountains gave promise of plenty to come. Miss Wilson sent them out for a short walk down to Lauterbach and back as soon as Frühstück was over. To her experienced eye, they were in for a storm very shortly, and the weather forecast had said that heavy snow was on the way from Russia, where they had been having a series of bad storms.

They returned about half-past ten, just as the first tiny flakes were beginning to drift down, and by the time morning lectures were over it was descending in a dizzy dervish dance that made Dickie open her eyes and whistle. “Caramba! What a blizzard!”

“‘Caramba’ is *not* an expression used in the best circles in Spain,” observed Miss Wilson, as she went past in time to catch this. “In any case, it is not German. *Must* you have a mixed grill of languages, Dickie?”

Dickie reddened. “Oh, verzeihung!” she mumbled. Then she added: “Es ist sehr schwierig für mir.”

“Unsinn! Es ist ganz leicht ein wenig deutsch zu sprechen!” the Head said inflexibly as she passed on.

“That’s all very well,” Dickie grumbled to Peggy, in the queer polyglot mixture of German and English that most of the girls used among themselves, even yet. “It may be quite easy for Bill to speak German, but it jolly well isn’t for me. I only had four terms of it before we came here and, ghastly as French is, German’s ten times ghastlier!”

“Iche habe keine deutsch gelerenn,” Gwynneth Hughes retorted.

And it was a fact that while most of them were able to express themselves fairly in French, most of them boggled at German. Mdlle informed her colleagues on more than one occasion that she felt ready to beat them all round or else tear her own hair out, they seemed so stupid about it.

However, her pupils were not to know that. Neither could they yet realize that by the time the school year ended, even the worst of them would be chattering away hard enough, even if accents left a good deal to be desired.

Mercifully for them. Mdlle elected to read to them that evening instead of demanding that they should produce polite conversation while they did needlework, and if they found it hard to speak, they were beginning to understand and they all enjoyed the charming “Buch von Trott” which she produced.

By the time they went to bed, everything outside had disappeared under a covering of snow and most folk were hopefully talking of learning to ski as soon as the blizzard was over. They were all thankful to snuggle down under the plumeaux, for with evening the wind had risen and, well-built as both the Chalet and the Annexe were, it searched through cracks and crannies, setting them shivering and complaining.

They got no ski-ing next day nor the day after, for the snow never ceased to fall the whole time. The third day produced short intervals when the wild whirling ceased, but there was no possibility of going out, so they had to make the best of it for yet another day. But the first of December was ushered in by bright winter sunlight, and when they drew back their curtains there was a perfect storm of exclamations at the dazzling whiteness all round them. Mercifully for them, it was also one of the days on which they might speak English.

“And that’s a good thing!” Pamela Burton observed as she looked out, “for I couldn’t possibly express myself in German or even French. What whiteness!”

“Peg, you’re the only one of us who’s had any experience,” Dickie said, as they made their way along the covered way. “Will they let us go out, do you think?”

“My experience was ages ago in my nursery days!” Peggy retorted. “It’ll all depend on whether it’s firm enough to walk on, I suppose.”

“How deep do you think it is?” Daphne asked, as they emerged into the back hall of Das Haus unter die Kiefern.

“Not knowing, can’t say. A foot at least—and probably more.”

“What’s that?” Miss Nalder asked, as she came down the stairs in time to overhear this. “The depth of the snow? A *foot*! My dear Peggy, where is your sense? It’s been snowing a full blizzard for more than two days, practically without a pause. I should say *four* feet would be very much nearer the mark!”

“Do you think we may go out, Mdlle?” Lesceline St. Georges asked eagerly.

“That all depends on whether the snow is firm or not. If it isn’t, you certainly can’t. You don’t want to sink in snow up to your shoulders, do you?” Miss Nalder asked. “We may have to wait a day or so, though I hope not.” Her eyes danced. “I’ve been seeing to my skis!”

With that they had to be content. However, after Frühstück, Miss Wilson announced that they would have their first lecture as usual. Then they were all to wrap up. It had been freezing during the night and they could go for a walk.

“Now pay attention,” she said. “Coats, hoods, big shawls! Put on socks over your stockings and mind you wear your nailed boots or I’m afraid you won’t stand much chance of keeping on your feet!” Then she left them.

“Shades of last February!” Nita murmured to Peggy; and the pair dissolved into giggles.

“What’s the joke?” Nell Randolph demanded, as they trooped along to the Annexe to make their beds.

“Something that happened on St. Briavel’s last Easter term when we had all that frost and snow,” Peggy explained. “Don’t you remember, Nell? I’m sure I told you all about it in one of my letters!”

Nell thought a moment. Then she began to laugh. “Yes; I remember. You all chose *the* most unconventional ways of coming down a slope, and even the mistress with you ended up by embracing a telegraph post! I simply screamed with laughter over your account of it. You certainly can make people see things, Peg! You ought to go in for writing, like your Aunt Jo.”

Peggy grinned. “One writer in the family’s quite enough!”

Elma, who had been walking ahead of them, suddenly turned. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, Peggy,” she said in the queer, half-shy way that characterized her lately. “Is your Aunt Jo the Josephine Bettany who wrote *Swords for the King!*?”

Peggy nodded. “Yes—and all the rest, too. She’s dad’s younger sister. I thought you all knew,” she added.

“I didn’t! I’d no idea!” Elma stared at her. “She really is your aunt? My dear, how simply marvellous! I think she’s a *wizard* writer! I have seven or eight of her books at home. When I was a kid, I adored the school and adventure stories; and I think her historical novels are amazing. The way she takes you right back into whatever times she’s writing about!”

Praise of her adored Aunt Jo always appealed to Peggy. “She has two new ones coming at Christmas,” she said. “One’s a school story of course. It’s a continuation of her *Harbour School* series. The other is a novel, about the American War of Independence. That’s called *Lady of the Plantation*. I’m simply aching for them!”

“How thrilling!” This was Nell. “When will they be coming, Peggy?”

“Some time this month, I expect. Auntie Jo promised to send my copies here, so I’ll lend them round if anyone wants them,” Peggy promised lavishly.

“Thanks a million! If I get my usual quota of book tokens at Christmas I’ll invest in them. I’ve all the school stories up to date. I must begin to collect the novels as well.”

Peggy privately resolved to give her friend one of the novels for Christmas, but she said no more. Time was flying and they had their beds to make. They separated and the subject ended for the time being.

Bed-making and tidying ended, they streamed back to their lecture-rooms. Elma went to her usual seat next to Pamela’s and began to arrange her desk for the lecture. Pamela arrived presently. She came to her seat, but took no notice of her former friend. When Elma had given rein to her temper that fateful night, she had made a rift between them that it would take a good deal to bridge.

Pamela was not an ungenerous girl, but she had had a very bad shock. Elma had always been the leader in their friendship, and had always been inclined to be dictatorial, but she had never spoken to her friend as she had spoken that night. Pamela had her own pride and it was up in arms for once. Unfortunately for both of them, there had been nothing in Elma's leadership to encourage the younger girl to try to overcome her soreness. She had honestly been trying to do the best she could for her friend, and when her efforts had been flung back in her face in that way, she was not likely either to forgive or forget in a hurry.

As a result, both were none too happy, though Pamela contrived to cover her own feelings by being very jolly with some of the others, and Elma kept herself well in the background and almost shrank from much contact with any of them. She had her own anxieties of which she said nothing to anyone. One thing the Head had said during that long talk in her cubicle had been that it would all be forgiven this time, but if it occurred again, she must leave the school.

"I could not take the responsibility," Miss Wilson had said.

Elma really meant to do better; but she was afraid of herself. During that long two days' solitude, she had been forced to think over things as she had never done before. She realized that much of what had happened had come from her own vanity and now she was terrified in case she should be foolish enough to fall again. In that case, as she knew all too well, her father would keep his word. Her present easy, pleasant life would end and she would be sent into an office with night-school to follow after her day's work. Her handsome allowance would be stopped and she would be expected to manage on her own earnings. It might be a very good thing for her from one point of view. From her own, it was a dreadful fate to be avoided at all costs.

Later on, she was to feel it from a different angle, but that was in the future and, quite frankly, much of her woe came from the fear that she might lose a good deal that she enjoyed.

The pealing of the bell brought the rest of the class in a hurry, and then Miss Wilson arrived for her geography lecture and they were kept hard at it until ten o'clock. When the bell rang again for the end of the lecture, they were sent to the Speisesaal for chocolate. Then they had to hurry and get ready to go out.

"Remember, girls," the Head had said before she left them, "you must put on your boots *and* your shawls. When you are ready, come to the hall and you will be given your tinted glasses."

A gasp broke out, and Dickie exclaimed: "Tinted glasses? But why, Miss Wilson?"

Miss Wilson laughed. "Haven't I told you yet? Good gracious! What can I have been thinking of! Well, I'll tell you now. The glare off the snow from the sun is often too strong for eyes unaccustomed to it, and unless they are shielded by tinted glasses there is grave risk of snow-blindness."

"Do you mean—should we, then, become aveuglé?" Gabrielle asked, horrified.

"Well, not altogether. You would see everything through a red, swimmy light and I can assure you that until eyes recover from that, it is most unpleasant. However, all you have to do to avoid it is to wear your glasses and you'll have no trouble. Now hurry along, all of you! I'll be waiting in the hall."

As soon as they had drunk their chocolate, they scurried off to pull on their outdoor garb of fleece-lined hoods, pulled well round their faces, lined climbing-breeches with leather jackets zipped up to the throat, big shawl crossed over the breast with the ends knotted behind heavy, nailed boots and fur-lined mitts. They clumped in fine style along the passages into the

hall, where Miss Wilson inspected each girl sharply as she handed her the glasses and saw her put them on.

When the last was ready, the door was opened and they poured out into the sharp, crystal-clear air.

“Ow! Isn’t it *cold!*” Nell exclaimed. Then she went off in peals of laughter. “What awful sights we all look in dark glasses! Lucy, I shouldn’t have known you if we’d met casually. You do look a freak!”

“You’re none too beautiful yourself,” Lucy retorted with a broad grin. “Specs are definitely not your style!”

“Too well I know it!” Nell gave a sigh. “Miss Wilson, which way do we go when we leave the garden?”

“Couldn’t we go part of the way up to Mahlhausen?” Peggy coaxed.

Miss Wilson shook her head. “Certainly not—or not until you have got your balance. You may scatter and keep about the alp. Try to keep moving, though. This wind is cutting!”

“Have you all got your sticks?” Miss Nalder added, as she appeared on the scene. “You have? Then come along! Here are Mdlle and Miss Culver, so we can set off at once.”

Thanks to the nailed boots and the sticks, they were more or less able to keep their feet, though more than one of them found herself executing a graceful glissade which she had never intended.

The shelf rang with their shrieks of dismay when this happened, and even more with their peals of laughter as several of them forgot that they were grown-up young women and pelted each other with snowballs made from the snow they grabbed from the bushes.

“I don’t know how you do it, Mdlle!” sighed Ghiselaine St. Georges, as she picked herself up after a tumble which she had tried to avoid by a series of wild contortions. “You are walking as easily as if it were grass underfoot.”

Mdlle laughed. “But, my dear Ghiselaine, I am accustomed to this. I spend part of each Christmas holiday in the snows and have done for more years than I care to count. Are you hurt?”

Ghiselaine shook her head. “Oh no; but I think I shall be very stiff—but *very* stiff at bedtime!” She spoke with emphasis.

Mdlle laughed again. “I think so, also. But it is worth it, n’est-ce-pas?”

Ghiselaine gave her a grin. “I’ll say it is!” she replied, airing her knowledge of English slang before she scuttling off to avoid any rebuke Mdlle might have meditated.

By the end of an hour and a half, Miss Nalder decided that they had all had enough for the first time. They were all red-cheeked, bright-eyed and breathless.

“Ouf! I’m cooking!” Barbara Henschell gasped.

“So’m I, all except my nose,” Dickie said, touching that organ gingerly with her mittened hand. “That feels like an icicle.”

“Never mind, love. It’s a healthy sign!” Barbara told her with a deep chuckle. “It’s a lovely red, too. Really, it’s just as well your hood’s blue or you’d have looked like a minor conflagration and that would have been a bit overpowering!”

Dickie made for her to avenge this insult, but she slipped, and it was only by dint of digging the sharpened ferrule of her stick into the frozen snow and squirming wildly that she didn’t go headlong.

“You wait till I get you indoors!” she threatened, as Barbara plunged away to avoid her.

Barbara chuckled maddeningly; but Miss Nalder was shouting to them to hurry up and come in, for she could smell the snow coming. They had to bury the hatchet on that and scurry off as fast as they could. No one wanted to be out in one of those blinding storms they had watched from the windows. Thanks to Miss Nalder's prescience, they were safely under cover before the snow came full force.

Peggy voiced all their feelings when, just as they were going through the hall to reach their cubicles, Miss Wilson emerged from the study and asked if they had enjoyed it.

Before anyone could reply, Peggy had demanded: "Can we go ski-ing to-morrow if it's fine?"

The Head looked at them with an aggravating smile. "Wait and see!" she said sweetly, and then she vanished.

Chapter Thirteen

NOT SO EASY AS IT LOOKS!

As the afternoon of that day closed in, the snow began to fall so heavily that lights, which had been burning all the afternoon, were turned out so that the girls could look out at the wild dances of the snowflakes.

“Thank goodness we’re not out there!” Peggy said with a shudder. “Switch those lights on again, someone! It’s enough to give one the creeps only to look at it!”

“And let us draw the curtains close,” Gabrielle added. “Me, I do not like it at all.”

They did as she suggested, and when Kaffee und Kuchen were over forgot the weather in dancing. At bedtime, it was still coming down as if it never meant to stop.

“This looks like another day indoors to-morrow!” Nell sighed.

However, when the morning came, they looked out of their windows to find that the storm was over for the time being, though the heavy skies gave promise of other and even heavier falls. Miss Wilson announced at Frühstück that they would make the most of the fine interval. They were to make their beds and then prepare for a morning out of doors—always provided that the snow held off so long!

“If you hear my whistle while you are out, you are all to make straight for the school,” she warned them, speaking in the German which was once more the language for the day. “Anyone who does not will not be allowed to go out next time. Bring your skis with you. It’s a good opportunity for you to begin ski-ing. And don’t forget your sticks. Now hurry up!”

There was no need for her final remark. Like one girl they fled to do their chores and prepare for the fun. Even Elma’s face relaxed and Pamela ceased to look so unhappy. As for the rest, they produced a series of beaming smiles which, so Miss Nalder told them, more than made up for the lack of sunshine!

“Do we put on our skis as soon as we get outside?” Nita demanded eagerly, when they were assembled in the hall.

“No, thank you! We’ll wait till you’re a little away. There, that gentle slope beyond the Annexe. We’ll go there and you can see what you make of it.”

“Must we wear glasses?” Peggy asked.

“Not necessarily. You don’t need them except for bright sunlight. By the way, I know what you’ll be like at first. I’ll excuse the German as long as you are out of doors. Now pick up your things and come along!”

Miss Wilson opened the door and led the way down the path, striding along easily, though the snow made walking none too easy. However, all wore heelless boots, so they managed, and reached the top of the slope after a trudge that left them breathless and hot. A fallen pine gave them somewhere to sit down while they slipped their feet through the ski-straps and pulled them tight. Then they stood up and prepared to make their first efforts.

“Come along, Lucy! I’ll give you a hand,” Nell said to her friend. She had been one of the first ready and had already proved the truth of her remark that once you got your balance it stayed with you for life.

Lucy staggered to her feet. Then she lifted one foot and set it down and proceeded to do the same with the other. Peggy, standing near, received a shrewd blow on the shin and yelped loudly, while Nell went off into fits of laughter.

“Hi!” protested Peggy vigorously. “Look where you’re kicking! That was me! Lucy, you’re a public menace!”

“Anyhow,” Nell choked back her laughter, “that’s all wrong. *Slide* your feet, you goop; don’t try to lift them! Like this!” And she slid off gracefully, using her sticks as she swung round in a curve and came back.

Dickie had been listening and she now boldly slid a foot forward. Then she tried the other. She made a third shot. Her skis promptly turned in and rushed lovingly at each other, and over she went with a yell that might have been heard half-way down the mountain.

Peggy fled to her aid—or rather, *tried* to do so. She didn’t manage even the second step, but found herself gracefully crossing her legs and sitting down with a thud.

“Thank goodness the snow’s soft and not like yesterday’s!” she gasped, as she struggled to get on to her feet again.

No one else was much more successful. Nita Eltringham did best so far as her skis were concerned. She progressed at least half a dozen steps, her eyes glued to her points, her whole mind set on willing them to keep apart. This was all very well. Unfortunately, in her earnestness, she never noticed that Miss Nalder was just ahead of her, helping Valerie Herriot, and the first thing that lady knew, she was being clutched in a bear’s hug while her chin met Nita’s forehead in a bang that made both of them exclaim.

“This,” gasped Peggy, who had been down half a dozen times by this, and was at last beginning to move about a little, “is the utter *edge!* And it looks so easy, too!”

Middle, who had come skimming over the snow to see to her colleague, laughed. “Not so easy as it looks, ma petite. Miss Nalder, I do trust your chin is not dislocated!”

“It feels like it,” Miss Nalder said, feeling her chin tenderly. “Nita, your head must be made of iron! I wonder I’ve any chin left!”

Nita giggled and looked sheepish. Actually, she was wondering just what sort of a lump she would have over her left eye by bedtime!

However, no one was daunted by all this. They began to get some idea of what was required, and by the time Miss Wilson decided that they had had quite enough for one day, a number of them found it possible to progress some distance before nature proved too much for them, their skis crossed and they crashed in a heap. The snow was dry and soft, and brushed off like powder. No one was really hurt, not even Nita and Miss Nalder.

“All the same,” the latter observed in an aside to her chief, “there’ll be aching shins by this afternoon or I miss my guess!”

Miss Wilson nodded with her eyes dancing with laughter. “I expect Matron will have prepared for it. I left her murmuring sweet nothings about hot baths and lotion. They aren’t doing too badly, considering it’s the first time. Edna Purdon is the poorest. She really seems to have no idea of balance!”

“Oh, she’s bad at all sports,” Miss Nalder said. “No use at netball; hopeless at badminton and worse at table tennis; and her gym is beneath contempt. I’m taking her for remedial exercises every day now, to see what I can do for her muscles. At present they’re like sticks of overboiled macaroni!”

“She told me quite gravely the other night that she does not care for sport, if you please! She doesn’t like dancing, either.”

“Well, like it or not, she’s going home at Christmas with something a little more like muscle about her, if I have to take her three times a day!” Miss Nalder declared firmly.

They went in after that, all ravenous for Mittagessen. The afternoon was devoted to singing and needlework, luckily, so they were resting a good deal. The Head had gone off to Interlaken by the early afternoon train to do some necessary shopping and Miss Nalder was left in charge. She ordained that after Kaffee und Kuchen they should sit quietly in the Saal or the salon and no one made any objection, for by this time unaccustomed muscles were beginning to make themselves felt. No one grumbled about it with the solitary exception of Edna. She tapped at the study door shortly after Mittagessen while the rest were gathering up their needlework in readiness for Mdlle's class and, when bidden to enter by Miss Nalder, begged to be allowed to go to bed.

"Aren't you well?" Miss Nalder asked.

"I ache so!" Edna's voice was perilously near a whine. "I hit myself in several places this morning and I'm sore all over. Please, Miss Nalder, I really don't feel well.

"Dear me!" Miss Nalder sounded suitably impressed. "Perhaps you had better go to Matron." She kept a wary eye on the girl, nevertheless, for Edna had had a heavy cold, and had left sick-room only the day before. "Come along and we'll see what she has to say."

Edna followed her to Matron's room, where that lady was refreshing herself with a cup of coffee, a cigarette and a novel, and Miss Nalder explained what was wrong. Matron had had some experience of Edna by this time, and her lips suddenly tightened. All she said was a request that the girl would go to sick-room and prepare for examination. Edna went, and the two elders conferred together.

"I don't suppose there's a thing the matter with her but using muscles she generally doesn't use at all," Matron said. "She's a whiner and tries to get out of everything that means physical activity."

"Are you telling me!" Miss Nalder gave a sniff. "I have her for P.T., remember. Gwyn, if there really is nothing wrong with her, don't you make bed or anything like that a jolly time."

"Don't you worry! I've quite enough to do without running round after malades imaginaires!" Matron assured her. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Wait here for me and have a cigarette."

Miss Nalder sat down and waited and presently Matron returned. "Well, I've sent her to bed," she said. "Nothing really wrong apart from a couple of small bruises. The trouble is she's been so babied all her life that the slightest knock seems like a grave injury to her. She'll be sorry to-morrow, for she'll be as lame as a tree with stiffness. However, I've ordered her into a hot soda bath and I'll rub some liniment in. Then she can go to bed in sick-room—on *invalid diet!*"

She spoke gravely enough, but her eyes met Miss Nalder's with a wicked twinkle. Miss Nalder chuckled. Invalid diet was very dull and uninteresting for people who made a fuss about nothing or were inclined to malingering. The Chalet School had cured many a girl by this method. Bed was always a part of it—just bed, with nothing to do but lie there. It always answered with Middles and Juniors, and if there was nothing really wrong, at any rate it ensured rest which never came amiss to active young creatures.

"Anyone else been to you?" Miss Nalder asked.

"No one, though I hauled in Nita Eltringham for myself. I thought she looked like a black eye. However, the discoloration is slight, and I gave her something to put on. What on earth was she doing to get a lump like that?"

"Banged into my chin," Miss Nalder told her.

“Good heavens! Let me see your chin.” Matron examined it. Then: “Which was harder?” she inquired gravely.

“Nita’s head, I should think!” Miss Nalder caressing her chin tenderly. “However, I can talk and eat, so I suppose she *didn’t* break my jawbone, which was what it felt like at first.”

“You should have come to me for some lotion. However, better late than never. Here you are! Dab it on and it’ll be all right by the morning.” And Matron presented her colleague with a bottle and a pad of cotton wool. “Now is there anything more? For I’ve a pile of table-linen to look over and I’d better do it now.”

“Nothing, thank you. It was fun, wasn’t it, though?” Miss Nalder added. “And some of the girls haven’t done badly for a first shot.”

Matron, who had come out to join in the fun for half an hour, nodded. “Nell Randolph has the makings of a good ski-er,” she said, as she began to lay out piles of table-linen on the table. “But she tells me she learnt one winter at Buxton.”

“When the St. Briavel’s crowd get all the letters they will shortly, I expect most of them will be green with envy,” Miss Nalder said pensively. “All right; I’m going now, so you have no need to give me that patience-on-a-monument look! I’ve a good deal to do myself.” And she went off laughing.

At bedtime, Matron ordered hot soda baths for all and went round with her liniment to anoint bumps and bruises again. No one made any complaint except Edna, and Matron noted thankfully that there seemed to be only one whiner in the school, at any rate. As for the girls, they settled off to sleep amidst heartfelt hopes that the next day would be as fine.

They were doomed to disappointment, for they woke to another morning of heavy grey mist which became a whirl of dancing snowflakes towards dusk, so that no one was able to go out all that day. Matron kept Edna in bed till next morning, by which time that young woman was so bored that she was thankful to say meekly when her tyrant arrived with the rising-bell that she felt all right now.

“Ah, I thought a few hours in bed would do the trick,” Matron remarked suavely in English, which was the day’s official language. “Jump up, then, Edna, or you’ll be late.”

The snow was still falling, but the storm was easing off, and after Mittagessen it had stopped altogether, though the sky was still heavy.

“*May* we have another shot at our skis?” Anthea implored the Head.

Miss Wilson nodded. “Yes; the more you practise the better, and we shall have another storm by night, I’m afraid. Hurry up and get ready, all of you. Edna, if you hurt yourself, go in at once, please. I can’t have Matron running after you like this.”

Edna went pink, but she only murmured, “Yes, Miss Wilson!” and went to change with her mind made up firmly to put up with aches and bruises rather than complain again when complaints brought her such deadly dull day and a half.

This day, the girls made better progress and some of the more daring even indulged in a snowfight. The dry, powdery snow was easily dusted off, and if they fell, they fell into chilly softness so that they were not hurt. Peggy, however, had an adventure.

She was ski-ing after Joan Sandys, intent on revenging herself for a well-aimed snowball which had caught her full in the mouth. The tip of one of her skis caught a hidden snag and over she went, plunging down from a little shelf to the hollow below. Here the snow had formed a deep drift, and Peggy vanished from sight into it.

Joan, glancing back, saw her go and turned to help her. When she reached the edge and no Peggy was to be seen, only the snow sliding majestically downwards, she set up a wild yell

that brought at least half the school to ask what was wrong.

“Peggy’s go-one!” she quavered, pointing downwards.

“Gone? What do you mean?” Miss Wilson demanded, while Miss Nalder, grasping at once what had occurred, turned and ski-ed away at top speed. She knew better than to try to drop down into the drift.

So did Nell Randolph, who shrieked to Dickie and one or two others to follow with her, and they all ski-ed down the slope, round the rising of the ground and into the hollow which now lay smooth and white before them.

Rather frightened, Nell asked: “How do we find her?”

“By digging,” Miss Nalder said brusquely. “Go to it, all of you! Hands only, and be careful.”

She set them the example and several of the others had reached them by this time. It took ten minutes’ hard digging before the end of a shawl appeared, by which time the news had mysteriously reached Lauterbach, and half a dozen of the men and boys had appeared with spades, and a dog of such nondescript breed that Daphne solemnly declared later on that he must possess points of *all* the fifty-seven varieties!

He possessed a good nose, at any rate, and he very quickly tracked Peggy and the girl was dug out, rather white and dazed, but not much the worse, though two or three of the girls had been sure that she must be suffocated by this time, and Mary Wormald had burst into noisy sobs at the bare idea.

“W-will Peggy be—d-dead?” she gulped.

“Nonsense!” Miss Wilson told her robustly. “This is new-fallen snow, light and full of oxygen. Unless she hurt herself anywhere when she fell, the worst that can happen will be that she will be dazed and frightened—though I don’t expect that last with Peggy,” she added. “Stop that babyish bawling, Mary!”

This was drastic. Mary stopped at once and turned red, though no one had time to notice it. This was the point where they uncovered Peggy’s face, and a minute or two later she had been dug free. Miss Nalder hurriedly examined her to be sure that no bones were broken.

Peggy came to herself during this and demanded: “What’s up now?”

“You fell over the edge into a drift,” Miss Nalder informed her. “Do you feel hurt anywhere? Arms and legs all right?”

“Quite O.K., thank you.” Peggy’s head was clearing quickly. “I didn’t hit a thing that I know of. I suppose it was the shock of falling that put me out for a moment or so.”

One of the men had been unstrapping her skis and now he looked up. “Das gnädige Fräulein has one ski broken,” he said.

That brought Peggy up with a bang! “Oh *no!* What a horrid catastrophe! How on earth can I get it mended?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care!” Miss Nalder said crossly. “The main thing is, are you *sure* you’re not hurt?”

“Oh yes; I’m quite sure. I can stand—look!” And Peggy scrambled to her feet and promptly sank knee deep in the snow.

Miss Wilson had followed them by this time, leaving Mdlle in charge of the other girls. She burst into peals of laughter at Peggy’s new predicament. “Clearly no harm done! But oh, Peggy, for pity’s sake look when you’re going another time and don’t give us any more shocks like this! You’ve taken ten years off my life!”

Peggy grinned sheepishly. "I'm awfully sorry. I didn't mean to do it." Then she added: "What happened to Joan? And how can I get my ski mended? I'm not missing any of the fun if I can help it!"

Miss Wilson turned and spoke in rapid Low German to the men and one of them nodded. Yes; it would be an easy matter to see to. He would do it that evening and das gnädige Fraülein need not fear that she would miss anything. He would do it that evening. Besides, more snow would be coming before many hours and it would probably be long and lasting when it began. He could smell it.

Even as he spoke, a flake or two drifted down and, though it was not followed by any more, Miss Wilson swung round quickly, incidentally rousing fierce envy of her ease on skis in the breasts of a good many of her pupils.

"Home, girls!" she said abruptly. "Mind how you go! We don't want any accidents with a snowstorm in the offing. Mdlle, will you and Miss Norton take charge? Peggy, I don't know how on earth we are to get you there! You certainly can't do it on one ski, and you equally certainly can't just walk! The snow's much too soft and deep!"

"Bitte, mein Fraülein," said a boy's voice behind her. "Here is my wood-sledge. Das Fraülein can sit on it and my brother and I will draw her, nicht wahr?"

It seemed the only solution. Peggy managed to get on to the sledge and was pulled back in state to Das Haus unter die Kiefern, where Miss Wilson, having previously rewarded the men, now presented the lads with their share when Peggy had rolled off the sledge with more ease than dignity.

"Well, it'll be a funny story to write home," she observed that evening as she settled down with pad and pen. "Won't Dad and Mother shriek!"

Chapter Fourteen

PARTY PROPOSITIONS

Christmas was coming nearer and a good many people were busy on Christmas presents for the home folks. Even so, time began to lag when the fifth day of December came and the snow still fell with respites of no more than an hour or two at best, so that since the day of Peggy's accident they had scarcely been out of doors at all.

"Oh, how bored I am!" Anthea Barnett yawned one evening as she tossed down the afternoon tea-cloth she was embroidering for her mother. "Can't we think of something new to do? Let's have a meeting on the subject."

Work was promptly put away. They were all feeling bored and they would be thankful for something fresh to do.

"Well, what suggestions has anyone?" Alison Power asked, when they were all sitting in a big circle.

"Could we give a party to the staff?" Nita proposed.

"To the staff? Why on earth to them?" Pamela asked abruptly.

"Oh, we always did at school. And they gave one to us. We always kept our programme a dead secret until the time and—well, we did some rather jolly things."

"But what would you do with them?" Nell demanded, wrinkling up her brows. "I should think they're about as sick of dancing as we are; and I defy anyone to produce any more progressive games!"

"We've done dozens of tableaux and charades, too," June Amery put in. "What about a table tennis tournament?"

She was promptly howled down. "All very well for the folks who play it well and enjoy it, but all of us don't," Gwynneth Hughes observed, with a glance at Edna. "The same applies to badminton, so don't suggest that either, anyone. Think of something *fresh!*"

"We haven't done a play yet," Peggy said thoughtfully. "What about doing a play and inviting them and the kitchen staff to see it?"

"That might be rather fun. What play could we do? We haven't long to get it up in, you know. We break up in about three weeks' time—or less, isn't it?"

Elma, who had kept herself well in the background of late, suddenly came out with an idea. "Let's do a pantomime! We can write it ourselves and then we can fit our characters to the people."

"What would you do for music?" Gwynneth demanded.

"Use anything we know—and can manage. It's only among ourselves. Elma, that's a *super* idea!" Peggy cried eagerly.

"And a ballet! We must have a ballet!" This was Gabrielle Fournet.

"O.K.—if anyone knows anything about ballet. Who does?" Dickie queried. "I might say," she added, "that nothing would induce me to be in it; but I wouldn't mind being—say—half a horse or something like that. I've a notion I could shine in that sort of part."

"And I'll be the other half!" Pamela put in ardently. "I've always *yearned* to be a panto horse!"

"The twins have had ballet lessons," Gabrielle said, pointing unashamedly to the St. Georges twins, who instantly went pink.

“Then that settles that! Twins, you’re to make up a ballet!” Anthea ordered firmly. “Who d’you want in it?”

Nell gave a sudden grin. “This is all very well and I’m all for it; but has it struck you at all that we’re putting the cart before the horse?”

“What? What on earth do you mean?” Peggy stared at her.

“Well, what story are you going to use? We’d better fix that first, hadn’t we?” Nell spoke very gently, but still with that amused grin, and they all shrieked.

“Pipe down, all of you! Someone will be coming to see who’s being murdered! Pipe down!” Dickie roared this above the tumult and they calmed down.

“Well, what story *shall* we take?” Nina asked, when they were quiet again and it was possible to speak normally.

“Cinderella—Goody Two-Shoes—Aladdin?” The suggestions came thick and fast, to be frowned on by Peggy and Anthea.

“Done to death, my dears! For goodness’ sake think of something more original!”

“La Belle au Bois Dormant?” one of the twins offered.

“The Sleeping Beauty? That’s better—which of you is it, by the way?”

“Ghiselaine,” the owner of the name said with a grin at her twin. She and her sister, Lesceline, were so exactly alike that even now, after nearly a whole term, the girls were often at a loss to know which was which. They were a quiet, rather demure pair, very pretty in their dark, Latin way, but so far they had made little impression on the rest.

“Well, it’s certainly better than those other hackneyed things,” Anthea said thoughtfully.

“You could put in a lovely ballet of fairies for the christening feast; and another for the wedding at the end,” Nita put in eagerly. “Can you manage two ballets, twins?”

“I think we can,” the twins said together.

“Well, shall we fix on that, then? All agreed? Good! Then that’s settled. Now for the characters!” Peggy reached over to the nearby table and picked up her scribbling pad and pen. “Who should we want? Don’t all speak at once!”

That kept them occupied for the rest of the evening. By the time they departed bedwards, however, they had made up their dramatis personæ and also contrived to cast most of the parts without much squabbling. Peggy, being on a miniature scale, and very fair and pretty, was chosen for Princess by almost unanimous vote.

“That hair of hers really will be an asset to the part,” Anthea said. “It’s so long and fair and curly. And then she’s light enough for the Prince to lift.”

Long-legged Nell was chosen for the prince and June Amery begged for the part of the cheeky page and got it. The wicked fairy went to Elma and Gabrielle was to be the good fairy. The pompous king and the silly queen fell to Anthea and Daphne; Gwynneth Hughes insisted on being a haughty lady-in-waiting; Dickie and Pamela got their horse. The other parts were settled with amazing amicability for amateurs and the next thing was to decide who should write the pantomime.

“Peggy had better do most of it—isn’t her aunt a well-known authoress?” Pat Binney said calmly; and the rest seized on this idea with acclamations, despite Peggy’s outraged protests that that sort of thing wasn’t hereditary!

Then Dickie, with a wicked twinkle, proposed that Pat be appointed to help with the great work, whereat Pat gave an indignant squeal and the rest cheered in an undertone, mindful of the fact that they did not want to bring any mistress down on them. Half a dozen people whose handwriting was really legible were pressed into service to make copies for the actresses and

Anthea was entrusted with the production. Stage managers were Lucy Holmes and Muriel Abbott, and the whole lot had to provide their own costumes, subject to a censorship of them all. That was everything they could do that night; and next morning they all had a surprise which further helped to dispel their boredom.

The post came very much later these days, thanks to the snow. It was a fine morning and Miss Wilson ordained a ski expedition up to Mahlhausen, the next village up the mountainside. All of them could manage more or less now, even Edna, who had learnt a lesson from the treatment she had received after that first effort and said very little to anyone, even if she did ache after the hard exercise.

When they got back, the letters had arrived. Miss Culver only waited to change as fast as she could and then she raced to the study, skimmed rapidly through the few letters there were, left the staff's share on her desk, took one for Peggy and another for Alison Power, picked up a bundle of envelopes lying on the Head's desk, and fled to the table in the hall, where she spread them out and then skipped off to a nearby room, where she drew the door nearly close and prepared to eavesdrop with all her might.

Elma was there first, as it happened. She expected no mail, but went to see and discovered an envelope addressed to herself in block letter. Puzzled, she turned it over, staring at it.

"Well, what is it?" asked Peggy's voice behind her. "You look as if you'd had a command invitation to a ball at Buckingham Palace!" She went to the table. "Oh, from Dad! Good! Hello! Here's one for me, too!"

"One what?" demanded Gwynneth Hughes as she arrived, followed by a bunch of the others. "Oh, letters! Hel-lo! Who's *printing* to me, I'd like to know?"

By this time, most of them were crowding round the table, laughing and exclaiming. It was Tuesday and not a day on which many letters came for the school, the bulk arriving on Mondays and Wednesdays. Now every girl in the place had one.

"Oh, go on—*go on!* Open them, do, you ninnies!" whispered the aggravated Miss Culver as she clung to the door handle.

It was left to Dickie with her usual plain common sense to be the first to slit hers open. An invitation card dropped out and she grabbed it eagerly. The next moment she gave a yelp.

"*Well!* What do you know about that?" she demanded of the company at large. "What price this?"

"What price what?" Nita asked, as she carefully opened hers.

Dickie slipped the card into her blazer pocket. "Read your own and let mine alone! Everyone's got one!" she retorted.

The next moment the hall was filled with the sound of tearing paper as the thirty-eight followed her advice. Loud cries of surprise and delight came next and Miss Wilson, who with Miss Nalder was in the study, listening as unashamedly as Miss Culver in the little writing-room, gave a smothered chuckle.

"That's shaken them!" Miss Nalder murmured to her chief. "We certainly have given them something to think about this time!—Oh hello, Mdlle!" as that lady arrived by the other door into the study. "You're just in time to hear the fun. Listen!"

"*What?* What's all this?" Peggy's silvery voice rose in a rapid crescendo above the clamour. "St. Nicholas? But when *is* St. Nicholas' Day? *I* don't know!"

"C'est le sixième décembre," replied Gabrielle. Then: "O-oh!"

"Hi! This is English day!" Dickie protested. "Speak English, Gabrielle! Now then, what were you oh-ing about?"

Gabrielle laughed. "Why, I had just remembered that to-morrow is the sixth. Oh, this will be fun! We used to celebrate the jour de la fête de St. Nicholas at the convent."

"I must put a stop to this!" Mdlle hissed back at her shaking colleagues. "I had forgotten those girls who are my compatriotes." And she irrupted into the hall just in time to stop Gabrielle and the other four from telling tales. "Gabrielle—Madeleine-Marie—Thérèse—Ghiselaine et Lesceline! Venez ici au moment! J'en ai dire à vous! Dépêchez-vous!"

The startled quintette went to her at once and she took them to a nearby lecture-room, where she put them all on their honour to say nothing at all about the happenings on St. Nicholas' Day. Then she let them go back to the hall, where the wicked Gabrielle proceeded to refuse to elucidate, though she hinted at things unutterable. The demure twins, who had plenty of mischief hidden under their quiet exteriors, quickly tumbled to the joke and joined in her hints, much to the fury of the others.

Finally, Anthea quelled the riot. "It's no use asking these idiots. Anyhow, I expect Mdlle made them promise not to tell. If the show is to-morrow, we shall all know all about it before long. We must just wait till then. Meantime, I want my chocolate and it's time for our lecture in about three minutes. Speisesaal, please!" She shooed them out of the hall and the staff were free to explode into the wild laughter that had been choking them for the last few minutes.

No one had time to think of being bored either that day or the next. When they were not speculating as to what lay in store for them on the morrow, they were hard at it with their pantomime.

"It just doesn't tell you a thing!" Peggy said pensively on the morning of St. Nicholas' Day as she read her card through for about the twentieth time.

It read:

ATTENTION!

St. Nicholas and his attendants will pay a visit to the Chalet School in the Oberland on the night of the Feast of St. Nicholas. Be prepared to meet them all and to receive what awaits your just deserts!

"I don't think I quite like the sound of that last sentence," Daphne said thoughtfully. "What lies behind it, I wonder?"

"St. Nicholas is the patron saint of little children; I know that much," Nell remarked. "Anyone know anything else?"

"He's the patron saint of sailors," Daphne said, her father being in the Navy.

"Also of bakers and merchants," Natalie Mensch added.

"And of *pawnbrokers!*" Barbara Henschell offered her quota and the rest shouted.

"He is also the patron saint of Greece—and Russia," Ghiselaine told them.

"He's got plenty on his plate at that rate," was Dickie's somewhat irreverent remark. "*Russia*, b'Jove! Poor chap! I don't envy him his job!"

"Oh, but he has other saints to help him," Madeleine, a very quiet, reserved girl, observed. "There is St. Andrew, for instance."

"St. Peter's brother, do you mean?" Peggy asked. "How nice! I've always rather loved St. Andrew."

"Why on earth?" demanded Elma, regarding Peggy as if she thought the latter was, as Dickie said later, "missing on the beat".

“Well, look at the way when he found Our Blessed Lord he never rested until he’d rushed off home and told St. Peter. I always thought it showed how awfully unselfish and generous he was. He knew he’d found a most wonderful new Friend so he simply had to share with his brother.”

It is safe to say that such ideas had never dawned before on Elma. Saints—the Apostles, anyhow—were a part of Scripture; a lesson to be learned if you wanted your marks. That any of them could be vivid and alive to people of her own generation was something that had never occurred to her—nor to Pamela and quite half of the other girls. There was no time to meditate on it now, for the rest were impatiently declaring that it wasn’t St. Andrew with whom they were concerned at the moment, but St. Nicholas, and *what was going to happen to them to-night*.

“Il faut attendre. On apprendra tout ce qu’on desire cette nuit’ci,” Ghiselaine said maddeningly, it being a French day.

“I dare say!” Dickie retorted. “Oh well,” with belated remembrance of the rule, “I mean to say, eh bien, nous apprendrons cette nuit je suppose. Parlons de notre pantomime. Il—or should it be ‘elle’—est plus interessant.”

“Le mot ‘pantomime’ est féminin,” Gabrielle told her; and Dickie groaned loudly.

“Mille pardons, mais le français est la langage la plus horrible!”

“*Dickie!* Que vous êtes impolie!” Lesceline exclaimed.

“J’ai dis ‘mille pardons’,” Dickie reminded her, grinning like a demon. “Je n’aime pas les autres langages-er—que la mienne.”

Seeing that she was completely impenitent, Peggy tried to pour oil on the troubled waters—for the French girls had all bristled up at this plain speaking—by remarking: “Pour moi, je crois bien que l’allemand est le plus mauvais de tout.”

As all except Natalie, who was Tirolian, agreed with this dictum Dickie’s rudeness was forgotten for the moment, and Anthea and Nita sensibly reminded the others that if they did not hurry they would be late for Frühstück. The bell sounding in the distance at that moment pointed this suggestion, and as half of them had not yet stripped their beds, they all had to fly to see to them before Matron should go her rounds, and the whole affair lapsed.

Chapter Fifteen

ST. NICHOLAS' NIGHT

When they were having Kaffee und Kuchen that afternoon, Miss Culver came with a message. "As this is a Feast Day, you may all speak whatever language you like to-night. And please don't change!" She whisked out of the door on the last word before anyone could ask any questions and they were still left guessing.

Abendessen usually came at seven-thirty, but to-night they had been told that it was part of the Feast and would come later. They were expected in the salon about half-past six.

"Well, I suppose we had better wash and tidy our hair," Anthea remarked, as she finished her coffee. "No, thank you, Muriel. I couldn't drink any more, thank you."

"There's just about one cup left in the urn," Muriel, who was officiating to-day, said as she peered into the inky depths. "Anyone want it?"

No one did, so it was left. They piled their china on trays and carried them to the buttery hatch. Then they tore back to tidy up the Saal before they went off to their cubicles. As they had been told not to change, they need only brush their hair after washing hands and faces and powder their noses and attend to their mouths. A certain amount of make-up was allowed, Miss Wilson observing when it had come up for discussion that almost certainly every one of them used it at home and it was futile to forbid it at their age—"So long as they don't overdo it," she had added. "I won't have that!" So everyone but Edna used her lipstick more or less discreetly. So far, *she* had continued to be scandalized at the idea and went about with shining nose and pale lips.

Peggy was touching up her own pretty mouth when Edna suddenly arrived in her cubicle. For a minute or two she simply stood fidgeting and saying "Yes" or "No" to Peggy's amiable chatter. Finally, that young woman put her lipstick away, turned round and demanded: "What do you *really* want with me, Edna?"

"Well—er—I—I thought perhaps you could—er—lend me——"

"Well? Lend you what?" Peggy was sorting through her handkerchiefs, in search of a pretty one. She dropped the one she had selected in sheer surprise when Edna finally stammered, "A—a little—f-face-powder, please."

Peggy stooped and picked up her handkerchief, and by the time she was upright she had recovered her breath. "Of course," she said cordially. "I've got a new box here. Let's see; I don't think it'll be too bad for you—you've a nice fair skin. Sit down and I'll touch you up."

Edna meekly sat down and Peggy found some cotton wool and carefully powdered her face. "I've another pinky lipstick here. Like to try it?" she asked hopefully. "And—I say, Edna, do let me do your hair again. There's no earthly need to strain it back from your face till you look like a skinned cat!"

The Edna who finally got up from the chair looked a different being from the one who had sat down. Peggy had been drilled in the use of make-up by her mother, who had vowed she wasn't going to have any of her girls going round looking like trollops! As a result, the girl used hers delicately, and she had certainly made a difference when she had coaxed Edna to let her loosen the tight pigtail and fluff the shining flaxen hair softly round her face.

"Sapristi!" Peggy exclaimed, as she surveyed her handiwork. "Edna, you're—you're quite pretty! Now," with some severity, "never let me see you looking a Miss Prissy Prim guy

again! It's most unkind and selfish of you!"

"Uh?" gasped the startled Edna.

"Of course it is. You don't spend your time before a mirror, but the rest of us have *got* to look at you some times. Why should we have to see a freak when you can look like—THIS!"

With a dexterous movement, Peggy wheeled Edna round before the mirror and made her look at the reflection. Loosened hair with a suspicion of wave in it, lips tinted a faint pink, and a dust of powder had made an amazing difference. Edna looked at herself and went pink.

"I—I believe I'll try it," she said slowly.

"Well, you can take that powder and lipstick. Buy yourself a puff the next time we're down," Peggy advised, as she closed the lid of her bureau. "Now come on! All the others have gone!"

They ran swiftly along the covered way and finally reached the salon, which they found decorated with branches of pine, cones dyed every colour of the rainbow and strung along the walls, and bunches of leaves painted gold and silver looping them at intervals.

"Oh, how pretty!" Peggy exclaimed, as she made for the corner where her own special chums were waiting.

Edna followed her shyly. She hoped the others would say nothing about her metamorphosis and, luckily for her, they were too much excited that night to think anything more about it than that Edna Purdon looked quite decent for once!

As Peggy threaded her way through the laughing, chattering groups, she noticed that Elma was sitting alone, for Pamela was with Muriel and half a dozen others and no one else seemed to be bothering with the girl.

"Go on, Edna," she said quickly. "I just want to speak to Elma."

Edna went on and was swept into a group of younger girls while Peggy shot across to Elma. "Elma, come and join our merry party. Goodness only knows what's in store for us and there's safety in numbers, you know! Come on before the worst happens!"

Elma raised her unhappy eyes to the merry face above hers and Peggy pulled her to her feet. "Come *on*! You can't sit there alone. I've an awful notion," she went on, as she slipped a chummy hand through the elder girl's arm and pulled her across to the corner, "that I've read somewhere or been told that some of St. Nicholas' attendants are *demons*! Though what a perfectly good saint is doing with demons is more than I can tell you! However, let's be safe rather than sorry. Here we are, folks! Shove up, Nell, and make room for two little ones!"

Nell moved along resignedly, and Peggy pushed Elma down on the settee and proceeded to squeeze in beside her.

"Where are our hostesses?" she went on gaily. "Most rude, I call it, to let your guests assemble and not be there to greet them!"

As if in reply, the big clock at the far end of the room chimed the half-hour, and as the silvery notes died away the door was flung open with a crash and St. Nicholas appeared, tall and stately in full canonicals, including a tall mitre which made him seem to tower above everyone else. Three of his attendants were clad as angels in robes of scarlet, green and blue. Each bore a bag flung over one shoulder, and Miss Norton, Middle and Matron really looked very well in their flowing garments with their hair banded with gleaming fillets of gold. Behind them came two demons clad in black from head to foot and armed with light switches.

The French girls went off into wild giggles at the sight. The rest frankly stared. They had never expected anything like this.

St. Nicholas swept forward. "Welcome all!" he said, in a deep bass voice—Miss Wilson was nearly choking with smothered laughter at the sight of the girls' goggling eyes and dropped jaws!—"Nicholas of Myra comes this night to reward the good and punish the bad."

Anthea, as the eldest there, pulled herself together. "Oh, th-thank you, St. Nicholas," she said quaveringly.

St. Nicholas stalked to the top of the room, where a huge armchair decked with evergreens and cones awaited him. The angels seated themselves round him on low stools and the demons stood at the back of the chair on which he enthroned himself. The room was silent, except for a smothered titter from Gabrielle or the twins, who, of course, knew what to expect. The saint leaned forward to the angel seated at his right hand. "Produce the record!" he commanded. "Rise and read!"

Suspiciously pink, the green angel rose and produced a long scroll adorned with illuminations and proceeded to read in solemn tones the names of the girls in alphabetical order. After each name she read out some sin, and various people wriggled and went red when their turn came.

Peggy was accused of the sin of selfishness in causing needless alarm to other people by not looking where she was going; Gwynneth was described as a slattern and guilty of the sin of sloth, since her stockings were not kept properly darned; Dickie was convicted of pride as she scorned all languages but her own. And so it went on down the long list till the name of Enid Young had been read out. *Her* sin was stated to be heedlessness, and Enid—who had dropped three cups one after the other only the day before, breaking them into atoms as a result—was scarlet.

St. Nicholas remained seated until the angel rolled up her scroll with a peculiar noise at the end of her reading. Then he rose to his feet and waved his demons forward.

"After them!" he roared. "On to them! Chastise them for their sins!"

On the word, Gabrielle and the twins were on their feet and diving for the door, screaming at the tops of their voices. They grabbed at some of the English girls as they tore past, hauling them along with them while they yelled: "En avant! En avant! Sauve qui peut!"

Marie-Thérèse and Madeleine were not far behind them and, after the first stunned moment, the rest of the girls were quick to grasp what they had to do. With shrieks and squalls they fled before the onslaught of the demons, who merrily wielded the long light switches they carried whenever they got near enough to do so.

Dickie contrived to escape the smaller demon, only to find herself facing the other, who had come leaping up the back stairs and caught her fairly. Peggy, trying in dive behind a big press, received a cut from the pursuing demon when she stuck which made her yell in surprise, as she thought he had turned aside to deal with Ghiselaine. He did do that the next moment and Ghiselaine tore downstairs to fall over Edna Purdon, who was trying to rush up to get away from her own pursuing fiend.

It was good fun, for the switches were very light and the demons careful to administer only merely touches, though they saw to it that not one of their victims escaped them. Upstairs and downstairs those fiends chased the girls, who fled before them with screams interspersed with wild giggles. Along passages and in and out of rooms they went. Nita danced madly round and round the old refectory table in the hall and nearly eluded her tormentor, but his fellow came sliding over the polished parquet from the other end and caught her as she slid away from him.

Finally Gabrielle, who was hot and breathless, saw her chance. She made a wild dive for the door of the salon, tore up it and flung herself at the feet of St. Nicholas and his angels, who were rocking with laughter in a most surprising way for a grave saint and angelic attendants.

“St. Nicholas—St. Nicholas! Avez pitié de moi!” she gasped.

St. Nicholas managed to control himself so far as to wave her to a seat at the side of the room. Then Lesceline arrived with Peggy and Daphne at her heels, and the three of them rolled over, nearly upsetting the dark little scarlet angel while they howled to St. Nicholas for mercy. St. Nicholas was too far gone to do more than nod and they sought refuge with Gabrielle. As for the scarlet angel, she was wiping her eyes on her robe and the blue one was little better. The other girls were following, and copying the French girls until at last all were sitting, panting, red, mopping their faces and drying their eyes and all thoroughly well shaken out of their usual selves. Pamela had forgotten to scowl. Edna’s hair was flying loose and she was in such a state of wild giggles as no one had ever seen her in before. Anthea was no longer stately, nor was Alison. Even Elma had lost the unhappy look which had troubled more people than Peggy Bettany. The mass of them were reduced to holding each other up and almost helpless from laughter and lack of breath.

At last St. Nicholas recovered himself and stood up to address his chastened subjects. In doing so, he caught sight of the scarlet angel’s face and his jaw dropped conspicuously. Everyone turned to see what had startled him and once more the whole place rang with their peals of laughter. The dye of Mdlle’s robe was evidently not fast, and when she had wiped the tears of mirth from her face, she had streaked herself until she looked like a Red Indian brave on the warpath!

Barbara Henschell and Gwynneth Hughes clutched at each other and slid to the floor. Daphne and Peggy simply held each other up, and Elma produced a complicated sound and rolled off her seat.

“Mais qu’avez-vous donc?” exclaimed Mdlle with some indignation, as she surveyed the shrieking throng. “What then is wrong with me?”

With a supreme effort, the taller demon pulled herself together and managed to choke out: “Lo-look at your face!” She pointed a shaking finger at Mdlle. “Lo-look at your face!”

Mdlle sprang off her stool and rushed for the nearest mirror. What she saw there made her cry out with horror. “Mais qu’est-ce que c’est arrivé? Oh, état impossible! Je vais me laver!” And she fled from the room to return presently with her face well washed.

By this time, the girls and the rest of the staff had managed to control themselves and were all sitting, more or less in their right minds, though most people were red-eyed and dishevelled and Hester was suffering from a violent attack of hiccoughs.

St. Nicholas stood up once more when she was seated on her stool. Then he called on his demons, who were not in much better shape than the girls themselves, and bade them seat themselves while the angel dealt with rewards for all good deeds recorded. He called on the green angel to read from the other scroll and she produced it and, as well as she could for odd chuckles, did as she was told.

As each girl’s name was called, St. Nicholas beckoned her to come to the throne and there she was handed a small package from the bag of each angel. St. Nicholas made the presentations and, for such a kindly saint, he looked uncommonly severe as he did so. The fact of the matter was, he was still nearly on the verge of giggles, and when Hester, coming to receive her share, said as she curtsied to him: “Hic—thank—hic—you, St. Nich—hic—olas!”

and wound up with a perfect volley of hiccoughs, it was only by dint of clenching his hands until the nails dug into his palms and biting his lips hard that he managed to keep from a fresh outburst.

The gifts were a complete surprise to most of the girls, and when Enid retired to her seat with her three parcels and the Saint kindly gave them leave to open the packages, there was silence, broken only by poor Hester's uncontrollable breathing as they inspected what they had.

Each girl found a packet of chocolate, a tiny plaster model of St. Nicholas and some personal trifle such as collar and cuffs of embroidered muslin, a wooden chalet, handkerchiefs, or a small phial of perfume. A chorus of delighted exclamations rose as they disclosed their treasures, and then Dickie jumped to her feet.

"Three cheers for St. Nicholas!" she cried. "I call him a simply smashing kind of saint!"

The cheers were given with all the breath that they had left; and then Anthea called for cheers for the angels and demons. The final touch came from Elma, who surprised everyone, herself included, by striking up, "For they are jolly good fellows!" which was taken up at once by the rest.

When it ended, St. Nicholas invited everyone to follow him to the Speisesaal, where a feast awaited them, and led the way to a transformed Speisesaal. The tables had been put together to form one long one which was decorated with evergreens and scarlet ribbons, with gay scarlet candles here and there casting their soft light over jellies, creams, bowls of fruit, dishes of bonbons and nuts and, in the centre of the table, a gigantic cake.

Fruit cocktails were offered first. Then came the solids of the feast in the shape of bowls of Karen's best bisque soup, followed by oyster patties and chicken in aspic. Then they attacked the lighter items. The crowning glory came when Karen and her satellites arrived with trays of strawberry ices.

"Richness can go no further!" Nell murmured in Peggy's ear, as she picked up her spoon. "*What* a night!"

"Good old St. Nick!" Peggy replied with a chuckle. "He's done us proud, hasn't he?"

And that was the end of the affair, for after Abendessen, Prayers came and then bed. But the letters all of them wrote home caused any younger members in their families to groan loudly because their schools did not provide such treats and to demand that their name should instantly be put down on the school's waiting list in case all places should be taken!

Chapter Sixteen

ELMA ASKS ADVICE

“Peggy, can I speak to you a minute?”

Peggy glanced up, two imps dancing in her eyes. “The question is not ‘*can* you’ but ‘*may* you’,” quoth she; then as Elma made an impatient movement, her mood changed. “Yes, of course you may—but not now if you don’t mind. I’ve got to fly for practice. Will it do in an hour’s time?”

“I suppose so,” Elma returned heavily. “An hour one way or the other can’t make all that difference, I suppose.”

Peggy dropped the music she had been sorting and stood up. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Bother my practice! It can go for once. Tell me what’s wrong, Elma?”

Elma stood irresolutely. She wanted help and advice, but she did not want to have to own up to her own folly. And yet she had sought Peggy out, feeling that if anyone would try to understand and help her, Peggy Bettany would.

Peggy looked up at her and wondered. “Tell me what’s wrong, Elma,” she coaxed. “If I can help you, I will.”

The other girl gave a hunted look round. Peggy guessed what she was thinking and looked round, too. They were in the Saal, where there were cupboards in which every girl had her own shelf for her possessions, such as music, needlework and so on. Peggy hurriedly shoved her music back into place and slammed the door shut.

“We can’t talk here. Someone will be sure to come barging in. Come on! Let’s make tracks for the music-room. We can talk there.”

“But what about your practice?” Elma asked. “I don’t want you to get into a row for my sake.”

“That’ll be O.K. I’ll put it in later on somehow. After all, I never *do* waste any time, so once can’t matter much.” And Peggy led the way out of the Saal, Elma following, a hopeful look dawning on her face.

In the music-room, Peggy seated herself on the piano-stool and waved Elma to a nearby chair. “Sit down and tell me what’s wrong. Nothing,” added experienced Peggy, “ever seems so bad when you’ve shared it.”

Elma sat down; but for all she had been so urgent in the Saal, she seemed to find it hard to begin now. She twisted her fingers together and stared down at them unseeingly. Peggy waited for a moment or two. Then she leaned forward, laying her own slim fingers over the other’s restless ones.

“Can’t you tell me, Elma? Do try! I hate to see anyone look as wretched as you do!”

Elma choked. Then she said: “I’ve just *got* to tell someone! I oughtn’t to bother you, but I don’t know what to do. Oh, Peggy! I’m in such a jam!”

“Get cracking, then.” Then, with a sudden flash of inspiration, Peggy added: “Have you been having any more letters you oughtn’t?”

Elma looked up. “So you know about it?”

“Only that you did have a letter like that. Has another come?”

Elma nodded. “I can’t think why it was given to me—except that it came from Ireland and the Head knows that my people are there. She may have thought it was from my father.

Generally, it's Mother who writes, and—and the last was typed."

"That would be it. What a brute whoever it is must be to go on writing! Don't they know that it'll get you into trouble?"

"I don't suppose he'd worry about *that*," Elma said bitterly. "The only thing *he* thinks about is what *he* wants."

"Then he's a selfish monster!" Peggy said definitely. "What do you mean to do, Elma? I mean, you can't go on getting letters from him if it's going to mean a hectic row every time. Why don't you go to Bill—I mean," she added in some confusion, "Miss Wilson?"

"Peggy—I couldn't! She was dreadfully angry last time and—and she said that—if I went on with the correspondence, she would have to think whether she could take the responsibility of keeping me here."

"But that's got nothing to do with it this time," Peggy said quickly. "It was one thing when you went on sub rosa. It's quite another when you take the letter to her and ask her to help you to deal with it. Honestly, Elma, you'd find her awfully understanding. I know I'd go to her if ever I was in a jam of any sort."

"You're never likely to be in the sort of jam *I* am in," Elma told her. "You're not that kind."

Peggy gave her a keen look from inquisitive blue eyes. "Elma—stop me if I'm asking more than I ought, but are you——" she hesitated and then went on: "What I mean is, are you—engaged?"

Elma shook her head. "No, thank you! I—I did think of it once; but not now—not when I see that he doesn't really care whether he gets me into the row of the year or not, so long as he can amuse himself with me." Suddenly the proud, hard tone in which she had been speaking vanished. "Oh, Peggy, I'm in such a *mess*!" And she put her head down on the keyboard of the piano and cried like a small child.

Peggy's arms went round her at once. "Oh, my dear! Don't cry! He jolly well isn't worth it! Look, Elma," she went on in her most coaxing tones, "you come and tell Bill all about it. I'll come, too, if you like and help you out. I *promise* you that Bill won't be snarkey with you over it. I've known her for years and if she *is* strict, she's always awfully just and fair. She'll deal with that blighter and *make* him leave you alone—I know she will."

"I don't see how she can," Elma sobbed. She fumbled in her blouse and produced a letter which she pushed into Peggy's hand. "She's written to him once to say he was to leave me alone and—and you can read for yourself how much good that was!"

Peggy gave her a startled look. Then she released Elma, who was quieter now, opened the letter and read it. When she had come to the end, she tossed it down on the floor and took Elma into her arms again.

"My poor lamb! I don't wonder you cry! But the hurt won't go *on*, Elma. You don't care enough for that. I'll bet you what you like that by next term you won't care two hoots! So far as *he* goes, he's nothing but a mean, low, utter——" Peggy paused to search her vocabulary for something that would be bad enough and finally fell back on one of her Aunt Jo's epithets—"hunks! Now try to stop crying and come and wash your face. Then we'll go to the study and tell Bill all about it and *she'll* deal with it for you."

But it took more than this to move Elma; and Peggy talked herself nearly hoarse before the elder girl at last agreed to go with her to the study and hand over the precious epistle. However, she succeeded at last, and Peggy opened the door of the music-room, looked up and down the passage and then walked Elma to the nearest splashery where the girl bathed her

face with cold water until it was nearly normal. A touch of powder and lipstick, and she was looking almost herself again. Then, armed with the letter, the pair went along to the study, where the Head was busy dictating letters to her secretary.

She looked up, rather startled when, in answer to her "Herein!" the door opened and Peggy and Elma came in together. A glance at Elma's face told her that that young lady had been crying. She also noted the unusually firm set of Peggy's lips and the flash in her eyes as she said formally: "Please, Miss Wilson, may we speak to you?"

"Of course. Come in, girls!" The Head waved them to chairs and then turned to Miss Culver. "That will keep you going for the next half-hour or so, I think, Miss Culver. I'll ring when I want you again. Now, you two," when Gillian Culver had gathered up the letters and the rest of her impedimenta and departed, "pull up your chairs and tell me what's wrong."

For reply, Elma laid her letter on the table. "This came for me to-day, Miss Wilson. Please, what can I do about it?"

The Head took it up and looked at it. Like the secretary, she saw the Irish stamp and at once leapt to the conclusion that there was bad news of Elma's parents.

"Do you want me to read it, Elma?" she asked.

Having managed so far, Elma was incapable of either doing or saying anything more. She nodded dumbly and Peggy came to the rescue. "Miss Culver gave it out with the other letters and Elma doesn't know what to do about it."

The Head glanced keenly at Elma, but she said nothing. She took up the letter, opened and read it, folded it up and returned it to its envelope, all in a deadly silence. The girls looked on anxiously. What would she say—or do?

"I see," she said at last. "Thank you for bringing it to me at once, Elma. That was the right thing to do and, in the circumstances, the brave thing to do. Not easy was it?"

"No-o-o," Elma said, "but Peggy said you'd understand and—and help me. I—I don't want to have any thing to do with it."

The Head nodded. "Very well, my dear. I will attend to it myself—and at once!" She saw the look of relief that flashed into Elma's eyes. Then she turned to Peggy. "And what is your share in this, Peggy?"

"Oh," Peggy said easily, "I just came with Elma to—er—buck her up a little. Shall I go, now?"

"Yes; I want to talk to Elma for a moment or two and you've done your share. By the way, what about your practice? Have you finished?"

Peggy went very red. "I—I haven't even begun yet. May I do it this evening between Kaffee und Kuchen and Abendessen?"

"By all means. At any rate, you must not miss it. Run along now and I'll see you later about it."

Peggy got up to go, but Elma stopped her. "Miss Wilson, it was my fault Peggy didn't do it now. I asked her to speak to me and—and," she added shamefacedly, "it was she who made me come. I wouldn't have dared, I don't think, if she hadn't gone on about it till I said I would. Please don't blame her for it."

"When she said that," the Head said when she was talking things over with the staff that evening after Abendessen, "I felt that our worst troubles were over where she was concerned. Oh, I don't say she won't make a pest of herself at times. I don't expect miracles and it will take more than half a term or even a whole one to transform a girl like Elma Conroy. Still, I do feel that there's some hope for her now!"

At the moment, the Head merely nodded and dismissed Peggy, who went off, thankful that Elma had taken her advice. "For I don't know what I could have done if she hadn't," she mused, as she went along to the Saal to seek her books before she went to the lecture-room where the girls usually prepared their notes or wrote their essays. "Poor Elma! She *was* in a jam! Thank goodness men don't interest me that way! I hope I'll be at least ten years older before they do. I don't see how you can be expected to have much sense about them until you've been grown-up for a while." Then she laughed to herself, for her own mother had married at nineteen and had not been twenty when she and her twin brother were born.

She piled up her books and departed for an hour's hard work and forgot all about Elma and her troubles.

Meanwhile, Miss Wilson, alone with her stormiest petrel, looked at her thoughtfully. "You know, Elma," she said, "in one way, I'm not sorry this"—she tapped the letter—"has happened."

Elma stared at her. "Why—I—don't understand," she stammered.

"Perhaps not." The Head set her elbows on the table, clasped her hands and balanced her chin on them. "I'll explain. You got an unpleasant shock when you were found out before and you were very unhappy about it. But things like that wear off, my child. Sooner or later you'd have forgotten, and then the next time the same sort of thing happened, you might—I don't say you would—you *might* have gone into it. If that came to pass, believe me, Elma, I should send you away. I couldn't take the risk of keeping you here with the others. It wouldn't be just to them."

Elma looked at her with wide eyes. "But—but what I do can't matter to them—not so long as I don't talk about it," she said.

"Don't you believe it!" Miss Wilson retorted. "It would be bound to come out sooner or later. However, this man, who is certainly one of the most selfish and inconsiderate beings I have ever known, chooses to put you in a position where, if you had not had the sense to listen to Peggy and come to me, the worst might have happened so far as you are concerned. I should think the knowledge of his selfishness must have opened your eyes pretty considerably to what he is and what a grave risk you have run of ruining your own happiness in life. Tell me, Elma, do you *really* care for him?"

Elma flushed. "I thought I did," she said. "Now—well, now I only hope I never see him again!"

"Very good. Bring straight to me any other letters that may come to you from him and I will deal with them." She paused here, and when she went on Elma sat upright with surprise. "You are a handsome creature and you are attractive as well. The sooner you learn to deal with situations like this, the better for you. Be careful how far you let men spend friendship or what may pass for friendship on you. That's all I have to say to you now. But don't worry about *this*!" She flicked the letter contemptuously with a finger. "It's not worth worrying over. As for any difficulty that this may have made between yourself and your friends here, that, I am afraid, is something that only you yourself can settle."

Elma jumped at this. She had not reckoned on the Head's noticing that she and Pamela were no longer friends. She had yet to learn that there was very little that went on in the school that Miss Wilson did *not* notice!

"All you can do is to be patient and be ready to make advances on your own side and if any come from the other, accept them in a friendly spirit. Now my preachment is finished—and quite time, too, I imagine you are thinking! You had better run along and see what you can

do about that geography essay of mine.” The Head concluded with a broad smile which Elma answered with a rather feeble one of her own before she left the study, feeling happier than she had done for some weeks.

“What have you done about the letter?” Mdlle asked when Miss Wilson had told them all as much as she felt they needed to know.

“I’ve written and told that creature that if there are any more letters and annoyance for Elma, I shall place the whole thing in the hands of her father, advising him to see his solicitor about the matter. I hope that will settle him!”

“I should think it almost might,” murmured Matron. “From all I can hear, Mr. Conroy isn’t the sort of man to mince matters. If this young bounder comes from the same place——”

“He does!” Miss Nalder nodded with dancing eyes.

“Then in that case, I imagine Mr. Stuart Raynor—that’s his name, isn’t it?—will steer very clear of Elma.”

“He will if he knows what’s good for him,” Miss Nalder murmured.

“Don’t you worry about that. Creatures of that kind always do know what’s to their own best advantage. I imagine he’ll leave Elma alone for the future!”

And, to anticipate a little, he did. Stuart Raynor was attracted by the handsome girl who was also heiress to her father’s wealth; but not to the point where he would risk trouble with Mr. Conroy and, therefore, trouble with his own father. Henceforth, Elma was free from any more attentions of his.

Chapter Seventeen

THE ENDING OF A FEUD

In the days that followed, the authorities at the new branch of the Chalet School saw with relief that Elma seemed to recover herself. The strained, worn look vanished from her eyes and she grew definitely happier. Peggy and Co. opened their ranks on occasion and let her into their group. What was even better, she and Anthea Barnett and Nita Eltringham began to strike up an alliance among them. They three were the oldest girls in the school and, so Miss Wilson thought, the united influence of two such girls as Anthea and Nita would do more for Elma than anything else.

The girl who was the greatest source of worry these days was Pamela Burton, who went about in a state of gloom that made her snappy and almost unapproachable. She varied this with fits of wild spirits that had little real fun in them.

“What’s wrong with Pamela?” Miss Norton asked one day in the staffroom where all the staff were assembled, waiting for the bell to summon them to Mittagessen. “She looks like a cross between a thunderstorm—worst variety!—and a— a crazy Puck!”

“Remarkable simile!” Miss Nalder observed. “Really, Vi! Is that the best you can do? I don’t think much of it!”

Little Mdlle Berné nodded her head. “Me, I see what it is that Vi means,” she said. “I have seen it, too. She is unhappy, I fear, la pauvre petite!”

Gillian Culver glanced up from her knitting. “If you ask me, all that is wrong with Pamela is an outsize in jealousy attacks,” she said abruptly.

Miss Norton raised her eyebrows. “Jealousy? Of what—or whom?”

“Anyone who has anything to do with Elma Conroy. They used to be as thick as thieves. Then, when there was all that fuss about that letter, they seem to have had a violent parting. Since then, Pamela avoids Elma so severely that it’s pointed. I’ve often wondered,” Gillian went on reflectively, “just how much Pamela was in the know about all that affair?”

“She obviously knew something—probably most of what there was to know.” Miss Nalder spoke definitely. “Yes; I think you’re right, Gill. I remember it happening. One day they were practically in each other’s arms; the next they couldn’t see each other. I wonder what actually happened?”

“What actually happened when—and about what?” This was the Head as she came into the room. “What are you people talking about?”

“Pamela and Elma’s row,” Gillian said.

Miss Wilson’s face grew troubled. “I’m rather worried about Pamela. She’s clearly very unhappy. Unfortunately, if it’s because she’s quarrelled with Elma, that’s something they must put right themselves. I, for one, refuse to butt in on their feuds and friendships. Besides, it would only make it worse. There’s the bell at last! Come along! We haven’t any too much time.”

The staff went down to the Speisesaal and talk on the subject ceased for the moment. Nor did they renew it, for after the meal everyone had to hurry into outdoor garb. A great international conductor was at Interlaken that week-end conducting two concerts, and the girls had been promised that if the weather held, they should go to the afternoon one to be given in the Casino on the Höheweg. Mittagessen was at noon and they would catch the mountain train

at Lauterbach at ten to one. As they had to ski down from Welsen to Lauterbach, there was no time for dallying. For once, they finished their meal in twenty minutes and then it was one mad rush for outdoor wraps and any other necessities. Then they strapped on their skis and ski-ed down to the station where they discarded them, leaving them in charge of the man there until they came back. The train came gliding down as they streamed on to the tiny platform and they all piled in as best they could, for it was fairly full already. The result was that Gillian Culver found herself sitting next to Peggy Bettany with Elma Conroy and Pamela Burton in front. This was a situation Pamela had tried to avoid, but Miss Norton had rebuked her sharply when she tried to move forward and squeeze in beside Nell and Lucy.

“Take the first seat empty, Pamela! There is neither time nor room for choosy nonsense!”

Pamela flounced down beside her former friend with a lowering brow and a mutter that no one heard clearly, which might have been as well. She sat on the bare edge of the seat, though Elma moved up to make room for her. As a result, when the train moved off with its customary little jerk, Pamela nearly fell on the floor and only Miss Culver’s grab at her saved her.

“For goodness’ sake sit on your seat properly!” Gillian said crossly. “You don’t want to make a show of yourself and the school, do you? Sit down, and let’s have no more nonsense!”

As she could hardly glare at the secretary, Pamela glared straight ahead of her so malevolently that a harmless maiden lady from Mahlhausen, who was also going to the concert and encountered the look, gave a gasp of horror. Luckily for Pamela, no one connected the sound with her. She moved about three inches nearer Elma, who gave her a shy, tentative smile. Pamela took no notice of it. She sat there, rigid and upright, with a look on her face that certainly showed no pleasurable anticipation of musical joys to come.

It was fortunate that the journey was a matter of some twenty-five minutes only or else, as Nell, glancing back and taking in the situation with a glance, wickedly whispered to Lucy, there might have been trouble of the worst kind. However, they reached Interlaken before that happened and hurried out of the train to line up for the necessary crocodile. By this time, they had all accepted the fact that when they came down to the town for events like this, pairing off was really needful and no one made any comments these days. Elma was claimed as a partner by Anthea, and Pamela had, perforce, to fall back on Edna, who didn’t like her and scarcely opened her lips during the walk from the Bahnhof to the Casino. Once they had reached the concert hall, Edna made a bee-line for Mary, June, and the rest of the crowd who were becoming her own particular gang.

Thus left to herself, Pamela sat down on the end seat left by Muriel Abbott and Pat Binney, who were close friends by this time. She bought her programme and sat scowling over it while the rest chattered softly together until a burst of applause heralded the arrival of the leader of the orchestra. A much bigger one came a few minutes later as the great conductor appeared. He was a shortish man in the late thirties, stockily built and with a fine head covered by a crop of thick black hair brushed back from a big, broad brow. He bowed three times in response to his welcome and then mounted the rostrum, from which he bowed again before turning to tap his desk with his baton and raise his arms. All the instruments of the orchestra came to the “ready” and the next moment the opening strains of Mendelssohn’s *Ruy Blas* overture swelled out over the now silent throng.

It was played magnificently and the conductor, after bowing his own thanks, signed to his orchestra to stand and stepped down so that they might receive their well-deserved meed from the audience. Then he climbed up again and once more the baton came into play, this time on

Smetana's *Vltava*, one of the symphonic poems from his group, *My Fatherland*. It was new to a good many of the girls, but they all enjoyed it and clapped loudly when the great, sweeping music came to an end. The conductor bowed again and again and then shook his head smilingly, gestured a negative and disappeared to bring the soloist, a young French contralto who had recently come out.

"She's only twenty-two," Peggy said in a low tone to Elma, who was sitting next her. "Not so very much older than we are, but my Aunt Jo has heard her and she says she has a lovely voice—and Aunt Jo sings herself and knows."

"Do you mean she's a concert singer?" Elma asked, greatly impressed. "I thought she wrote books?"

"So she does. Oh no; she's never sung in public, though she has a lovely voice. She's always saying she'll have more lessons when she has time. Then she goes and has another baby and that ends *that*. The latest was twins, so she's got her hands full all right. Here they come!" And Peggy lapsed into silence as the great man came on to the platform, leading a dark, slender girl by the hand.

Courteous applause greeted the young singer and as she curtsied her thanks, her dark eyes roved over the audience. They fell on the rows of girls, all clearly not far from her own age, and a vivid smile suddenly lit up her rather grave face. Then she sobered again, for the baton had rapped the desk and the orchestra was playing the opening bars of Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrädchen*.

"Bold, to open with that," Miss Nalder whispered to Mdlle. "It needs some singing!"

There was no chance for Mdlle to reply, for at that moment the first rich notes of the beautiful voice had begun and the passion and fire of the words rang out above the murmuring spinning-wheel notes of the accompaniment. In this, perhaps Schubert's most perfect song, the young singer established herself with her audience. There was a breathless pause as the last note died away. Then came the thunder of applause and the cries of "Bis! Bis!"

Miss Wilson turned to Miss Norton as she clapped vigorously to say in an undertone: "Marvellous artistry, but a girl of that age should not be able to sing that particular song like that!"

A white-haired lady sitting behind overheard, and leaned forward. "Pardon, madame, but Marie-Claire de Fontevraud sings from the heart. She was betrothed at seventeen to a young man who had been wounded during the war. It was thought that his wound had healed, but only three months before the wedding it flared up again and he died—on the wedding day. He had always loved her beautiful voice and, when she could think again, she returned to the Conservatoire at Paris and went on with her lessons. Now, for the present, she sings. Some day, though, she will sing no longer at concerts."

There was no time for more, for already the orchestra were playing the prelude to *Rastlose Liebe*. Then, having given proof of her dramatic gifts, the singer finished the Schubert group with *Röslein auf der Heide*, sung with the simplicity of a child.

Had encores been allowed, the audience would certainly have demanded one; but the concert was being broadcast, so though they brought Mdlle de Fontevraud back once more, the conductor was obliged to negative it and raise his baton for the final number of the first part of the concert. This was Richard Strauss' *Don Juan*.

When it had ended and the applause had died down, the Head turned round to speak to the lady who had addressed her, only to find the seat empty.

"I'm sorry," she said regretfully to Miss Norton. "I should have liked to know some more about that girl. She certainly should have a future before her. But what, I wonder, does she mean to do later on if she gives up concert work?"

No one could tell her, so she had to leave it alone, for the lady did not come back for the second part, though Mdlle de Fontevraud sang again, this time a group of modern songs, and proved herself as capable of dealing with modern musical idiom as of the classics. Apart from that, the second symphony of Beethoven was played, and when the concert ended the girls were wild with delight and only sorry that they could not stay for the evening performance.

That was not possible, however, and the staff hurried them off to the tea-shop where tables had been booked and they could discuss the music and performers to their full satisfaction over chocolate, cream-cakes and Berne pastry, surely the best in the world.

They left the tea-shop for the station and arrived with ten minutes to spare. The staff made no attempt to keep the girls together. They were all old enough to look after themselves. So when Nell and two or three of the others strayed to the bookstand in search of new magazines and the French girls went off to invest in chocolate for Sunday, no one interfered. Elma, standing near Peggy and Co., glanced round and saw Pamela a little apart from the rest and alone. The Head's remarks about being ready to make advances if she saw a chance had never left her. This seemed a good opportunity. She slipped away from the others and went up to her former chum.

"Pam," she said eagerly, "do listen to me—*please!* I—I want to tell you——"

"I don't care what you want to tell me. I don't want to hear it!" Pamela broke in on her speech. "I've *done* with you, Elma Conroy! I never want to be friends with you again!" And she turned away just in time to stop Elma seeing the tears that suddenly pricked at the backs of her eyes.

"But Pam—I want to say I'm sorry I was such a beast to you! I've been sorry ever since, truly——" Elma stopped there, for Pamela had stalked off, leaving her alone with the words of her fervid apology spoken to the empty air.

The fact of the matter was that Pamela was suffering from a violent attack of jealousy on top of the old sore feeling she had assiduously nursed against Elma. The elder girl had been the one to blame and yet there she was, laughing and chattering with Peggy Bettany and her crowd as if nothing had happened! She, Pamela, had only said what she had done out of real friendship and Elma had flung it back in her face in the most insulting way.

"She needn't think she can treat me as if I was the scum of the earth and then say she's sorry and get away with it!" Pamela thought stormily to herself. "She jolly well *can't!* I've *been* soft about her, but it's not going on! I *hate* her! I wish I'd never been friends with her at all! Being pally with Peggy and that lot and then fancying she can pick me up again just when it suits her! I'm not as cheap as all that, and so she may find out!"

When the train came in and they took their seats, she was careful to choose one as far away from Elma as possible. Miss Wilson looked at her, but decided to say nothing. Pamela looked about as approachable as an infuriated octopus!

"What's wrong with Pamela *now?*" Matron asked, as the Head sat down beside her. "I wonder that old boy she's sitting next isn't afraid. She looks like the First Murderer in *Macbeth!*"

"I have an idea that Elma tried to make it up with her just now," the Head replied. "I saw her go up to Pamela on the station platform. I don't know just what *has* happened between those two, but, from sitting in each other's pockets all day, Pamela, at least, appears to want to

get as far away from Elma as she can. In one way, I can't say I'm sorry. I don't think that friendship was good for either of them. But I could wish it had happened less—less violently. Pamela is obviously miserable and I don't think Elma is any too happy about it, though Peggy and Co. seem to have taken her more or less under their wing. Well, we can do nothing. Elma got all the advice I'm giving her on the subject. I think she's tried to carry it out, but Pamela won't play ball."

"Silly little ass if she doesn't! Elma will grow away from her in time and then she'll be left alone, for she isn't specially friendly with any of the others that I can see."

Miss Wilson nodded, her thoughts going back to a very similar friendship in the early days of the school's sojourn in England.^[4] That friendship had broken down completely and the end had been disaster for one of the partners. The same sort of thing could not happen here and now; and Pamela Burton was a very different sort of girl with little or none of the wilful daring that had characterized Betty Wynne-Davies. She also had far less excuse for her shortcomings than Betty had had, for she came from a good home with parents who cared deeply for her. Poor Betty was an orphan in charge of a guardian who knew little about girls and cared less. At the same time no one wanted a repetition of what had happened during the war years, least of all Miss Wilson. Sitting there in the brightly lit train, she began to wonder if she could do anything about it after all. And then it was taken out of her hands altogether.

[4] See *The Chalet School Goes To It*

By this time, the train had reached the end of its run across the narrow plain and begun to climb the mountain slope. Suddenly, without an instant's warning, the lights went out and the train stopped dead. Not that it stayed there. It began, slowly and terrifyingly, to slide backwards! Cries of terror and dismay broke out. Someone in one of the other carriages began to scream and that acted like an electric press-button, releasing other shrieks from the passengers.

Miss Wilson sprang to her feet, feeling in her bag for her torch as she cried: "Girls! Don't move! Stay where you are!" She pulled the torch out of the bag and switched it on. It was a big, powerful one, necessary for the return journey through the pines to Welsen, and its beam lit up the carriage, showing her the girls mostly clinging to each other or their seats. They turned white, frightened faces to her, but most of them sat tight. Only two—Pamela and Edna—lost their heads altogether. The latter rushed at her Head, clutching her and asking tearfully if the train would roll over the edge and they would all be killed. Miss Wilson said sharply, "Certainly not!" and pushed her into Matron's arms, leaving that lady to deal with her.

Pamela, in a thoroughly nervy state to begin with, was nearly frantic with fear. She made for the nearest door and began to try to tug it open—vainly, as it mercifully happened, for the loss of electric current had automatically locked the doors. The Head did not grasp this and she made a wild dive up the aisle to the panic-stricken girl.

"Pamela! Stop that! Stop it at once! Do you want to be thrown out and killed? Come away from that door!"

"Let me out—let me out!" Pamela gasped hysterically.

At that moment, the train ended its slow, downward passage and stopped short with a jerk which threw Pamela off her feet and nearly sent Miss Wilson on top of her, had she not caught at the back of a seat for support. Pamela clutched at the nearest thing clutchable, which happened to be the Head's ankles, and this time Miss Wilson did overbalance and would have been right down but for Matron, who had left Edna to Dickie and followed her Head to help

with Pamela. She managed to catch Miss Wilson's shoulder in a firm grasp and succeeded in steadying her, though, as that lady found later on, only at the cost of bruising her badly. At the time, as she owned, she felt nothing. She stooped down and tried to haul Pamela to her feet, but the girl remained grovelling on the floor, screaming that they were all going to be killed, and nothing either Miss Wilson or Matron could say had the slightest effect.

However, several of the girls had produced *their* torches by now, and the worst feature of the whole affair was relieved when the dense blackness which had first overwhelmed them had been banished. The train officials were moving from carriage to carriage, assuring the passengers that they were safe enough. It was only a question of a short delay until the current was switched on again. Miss Wilson, determined that no one should see a member of the school in such a state of terror, stooped again and, using all her force, dragged the girl to her feet, but it was a case of holding her up for her fear seemed to have taken all her strength. Matron stopped the wild shrieks, though, by producing her smelling salts, guaranteed as extra strong, and holding them under her nose. Pamela got the full benefit and lost her breath for a second. Then someone came hurriedly forward, kneeling on the seat behind, and taking some of the weight off the Head.

"It's all right, Miss Wilson. I've got her safely and I'll see to her," said Elma's voice. "There's room for her at the back with Anthea and me and we'll look after her."

Too dazed to heed anything but the old friendly voice she had loved so well, Pamela clung to Elma, sobbing: "Oh, Elma! Are we going to be killed? Oh, I'm so frightened!"

"Of course not, idiot!" Only a very keen listener would have heard the slight tremor in Elma's voice. "Come on to the back and sit down. All that's going to happen is that we'll be held up here until they get the power turned on again. Come on and sit down and for goodness' sake don't let the Swiss see you making a goat of yourself by having jumping hysterics! Here we are— Oh, thanks a lot, Anthea! If you really don't mind, I think she'll be better with me." For Anthea had helped her push Pamela into their seat and then, with a smile and a nod, had moved over to a spare seat on the other side of the aisle and settled into it.

Elma sat down, keeping an arm round Pamela, holding her close. Pamela gave a great gasp and then began to cry naturally.

"Silly old joker, aren't you?" Elma murmured, as she fished out her handkerchief and stuffed it into Pamela's hand. "There you are. Now mop up and stop it—*Ah!*"

At that very instant, the lights flashed on again and the train began to move very slowly uphill. Pamela, feeling the comfort of Elma's arm and voice all round her, choked loudly two or three times. Then she contrived to get hold of herself, and by the time the little train had reached Lauterbach in safety, she was sitting up, very white and shaken, but more or less herself again. Edna, too, had recovered, though she scuttled out on to the platform as if, Peggy said later, she expected the thing to go slithering down to the plain again in short order.

The girls got out and quite a number of the other passengers did so too, preferring the long, snowy tramp up to Mahlhausen to risking any further wild thrills. The Head, learning that they had only three torches among them, offered hers, and Peggy and Nell followed suit. They themselves crossed the little alpe to the woodland path; the people from Mahlhausen would keep to the track running parallel to the railway.

All the way up to their own mountain shelf, Pamela and Elma kept together and, by the time they had reached Das Haus unter die Kiefern, to all intents and purposes the gulf between them had been bridged. Not altogether, perhaps. Too much had happened for their friendship ever to have all its old intimacy again. Pamela would never again be so utterly under Elma's

dominance, nor Elma ever try to exert such influence over her; but their friendship was renewed on much healthier and saner lines. Pamela learned to think for herself instead of depending on Elma as she had done in the past. She also found that though now she was by no means the only friend the latter owned, she had her own place and only her own actions could ever rob her of that.

As for Elma, she had learned her lesson thoroughly. The events of the term had taught her more about the art of living with other people than she had ever known before, and by the time her school days ended she was growing into the sort of girl the Chalet School authorities were proud to recognize as one of theirs.

Chapter Eighteen

FUTURE FOR A PANTOMIME

The next day being Sunday, the girls went to church in the morning as usual and in the afternoon wrote letters, read, or talked quietly. After Kaffee und Kuchen, they wrapped up warmly and went for a tramp under a sky powdered with chill white stars. Next day, however, made up with its bustle for the tranquillity of Sunday. Term ended on the Wednesday of the following week and it had been decided to give their pantomime the Saturday before that. Part of their Sunday afternoon had been taken up with writing and illustrating invitations to all the staff, both teaching and domestic. As this included the visiting staff, of whom there were five, and they had set out to make their invitations things of beauty, the job occupied them very thoroughly.

The Head was the first to find hers. Nell had taken the opportunity of having to take a pile of essays to the study for her to drop the envelope on top of them, and Miss Wilson found it when she dashed in to pick up some blank maps before going to St. Agnes'. Greatly intrigued by the two fairies holding the scroll bearing her name, she left the maps to take care of themselves and carefully opened the envelope to see what it contained.

"Well!" she ejaculated to Miss Nalder, who came in to ask for Edna for extra remedials. "What do you know about *that*?" And she held out the gaily decorated card with its trails of briar roses enclosing the Old English lettering.

"What is it? Let me see!" Miss Nalder craned forward curiously. Then she made a dive for the door.

"Where are you going?" the Head cried.

"To see if there's one for me, of course!" She vanished, to return a few seconds later, waving a similar envelope. "One for each of us—and the kitchen staff are included! Now let's see. Lend me your paper-knife, Nell. I can't *tear* a work of art like this!"

The Head passed it over with a laugh and Miss Nalder opened her envelope to find her invitation decorated with dancing elves.

"Wording's the same, though," she observed, as she read it. "These are very tricky, aren't they?"

"If you mean 'pretty' or 'jolly', I'd say so! Where on earth did you pick up that piece of slang?"

"No idea!" Miss Nalder replied airily. "My dear! A *pantomime*! Who says our girls aren't enterprising?"

Miss Wilson, re-reading hers, laughed. "No one that I've ever heard of. I suppose it was bound to come." The cuckoo bounced out of his little door and cuckooed the hour, rousing both mistresses to a sense of their duty.

"Good heavens! I should have been with St. Agnes' a quarter of an hour ago! Did you say you wanted Edna, Phyll? I'll send her to you, but don't keep her beyond her time, please. She needs all the geography I can pour into her."

"O.K.; she shall return at the end of her twenty minutes," Miss Nalder promised. "See you later!" And she ran off to the tiny cubby-hole dignified by the name of "Remedial Room".

By the end of the morning, all the staff knew what was in store for them and great was the speculation as to how the girls would manage a pantomime.

“Where did they get the book of words, do you suppose?” Miss Norton asked, as she sipped her coffee after Mittagessen.

“Unless I’m greatly mistaken, they’ve written it among themselves,” Matron said, looking mysterious.

“How do you know that?” Gillian Culver was down on her at once. “None of them’s a Jo Bettany, you know—unless Jo’s mantle has fallen on her niece and I’ve never heard that Peggy showed signs of literary genius!”

Matron only looked provoking and declined to say any more than: “You’ll see I’m right about it.”

A tap at the door, and Marie appeared in answer to the Head’s “Herein!”

“Bitte, mein Fraülein, eine Dame möchte Sie sehen,” she said.

Miss Wilson looked up, surprised. Visitors were still rather a rarity at Das Haus unter die Kiefern and especially in the early afternoon. All she said, however, was: “Gut! Ich komme.”

She was not very long away. When she came back, her eyes were dancing and her lips quivering.

“What did she want?” Miss Nalder asked suspiciously. “You’re looking very wicked, Nell!”

“What an awful thing to say to your Head! I’m shocked at you, Phyll!” her Head retorted.

Matron smiled in a superior way. “I suppose it was someone come down from Mahlhausen to return our torches. Don’t fuss, Phyll!”

“How did you know that?” the Head demanded.

“I guessed it. Why were you looking so wicked over it? Anyone we know?” Matron had stood up as she spoke and grinned down on the rest from her altitude of six feet.

“Never even heard of her—or no, that’s not quite true. We don’t know her, though. No; the joke is that Peggy came racing through the hall with her arms full of butter muslin as I let the lady out and my visitor—she’s Lady Aldis, by the way; she’s up at Mahlhausen on her husband’s behalf; he’s the M.P. that had to resign because of ill-health—and when she saw Peg, she said, ‘Oh, are your girls giving a play?’ I said they were, and called Peggy and introduced her. Then she said very wistfully that she wished they could give their play up there. It would be something for the invalids, who have a dullish life on the whole. Peg had to say she’d ask the others if they could do it some time before we break up and she’s gone off now to do it. I don’t envy her!”

“They’ll be horrified at the bare idea,” Miss Norton said.

“At first, no doubt. But they have to learn to think of others besides themselves and Peggy and that crowd know it. If they do agree, I think we’ll waive lectures for the rest of the term and let them have the time for rehearsing. Julie”—she turned to Mdlle Berné—“you’ll have to give them a hand with the dresses; they’re probably making the lot themselves, but what would do for us won’t do for a semi-public show.”

“Tu parles vraiment. Ce sera un grand plaisir!” Mdlle said.

So it was settled; and after the staff party had broken up, the Head went down to the Saal where they were all sitting, sewing industriously, to find out what they proposed to do.

“Do you mean we *must* do it, Miss Wilson?” Anthea asked doubtfully. “We only got it up for ourselves and—well—will it be good enough for strangers? We—we’ve even *written* the thing!”

“That, I can’t tell you. If we cut out lectures and give you the time for rehearsals instead, do you think you could polish it sufficiently for that? I’d like to help those poor folk if we

could. Life is often very dull for them up there.”

“We could make a bit more of it,” Peggy said, “but—well, if you want to know, *I* did most of the writing!” She wound up on such a note of desperation that it took Miss Wilson all her time to keep a straight face.

“No reason why it shouldn’t be quite good, even so. We’ve done lots of Jo’s plays written when she was no older than you. Suppose you let me have the script and I’ll run through it and tell you what I think?”

They leapt at that. Peggy scuttled off to her cubicle for her copy, and while she was gone the Head repeated her proposal that the staff should help with dresses, scenery and anything else they could.

Dickie—whose sewing was of the most utilitarian nature so that she had been struggling with the coverings for the horse while the rest stitched on butter muslin and other frailer fabrics—looked hugely relieved, and Edna, who could hardly sew at all and had been relegated to pinning up lengths for the rest to stitch, dropped her work and clapped.

Peggy came back with the play to find them all eagerly discussing what they could do with so much extra help, and when she had handed the exercise-books over to the Head, that lady went off feeling fairly certain that the poor invalids up at Mahlhausen would get their pantomime if the script was in the least possible.

She returned it after Kaffee und Kuchen, having spent a most hilarious afternoon with it, and told them that she thought it would do very well indeed.

“You can have the time for rehearsals,” she said. “We won’t help you there as we’d like to see it fresh on Saturday; but give us the dresses and anything else we can do and we’ll take so much off your shoulders.”

“And *that’s* something to be thankful for!” Nita said, as they sought out all their materials and heaped them together. “It’ll be too late to do much rehearsing after we’ve got through this, so I vote we turn the Saal over to the twins and their ballet troupe and let them get on with it while the rest of us practise the songs.”

“Oh, oui!” Ghiselaine looked highly delighted at this. “Take away all those things and you stay, fairies, for the first ballet. It is now necessary that we practise very hard.”

The rest hurriedly gathered up their piles and fled, and all the fairies, including the wicked one, remained behind. Elma knew nothing about ballet dancing and was, in any case, far too tall to make a successful dancer, since the average height is about five foot to five foot two and she towered a good six inches above that. But Ghiselaine had contrived some very effective miming and graceful movements for her. The horse also stayed, since that part was all movements and funny ones at that. However, as Anthea had once said, seeing who was doing it, they had no need to worry about *that*!

Thereafter, the girls were hard at it, doing their best to polish up what had been merely a very fair performance before, while the staff sat about sewing whenever they had a spare moment. Luckily, Matron offered the loan of her sewing-machine and that lightened their labours considerably. One fairy dress had been finished and could be used as a pattern. The girls had clubbed together to buy yards of butter muslin and then dyed it to suit themselves. The court dresses were of fine hessian dyed and a dozen pairs of cream casement curtains that Peggy had persuaded her father to send them. Her mother had intended using them as dust-sheets, but she never got them back, Peggy calmly presenting them to the school to form a nucleus, with the floating fairy robes, for an acting cupboard. Sheets of tissue paper and rolls of crepe had to be turned into artificial flowers, and here Mdlle’s French fingers proved

invaluable. As for jewellery and regalia, they had saved every scrap of chocolate paper they could find and written home for all the glass beads that could be spared. These sewn on to the cardboard crowns gave a good effect, and when the Queen's train, made from an old green velvet portière, had been bordered with glittering glass beads and cotton-wool ermine, the result was regal!

"What are you doing about wings?" the Head asked Anthea, having learned that she was producer.

"Only two sets needed—but they'll be teasers!" Anthea returned. "Most of the fairies are just having loose draperies to match their dresses hanging from their shoulders and attached to their wrists with elastic. But we want a pair of bat's wings for the bad fairy and something rather special for the Queen. We haven't solved that problem at all. Can you suggest anything?"

Miss Wilson wrinkled up her brows in deep thought. However, she had not been at the Chalet School and helped to make bricks without straw all these years for nothing.

"I've got a yellow plastic raincoat that has one sleeve badly torn. You might manage your bat's wings out of that," she said finally. "I should use a light cane framework for them if I were you. As for the Queen, you had better make her like the rest, but sew silver stars all over hers and give her a crown of stars."

"Saved!" Anthea exclaimed dramatically. "That really *was* a headache, but you've solved the problem beautifully, Miss Wilson! I'll tell the rest at once. Thanks a lot!"

The Head gave her a quizzical look, but forbore to remind her that those were hardly the terms with which to address your head mistress. Instead, she suggested that she should go and ask someone to begin making the stars out of drawing paper at once and left Anthea to go and tell the rest.

They were delighted when they heard and Nell was moved to propose a vote of thanks to the Head for solving their final difficulties. The staff heard them cheering, but had no idea what it was about until much later. Finally, Saturday came and the girls occupied the salon, which was the largest room in the house, and proceeded to set their stage. They had decided to range the audience round three walls, leaving the wall with the two doors in it for the back of the stage. For wings, they had commandeered Karen's two mighty clothes-horses which stood seven feet high and had three leaves each. Curtains were hung over them, and with a few adornments they answered quite well. One of the men from Lauterbach had been called in, and he had rigged up curtains for them and also put in various screws, rollers and pulleys so that they could run the back drops they needed for some of the scenes through them and let them down like blinds.

"And for pity's sake, whoever does it, mind that you don't get them mixed up and let the wrong one down!" Dickie warned the rest as they assembled on their stage that evening to wait until the audience should all have arrived. "The first is Batwing's home. Then comes the tower room. Last you have Prince Oriole's digs—though what *any* prince was doing in digs with a landlady like Mrs. Graball I just wouldn't know! Most unroyal, I call it!"

"I expect there was a bad housing shortage in his country, and he does say he can't get round his castle for painters and paperhangers and tapestry workers and all the rest!" Pat retorted.

"Taisez-vous, all of you! Bill and Nally have just come in and they're the last!" hissed Peggy, who had been standing with one eye glued to a crack in the curtains.

Anthea rose to the occasion and became very much the producer. “Clear the stage, Fairies! You aren’t on in this. Queen, get to your throne and for goodness’ sake remember your train when you leave it. You nearly had the thing over last night! Is that cradle in place? Squat down by it, Nurse. Courtiers, take your places. Fairies—*Fairies!* I told you to clear the stage! *Scram!* O.K., Daph; you can strike up in a sec. Just let me get to my throne. Peggy and Nell, be ready with those curtains! *Now!*”

Daphne at the piano crashed into the first chords of the opening chorus—they had to take it in turns to manage the accompaniments and the curtains—and Peggy and Nell, not on in the first scene, laid hold on their cords and hauled with a will. The curtains swung apart and up, and the assembled company, together with those offstage who were huddled round the doors, broke into song.

Chapter Nineteen

“THE SLEEPING BEAUTY”

On the Sunday, a picked number went up to Mahlhausen to inspect the hall in which the repeat of the pantomime was to be given. Saturday night's show had been a huge success. The audience had been especially delighted with the singing and the ballet and had laughed until they literally cried over the antics of the horse and its groom, Tlot-Tlot, played by Edna of all people and very adequately played, too.

“I wouldn't have believed she had it in her!” Miss Wilson had quavered after a scene in which the horse remained blatantly and obstinately stupid, and Tlot-Tlot, from beginning in coaxing tones, had rapidly risen to a crescendo that threatened to burst off his buttons. In fact Ripalong, the horse, earned a special round of applause all to himself and showed his appreciation by stamping one foot after the other as rapidly as he could.

The fairy ballets were charming and it was amazing how much the French twins had done with the girls considering that, besides themselves, there were only three others who had had any kind of ballet training at all. The Court had provided a stately minuet, and a gay gavotte which was later burlesqued by Mrs. Graball, Prince Oriole's landlady, Mynsabeer the Court butler, Eliza-Jane-Ann the cook at the palace, and Tlot-Tlot.

The salon had had its shortcomings, however, and the drama committee were thrilled to see that at Mahlhausen they had a proper stage with well-hung curtains and arrangements for backdrops—Dickie had nearly brained the landlady on Friday night by letting down Prince Oriole's room too soon—and there were flats for the wings which gave windows for the courtiers to look out at appropriate intervals. Better still, the village had a tiny orchestra of its own which volunteered to provide the music, an offer instantly and ecstatically accepted by all concerned since their own arrangements had had a good many drawbacks, no matter how carefully they had sandwiched things. As a final glory there were footlights and limes, handled by an enthusiastic youth who was in Switzerland more as a precaution than for any sad reason and who found time hang heavily on his hands.

Lady Aldis had suggested that the performers should come up on the early morning train. All their meals would be provided, and as they must begin early, partly for their own sakes but mainly for the sakes of the sick folk who were to see them, Miss Wilson agreed. Packing would be Tuesday's work and the girls could sleep late and go to bed early, for they were off on Wednesday.

By ten o'clock the school was in the hall, which had been built through the subscriptions of a few wealthy people whose relations had benefited by the treatment at Mahlhausen, and by noon the stage had been set for the Palace banquetting hall; the backdrops were all in position with men who helped on these occasions to take over; and Anthea and the electrician had gone into a huddle over Peggy's script and the lighting charts.

While this was going on, the twins and their ballet troupe were rehearsing with the orchestra. The songs and other dances would be all right, Ghislaine had said, but the orchestra must know what they were doing for the fairy dances. The rest were unpacking their dresses, shaking them out and hanging them up in the tiny dressing-rooms behind the stage.

They had done without a prompter on the Saturday, anyone needing such help getting her cue from whoever was nearest. It should be said here that this happened only three times, for

the girls had made very sure of their lines. To-night, Miss Norton, armed with the script, sat on a chair in the wings. Miss Nalder and Matron had volunteered for stage managers and Gillian Culver and Mdlle would be the dressers. All this made things much easier for the actors, who had to think of the play only.

Promptly at six, the orchestra, which had just finished Handel's *Water Music* and received great applause, swung into *The Campbells are Comin'*, to which air Peggy had written her opening chorus, and the curtain rose on a charming scene with the King and Queen on their thrones, the baby's cradle standing down right with Mrs. Cossetum, the royal nurse, rocking it and peeping in every now and then at the baby, and the courtiers, brave in their brightly dyed dresses, grouped about. As the chorus ended, King Pomposo rose to his feet and announced with tremendous dignity and all the long words Peggy could cram in, that his daughter was to be christened on the following Friday so that his people could make a long week-end of it.

Up bobbed the cook, complete with frying-pan in one hand and saucepan lid in the other, to complain that it wouldn't be lucky. Friday never *was* lucky for beginning anything! It was a shame, so it was, to give the little dear an unlucky send-off! The King thundered at her in his best and most Johnsonian periods, and she kept putting in, "Eh?—What d'yer say?—Don't understand!—What's that?" varied by an occasional, "Ee my! Just 'ark at 'im?—That's wot eddication does for yer!—Ain't it grand ter 'ear 'im?—Yer *don't* say!" Barbara enjoyed herself thoroughly until, exasperated, he bounced down from his throne and the pair of them stood dead centre, arguing until Eliza-Jane-Ann finally ended it by clashing frying-pan and lid together, rather as if they were a pair of cymbals, and saying, "Well, 'ave it yer own way—but don't say I 'aven't warned yer!" before she scuttled off, hustled out by Mynsabeer, the Court butler.

By the time the audience had finished shouting over this spirited affair, the King was back on his throne and Queen Belidiote was saying plaintively to her spouse: "Well, my dear, I don't wonder the poor woman couldn't understand you. Quite often I can't make head or tail of what you mean myself! I can't think *why* you've taken to talking in this grand manner of yours lately. I'm sure when you proposed to me you did it as simply as possible. Just, 'Shall us?' and I said, 'Let's!' and we *did!*'"

Renewed shrieks from the audience at this pathetic reminiscence!

After a little more dialogue on the same lines, in which both King and Queen lived up to their names, the Duke of Blarney, the Lord Chancellor, suggested that perhaps, as time was passing and they only knew the *date* of the christening, it might be as well to make out the lists of the guests so that the Lord Chancellor could send out the invitations.

The list provided for a fine variety of wrangling, but at last it was decided that *all* the fairies were to be invited. And that was where the Queen dug her toes in and said that if they asked that horrid old Batwing to come to the feast, *she* shouldn't be there—and neither should her daughter!

The King, the Lord Chancellor, Major-General Sir Timothy Dottim-Wunn, the commander-in-chief of the royal forces, all united in trying to persuade her Majesty to give way, but she held firm. Finally, the palace clock put an end to the argument by chiming nine. They finally gave in, agreed that Batwing should be left out, and then the King invited his Court to join in a gavotte and the curtain fell on the bowing and curtsying figures in a picture as pretty as a Fragonard painting.

The first backdrop now came down to show Tlot-Tlot trying to persuade Ripalong to come out of his stall nicely as they had to take the invitations to the fairies. Ripalong blandly

ignored the suggestion and, when Tlot-Tlot tugged at his reins, turned his head over his shoulder and stamped with his hind feet. At last Tlot-Tlot got him turned round to face the audience and then tried to pull him out of his stall. Ripalong straddled his feet and Tlot-Tlot had to give it up and try the effect of talk. For five solid minutes, the audience were holding their sides and mopping their eyes as the groom repeated the crescendo effect and Ripalong listened, cocking his head from side to side, occasionally pawing slightly, and once kicking out. Then he suddenly tossed his head and ambled gently forth, when another game started with Tlot-Tlot trying to mount him and Ripalong moving on every time the groom got anywhere near him. They kept this up for another two or three minutes and finally Ripalong trotted out with Tlot-Tlot clinging to the reins and berating him the whole way.

The curtain fell, but went up again almost at once to show the same scene for Batwing's cave. A brazier with sticks and red cellophane, with a couple of torches to light it up, had a very fine effect and Batwing herself looked every inch an evil fairy. She wore mustard yellow and a pair of glittering yellow wings rose from her shoulders. Her long black hair fell loose to her waist and she wore a scowl so black that it needed no telling who she was. Beside her stood a black Imp—Mary Wormald—to whom she told the story of the deadly insult offered her by Pomposo and Belidiote in not inviting her with the rest to the christening.

The Imp sympathized with his mistress and asked what she was going to do about it. She replied that she was going to make them regret their action to their dying day. She was going; and she had a fine gift for the baby princess! Here she chuckled grimly, and the Imp, who seemed to know his mistress, asked if she wanted her horse brought. She snapped back that of course she did. Ever since the Fairy Queen had changed her own beautiful golden wings for the horrors she now had, she couldn't fly farther than two miles, as he very well knew.

The Imp fled before the storm, leaving her muttering to herself, and presently returned with the horse. For this scene, that noble animal was covered with a huge piece of sacking to hide his gay trappings. Batwing told him where he was to take her and he showed that he understood by uttering a unique noise intended for a whinny, but Dickie had started to "Hee-haw" and only just changed it in time. Then he kicked out at the Imp, who tumbled over a three-legged stool and picked himself up, complaining shrilly. Batwing told him to hold his noise and help her to mount. She climbed on the stool and got up. The audience never knew, but that was where she nearly forgot to glower, for the hinder part of the horse gasped and muttered: "Oh, lord! Stones heavier than Edna!"

However, she held on to her scowl and they clattered off as the curtain fell.

It next rose on the christening feast with Mrs. Cossetum the Nurse singing *Golden Slumbers* to the baby as she rocked the cradle. Natalie Mensch had a charming soprano and she sang the old lullaby very prettily. Then a Herald appeared, armed with a bugle on which he blew a feeble blast before announcing, "Their Majesties, King Pomposo and Queen Belidiote!"

The royal procession entered, led by the King and Queen, whose trains were borne by two little girls staying up at Mahlhausen as their mother was at the big sanatorium at the back of the village. The girls had hurriedly pressed them into service and somehow dresses had been concocted for them and they had been drilled in their duties. Gwynneth, the haughty Countess, had undertaken to see to them and she followed immediately behind the royal pair, escorted by the Lord Chancellor. The Major-General was next and then the courtiers followed two by two, followed by an array of fairies.

The Nurse stooped over the cradle and lifted out “the baby”—it was a bundle, decked in muslin and ribbons, and everyone concerned had been warned to handle it like priceless china for fear of accidents!—and brought it to the Queen, dipping in a curtsy before she laid it in its royal mother’s arms. Then she backed to the cradle which she pushed to one side.

The Queen of the Fairies now moved forward to announce that she and her sisters would dance the Dance of Joy, after which they would give their gifts. The orchestra broke into Weber’s *L’Invitation à la Valse* and the ballet began.

It was really exceedingly pretty. The twins had had the sense to keep to the simplest movements and most of what the corps de ballet had to do was move gracefully about the stage, waving their arms lightly while the twins and Gabrielle executed pirouettes, arabesques and fouettés mingled with pas de bourrées. To the wiegend movement, the twins danced a pas de deux very delightfully and thrilled the audience by executing a series of entrechats quite capably. It finished with a charming tableau, and the play was held up for quite two minutes by the applause that followed.

There was no time for encores, however, and presently the fairies danced to the left and the giving of the gifts began. Then, just as Ghiselaine had endowed Princess Fairstar with a loving heart and was tripping off to join her sisters, there was a clatter and Ripalong came gallyumphing in with Batwing on his back, uttering a whole series of malicious chuckles.

(N.B. Elma had spent all one afternoon in the music room perfecting those chuckles. Karen the cook had gone past and heard her and taken to her heels, never stopping till she reached the haven of the kitchen where, as she assured her coadjutors, she had heard the devil laughing most evilly!)

The pretty fairy group huddled together as the Queen slipped from her place to hide behind a curtain. The courtiers backed away from the wicked fairy. Only the gallant Sir Timothy Dottim-Wunn, remembering that he was a soldier, stood his ground. Batwing disposed of him by riding her horse directly at him, so that he had to move in a hurry and tripped over his sword, to fall into the arms of the ubiquitous cook who eased him to his feet with a hearty, “Wot cheer, cock! Go where yer lookin’, can’t yer?”

By the time the audience had recovered from this sally, Batwing had dismounted and was stooping over the baby in the Queen’s arms. The Queen clutched the bundle to her, causing the Head to hope anxiously that it would not come to pieces, and Batwing chuckled evilly again before she pronounced her curse.

“Listen one and listen all
While I give this child my gift.
Be it known in cot and hall
Mine, the last, no man can lift.

Princess, blessed with loving heart,
Beauty, grace and all that’s good,
Life to you so fair at start
Breaks with you in parting rude.

Fifteen years you grace this land,
Tenderest, fairest `neath its sky.
Then upon a spindle you
Prick your finger and so—DIE!”

A long, shuddering cry broke out at this dictum from monarchs, courtiers and servants. The fairies wailed to Batwing to have pity.

The evil fairy gave vent to a series of blood-curdling chuckles—there had been a good deal of excuse for Karen—and then cackling, “Too late—too late!” made for her steed. Before she reached him, however, the Fairy Queen moved forward.

“Fear not!” she said. “Batwing’s is *not* the last gift. Mine is yet to be spoken. Give me the child.”

She stooped to take it from Queen Belidiote, who nearly upset her gravity fatally by muttering as she handed the bundle over, “For heaven’s sake be careful! I can feel the thing coming to bits!”

Luckily, Gabrielle was a self-possessed young thing. She bit her lips hard as she glided to the centre of the stage, the other fairies thronging round her. Then, with a rather more strongly marked French accent than usual, she spoke her gift.

“Mine the latest gift of all.
Princess Fairstar shall not die.
In deep slumber she shall fall,
For a century will lie
Dreaming of the days to be
When a gay and gallant youth
Wakes her with the kiss of love
Given by the lips of truth.
Then, oh mortals, she shall wake
To a happy life and long;
Love and joy and beauty hers,
Laughter, gaiety and song.”

Batwing uttered a weird sound, half squawk, half screech, and hurried off, forgetting her horse as she stopped at intervals to stamp her foot and shake her clenched fists in the air. The Fairy Queen, still holding the bundle, gazed after her in triumph. Then the curtains descended—and only just in time. Between them, she and Belidiote had managed to loosen the sash that held the “baby” together and the oddments it was made up of collapsed and she and Mynsabeer, who happened to be nearest, had a scramble to gather together its component parts before the backcloth representing Mrs. Graball’s sitting-room fell.

It was turned into the Palace kitchen as quickly as possible with kitchen utensils, a table and chairs set before it. Someone hung a huge cardboard clock-face above the painted fireplace and a cardboard affair meant to be a gas cooker was set against it.

The girls had found that they must have a scene slipped in between the christening and the fifteenth birthday and had elected to introduce a sweep into the proceedings. It was played by Auriel Herbert, a thin wisp of a girl; and the young sinners had deliberately “lifted” a scene from Dorothy Sayers’ *Busman’s Honeymoon*. The result was that the audience watched, fascinated, as the sweep, after a wordy passage with the cook, stripped off his tweed coat to

display a scarlet jumper; two minutes later removed that and exhibited a blue one; took down the dignity of Mynsabeer and then peeled to a green sweater. As this went on for another five minutes, the audience rocked with delight, and the end of the scene found the sweep struggling out of a yellow jumper showing a Fair Isle beneath. Then the curtain fell and was raised again to show the banqueting hall on Princess Fairstar's fifteenth birthday. Tables piled with everything the girls could lay hands on stood round the sides, and the princess was running backwards and forwards, opening parcels and embracing the donors, while the court sang in chorus, "Fifteen to-day!"

As the chorus ended, they broke into a gay dance in which Fairstar joined. When it was over, she clasped her hands ecstatically, crying: "Oh, you dear, kind, spoiling people! How can I ever thank you for your lovely presents!"

"Sing to us, Princess," the Countess said.

"Yes; sing to us, your Highness. No one else in the land has a voice to compare with yours!" the Duke of Blarney added. "Sure the very birds themselves have to be silent when you sing, for shame that you can outdo them every time."

Princess Fairstar laughed and scolded his flattery. Then she sang to the tune of "Lilliburlero" *T'is is My Birthday!* with the entire chorus joining in the refrain. Peggy owned a charming mezzo-soprano and the gay tune went with a swing that brought her a round of applause.

After that, the Princess skipped away to thank the palace servants for their gifts, followed by most of the courtiers. The King and Queen, left alone, discussed the fact that this was the fateful birthday. The King had banished all spinning wheels and spindles from the realm and made it an offence punishable by death for anyone either to make or bring them into the country.

At this point, the Queen mourned the fact that all materials had to be imported now and the King retorted that he knew it all too well! Import duties on cottons and woollens were prohibitive, and as for silks and velvets, they were out of the question nowadays! And whose fault was it? The Queen's! She needn't think she could have any new dresses yet, either, for the gold and dollar reserves were almost at an end!

"Can't we borrow from someone?" the Queen asked.

"No, we can't! I've borrowed every ha'penny I can and goodness knows I've nothing left to offer as security!" the King retorted.

She told him that he wasn't a man of business, and then the orchestra glided into the old air *Oh, No, John* and they sang a quarrelling duet in which the King lamented that he had ever given in to his spouse's fad and she said that no one who said her face might pass with a shove, but the less said about her feet the better! was coming to any festivity *she* had to do with!

The courtiers, who had returned, took it up, and then Fairstar came dancing in to insist on all playing Hide and Seek with the King for "He". They all ran off, singing "*Boys and Girls Come Out to Play*" as they went. Curtain!

The next scene was the room in the tower with Batwing spinning and holding a real spindle borrowed from someone at Lauterbach. Fairstar came running in to hide. She saw the old crone and began to chat and ask about the wheel and spindle. Batwing offered to show her and Fairstar took the spindle and then dropped, to the tune of Batwing's horrid chuckles, just as the King burst in to catch his daughter. The scene was blacked out and Batwing scuttled off while the men raised the backdrop, and when the lights were switched on again it was to show

the King standing in the banqueting hall, Fairstar lying limply in his arms, the Queen weeping at his side and the courtiers crowding round, singing a dirge to the *Londonderry Air*.

As it ended, the cook arrived, took one look at her royal master and said: "I told yer so! Didn't I warn yer Friday was unlucky fer the christenin'? Now you 'ave done it! 'Ere! Yer'll be droppin' 'er! Take and lay her down! Some of you howlers push that couch along 'ere and look sharp, too!"

The couch was pushed into place by the Chancellor and the Major-General, and the King thankfully laid his daughter on it. He had been within an ace of dropping her. Anthea was tall and strong and Peggy was very slight; but seven stones of dead weight is a good deal to hold for more than a minute or two.

It was at this point that the Major-General suddenly exclaimed: "Didn't that lady say she was to sleep for a hundred years? Good heavens! When she wakes up again, *we'll* all be dead!"

The music of Saint-Saën's *Dying Swan* stole out and the Fairy Queen appeared to tell them that the whole kingdom would also fall asleep, and when the Prince whose kiss would waken Fairstar arrived, they, too, would awaken.

The practical Sir Timothy asked what was going to happen to the country during the century. Anyone could just walk in and take it at *that* rate!

The Queen replied that the mountains would rise round it and the briar roses would trail their sweet-scented thorny sprays everywhere and only the right Prince would be able to scale the heights and cut his way through the thickets. Then she sang a summons to her fairies and they danced in with long sprays of wild roses while the court sank to sleep just as they were—the King and Queen on their thrones; the general standing to attention with a hand on his sword-hilt; the cook and all the other servants with brushes and dustpans and a rolling-pin and—this was Mynsabeer—a pewter pot half-way to his mouth; the courtiers in pairs and groups and the countess grabbing at the kitchen-maid to haul her back from the couch where Fairstar lay asleep. The *Dying Swan* whispered out as the fairies moved hither and thither, strewing their rose sprays over all, and the curtain slowly and softly fell.

When the curtain rose again, it was on a frankly funny scene between Prince Oriole, his landlady and a neighbour, in which it transpired that the Prince's castle was being done up for the coming of his bride, who was to be the legendary sleeping princess in the country beyond the mountains. His godmother had told him so, and he was just about to set off with Chick his page and Ripalong his horse. The argument which followed, in which the two ladies tried to stop him and Chick, who popped in and out and who sauced everyone impartially, reduced the audience to helpless mirth.

When Chick suddenly arrived with Ripalong, despite the shrieks and protests of the landlady and her friend, and Ripalong stretched out his neck and removed the friend's hat from her head—the mouth had been made of two pieces of cane over which the brown stuff which represented his coat had been stretched, and it was easy for Dickie to pull the strings attached and remove the hat—Lady Aldis, sitting beside the Head, moaned with a hand to her side: "O-oh! I ca-an't laugh any more! I've got *such* a stitch!"

Eventually, Prince Oriole mounted his ungainly steed after removing the hat from its mouth and returning it to its owner with a courtly bow and, accompanied by Chick, set off on his mission. Mrs. Graball and her neighbour fluttered dish-towels after them, singing a most mournful duet as they did so.

The final scene took place in the banqueting hall again. The curtain rose to show it as it had last been. The King and Queen leaned their heads together and the King snored loudly. Fairstar rested against her cushions with her long curly hair carefully swept down over the side of the couch, and Batwing standing behind scowling down awfully at her. The electrician used blue limes for this, giving it an eerie look that was remarkable. Suddenly the joyous music of an old song, *Summer is Here*, pealed out and the fairies came dancing in, led by their Queen. As they danced they sang the words of the song, which Peggy had dug out of a collection of her mother's during the last holiday and wired for frantically to her father when the pantomime was first mooted. They also gathered up the wild rose sprays. The Queen advanced on Batwing, who glared at her and told her that this was the end of her power and the end of her fairyhood. The Prince was at hand, the spell would be broken. Henceforth, Batwing would become a toad and a toad she would remain unless she truly repented of all her evil doings.

At this awful pronouncement, Batwing shrieked, but the other fairies mobbed her, hiding her from sight for about twenty seconds. When they swung back she had vanished, and in her place there squatted a monster toad! Elma had been standing with the hind-legs of the dress already pulled up under her own yellow robes, and all the fairies had to do as she stooped among them was to drag it up over her head and draw up the zipper at the back. The rather dim blue lighting helped enormously and the audience were deeply impressed. Then, driven out by the good fairies, she slowly hopped off, and at the same moment the limes changed to amber and pink, the orchestra broke into *See the Conquering Hero Comes*, and the Prince gallumphed solemnly in on Rivalong. The fairies took charge of the horse when he dismounted and the Fairy Queen, with the words, "Here lies your bride, my godson!" led him to the couch and then drew back.

Kneeling on one knee, he gravely lifted a hand to his lips. Then he stood up, bent over his wakening bride, and raised her.

Fairstar gazed up into his face. "My Prince!" she said.

"My promised bride!" he responded.

And then the court woke. The maids began to use their brooms; the courtier who had been about to kiss his lady did so—resoundingly; Mynsabeer drained his pewter pot; the King and Queen yawned, stretched, rubbed their eyes, and sat up. In short, everything went on from just where it had left off. And from behind the scenes came the joyous pealing of—dinner-bells! It was the best they could manage in the circumstances and, as Dickie said later, if people hadn't enough imagination to translate the sound into church-bells, well, it was just too bad for them!

Oriole raised his bride to her feet and they kissed. Everyone cheered and the horse wagged a front leg violently. The Prince led his bride up to her parents and they knelt for the blessing. Then the fairies glided into their final ballet, and danced gaily to Chopin music.

It ended with a grand march of everyone but the royalties. The King and Queen remained seated with the young pair standing hand in hand at the foot of the dais on which the thrones had been put, and the rest—including Batwing, who had got rid of her toad's case—marched round the stage in pairs, formed fours up to the thrones, and then stood with arms raised in a triumphal salute to Oriole and Fairstar while they all sang the final chorus.

"It's been a jolly good term for the very first, hasn't it?" Peggy Bettany said, on the station platform at Interlaken on the Wednesday morning when they were waiting for the Basle train.

A whole chorus of voices agreed with her.

“It’s meant a lot to me,” Elma said soberly.

“Me, too!” This was Edna. “I love school now! And next term Nally says we’ll get lots more fun with ski-ing and so on!”

The train came hurtling in and they were hustled up the steps and into their carriage by Miss Nalder and Miss Norton, who were to escort them to England. The Head, her secretary and Matron would not leave until the end of the week. They stood on the platform, waving good-bye as the train pulled out. When it was gone, they made for their favourite coffee shop to seek refreshment.

“Well,” said Gillian Culver, as she stirred her steaming chocolate, “what about it, Bill? Have we made a go of it?”

The Head gave her a twinkling smile. “We’ve made a beginning anyhow. There have been difficulties, of course; but, on the whole, I think we can truthfully say that we’ve started on the right road and the Chalet School in the Oberland will be a real credit to *the* Chalet School!”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
Inconsistency in accents has been retained.

[The end of *Chalet School in the Oberland* by Elinor Mary Brent-Dyer]