

A HOLIDAY QUEEN



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Some of the band began to appear.

A HOLIDAY
QUEEN

BY
E. J. OXENHAM

COLLINS
LONDON AND GLASGOW

TO
THE MEMBERS
OF
QUEEN LEXA'S
CHINESE MEETING

PRINTED AND MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN
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CHAPTER I

QUEEN LEXA'S KINGDOM

‘“If not yourself, who would you be?”’ asked Lexa, quoting from the confession-book.

‘Dear me! I’m sure I don’t know. What an extraordinary child you are, Lexa!’ and her grandfather gazed at her over his newspaper.

Lexa did not like being called an extraordinary child, but one had to put up with Grandpa. So she continued:

‘I’ve been thinking about it. I’d like to be somebody who was chief over every one else—like the captain of a pirate ship, you know, or the chief of a band of robbers; or I wouldn’t mind being the Sultan, or the Tsar, or the Kaiser; or, if I couldn’t quite manage that, I’d like to be head girl in a big school, and order all the others about. I’d do it quite nicely, of course, but I would like being head! I’d be a very good Queen, but I would like to *be* a Queen!’

‘Authority over others entails certain responsibilities, and should be accompanied by superiority over those in subjection,’ said Mr Stewart didactically.

Lexa did not know what that meant, so she passed it by, and remarked:

‘Robin Hood must have had a jolly time! Rob Roy, too! . . . It’s so dull to do lessons with a governess, and have no friends but two silly old dogs!’

She was curled up in the window seat with a book, her fox-terriers asleep at her feet. Presently the maid announced, ‘Dr Black to see you, sir!’ and Lexa gave up her dreams of authority and buried herself in her book again.

‘Why, Doctor,’ Mr Stewart was saying, ‘to what do I owe this pleasure? Lexa is all right again, isn’t she?’

‘Well, now, it is chiefly on her account I’ve come in to-night. I’ve been wanting a chat with you about her. She is fairly well again, but this attack of scarlet fever has left her in a delicate state. She is growing too fast—she’s too tall for a girl of thirteen—and it would not take much to knock her up again. Why do you keep her here? Glasgow isn’t the place for her just now. She ought to live in the open air for a time. Why don’t you send her into the country?’

‘But I don’t like the country!’ the old gentleman objected. ‘All my friends are in town, and I should not know what to do with myself in the country. The child goes for a walk with her governess every day, and she has the garden. Isn’t that enough?’

‘Is the garden big enough for tennis?’

‘Not quite, I believe!’

‘And a walk, I suppose, means a stroll along the streets! And in the house she spends her time over books and needlework——’

‘Not much needlework that ever I see!’ chuckled the old gentleman. ‘Story-books—yes!’

‘You’ll have her ill again if you aren’t careful. Education is all very well, but——’

‘She has just had a fortnight at Crieff!’

‘At the Hydro?’

‘Well, yes! But she seemed to enjoy it.’

‘Bah! A fortnight! She wants to live in the open air for the next few months. This is April. Send her to the coast till the end of September. Let her sail, and walk, and cycle, and swim,

and climb, and anything else she likes, and by the autumn she'll be ready to begin work again.'

There was a movement behind the window curtain, as Lexa laid down her book, but her grandfather had forgotten her, and the doctor did not know she was there.

'If I'm not mistaken,' he continued, 'her parents would sooner find her well and strong when they come home than well advanced and delicate. That place down the water, Morven, belongs to you, doesn't it?'

'Yes, but the house has been shut up for some time. My son used to live there, but I never cared for it for long at a time, so after he left home we came to Glasgow.'

'The very place for Miss Lexa! Send her there, forbid her to open even a story-book except on wet days, give her season tickets for the steamers, and see that she spends all her time on the water or on the hills, and in a month——'

'How—simply—splendid!' and Lexa sprang out from behind the curtain, the dogs at her heels. 'Doctor, I thought you were horrid when you stuck a spoon down my throat, but you're just the nicest man I know—except two! And one of them is you, Grandpa! It will be splendid! How soon can we go?'

So it came about that trunks were packed, messages sent, and one morning in May Lexa and her grandfather, and Miss Sparrow, stood on the steamer on their way to the big house among the hills, called Morven.

Mr Stewart settled himself in a sheltered seat with the morning paper. Lexa and Miss Sparrow left him there, and went to stand in front of the funnel, where they could look ahead.

Miss Sparrow was not a governess. That was understood from the beginning. For Lexa had protested against being sent away in charge of the lady with whom she had studied all winter, and had insisted that a governess could not be a suitable companion for holidays. So Mr Stewart, agreeing, had suggested that the worthy, but middle-aged, lady should take a few months' rest, and after some enquiries had presented Miss Sparrow to Lexa, to her instant satisfaction.

Miss Sparrow was the daughter of an old friend, and he could trust Lexa in her hands. And Lexa, looking for some one who would be a help and not a hindrance in her many plans for enjoyment, had accepted her at once as just what she wanted.

Miss Sparrow was small and plump, not very much taller than Lexa herself. Her hair was brown and curly, and her eyes were bright and full of laughter. She was quick and eager in her movements, and looked as if she would be ready for anything at any time. Lexa, with many hopes in her mind for the summer months, hailed her at sight as a kindred spirit, and instantly forgot that Miss Sparrow was supposed to be in charge of her. From the first, she acted rather as if she were in charge of Miss Sparrow, and that wise young lady accepted the position, but waited watchfully for the time when she would have to take command.

Of course, her name was not Miss Sparrow. But during their first afternoon together, Lexa had declared her intention of calling her that and nothing else, saying she looked like it somehow, and Miss Sparrow had laughed and consented.

'Call me anything you like, if it will make us better friends, Lexa.'

'I'm sure it will. But if you ever call me Alexina we'll quarrel.'

'I thought perhaps it was Alexandra.'

'I only wish it was,' groaned Alexina. 'They called me after my grandfather, and I don't think it was kind.'

'We'll forget Alexina,' laughed Miss Sparrow.

‘Yes, do, please! I’ve forgotten your proper name already.’

‘Oh, please don’t forget it altogether!—because of my letters, you know!’

Lexa thought it a good omen that Miss Sparrow was willing to stand in front of the funnel. So many people—including Mr Stewart—considered it necessary to sit in a sheltered seat all the time they were on the steamer, and that was not her idea of enjoyment at all.

‘I like to feel the wind, and to see where we’re going,’ said Miss Sparrow.

‘So do I. I love it. And I’m going to like *you*,’ Lexa said, with conviction.

Miss Sparrow wore a round tweed hat, the exact shade of her brown hair, and a neat little fur coat, belted at the waist—no big hat to be held on, or scarf or loose cape to flap about.

‘I like sailing, don’t you?’ said she, and Lexa agreed fervently.

‘I love it! Doesn’t the sea smell good! We used to live at Morven, you know, till daddy and mother went away, and we had a yacht and sailed all the time. He’s a sailor, so of course——’

‘Let’s walk about,’ said Miss Sparrow, and put her hands in her pockets and tramped up and down to keep warm.—‘Yes, Mr Stewart told me. He loves the sea, doesn’t he?’

‘He’s always happiest when he’s sailing. They’re exploring just now,’ and Lexa looked grave for a moment.

‘Aren’t the hills wonderful to-day? See the lochs opening out as we get near,’ said Miss Sparrow, and they hung over the railing together, drinking in the strong fresh air blowing up from the sea, and gazing, with wide-open eyes that smarted with the wind, at the picture before them.

Low green hills on the left, greater hills and distant blue mountains on the right; the river opening out like a great lake; ships coming up from the sea; the high blue peaks of Arran, and the low dark ridge of Bute, rising like a wall to shut the sea-door and keep out the ocean—these were their first picture. Then the hills fell apart, and gleaming arms of water ran up towards the mountains which ringed the heads of the lochs, and Lexa, leaning over the side, pointed eagerly forward.

‘Morven is in there—among all those trees—up at the head, where the hills are. We’re nearly there now.’

A landeau was waiting by the little pier, and a man whose long gray beard made him look old, while his upright bearing made him seem still young, stood by the toll gate to greet them.

‘All well, Mac?’ asked Mr Stewart.

‘All well, sir,’ said Mac briefly, his eyes on Lexa.

‘I suppose our things arrived safely yesterday?’

‘They did, sir! And will this be the Captain’s lassie? I’d scarce ha’ known her, she’s that big.’

‘She has grown, hasn’t she? But you’d expect that in three years. You and Grannie must put some colour into her face, Mac.’

‘We will, sir! We’ll do our best.’

‘Lexa, this is Mr MacTaggart, who will take you out driving and sailing. You have forgotten him, but you used to know him very well. You’ll soon make friends again, I know. He and Mrsing to take care of you and Miss—Sparrow!’ with a smiling glance at her. ‘Now jump in, and we’ll get home.’

‘We will, sir!’ and Mr MacTaggart swung up into his seat and cracked his whip and called to the horses.

Lexa called up the dogs, who had been very unhappy on the boat, but were now rejoicing in their freedom, and they followed, barking at the horses and making frequent excursions into

the woods after rabbits. It was all so very different from Glasgow that they did not yet realise the good time before them, but they knew it was their duty to chase rabbits, so they did their best.

The road ran up towards the hills at the head of the loch, across a little plain where a river wandered through the meadows, and skirting the foot of a great ridge clothed almost to the summit with pines and firs and larch.

‘What beautiful trees!’ said Miss Sparrow. ‘Don’t you like pines, Lexa? They’re so clean and dry——’

‘And spikey. I love them!’ Lexa said enthusiastically. ‘Aren’t there a lot of them here?’

They covered every hill and slope with a rich dark garment, thickly strewn with emerald where the delicate fresh green of the young larches rose among the gloomy ancients. The road through the woods was smooth and white and broad, and very lonely, and once, as they turned a sharp corner, Lexa caught sight of a rabbit family scuttling across the path in front. It was all very trim and neat, and among the firs by the side of the road were many rare shrubs and trees, for these were the Morven grounds, and Mr Stewart was very proud of his trees. As they drove along, he kept calling Miss Sparrow’s attention to particular favourites and rare specimens, many of them brought from abroad by Lexa’s father.

Beyond the plain there rose the clustering hills at the head of the loch, many of them quite worthy of the name of mountain, all covered on their lower slopes by the dark, blue-green mantle of the pines, but bare rock above, thinly covered with grass and brown heather. One round hill stood out before the others, and among the trees at its base were the gray towers of a big house. Lexa pointed to them eagerly.

‘That’s Morven! Oh, I *am* so glad to see it again—dear old place!’

In a clearing in the woods lay the home-farm, a group of white houses and barns and stacks. Then the carriage drew up before big iron gates, and Mr MacTaggart whistled to his grandchildren to come and let them in.

Janet, the eldest, opened the gates, and they all stood holding them wide and gazing after the carriage. Lexa threw a bag of sweets she had bought on the steamer, and one small boy, little Jim, caught it, and responded with a shy smile. Janet held up four-year-old Baby Joe, and John and Joanna smiled shyly also and waved their hands. Then the trees hid them from sight, and she turned to look eagerly forward up the white avenue between the walls of pines.

Mrs MacTaggart—Granny Mac—stood at the open door to greet them. She was a dear old lady, with curly gray hair under a little white cap, and her face was all smiles of welcome, and broke into radiant delight when Lexa sprang from the carriage and ran to her, crying:

‘Dear Granny Mac, I haven’t forgotten *you*, anyway! I remember you quite well, and I am so pleased to see you again!’

It was a big stone house, with long straight windows, and towers and turrets and battlements like a castle. Lawns and gardens stretched out on every side, and the fir wood enclosed these like a wall.

Inside the house, all was arranged for comfort, for there was much bad weather among the hills, and dwellers at Morven had to be prepared to spend much time indoors. So the larder was always well stocked, and the library full of books.

In the entrance hall a wood fire was roaring on the wide hearth to greet the travellers. On the walls hung curios from all over the world, and below these were ranged many fine specimens of stuffed animals—among them a Polar bear, some Eskimo dogs, and a walrus.

But Lexa never glanced at these, but hurried into the dining-room, saying, 'There's something here I want to see. Come, and I'll show you, too, Miss Sparrow.'

On each side of the hearth hung a portrait. One was of a big sunburnt man, the other, a lady, with a baby girl in her lap. These last were very much alike, in their red-gold hair, blue eyes, and clear fair skin, and with Lexa standing looking up at them, there could be no doubt as to who they were.

She gazed at the pictures for a time, then turned away with a sigh.

'The portraits we have in Glasgow aren't nearly so good as these. I've been longing to see them again. Now I'm here I shall look at them every day. I do wish Father and Mother would come home! It seems ages since they went, though it's only three years.'

'You and I, who are left at home, must just have patience, Lexa,' said Mr Stewart.

After dinner, while Miss Sparrow unpacked, and her grandfather had a nap, Lexa went down to the kitchen for a chat with Granny Mac. She learned that the children at the gate were Granny's son's children, and that they lived in the lodge with their mother. Their father had sailed away with Captain Stewart three years before. Mr Mac and Granny lived in the big house, and were to remain there to take care of Lexa and Miss Sparrow, for Mr Stewart was returning to Glasgow immediately.

Then Mr Stewart called her, and led her upstairs, and still farther up, till they reached the top of the house. Here a flight of narrow iron steps led to a trap-door, and through this they reached the flat roof of a tower, and stood by the parapet.

'Now, Queen Lexa,' said the old gentleman, when he had recovered from the climb, 'here is your kingdom! This is your castle. I'm going away in two days, and you shall have it all to yourself, but make room in it for Miss Sparrow! Mr MacTaggart will do whatever you like, provided it's nothing dangerous. Be out as much as you can, and as the weather will allow. Here are tickets for the steamers. Go sailing as much as you like. That little yacht anchored off the river is yours, but you are never to go out in her without Mr Mac. Your bicycle is downstairs. So is the pony trap. Get brown and strong, and don't attempt anything too adventurous. Enjoy yourself thoroughly, and play at being Queen to your heart's content.'

Such a kingdom! Hills and mountains everywhere, pine woods covering every valley and glen. In front, the shining arm of the sea by which they had come, with hills rising from the water on each side, and hurrying steamers and idle yachts and brown-sailed fishing-boats. Behind, among the mountains, the gleam of water again, where a lonely loch invited to picnics and solitary rambles. Hills to climb, woods to ramble in, the shores of loch and river to explore, mysterious glens buried among the trees, streams and waterfalls to be discovered, and all uninhabited, except by sheep and rabbits and a few cottage folk—what more could even a Queen want?

'It's perfect!' said Lexa, with a long breath of delight and anticipation. 'And I'm going to have a splendid time! Can't you stop and enjoy it too, Grandpa?'

'No, dear, I must get back. Besides, I wouldn't enjoy it as I hope you will do. Have a good time, and get strong and well, and I will be satisfied.'

'I will, sir!' said Lexa, in imitation of Mr MacTaggart. 'Grandfather,' she said, with conviction, 'I'm going to have a perfectly lovely time!'

CHAPTER II

QUEEN LEXA AND JANET

For a while, Queen Lexa found her kingdom perfect.

Miss Sparrow proved as good a companion as she had hoped. She never confessed to being tired, she preferred the open air, and would only stay indoors when it was raining hard. She did not know the country well, and was enraptured with every fresh discovery. She was ready for walking, climbing, or sailing, and she and Lexa were out all day long.

With her, Lexa explored her kingdom, and found it beautiful, and wider even than it had seemed at first sight. On fine days, they climbed the lower hills and rambled among the woods and glens, or cycled along the coach roads, and always found some new beauty-spot to describe to Granny Mac at night. When the roads were too wet for cycling, they walked, or drove in the pony trap, and found the hills always more beautiful in showery weather, while in mist, as each giant loomed mysteriously up, veiled in cloud, they were perhaps most wonderful of all. In all these excursions the dogs were their companions, and chased rabbits and chickens and sheep, and gave their mistress constant amusement and endless trouble.

But there were days when the roads were so muddy that even driving was not pleasant, and walking was out of the question. Then the dogs were left at home, to their great distress, and Lexa and Miss Sparrow and Mr Mac went sailing. The little yacht did her duty nobly, and carried them up and down the lochs, the waves splashing on her side as she heeled before the breeze. They had many an envious look from children on steamers or on the rocks as they flitted past, crossing the loch as they tacked to catch the wind, threading their way among yachts and steamers and small boats. Then, as they rounded the point to speed away up another loch, Lexa would clutch at the side till they were in smooth water again, and Miss Sparrow, in her tweed hat and coat, would point out the new beauties before them. Mr Mac knew the name of every house and who lived in it, and could tell stories about most of them, so he was a pleasant companion, and before long they grew quite learned in the legends of the neighbourhood.

When it was too stormy for yachting, or when Mr Mac was busy, they caught the steamer at the nearest pier, and travelled more quickly and to greater distances than was possible in the yacht. Lexa was interested in every town and village along the shore, and wished to visit every loch and island. So occasionally Morven was deserted, while its Queen roamed farther afield and made friends with the captains, pursers, and sailors on the steamers.

For a while, then, Lexa was satisfied, and found her kingdom very much to her mind.

But after a few weeks, she began to find something lacking. It was still all very nice, but it was not perfect. There was something she wanted—something which had occurred to her when she first knew she was to be Queen of Morven, but which, in the interest of her new surroundings, she had forgotten.

She was a Queen without subjects. She wanted friends of her own age. She was lonely. Miss Sparrow was a delightful companion, but Lexa wanted more than that. In imagination, she saw Morven as she would like it to be, filled with boys and girls, and herself the queen of them all. That might not be possible, but surely she could have friends to share it all, and to enter into it as Granny and Mr Mac could not do? Miss Sparrow was very jolly, but she was only one. Lexa, looking from her tower over her kingdom, saw how it would lend itself to

picnics and games and sports, and enjoyment of all kinds, but for these she must have friends. She and Miss Sparrow could not do these things alone.

Of course, there were the children at the lodge. They were all devoted to her, down to Baby Joe. Jim cleaned her bicycle, and John brushed her boots. Janet, the eldest girl, was already knitting her a pair of socks, and little Joanna was struggling with some warm woollen gloves, in the hope that Miss Lexa would wear them in the winter, or when sailing.

Their homage was absolute, but as companions they were useless. They knew none of the games she would have liked, and were far too shy and deferential to play with her, though eager to please her and delighted when she made them any request.

One wet night, she asked the whole five up to tea, turned Granny and Miss Sparrow out of the room, and let no one come in but the dogs. But the evening was a dismal failure. They were all on their good behaviour, and very much in awe of their hostess. If little Joe so much as dropped a biscuit, or Joanna helped herself without being asked, Janet's elder-sisterly eye rested so severely on the culprit that he wanted to creep under the table. They were very, very good, but oh, so shy!

Lexa produced cards and proposed a game of Snap or Happy Families. But they had been taught that to play with cards was wicked, and looked blank and rather frightened, but were interested in the pictures on the cards. So she showed them how to build card-houses, and this pleased the little ones so much that she left them at it and found some picture-books to show to Janet.

The girl's eyes fairly sparkled at sight of them.

'Eh, the bonny books! May I see them, Miss Lexa? I'll be that carefu'! Jim, Jim! Look here! Did ye ever see the like?'

'Oh ay, they're bonny,' Jim said carelessly, and turned to the cards again. 'Janet's fair daft about books, ye ken,' he explained.

'We hevna the money for books, but, my!—if we had! I'm feart to touch them, Miss Lexa.'

'Oh, don't be afraid!' Lexa laughed. 'They're old ones. Grandfather gave them to me long ago.'

'My, he's a good man that! I wouldna hurt them for the world! They're rale bonny. I've no seen them wi' the picters in colours before. Gin they were mine, I'd read an' read——'

'Ay, ye'd do naething else, Janet.'

'If you would like to take this one home and read it, Janet, I'll be very glad to lend it to you. Not that one—that was a present from my mother—this one. I think you'll like it. It's a fairy-tale.'

'Oh, Miss Lexa! Oh, if I daured! But—but—I wouldna like! Some hairm might come to't.'

'Oh, that's not likely! You'll take care of it, I know. Do you like fairy-tales?'

'I never had mair nor three books in my life, an' I dinna think——'

'I don't believe you know what a fairy-tale is! You must tell me how you like it,' Lexa laughed.

'I'll do that! Oh, I'm that glad, I canna say! Gin I had a' thae books, Miss Lexa, I'd be the best lassie that ever wis,' she added quaintly.

'And you think I'm not? Thank you!——'

'Oh, Miss Lexa! As if I'd——'

‘No, I know you didn’t mean that. I was only teasing. Well, I hope you’ll like the book, Janet. John, I’ll show you something with those cards.’

She began to do a few simple conjuring tricks, and their eyes grew so round as they watched that she laughed as she wondered if they would drop out. But Janet sat buried in her book, and neither the awed silence of John and Jim, nor the shouts of Joanna and little Joe, made her look up.

After that tea-party the children’s devotion was greater than ever, and they did their best to show it in many ways. John presented her with a guinea-pig, and Jim spent a whole day in the woods, till he caught a baby squirrel and brought it to her. Janet wanted to give her a collie pup, her greatest treasure, but Lexa knew what a wrench it had cost her to offer it, and would not take it. So they sent her a family of baby rabbits instead, and when she exclaimed that she would need a house for them all, the boys cleared a room in the stables and fitted it with boxes and hutches, and Lexa was very proud of her menagerie.

She was pleased with these tokens of the children’s gratitude, but she never knew quite how grateful Janet was for the books she constantly lent her. Janet had been turning into a little old woman before her time, and was quite a second mother to Baby Joe. Lexa’s stories and fairy-tales gave her childhood a second lease of life, and brightened days of hard work with the thought of the evening rest in the new world the books had opened to her.

The boys reported that she kept the books in her mother’s drawer under her Sunday dress, wrapped, like her Bible, in clean pocket-handkerchiefs. They only appeared when all the work was done and the little ones were in bed, and Janet could be sure of a quiet corner with her knitting, for, even while she read, her fingers were never idle.

But Lexa, who had always had rather more books than were good for her, could not possibly understand how Janet had hungered for even one new story. She had read and re-read everything she could lay her hands on, and had once even begged Granny to let her come to the big house sometimes and read some of the books in the library there. But Granny had rebuked her sternly for her presumption in daring to suggest such a thing, and Janet, abashed and shy, had said no more, and had longed and hungered in silence.

Lexa’s stories and books of adventure and travel led her out into a new wonderful world, and her devotion to her little mistress was passionate and deep. And since Janet was leader of the five, they all followed her example and gave to Lexa a depth of homage and love which any Queen might have envied.

But this Queen desired more than homage. She wanted friends, and as friends or companions the little MacTaggarts were out of the question. The very intensity of their admiration made comradeship impossible.

So the Queen found her kingdom lonely, and felt the need of friends.

‘Miss Sparrow,’ she said one night, as they sat over the kitchen fire—having begged Granny’s permission to join her, because the kitchen looked so cosy—‘do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going sailing on the Kyles steamer next Saturday, and if I see any nice girls or boys I’m going to invite them here. I must have somebody to play with.’

She had planned her campaign with care, so now she was ready to consult Miss Sparrow. But Miss Sparrow—wise young lady!—had seen how matters were going, and had realised that this discontent and longing for companionship must be satisfied. So she had made her own plans, and was ready now to help and suggest so quietly that Lexa would think it was all her own idea. She had even consulted Mr Stewart, unknown to Lexa, and was ready for the emergency.

‘I don’t think I’d do that,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘You can’t always tell at first sight if people are going to turn out nice. You might make some friends and then wish you hadn’t.’

‘But what else can I do? There must be plenty of girls living quite close who’d be nice friends. Why should I be lonely? Why shouldn’t I know them? But how can I manage it?’

‘Your father and mother lived here until three years ago, didn’t they?’

‘Yes?’ queried Lexa, startled at the apparent irrelevance of this.

‘And you with them. They must have had friends here, you know, and so must you. If you could remember any of them, you could renew the friendship, and you would soon have as many companions as you want.’

‘That’s a good idea!’ Lexa said thoughtfully. ‘But I don’t think I do remember any of them! Let me see, now!’

‘There were the Hunters of Monzie,’ said Miss Sparrow casually.

‘Why, how do you know?’

‘Mr Stewart happened to mention them. And some Macdonalds, from Dunoon, and a Mrs Duncan, I think.’

‘I ken Mrs Duncan fine,’ said Granny, looking up from her knitting, ‘and Mrs Macdonald was at school with Miss Lexa’s mother. Many’s the time she’s been here. She has a fine lassie just your size, Miss Lexa.’

‘Mrs Macdonald’s lassie must be one of my friends,’ Lexa said with decision.

‘An’ d’ye mean to tell me, Miss Lexa, ye’ve forgotten the Macfarlanes of Creggandarroch? Master Jim’s played wi’ you many a day. I mind the time he pulled your hair, an’ you slapped him an’ cam’ greetin’ to me.’

‘I’m sure I never cried, Granny!’

‘Ye did that!’ smiled Granny.

‘Well, I’m glad I slapped him, anyway. I don’t think I’ll renew the acquaintance with Master Jim. He doesn’t sound very nice.’

‘He was just a laddie. Oh, you’ll meet him yet, Miss Lexa. It’s but three miles to Creggandarroch, and in his holidays you’ll surely see him about.’

‘Then I won’t look at him. If I meet a boy who looks as if his name was Jim, I’ll turn up my nose and look the other way. Those may do for a beginning, Miss Sparrow. I’ll make them bring their friends to see me, and I’ll soon have plenty.’

‘Why, how many do you want?’ laughed Miss Sparrow.

‘Well, I’ve been thinking! If these girls are nice, and if they’re willing, we might form a kind of band, or company, and have meetings here, and picnics together, and excursions, and all kinds of fun. Don’t you think it would be jolly?’

‘Very jolly, if all went well. But it would be a big undertaking, Lexa.’

‘I don’t see why! I’m sure it could be managed. But we’ll see about that later. How can I get to know these girls?’

So, next day, she and Miss Sparrow drove out in the pony trap, through the Morven woods, across the bridge over the river, and by the road round the head of the loch.

Creggandarroch, the big house mentioned by Granny, was one of the first they reached, but Lexa sturdily refused to call on the Macfarlanes.

‘He pulled my hair and I slapped him! We might begin it again. I think I can do without Master Jim,’ she said.

Shyness was not usually one of her troubles, but the ordeal of paying state calls on strangers was too much for her, and she sat very silent and demure after Miss Sparrow had

introduced her, and left the burden of explanation to her. But Mr Stewart's name, and the sight of the Morven ponies, were sufficient to assure their welcome, and Mrs Hunter of Monzie, and Mrs Macdonald and Mrs Duncan, in Dunoon, were sure their daughters would be delighted to renew the friendship of their parents.

'Nelly and Maggie will be delighted to visit you, Lexa,' smiled Mrs Hunter. 'Morven, having been shut up for so long, has always been a kind of mystery to them, and the thought of going inside its gates will excite them, I know. I'm sorry they're at school, but they go in by steamer every morning and only get home to late tea. Could you wait to see them?'

But Lexa was anxious to hurry on, so she suggested a plan of her own.

'I'm going down to Rothesay on Saturday morning. Couldn't they go too, and we'd make friends on the boat?'

That was easily arranged. She was shown a photograph of the girls, so that she should recognise them, then they took their leave, and drove on towards Dunoon.

'Mrs Macdonald's lassie' was at school also, and so were Mrs Duncan's two girls, but Lexa was warmly welcomed by both the mothers, as the daughter of their old friend. She proposed the plan already suggested, that they should all meet on the steamer on Saturday and make plans for future friendship, and then she and Miss Sparrow drove home, Lexa well pleased with her afternoon's work, Miss Sparrow much amused—but carefully concealing the fact—and deeply interested as to future developments.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST RECRUIT

All Lexa's thoughts were now turned towards Saturday, and the new friends she was to meet on the steamer. But before Saturday came, something happened which made her almost forget her plans and hopes for the day.

Wednesday was bright and clear, the very day for a long ramble. But Miss Sparrow woke with a bad headache—a very unusual thing with her—and could not leave her bed.

'I shall be all right to-morrow. You'll amuse yourself somehow, won't you, Lexa?'

'Yes, indeed! Don't worry about me! I am so sorry about it, Miss Sparrow. I'll go right away and not bother you all day, and you must go to sleep and not think about me once. Then perhaps it will be better by to-morrow.'

Then she asked Granny Mac for a picnic basket, saying she was going into the woods for the day. Her plans went beyond the woods, to be sure, but she knew that if she disclosed them fully, Granny, or Mr Mac, or Miss Sparrow, would raise difficulties and keep her from carrying them out. She had full confidence in herself, and wanted no interference. So she strapped her lunch basket on to her bicycle, called the dogs, and rode away.

An adventure lay before her. The great hill of Morven, rising out of the woods behind the house, had attracted her since first she saw it. She longed to conquer it, to stand on its bare head and look down on Morven and the woods and house and loch. The hills around would look even grander from that height, and she would see more of that mysterious lonely loch among the mountains behind, which she had first seen from the tower of Morven House. She and Miss Sparrow had already cycled to its shores, but it seemed to turn a corner and reach away among the hills. She wanted to see its whole length, if possible.

Miss Sparrow had said Morven Hill was too high to climb. Lexa thought otherwise, and was bent upon its conquest.

She had ridden about a mile along the white road, with walls of firs on each side, when she came to a parting of the ways, and stopped to consider. Her route lay along one of these roads, it did not much matter which, till she found a path leading up through the trees. She stood looking at both roads, and hesitating between right and left, while the dogs raced up and down in search of rabbits.

Imperative ringing of a bicycle bell startled her, and round the bend of the road came a boy, and he sprang off his cycle beside her.

'Can you tell me which road is best if you want to climb the hill?' he asked.

He was a good-looking boy, fair-haired and very sunburnt, wearing flannel trousers and a white linen jacket, and he seemed about her own age. Lexa liked his looks.

'Either will do,' she said. 'I'll race you to the top.'

He gazed back at her with interest. Sensible clothes—a short gray cycling costume, and a gray hat well on the back of her head—no silly bracelets or necklaces—pretty hair, in curls about her face, and not long enough to get in her way—no freckles—big blue eyes—yes, he approved of her.

'You aren't going to try the climb, surely! You'll never do it. It's over two thousand feet, and besides, girls can't climb.'

Lexa laughed at the calm assurance of his tone. ‘This girl can. We’ll see who gets there first. Have you brought your lunch? Then let’s have dinner together on the very highest point.’

‘Are you really going to try? You’ll only get half-way, you know, and then have to give up.’

‘I never give up,’ said Lexa confidently. ‘You will race, won’t you? You’ll take this road, I’ll take that one. We’ll meet at the top.’

‘Oh, I’ll wait for you there, if you like,’ he laughed. ‘If you aren’t too long, that is.’

‘I won’t begin my dinner till you come—if I’m not too hungry,’ she retorted. ‘What’s your name? And where do you live?’

‘Macfarlane. Creggandarroch.’

Lexa’s eyes danced. She had quite forgotten the boy she was not going to speak to.

‘Really? Then beg my pardon at once, you rude boy!’

‘Eh?—I’m afraid I don’t quite——’

‘Oh, don’t you! You pulled my hair. Granny Mac says so.’

‘I say, what d’you mean?’ cried the mystified Jim.

‘I’m Lexa Stewart, from Morven. We used to know one another, and you——’

‘Thought I knew you somehow! I say, I’m awfully glad you’ve come back! Are you living there?’

She nodded. ‘I wasn’t going to speak to you if I met you, because——’

‘I apologise most humbly! I crave Your Majesty’s pardon!’ and he lowered his head in an elaborate bow. ‘But that was ages ago, and we were only kiddies. Don’t bear a grudge against me for ever.’

‘We’ll return to the subject later. We’ll talk at the top. This is wasting time. What will you do with your bike?’

‘Leave it at the cottage round the corner.’

‘I’ll take mine there too. Then we’ll come back here and start fair.’

Such a climb! After an hour’s scrambling, often on hands and knees, up the steep slope covered with pine needles, Lexa was tired out. But she determined not to rest till she came to the end of the trees, which reached about half-way up the hill. So she struggled on, slipping and scrambling, always keeping near a stream that came dashing down the mountain side. Once she stopped, panting, to gaze at it rushing over the rocks in a series of little falls, with a noise that nearly deafened her, and many times she drank from pools among the stones.

At last she left the trees behind, and sank down on the grass beside the stream, which had become a mere thread of water. Here she rested, and ate a scone, sprinkling crumbs for a robin who came hopping hopefully up. Then, made wise by experience gained in other long walks, she took off her shoes and stockings and sat with her feet in a pool.

But thoughts of Jim, scrambling up the other side, would not let her rest long. Greatly refreshed, she set off again, and found the way easier now that she was out in the wind. The breeze grew stronger as she went up, and when at last she lay, a very tired girl indeed, among the rocks at the top, it seemed quite a gale.

She cast one look round for Jim. There was no sign of him anywhere. With a triumphant laugh, she pulled off her tam and put it down on what seemed the highest point, with a stone upon it to keep it steady. Then she lay down in the shelter of a rock to rest.

The dogs were tired, too, for they had been racing about after rabbits, while their mistress had kept a fairly straight course. So they dropped beside her, panting with loose-hanging tongues, and then, putting their noses on their paws, went to sleep.

Half an hour passed, and on the mountain-top everything was still. The dogs were dreaming of rabbits. Lexa had not moved. A venturesome little head popped out of a rabbit-hole to look at them, then an inquisitive little gray body crept nearer. One of the dogs yelped in his sleep, and with a scuffle of tiny feet and a flash of white tail it fled back to safety. The larks sang on overhead, and the grasshoppers chirped all around, but Lexa did not move.

Jim, still some way off, saw the dogs and the tam-o'-shanter, and knew himself beaten.

'She's done it! Didn't think she would. Plucky kind of girl,' he said to himself.

The dogs greeted him with lazily-wagging tails. He did not see Lexa anywhere, so went to look for her.

'Well, I never! Sound asleep! Good scheme too! I'm not as bad that, though!' and he sat down to rest.

Presently Lexa stirred, then yawned, and sat up suddenly at sight of him.

'Have I been asleep? How very silly! But I was hot. So you've got here at last, Master Jim? What about girls now? I've been waiting here for ages.'

'I didn't think you'd manage it,' he admitted. 'But I didn't go to sleep, anyway.'

But Lexa was wide awake by this time. 'Sleep? Who went to sleep? What nonsense!'

He laughed. 'Let's have lunch.'

She chose a flat rock, and they sat down on opposite sides of it and opened their baskets. She had ham sandwiches, a jam tart, and scones. He had sausage rolls, a big slice of cake, and some apples. She had a flask, her grandfather's present, filled with milk, he had a bottle of ginger-beer. At Lexa's suggestion, they went shares in everything, and, spreading them all on the rock, had a royal feast.

'What a jolly flask!' commented Jim. 'It's too good for a girl, if you'll pardon my saying so.'

'Now, see here! I like you,' said Lexa, with rather embarrassing frankness, 'and I was going to forgive you and be friends. But if I do, you must stop making those remarks about girls. I beat you coming up, you know.'

'I didn't go to sleep when I got here, anyway.'

Lexa changed the subject.

'Isn't it jolly up here? Can't we see a long way? There's Morven among the trees, and see what tiny dots the steamers look! Have you any sisters, Jim?'

'One small one. She's a very decent kid, but she's only eight. There's a girl coming to stop with us in July.'

'You see, it's this way. I'm a Queen—did you know?'

'Can't say I did,' he laughed. 'What of—Morven?'

'Yes. And it's all very well to have miles of woods to do what you like in, and a castle, and a pony-carriage, and a yacht—'

'A yacht?' and Jim looked at her doubtfully.

'Yes, lying off the river, that wee speck, away down there. Mr Mac takes me out sailing. Well, as I was saying, it's very nice to have all those things, of course, but if you have them all to yourself, they get dull in time. I don't know any one here, and I'm badly wanting friends. Do you go to school?'

'Of course, but to-day's a holiday.'

'Are there any nice boys at your school? Any boys—er—something like you?'

Jim jumped up and bowed again, with a flourish of his hand.

'None of them quite come up to me, of course. You couldn't expect that. I am the bright and shining example to the school. But there are some very decent fellows. Why?'

'Have they sisters?'

'I'm sure I don't know, Your Majesty.'

'Well, now,' said Lexa, delighted with her title, 'if I have a picnic at Morven next Saturday week, will you come, and bring your little sister, and invite one or two nice boys who'll behave themselves? I'll ask some girls. Then if they're willing, we might form a kind of band, or club. I'd be Queen and you'd be Prime Minister. We could arrange picnics, and have games and cycle rides, and cricket matches and competitions. Don't you think it would be a good plan? There must be lots of children somewhere. You always see them on the steamers. Why shouldn't we all know one another, and have fun together?'

'It's a good scheme,' Jim said slowly. 'A—very—good—scheme—indeed. I wonder we never thought of it before. But can you manage it? What will your folks say? Maybe they won't like it.'

'I haven't any. That's the trouble,' Lexa said mournfully. 'There isn't any one but Granny Mac—she's the housekeeper—and the servants and me, and Miss Sparrow—she's not a governess! Grandfather lives in Glasgow.'

'Brothers and sisters?'

'Never had any. Father and mother are away.'

'I know,' he nodded. 'I've heard about them. Hard lines for you.'

'They stayed at home at first, but he was always wanting to go to sea again. When I was small he went for one voyage, and mother stayed at home with me. But when I was ten, he went away again, and mother went with him, for she likes the sea too. They left me with Grandpa, though I would have liked to go better than anything in the world. I'm hoping they'll soon be home, for it's three years now since they went.'

'It is hard lines,' Jim said sympathetically again. 'Where have they gone?'

'To find the South Pole.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Father went to Greenland last time, and made some important discoveries, though I don't understand what they were. But he said it was getting overcrowded up there, so they went South instead. I expect they'll find all kinds of things down there. Father used to say he was sure there was land round the South Pole.'

'It sounds very interesting, but I can't say I know anything about it.'

'Sometimes I get lonely when I think about them. That's why I want to make friends. I have that great house and garden all to myself. I can do just what I like. Granny Mac will be pleased with anything I do. So you will come to my picnic, won't you?'

'Nanny and I will be delighted.'

'Bring one or two nice boys, and I'll find some girls. Ask them to meet me at the pier. Then they can cycle or come by boat, which they like. Three o'clock, will that do? All right! You don't know how grateful I am to you for choosing to-day to climb Morven.'

'It was Rob Cameron's fault,' Jim laughed. 'He's one of the chaps I'll introduce to you. He climbed a hill nineteen hundred feet high in the holidays, and he's been bragging of it ever since. I wanted to go one better—'

'So you'd have something to brag about too.'

'No, so I could shut him up when he started. We're sick of hearing about it. This is a good five hundred better, so he'll have to take a back seat.'

Lexa laughed. 'Well, I'm glad you chose to-day. Now shouldn't we be getting down again? It's two o'clock, so it will take us all our time to be home for tea. Which way shall we go?'

'Mine, if you don't mind. It's not very rough walking, and I've something to do down there.'

'Walking!' said Lexa, as they called the dogs, after a last look round at the mountains and river and lochs and woods. 'It wasn't walking at all on my side. It was scrambling. Look at that great hole in my stocking! I thought your side must have been worse than mine, since it took you so long!'

'I didn't go to sleep after it, anyway,' Jim laughed, and Lexa said no more on that point.

But his path, though steep, was certainly easier than hers had been, and they were able to talk of many things as they went. Jim told of school and cricket and the other boys, Lexa of her sailing and riding and walking with Miss Sparrow. He collected birds' eggs, she stamps and coins. She offered to bring to the picnic some eggs Johnny Mac had given her, and he laughingly promised to send her some stamps as a prize for winning the race.

'If we form a band we can exchange all these things, you know,' she said.

'Yes. Look at the waterfall. Isn't it fine?'

A wave of water leapt over the rocks, and fell foaming into a pool at the bottom of a chasm. The edge was overgrown with trees and ferns, and Jim held Queen Lexa back lest she should mistake a tuft of heather for solid ground.

'It's the biggest waterfall I've seen yet,' she said. 'Do people ever fall in, I wonder?'

'Sheep do, I believe, and it's a dangerous place for children.'

'I should think so! They should never be allowed here without some one to look after them.'

Some way below the fall, they came on a cottage buried among the trees.

'Now,' said Jim, 'if you don't mind waiting for two minutes, Your Majesty, I want to speak to some one in here. I guess you're ready for a rest. I won't be long.'

He left her by the stream which ran out from below the waterfall, and she wondered much what he wanted in the cottage. She was hot and thirsty, so drank from the stream, while the dogs ran eagerly into the water.

'Well?' she asked, when he came back. 'What did you want in there?'

'Only to speak to some one,' and that was all he would say.

A small girl had followed him to the door of the cottage, and stood smiling and waving her hand till they were out of sight. Lexa teased him with questions, but could draw no answer from him, and when they parted at the crossroads she was still unsatisfied.

'Now don't forget! I got to the top first!' she said, as a parting shot.

'But then you went to sleep!' Jim laughed.

'Remember my picnic on Saturday week! Now I'm going home to be scolded by Miss Sparrow!'

CHAPTER IV

WHY JIM LOST THE RACE

‘Yes,’ said Lexa to Miss Sparrow, as they sat at breakfast next morning, she considering a row of picture postcards, ‘Jim Macfarlane is a much nicer boy than I thought, considering that he once pulled my hair! I’m glad I met him. But I do want to know why he went to that cottage! And I’m going to find out somehow.’

The cards informed her that the writer had arrived home late for tea, which was clearly her fault,—that he hoped she was none the worse for her exertions,—that she climbed jolly well for a girl,—that if she hadn’t been talking rot, and that ripping little yacht was really hers, she was a lucky kid,—that the writer’s mother had picked up that last card, which wasn’t meant for her to read at all, and said that wasn’t the kind of language to write to a young lady, and he mustn’t send it, but he thought he would, all the same, as there was such a decent picture on the other side,—that in that case he must beg pardon for it at once, which he did forthwith,—and that he and Miss Nanny MacFarlane were looking forward eagerly to Saturday week.

Lexa laughed, and ran upstairs to arrange the stamps in her album, then, with her bicycle and the dogs, set out for the cottage on the hill. Miss Sparrow scarcely felt fit yet to attempt the climb. She had been reluctant to let Lexa go alone, after her confession of what she had done the day before, but on receiving a solemn promise that she would not go beyond the cottage, she had consented.

But going down the avenue between the walls of pines Lexa met Janet, carrying a long broom.

‘Ye said we’d redd up the wee hoose the day, Miss Lexa.’

‘So I did. I’d forgotten all about it. Then I’ll go riding in the afternoon.’

In exploring the garden, Lexa had come upon the summer-house, and had been delighted with it. It stood on the edge of the lawn, with the fir-wood behind, and was built of light brown wood, with a flight of steps leading up to the doorway. On each side of the door was a tiny window, with diamond-shaped panes of stained glass opening outwards, and wooden shutters. The roof was flat, and hidden by the branches of the firs which met above it, and the walls were overgrown with creepers.

The outside of the little house was very pretty, though in want of a fresh coat of paint. Its inside condition drew a cry of horror from Janet. The corners were full of cobwebs, and the dust lay so thick that Lexa laughingly wrote her name everywhere. But it only wanted to be clean to be a delightful little place. There were a table and chairs of brown wood to match the walls, and shelves and cupboards, which made Lexa long to keep house there.

So Janet brought her broom, and brushed down the walls and swept the floor, then washed and scrubbed it all and cleaned the windows, till everything was as fresh and clean as in the lodge itself. Lexa had intended to help, but her share was to sit on the table and talk, while Janet worked. That was, to Janet’s mind, quite as it should be, and she worked hard and listened to Lexa’s chatter, and at times joined in.

But one time she paused, and, sitting on her heels, looked up.

‘Miss Lexa, d’ye think your fayther will ever come hame?’

Lexa stared. ‘Why, of course, Janet! What *do* you mean?’

'Well, ye see, they've been awa' that lang, that whiles I think they'll no come hame. My fayther's with him, ye ken.'

'Yes, I know. But of course they'll come back. I've never doubted it for a moment. What a dreadful idea, Janet! What should we do if they didn't come home?'

'I dinna ken. But it's three year come this September sin' they went awa', an' there's no word o' them.'

'They can't send letters from the South Pole,' Lexa said stoutly. 'And father said they might be away three years. He came back all right the time before.'

'My fayther wasna with him then. I hope they're a' richt.'

'Of course they are! Nothing could possibly happen to them.'

But for a time Lexa was very silent. It had never occurred to her that her parents could come to any harm. She had grumbled that they stayed away so long, but she had never doubted that they would come at last. Janet's suggestion had roused her fear for the first time, and for a while she was worried and silent.

'I'm worse off than you, Janet,' she said at last. 'My mother is away too. You have your mother and all the children. I have nobody at all. I should be quite alone, if—but I won't think about that! Why did you put it into my head? Such a dreadful thing couldn't happen. I'm quite sure it couldn't. They'll all come back safe, and I do hope it will be soon.'

Janet worked at the summer-house all morning, and left it so clean and neat that Lexa exclaimed, 'I'll use it as a sitting-room in wet weather. I'll give tea-parties here. I'll come when I'm cross and want to get away from everybody. It would be a splendid place to sulk in,' and Janet laughed, and decided to hint to the boys that it would be a pleasant surprise for Miss Lexa if they gave the house a fresh coat of paint some day when she was out sailing.

In the afternoon Lexa called the dogs once more, mounted her bicycle, and set off again for the cottage on the hill.

The same little girl whom she had seen the day before was sitting on the wall, knitting and singing. A small boy was playing on the ground. They were barefoot and bareheaded, and were ragged and untidy, but seemed merry enough.

Lexa went up to the girl.

'What is your name?'

'Leezie, an' this is jist wee Wullie, Miss.'

'Do you remember seeing me yesterday?'

'Aye, ye wis with *him*, last time he kem. But no' when he brocht back wee Wullie.'

'When was that?'

'Ye see, we'd lost Wullie, Miss. Mither wis busy at the washin', an' I wis singin' Baby to sleep, an' we jist forgot a' about Wullie. I left him playin' oot here. Then mither said, "Whaur's that wean?" an' when I kem oot to look for him, he wisna here. I searched everywhere, an' couldna fin' him, an' then I minded the fall, up yonder, ye ken'—Lexa nodded, intensely interested—'an' I wis that feart he micht ha' fallen in! Then he—your freen'—kem by, an' saw me greetin', an' asked what wis wrang. When I told him, he said, "I'm gaein' up the hill. Gin I meet Wullie, I'll send him doon to ye quick. Go you an' seek in the glen again." I searched a' through the glen, but Wullie wisna there. Then jist as I wis comin' back, he kem doon the hill again, wi' Wullie in his airms——'

'What, Jim?' cried Lexa, mindful of the race.

'Aye, your freen'. When he got to the fall, he hadna seen Wullie, so he looked to see if he'd slippit through the trees. An' there he wis, hangin' on to the rocks doon there, oot o' the

watter, but no' able to clim' up. So your freen' went doon and fetchit him, an' he said it wisna easy to clim' up wi' the wean in his airms. Then he foun' Wullie'd hurt his fit on the rocks, so he kerriet him back here. We were that gled to see him! Then the last time he kem to ask if Wullie was a' richt, an' he gave him saxpence!'

'I suppose it must have taken him some time climbing down after Willie, and then bringing him back here?' Lexa said thoughtfully.

'Oh, ay, a good long while! Wullie's gey heavy to kerry, ye ken.'

'Besides making him tired. No wonder I won the race!'

She gave Lizzie another sixpence for Willie, to help to cure his foot, and went thoughtfully downhill again.

Jim had risen immensely in her estimation. She had liked him all the time, but, though naturally proud of having won the race she had herself proposed, she had been almost regretting her victory, since it had made her think less of him. Who could help thinking just a little scornfully of a boy beaten by a good half-hour by a girl of his own age, especially when, as it proved, she had had the more difficult climb?

But now matters were changed. In searching for and rescuing Willie, and in carrying him back to the cottage, he must have lost more time than would have given him the victory. He must almost have given up all thought of winning the race, unless, as was likely enough, he had not expected her to reach the top of the hill at all.

But he could scarcely have done less. He could not have left the child on the rocks. In going to the rescue he had done nothing very wonderful. The wonderful thing, the thing which made Lexa so thoughtful, was this—he had said nothing about it. Knowing how much she would like to win the race, he had let her think she had done so, and had even let her laugh at him for being beaten by a girl. He had just laughed back good-temperedly, without saying a word about Lizzie and Willie, and she would never have understood if they had not come home past the cottage.

Lexa knew she could not have done it. She might have given up the race for the sake of giving needed help, but she would have explained and insisted on another trial. She respected Jim far more than if he had won the race.

'He shall be my Prime Minister,' she said to the dogs, as they went downhill. 'If his sister is like him, I shall be very fond of her. I wish there were more of them. Now, shall I tell him that I know, or will he be cross? I think I'll risk it!'

So she sent a postcard to Jim, thanking him for his, of the morning, and assuring him that Willie's foot was quite well again, and that he and Lizzie were much obliged for the sixpence. Jim laughed out as he read it.

'Inquisitive little monkey! I thought perhaps she would, being a girl! I'm not sorry, though.'

CHAPTER V

QUEEN LEXA GOES RECRUITING

On Saturday morning, Queen Lexa boarded the steamer with eager anticipation in her face. To-day she was to meet her new friends, and she was looking forward to seeing them with keen pleasure.

She had sailed on this steamer before, and had long since made friends with the captain. He seemed to have friends on every pier and on every steamer they met, and was continually waving a greeting to some one. He generally had somebody on the bridge with him, either his son or some of his little passengers. Lexa had been invited up there more than once, and shown the compass and the wheel, and to-day, as the steamer crossed the loch, she climbed up uninvited.

‘Good-morning, Captain! Haven’t you brought Duncan and Katie to-day?’

‘They’re off for a long walk.’

‘I’m going to have a picnic next Saturday, Captain.’

‘Ay? It’ll be a fine place for picnics, Morven.’

‘May Duncan and Katie come, please?’

‘Eh? I don’t know. They’d be delighted, of course, but——’

‘And of course you’ll let them come! Tell them to meet me at the pier about three o’clock. Thank you so much! Good-bye!’ and she ran down to the deck and left Captain McNab laughing.

As the steamer drew near each pier, Lexa and Miss Sparrow, from their seat near the paddle-box, watched the passengers come on board. Lexa, eager to see her new friends, waited impatiently for some of them to appear.

‘There are my first two—those light blue coats! They’re the Hunter girls. Don’t you know them from the photo? I’ll speak to them before we get to Dunoon, because there will be others after.—Miss Sparrow! Look at those two jolly girls in navy shorts! Don’t you think I could ask them too?’

‘Won’t you have plenty, Lexa? You will have a good many new friends to-day, to say nothing of Jim and his sister, and your rash invitation to the rest of his schoolfellows.’

‘Now don’t scold about that, there’s a dear Miss Sparrow! I know I shouldn’t have done it, but I must have some boys to make it good fun, and I know he’ll only bring boys I’ll like.’

‘You’ll have a very big party.’

‘That’s what I want. Granny Mac will see to it all for me, and I know Grandpa won’t mind. You said he was quite willing I should make a few friends.’

‘A few, yes! But not all the children on the river.’

‘Oh, I’m not going to ask them all! There are some I wouldn’t have for anything! Look at that prim proper girl reading a book over there! Reading on a steamer! I hate to see people reading on a steamer. I wouldn’t have her if you asked me to. I believe it’s a history book, anyway. But those others look good fun, and I’m going to speak to them.’

At first she could not find the girls in the light blue coats. They seemed to have disappeared. She sought for them all over the deck, then, remembering the engine-room, ran down to look for them there.

But they were not there, and she was turning to go on deck again, when the noise of laughter close at hand made her pause. She followed the sound, and came on a merry party, in a corner of which she was particularly fond herself.

On the lower deck, close to where the water, churned into foam by the paddles, escaped, and frothed and bubbled against the side, was an empty space outside the windows of the saloon, where pails and coils of rope were stored. It was a particularly inviting spot, because sooner or later a wave from the paddles was sure to wash through the scupper holes, and any one sitting there was liable to get damp.

The girls in the light blue coats had brought camp-chairs and made themselves comfortable here, and the girls in gray shorts were with them, perched on the coiled ropes. Maggie Hunter had a bag of biscuits in her lap, and was tossing handfuls of broken pieces to the gulls, who had collected in a moment, and were wheeling and screaming about, to the discomfort of the passengers on the upper deck. People were wondering what was bringing them in such numbers, and were complaining of the noise, but Maggie's bag was still half full, and she cared nothing for the grumblers above.

'Jean, you go and buy me some more biscuits,' she said, as Lexa approached. 'These won't last long. Won't he be mad?' and the others laughed, while the younger girl sprang up to obey.

'Won't who be mad?' asked Lexa with interest, and the girls stared.

But Maggie and Nelly were prepared.

'Are you *her*?' asked Nelly eagerly.

'It's Saturday, you know. Grammar goes overboard on Saturdays,' Maggie explained. '*Are you her*?'

'I think I must be. I'm Lexa Stewart——'

'Then you *are* her! Isn't Morven just a lovely place to live?' asked Nelly, going to the point without hesitation.

'It's very nice, but I'm all alone there. I can't have half the fun I'd like. I can think of all kinds of things, but they're no good alone.'

'I don't see why you should be all alone,' Nelly said pointedly, and Lexa laughed.

'Neither do I. Will you come to a picnic there next Saturday?'

'Rather!'

'Please do. About three, at the pier. Now I must run. I want to see some one who's coming on at Dunoon. Be sure you turn up. Couldn't you come too?' she asked of the girls in shorts, who were listening wistfully.

'We'd love to, but do you think——'

'Do you all go to school together?'

'Yes.'

'Then ask your mother to let you come with Nelly and Maggie. I'll be very pleased if you will. Tell me your address, and I'll write you a proper note. I don't think I know your names. You're Jean, aren't you?'

'And I'm Elspeth—Macpherson.'

'Beg their mother to let them come, won't you?' she asked of Nelly Hunter. 'And now, do tell me—I really ought to go, but I must hear first—who'll be mad, and why?'

They all laughed, and Maggie explained: 'The purser. We quarrelled with him, because he wouldn't believe we had season tickets. They'll try to chase the gulls away, and they won't be

able to, and everybody will grumble, and he'll be mad, but I don't see how he can stop me feeding them if I like. There goes the gangway! You'd better run,' and Lexa fled up the steps.

Standing by the gangway, she kept watch for more friends, explaining to Miss Sparrow all the while:

'They're jolly. They're all coming—yes, all four. I wonder if that's Ruth Macdonald, with the red coat and lovely dark hair? See her?—with a small boy. And those will be the Duncan girls with her. Then they're all friends already. So much the better. Oh, Miss Sparrow! What a dear wee girl, coming on with her mother! Do you see? With the little bonnet hat and curls, and furry coat. I would like to know her!'

'She's too small to be a companion for you, Lexa.'

'I'd like to know her, all the same. I must have one or two babies!'

'What a noise the gulls are making to-day! I wonder what can be exciting them so?'

Lexa laughed. 'If you'd like to know, and if you won't tell—but no, I'd better not! It's hardly fair. I'm going to speak to Red Coat,' and she slipped away among the crowd, leaving Miss Sparrow wondering.

Red Coat and her friends had disappeared also, but Lexa knew where they had gone, and found them easily.

At the far end of the upper deck a flight of steps led down to the lower, where, just above the stern, was a sheltered spot which Lexa had often thought would be a good place for a game, if only she had had some one to play with. She leant over the upper railing, and looked down on another lively party.

Red Coat and the Duncan girls were playing statistics. Each had pencil and paper, and one was marking down every yacht they passed, another every rowing-boat, and the third every steamer, while Red Coat's little brother insisted that he was counting the sea-gulls. The girls said this was not fair, as he could not possibly tell which he had counted already. But he marked down every one he saw, and soon announced that he had reached a hundred first. So the girls turned their backs on him and left him alone.

When Lexa came up, a hot dispute was going on between Red Coat and Mary Duncan over a brown-sailed fishing-smack. Red Coat said it was a yacht, because it was rigged like a little yacht, and what did it matter what colour the sails were? Mary said it was a rowing-boat with sails. Who ever heard of calling a dirty herring-boat a yacht?

Here Janie Duncan created a diversion by jumping up and demanding what that was over there. Was it a steamer?—and all turned to look, except the small boy, who was hastily marking down twenty more sea-gulls.

Lexa had a pair of field-glasses slung over her shoulder. She glanced at the vessel in dispute, then ran down to the lower deck.

'That's a liner from America,' she said. 'Would you like to look through the glass?'

They accepted the offer gratefully, and examined the distant curl of smoke carefully in turn.

'Steamers—I'm steamers—and yachts are equal at present, so it's important,' Janie explained.

'Of course. But I think you'll find that's a liner.'

They agreed reluctantly that it was, so could not be counted by any one. Then they returned to the dispute over the fishing-boat, and appealed to Lexa for her opinion.

'I think you'd better let me join you and count the herring-boats,' said she. You really can't call that either a yacht or a small boat.'

‘But you haven’t any paper. I’ll give you a piece of mine,’ Red Coat suggested.

‘Thanks,’ and she settled herself on a coil of rope and joined in the game.

‘Are you Lexa?’ asked Red Coat suddenly, during a quiet interval after Toward Point was passed.

‘Why, I’d quite forgotten!’ cried Mary Duncan. ‘Are you Lexa?’

‘I declare, so had I! Are you Lexa?’

‘Yes, I’m Lexa. I’ve discovered your names. You’re Mary, aren’t you? and Janie? And you are Ruth Macdonald? What is little Sea-gull’s name?’

‘Oh, he’s Alfie——’

‘I got to a thousand first, anyway,’ said the small boy in an injured tone.

‘Anybody could, if they played like you do.’

‘I’m having a picnic next Saturday. Can you all come?’

‘At Morven? Oh, yes, *please!*’

Lexa laughed. ‘Do! I’ll meet you at the pier, at three o’clock.’

‘I say, here’s boats, an’ yachts, an’ millions of steamers!’ cried Alfie, who had been for a brief run to the upper deck, and had not heard the reference to the picnic.

They were entering Rothesay Bay, and Lexa foresaw considerable excitement in the progress of the game, as it was crowded with craft of every kind. But the girls began hastily to get their things together, in readiness for going ashore, so they parted, she promising to look out for them when they came on board again on their way home.

As the steamer left the bay for the trip through the Kyles, it was nearly empty. The Hunters and Macphersons had gone ashore also, so the sea-gulls had rest for a time. Lexa went back to Miss Sparrow to report progress.

‘Let’s go and sit forward, where we can see the Kyles open out before us. Isn’t Loch Striven looking grand to-day? Aren’t you getting hungry? It must be nearly time for lunch.’

But as they went along the deck, she came unexpectedly upon another recruit.

In one of the sheltered seats behind the funnel sat the little girl Lexa had noticed as she came on board. She was very tiny, not more than eight years old, with a little round face and flaxen curls, and in her little fur coat and attractive hat she looked dainty and sweet and shy. Her mother, sitting by her, was tall and fair, wearing black and a widow’s cap, and her sad shy eyes had been following Lexa. Now she leaned forward as they approached.

‘Lexa! Surely you are Lexa Stewart, from Morven?’

Lexa stopped in surprise.

‘Yes?’ she queried. ‘I am.’

‘I knew your mother very well. You are very like her. Is she home again?’

‘No, we’ve had no news for ever so long. But they’ll come home some day soon. This is Miss Sparrow! It was so good of you to speak to me! I want to make friends with every one we used to know.’

‘I had been watching you. I was sure I could not be making a mistake. I am Mrs Ferguson. This is my little daughter Isobel.’

Lexa sat down beside the child, who was clinging to her mother’s hand and evidently hoping to remain unnoticed.

‘I am so glad to have you to talk to! All my friends went off at Rothesay. I saw you come on board, and I wanted to speak to you then.’

But Isobel looked frightened and said nothing, and her mother said apologetically:

‘I am afraid you will find her very shy. She has no companions, and I fear it has not been good for her. Isobel, this is Lexa. Now you must talk to her, you know.’

‘Oh, we’re going to have a long chat while you talk to Miss Sparrow. Have you ever been on the bridge, Isobel?—where the captain stands, you know?’

‘No.’

‘Would you like to go? The captain is a friend of mine. I’ll show you how they steer the ship.’

‘I would rather stay with mother, please.’

‘Have you been for many sails yet?’

‘This is the first this summer.’

She spoke just above her breath. Lexa made up her mind that she must come to the picnic and play games with Jim’s little sister and Alfie Macdonald, and see if that did her any good.

She talked about the steamers, the hills, and the sea-gulls. She told of the picnics she had had, and about her dogs. Then, encouraged by the child’s interested face, she spoke of her collection of animals, the menagerie. Isobel did not say much, but her face was full of interest, and she evidently enjoyed Lexa’s chatter. Her mother was delighted, and said so, and this gave Lexa her opportunity.

She invited Isobel to tea the following Saturday, but said nothing about the others who were to be there, lest the thought of them should frighten the child.

‘I’ll drive over for Isobel,’ she said to Mrs Ferguson, ‘for she couldn’t come by steamer alone. I’ll come quite early, for the drive will take so long.’

The child looked scared at the very idea of going alone, but her mother accepted the invitation with many thanks. Lexa sat talking with them for some time, and laughed gently at Isobel for being afraid of her. Then, as the steamer drew in to the last pier, she said good-bye, promising to come back later on.

She and Miss Sparrow were not going ashore. The boat would only have a few minutes before turning to go home again, so they took possession of the corner where the statistics had been in progress, and made themselves comfortable for a picnic lunch.

‘My plan’s going to be a success,’ Lexa said exuberantly, as Miss Sparrow opened her basket. ‘They’re all jolly, and they want to come. I’ve asked—let me see!—nine, and the captain’s two make eleven, without Jim and his sister. That’s a good beginning for my Band.’

‘A splendid beginning,’ Miss Sparrow agreed. ‘Then you’re still thinking of that?—Ham or tongue?’

‘Tongue, please! Thanks!—Of the Band? Of course I am. Don’t you think it’s a fine idea? We’ll have splendid times together, and Morven’s just the place for meetings. It’s made for it. The holidays will soon begin, and they’ll all want something to do. Why shouldn’t we meet and enjoy ourselves together? I’m quite sure Grandpa won’t mind. They’re nearly all old friends.’

‘No, he won’t mind,’ Miss Sparrow said soberly, ‘for I’ve asked him.’

Lexa looked at her quickly.

‘I wrote and told him your idea, and he seemed pleased with it. So you know he is willing. But, Lexa—I suppose your idea is to be head of your Band yourself?’

Lexa looked up quickly again.

‘I thought so! If I propose it, and invite them, and take all the trouble of arranging it, it will be quite fair, won’t it?—Some more lemonade, please!’

‘Quite, and they’ll probably all be willing. But you’ll have to be careful.’

‘Careful?’

‘Yes. There are good queens and bad queens, you know.—Another sandwich?’

‘Oh, I’ll be a good one, of course! I only want to give everybody a jolly time. That’s all right, isn’t it?’

Miss Sparrow looked thoughtful. ‘That’s all right. I meant rather—be careful of yourself, or you may get into trouble. You can’t be a good queen unless—I don’t want to preach, but I know it’s true, and I’m afraid your Band may be a failure unless you remember—unless you’re good yourself.’

‘Oh, but of course I’m going to be!’ Lexa said easily. ‘Can I have an apple? Thanks!—Miss Sparrow!’

‘Yes? Why don’t you go on, Lexa?’

‘I don’t want to hurt your feelings.’

‘Why, what are you going to say? Anything very dreadful?’

‘Don’t you sometimes want to get rid of me for a while, and not be bothered with me? Aren’t there things you want to do that you can’t do while I’m there?’

‘Whatever do you mean, Lexa? I write my letters after you’re in bed.’

‘You see,’ Lexa exclaimed, in some embarrassment, ‘if you—you’re sure you won’t mind?—if you come to the meetings of the Band, they’ll all be shy, and so shall I, and it won’t be the same as if it was only us children together. You can’t help being a grown-up, but if we didn’t let grown-ups in at all it would be very much easier, don’t you see? We may have to make speeches—I shall, anyway—and I could never do it if you were there. It’s always different if there’s even one grown-up in the room. So I was wondering if—well, if you’d mind—if there was anything else you could do while we have our meetings? But if you mind very much——’

Miss Sparrow was looking thoughtful. She said nothing, and Lexa cried eagerly:

‘Do you mind? If you do, I’ll be so sorry I ever said it, and I wouldn’t say you mustn’t come—not for anything! It’s only if you really don’t mind.’

‘I don’t mind,’ Miss Sparrow said quickly, and a smile crept about her lips. ‘I was only thinking what I should do while you were busy. I think I know—yes, there is something I can do, Lexa! So you needn’t trouble about me. But——’

‘What will you do?’ Lexa asked curiously. ‘Darn stockings? Or read?’

‘Oh, no! Something much more interesting than that! But I can’t tell you about it just now. It must be my secret, Lexa.’

‘Oh! Oh, Miss Sparrow!’

Miss Sparrow’s eyes twinkled at her cry of dismay. ‘Certainly! You have your Band, I have my secret. It’s only fair!’

‘We-ell! I suppose so,’ Lexa said reluctantly.

‘Oh, of course! I won’t disturb your meetings, and you mustn’t interrupt my work. But if you want help or advice, you’ll ask me, won’t you?’

‘And you really won’t tell me what you’re going to do?’

‘I’m afraid I really can’t,’ Miss Sparrow said smiling, with thoughtful eyes fixed on the distant blue hills of Arran.

‘Oh, dear! But I suppose I can’t say anything! I’ve brought it on myself,’ Lexa said ruefully. ‘Well, we’ll arrange it that way, then, if you really won’t tell me.’

The steamer had started on her homeward way while they had been talking. The Arran hills dropped behind the shoulder of Bute, as they turned the corner of the Kyles, and Lexa

sprang up to throw crumbs to the gulls. Then she went off for another chat with Isobel Ferguson before they reached Rothesay, and left Miss Sparrow sitting in the stern, watching the foaming track behind, that deeply thoughtful look still on her face.

Lexa had intended to resume her game with Ruth Macdonald and the Duncans when they came on board again. But among those who crowded on at Rothesay, she recognised two whom she had noticed on the outward journey, but had not had time to speak to. The boy wore kilts and a bonnet. The girl, in a pleated skirt and tight blue jersey, had short black curls hanging about her face, and looked like a shaggy terrier.

It would have been difficult not to notice them. Every one on board had been aware of their presence. They had been up on the bridge with Captain McNab. They had teased the sailors and tormented the harassed purser. They had played hide-and-seek, to the annoyance of the other passengers. Then for a while the upper deck had had peace, while they were down in the engine-room.

They were preparing for a game of touch when Queen Lexa accosted the boy.

'You two will get thrown overboard, if you don't mind,' she said. 'Come and talk to me, and help me eat these chocolates. What are your names?'

'I'm Roy Macgregor, and she's Isabella, but we call her Tibbie.'

'That's better! That's much better!' Lexa cried, and Tibbie laughed at her through her curls, like a bright-eyed Skye terrier.

'Where do you live?'

'Balquhiddar House.'

'Do you know the way to Morven?'

'Do we know the way to the pier? We've passed it dozens of times.'

'Then you cycle?'

'No such luck. We just walk.'

'Morven's six miles from your house. That makes twelve there and back,' Lexa said, looking at him doubtfully.

'That's nothing. Even Tib can manage that. I can do more, of course.'

'That's a fib, anyway,' Tibbie observed. 'I can walk every bit as far as you. You'd better just mind what you're saying, my boy. I'm listening.'

'Which of you is the elder?' asked Lexa, laughing, but they did not seem to hear her.

'You! You can talk, yes,' Roy said scornfully. 'But it's only talk. Last time I walked round the loch you turned back at the bridge.'

'But there was a stone in my shoe, you know there was, and it made me lame!' Tib protested indignantly. 'Look here! I'll walk round from point to point to-morrow afternoon and back. Don't come if it's too far for you. It's quite fourteen miles.'

'Too far! I'll come to carry you home.'

'Do stop quarrelling, and listen to me!' cried Lexa. 'Which of you is the elder?'

'Twins, that's the trouble,' Roy grumbled. 'If I'd been a month or two older than Tib, she'd have had to behave. As it is, she just cheeks me, and then I hit her and she hits back, and so it goes on all the time.'

Lexa laughed. 'I live at Morven, and I'm having a picnic there next Saturday. I'd like you both to come, if you'll promise not to fight.'

'If he'll behave, we'll be as good as gold,' said Tibbie.

'If Tib isn't cheeky, it will be all right,' said Roy.

'You'll both have to behave yourselves, of course. Then you'll come?'

‘Won’t we just? It will be ripping.’

‘We’re very much obliged to you,’ said Tibbie decorously.

‘You don’t think your mother will mind?’

‘We live with our uncle. I’d like to see him mind!’

Lexa laughed. ‘Well, then, good-bye till Saturday, if that long walk to-morrow isn’t too much for either of you. And remember, no fighting!’

At each pier now, Lexa, like the captain, had friends to wave farewell to. When she and Miss Sparrow left the steamer, Roy and Tibbie were on the bridge waving their caps and cheering. Then Tib seized her brother’s bonnet, and threw it with all her might towards the stern, and rushed away below to escape his wrath. He dived after her, and Lexa laughingly waved her hand to the captain, and went off to claim her bicycle, thoroughly satisfied with her day’s work.

CHAPTER VI

NANNY

On Sunday afternoon, while Miss Sparrow wrote letters, Queen Lexa went for a walk. She strolled down to the mouth of the river to watch the gulls on the sand-banks uncovered at low tide, then, very full of her plans for the picnic and for the future of the Band, she turned homewards, calling the dogs, who were barking at the birds.

It was very hot. The sky was cloudless, and the water in the distance seemed quivering in the heat. From the pines on the hill came a constant stir and murmur as of waves on a distant beach, but in the valley there was not a breath of air. The sheep and cows in the meadows were all asleep. So were the cottage folk, and the children were indoors. The only waking creatures seemed to be the dogs, the screaming gulls, and Lexa.

The sun beat down on the bridge and the hot white road, and the Queen looked round for shelter and a resting-place.

The dogs ran down to the river for a drink. Close to the bridge, under some willows, was moored the boat belonging to the little yacht. It looked cool and inviting, so she followed the dogs down to the beach, drew up the boat, and climbed in.

The heat and the Sunday stillness made her drowsy. She was nodding, when she heard footsteps on the road. She looked up lazily, then sprang to her feet.

‘Jim! Jim Macfarlane! Where are you going? Dear me! Aren’t we fine on Sundays!’

Jim laughed. He kept his kilt for full-dress occasions, and looked truly imposing in all the glory of tartan, flowing plaid, and silver-mounted sporran. With him was his little sister, dressed like Lexa in white.

‘Allow me to present to Your Majesty Miss Nanny Macfarlane. Nanny—Queen Lexa of Morven.’

They shook hands gravely, and Nanny said, ‘We’re coming on Saturday. It will be jolly. I’d like to come before breakfast, and stop all day.’

‘My dear child!’ remonstrated her brother.

Lexa laughed. ‘Where were you going this afternoon, Nanny? To see me?’

‘I wanted to, but Jim said we mustn’t, ‘cause it was Sunday.’

‘But she teased so, that I brought her along for a look at the house.’

‘And we might meet her, you said.’

‘I believe I did say something of the kind.’

‘You said, “She’s a jolly sensible kid, and she’s sure to be out on a day like this!”’

‘Thank you so much! So kind of you! So glad I have your lordship’s approval!’ Queen Lexa laughed.

‘Nanny, you really mustn’t repeat every word that’s said to you! I’ve told you so before.’

‘Yes, I know! How many are coming to the picnic, Queen Lexa?’

‘Ever so many, Nanny. I invited thirteen yesterday. That’s a good beginning for our Band, isn’t it?’

‘But can you do with so many? It will make a great crowd.’

‘He means, will you have tea enough to go round?’ put in the irrepressible Nanny. ‘He said, when he was talking about it, he——’

‘Nanny! will you be quiet?’

‘Go on, Nanny, go on! What did he say?’ cried Lexa in delight.

‘He said he hoped you’d have enough cookies to go round. He wasn’t sure if you knew how much boys could eat at a picnic.’

‘I’ll not take you out with me again, Miss.’

But Nanny only laughed comfortably.

‘Are they nice girls, Queen Lexa? Jim said’—Jim groaned—‘that he wished you wouldn’t ask a lot of girls, for he doesn’t like girls as a rule. But he says you’re a decent kind, better than most.’

At sight of Jim’s face, Lexa laughed out. Then, seeing he was really annoyed, she changed the subject.

‘I wonder if you know any of them! The Hunter girls come from Monzie, over there——’

‘I know them. Red hair and freckles.’

‘I know them too. They go to our school. Jim once said——’

‘We don’t want to hear that, Nanny. And the Macphersons?’

Jim shook his head, but Nanny nodded.

‘They go to school too.’

‘And Duncan and Katie McNab?’

‘Their father is captain of one of the steamers? Yes, I know them. They’re all right.’

‘You once said, Jim——’

‘And the Macgregors, do you know them? They’re great fun, if they’ll only behave. They said they were going to walk along this way this afternoon. They’re twins——’

‘Don’t like twins, as a rule. They’re generally so affectionate, and talk about, “Dear This,” and “Darling Somebody Else.”’

Lexa laughed. ‘These two don’t. They quarrelled all the time they were with me.’

‘Then we met them on the road. They were—well; discussing!—who had reached the milestone first.’

‘It sounds like them. Perhaps we’ll see them on their way home. Now, who have you asked to come?’

‘There’s Rob Cameron. You’ll like him.’

‘Has he any sisters?’

‘I’m afraid not, Your Majesty.’

‘Poor boy! It will do him good to meet some girls! Well?’

‘Ronald Gordon. I’ve only asked those two.’

‘I’m very much obliged to you. That will do nicely to begin with.’

They sat for some time talking in the shade of the trees. Then Jim reminded his sister of their long walk before tea, so they said good-bye.

Lexa was starting for home also when she heard voices on the road. This time, to her delight, it was Tibbie and Roy Macgregor, and at sight of her they came down to the beach and dropped on the shingle, too hot and tired even to quarrel.

Tib revived first, and sat up.

‘And he said he’d carry me home! He doesn’t look like it, does he?’

‘Tib’s crazy,’ said Roy. ‘When we got to the point, she wanted to go on, and I had to make her turn back by force. She was dead beat, even then.’

‘That’s a fib, anyway. He wanted to take the ferry home!’

‘Oh, Isabella Macgregor! I never mentioned the ferry! Who’s telling them now?’

‘But you looked at it as if you’d like to, but didn’t dare to say so. You’ve been stopping to rest every half-hour——’

‘That’s another!’

‘Be quiet, both of you! I really don’t think you’d better come on Saturday.’

‘Oh, we’ll be good, we will be good! We’ll be as good as gold. I’ll behave as if Tib was my long-lost brother. We won’t have any more fooling.’

And while they sat there, the twins were really surprisingly quiet, and discussed the walks in the neighbourhood without even an argument. But Tibbie rose at last, mindful of tea-time.

‘Come on, Roy! You’ve rested long enough. I want my tea. You know,’ with a sigh of relief, ‘if we go on we can quarrel some more, and it always makes the time pass quicker. It’s such hard work being polite to you.’

And Lexa heard Roy’s shouted answer, as he sped after her along the road.

‘To you it’s naturally hard work to be polite at all!’

CHAPTER VII

QUEEN LEXA HOLDS A MEETING

During the week, Queen Lexa wrote to her grandfather, describing her new friends, and giving a list of things she begged him to send before Saturday. On Friday she had a long talk with Granny Mac, and explained the arrangements she wished carried out. Then she summoned Janet and Joanna and the boys, and gave them directions as to what each was to do, with the result that they began to look forward to the picnic almost as eagerly as she did herself.

Miss Sparrow, much amused to find herself not required in any way, watched and listened quietly, but did not offer even a suggestion till it should be asked for. Lexa had taken command so very thoroughly, and was so clear and decided in her plans, that it was plain she wanted everything left to herself. So Miss Sparrow, interested and amused, and rather surprised, offered no advice or assistance, but waited to see if any hitch would come when she would be called on for help.

But Lexa had a distinct talent for organisation, and had made her plans with care. Nothing went wrong, and she seemed to have thought of everything. Mr Mac and Granny fell in with her ideas with enthusiasm, and were prepared to carry out their share of the proceedings to the letter.

Saturday morning was bright and sunny, and Lexa sprang out of bed full of eager hopes for a busy and exciting day.

She spent the morning in the place chosen for the picnic, with Mr Mac and John and Jim, while Janet was busy with Granny and her mother in the kitchen. Directly after dinner, she drove off in the pony-trap to fetch little Isobel Ferguson, and Miss Sparrow retired to her own room, which was at the back of the house, looking out on Morven Hill.

Lexa, as she was setting out, turned back to her with troubled face.

‘You’re sure you don’t mind, Miss Sparrow?’

‘Oh, quite!’ said Miss Sparrow briskly. ‘I’m looking forward to this afternoon! I have some most interesting work to do.’

‘I *do wish* you’d tell me what it is!’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t think of it!’ laughed Miss Sparrow. ‘It has nothing whatever to do with you,’ and Lexa drove away, looking thoughtful and feeling exceedingly curious.

At the last moment Isobel’s courage failed her, and she clung to her mother and said she would rather wait at home. But Mrs Ferguson carried her out to the trap, and Lexa told her to look at the pony, and before she quite realised it they were driving down the road.

At first she was too shy to speak, but Lexa took no notice, and chattered on about the dogs, who were racing alongside. So by degrees Isobel forgot her shyness, and at last ventured a word or two about the yachts, and the gulls on the shore.

As they drove round the head of the loch, Nelly and Maggie Hunter rode up, and jumped off their cycles to ask if they were too early. But Lexa laughingly told them to ride on to the pier and wait for her there, and Isobel began to look frightened.

As they crossed the bridge over the river, at the head of the loch, Lexa gave a cry of dismay.

‘There’s the steamer! I don’t believe we shall be in time. Hurry up, do!’ to the pony.

‘Now you won’t be frightened, will you, if there are a few of my friends to tea, Isobel?’

‘Oh! I thought—it would be just—you and me.’

‘They’re very nice,’ Lexa said consolingly, ‘and I’ll take care of you. You can stay by me all the time, if you like.’

‘I would like to, please.’

‘Very well. I’ll not let a single boy speak to you unless you tell me to.’

As they reached the pier gate, Jim Macfarlane came spinning round the corner on his bicycle, with Nanny on the step, and Mr Mac drove up with a big luggage cart.

Jim greeted Queen Lexa with a shout.

‘You win again! We saw you, and we’ve been scorching to catch you up. But the steamer’s only half a minute behind you, Your Majesty.’

Nanny came up to the trap to shake hands.

‘Do you like riding on the step?’ she asked of Isobel. ‘I’d like a proper bike better, wouldn’t you? Queen Lexa, Jim says you’ve got such a jolly bike. He says you’re a very lucky kid.’

Lexa laughed, and Jim exclaimed:

‘If you start that, young lady, I’ll duck you in the loch, and what will become of your best dress then?’

‘It isn’t my best, it’s my second best. You said anything was good enough for a picnic!’ and she sprang away from him.

‘Well, now,’ said Lexa, as Jim dashed after her, ‘I quite agree with him. Come in here with us, Nanny. Jim, she doesn’t mean anything. She doesn’t understand.’

‘That’s all very well, but how would you like it yourself, Your Majesty?’

‘Why do they call you that?’ whispered Isobel. ‘Are you a Queen, Lexa?’

Lexa nodded, then bent forward to greet Ruth Macdonald.

‘Will you climb into the cart, and let Alfie come in here with me, please? We are the little ones. Good-afternoon, Duncan!’ to the captain’s son. ‘How are you, Katie?’

‘Here comes Rob Cameron,’ said Nanny. ‘He’s often been to our house to tea. Isn’t Ruth Macdonald pretty, Queen Lexa? Jim says she’s nearly as pretty as you.’

‘Nanny, I shall have to get a big bag and tie your head up in it. Jim, come and introduce me. And here come the Macgregors!’

Down the village street raced Roy and Tibbie, and Roy came running up to the trap.

‘Queen Lexa, you might give Tibbie a lift, if there’s plenty of room. She’s dead beat.’

‘*That’s* a fib, anyway. I’m not the least bit tired. Roy Macgregor, you have the biggest imagination! And Queen Lexa asked you to behave yourself! I’m ashamed of you.’

‘Get into the cart, both of you. Rob, will you please keep these two in order? If they quarrel, report them to me, and they shan’t come again.’

‘Oh, we’ll be good! We will be good!’

‘Now, Mr Mac, you lead the way. We’ll follow.’

The others were listening in surprise. ‘Come again!’ Then there were to be more invitations! But how she ordered everybody about! And why did Jim Macfarlane and these two call her ‘Your Majesty’?

In the cart they discussed the matter as they went. In the trap, Alfie and Nanny chattered away, and Jim, cycling in front, looked back anxiously at times at the sound of his sister’s voice. Lexa tried to draw Isobel into the conversation, but she was not used to companions of her own age, and was rather scared by their lively chatter.

But as they went, all, big and small, were looking eagerly about them, for Morven, standing deserted among its woods, had been a mystery to them all, and the thought of entering its big gates was delightful. They had all been growing more and more excited over the prospect as the time drew near, and had been eager for Saturday to come.

So the chattering ceased as they drove down the lonely white road between the walls of rare trees and evergreens, and all looked eagerly forward. Alfie Macdonald had hopes of seeing a rabbit in the road, but was disappointed, thanks to the noise of the cart, which gave warning of their coming. The boys caught flashes of white now and then, as terrified white tails made for shelter among the pine needles under the trees, and some one saw a squirrel, and proclaimed the fact with such a shout that the squirrel disappeared up a tree and was seen no more.

Now and then the wall of trees broke away and showed the great hills towering above, blue and gray and green and brown, or bearing vivid patches of golden gorse. Where the trees were thick, the ground was rich brown, carpeted with pine needles and cushions of moss.

A shout from the boys in front announced the gates of Morven, and Mr Mac drove in in fine style, cracking his whip, while little John held the gate wide, and Mrs MacTaggart, outside the creeper-draped lodge, helped up Baby Joe to wave his hand to the party.

The cart drew up beside the lawn, and Lexa sprang from the trap and hurried to her guests.

‘Will you all come on to the lawn, please?’ and they obeyed hastily, with eager, curious eyes.

The lawn was evidently prepared for their coming. Beside the little brown summer-house, which looked very clean and fresh, but had mysteriously closed doors and windows, a flagstaff had been planted in the grass, bearing a big Scotch banner—bright yellow, with a fierce red lion. On the grass, before the summer-house and banner, were spread plaids and rugs, and below the banner, on a white bearskin from among the curios in the hall, stood a big armchair, draped in another white fur rug, with some footstools around it. Janet and Joanna and the boys were standing on the steps of the summer-house, the girls in big white aprons, all looking eager and excited and a trifle nervous.

Lexa led her guests forward.

‘Please all sit down on these rugs! Isobel, come and sit by me, and Nanny and Alfie too.’

She took her place on the throne below the banner, and made the little ones sit on the stools at her feet. The others, deeply impressed, seated themselves on the plaids, and waited, in intense interest, for what would come next.

But what came next was very much to their minds and quite a surprise, for Lexa nodded to Janet, and she and Joanna and the boys disappeared into the summer-house, and came out again in a moment, each carrying a tray. The boys on theirs had glasses of lemonade, the girls plates of fancy biscuits and chocolates.

‘Well done, Queen Lexa!’ Jim murmured to his neighbour, Rob. ‘Not bad, is it? She does know how to manage things.’

When the refreshments had disappeared, Queen Lexa rose to address her subjects. She had never made a speech before, but had thought it would be easy. But she discovered now that it was very difficult, though she knew just what she wanted to say.

She cleared her throat once or twice, and hesitated. Then she caught Jim’s eye, and it put her on her mettle. If she failed, he would laugh. Or perhaps he would be sympathetic, which would be worse. She would show him that she was not the least nervous. It would be all right once she had made a start.

'My friends,' she spoke out bravely and clearly, 'I expect you are all wondering why I have asked you here this afternoon. I don't know any of you very well yet, but I hope we shall all be good friends soon. I live here at Morven, you know, and it is so far from everywhere that I'm often lonely. I haven't any brothers or sisters, and I've no one to play with, so I have often been very lonely indeed. But I thought it was silly to go on being lonely, when there must be plenty of boys and girls living not far away who would be willing to be friends.'

'Then one day I met Jim Macfarlane on the top of Morven Hill'—they turned with one accord to look at the mountain towering above them, and gazed at Lexa with more respect because she had climbed it—'and I asked him to invite some boys to meet me here to-day. And last Saturday I met the rest of you on the steamer, and asked you all as well; so I hope we shall be good friends. Now I want to propose a plan, and it's this. Let's form a Band—you've heard of robber bands, and pirate bands. I'll be Queen, if you don't mind, because I thought of it, and Jim Macfarlane will be my Prime Minister, if I want help or advice.'

'I'll ask you here to meetings, and we'll arrange cycle rides and picnics, and stamp and bird's egg clubs for those who collect and for exchange, and we'll have sports and competitions and prizes. We'll have a cricket club for the boys, and they shall challenge the outsiders, and tennis and croquet tournaments. I'll write to my grandfather in Glasgow, and he'll send me some badges, and we'll each wear one.'

'Of course, I know we can't do much in school time. I don't do lessons myself, just at present, but the rest of you do, and you won't want to spend every Saturday afternoon here with me. But there is less than a month of the term left now. By July you will all have holidays, and then we can have plenty of fun. I think we might have one more meeting when the badges come, and then wait till the holidays. Now what do you say? Has any one any objections, or any improvements to suggest?'

She looked round keenly at them all. Everybody seemed pleased, and on several faces there was eager delight and excitement. Her plan promised to be a success. Then Jim rose to his feet.

'If any person here present has any objection to the proposals just submitted to the meeting let him speak out, for now is the time! No? Then I ask you all to give three cheers for Queen Lexa! Hip, hip, hurrah!'

The cheers were given heartily, with all the vigour of seventeen pairs of lungs just refreshed by lemonade and chocolates, and Janet and her brothers, after a moment of surprise, joined in and shouted lustily. Lexa flushed with pleasure.

'That is very good of you. I am very much obliged to you all. Now, is there anything else, I wonder? Oh, yes!—Well?' as Nanny Macfarlane put up her hand as if in school. 'Yes, Nanny?'

'If you please, Queen Lexa, there's a little girl lives near us, who'd just love to come too! Her name's Effie Galbraith, and she's ever so nice. Jim says she's the prettiest kid he's ever seen, for a little one, you know, but I don't think she's half so pretty as Isobel Ferguson.'

Isobel blushed, and the Band gave a shout of laughter. As the noise subsided, Lexa said:

'Master Jim may say he doesn't care for girls, but he seems to know what he thinks about their looks.'

'Oh, but he likes pretty ones. He says he likes you, though, because you're jolly and good fun, and not because——'

'Nanny, Nanny, I shall really have to tie your head up in that bag! Has Effie any brothers or sisters?'

‘There’s a boy ‘bout as big as Jim.’

‘Then ask them both to come. We shall want more boys if we’re going to have a cricket team. Now, I have one more thing to say. If I am a Queen, you must all have titles too. We’ll start fair. The boys will all be knights, and be called Sir, and the girls will be Ladies. If any of you do anything to deserve it, I shall make you a Duke or an Earl, or a Countess or Duchess. And, of course, if I find that anybody doesn’t deserve his title, I shall un-knight him; but that would be a great disgrace, and I hope it will never happen. Now we’ll have some tea.’

At her nod, Janet opened the summer-house door again and displayed the tea-table covered with cups. John and Jim MacTaggart carried out another table from behind the house, and placed on it plates of cookies and scones and fancy cakes. Janet lit a spirit-lamp and boiled the kettle and made the tea, while little Joanna was handing round plates. Then John and Jim came out with trays laden with cups, followed by Joanna, with scones and bread-and-butter.

Jim Macfarlane jumped up. ‘Shall I help, Your Majesty?’

‘Not to-day, thank you, Sir Jim!’—at which the Band began to laugh, and Sir Jim winked. ‘They can manage, and they like to do it. Perhaps another day you will be good enough to help.’

She sat down to talk to ‘Lady Isobel’ and ‘Lady Nanny.’ Nanny giggled as she heard her title, and Isobel blushed with pleasure. Then ‘Lady Tibbie’ came up, and she left her and Nanny chattering away, while Isobel listened, shy still, but greatly interested.

Everybody grew very friendly over tea, and still more so in the games which followed. But Queen Lexa did not have her share either of games or tea, for she was going about with a little notebook, asking each in turn a number of questions. How old were they? When were their birthdays? Where did they go to school? When were the holidays likely to begin? Had they bicycles, and how far could they ride?—and a great deal more.

Then, satisfied on all these points, she put away the notebook and led them away from the lawn for a game of hide-and-seek among the trees. When they were too hot to play any more, she showed them the deer, and the swans, and the goldfish, and took them into her menagerie. They were still admiring the guinea-pigs and rabbits, and Isobel was gazing in delight at the baby squirrel, when Mr Mac came in to say that there was no time to lose if they wanted to catch that steamer.

So there was a rush for the big cart, and some were beginning to say good-bye to Queen Lexa, when she said, laughing, ‘I’m coming with you to the pier. I have to take Isobel home. Climb into the trap, little ones! Jump on your bikes, boys! We’ll all go together.’

When those who were sailing home had been cheered off on the steamer, the others took the road again, and the cyclists escorted Queen Lexa and Nanny and Isobel, dropping off one by one as they reached their homes. The Macfarlanes were among the first to say good-bye, but by the time Lexa had left Isobel with her mother, the others had all gone also, and she set out on her lonely drive home.

It was still light, and she did not mind being alone, but of course it would have been pleasanter to have a companion. After the merry drive out it seemed rather dreary to go home alone. She was just realising this, when she jumped at sight of some one among the trees.

‘Why, Jim! Whatever are you doing there?’

‘Waiting for you. I’m going to see you home,’ and he mounted his bicycle again. ‘It’s too late for you to go about by yourself. On that lonely road, too! Well, had a good time?’

‘You mustn’t come with me, Jim! It’s too far, and there isn’t any need.’

‘It’s nothing on a bike,’ said Jim, and refused to leave her till they had reached Morven gates.

‘Enjoyed yourself, Your Majesty?’ he asked, as he was saying good-night.

‘Oh, yes! I’ve had a perfectly lovely time! I just wish they could come every day. Good-night!’

Miss Sparrow had no need to put the question, for Lexa’s glowing account of the picnic told its own story.

‘We all had a splendid time! I’m sure they liked it too. But what about you, Miss Sparrow? Weren’t you lonely?’

‘Not a bit!’ and Miss Sparrow began to smile mysteriously again.

‘Are you sure you didn’t mind?’

‘Quite sure!’ laughed Miss Sparrow. ‘I’d have liked to hear your maiden speech, of course, but I never even peeped out of the windows. I stayed in my own room the whole time, though I felt strongly tempted to come and have a look at you at first.’

‘I knew you wouldn’t, of course, when you’d promised, but I was afraid perhaps you’d feel bad because we were leaving you out.’

‘I’m afraid I never thought about you, once I had grown interested in my own work. I was quite happy, I assure you.’

Lexa eyed her curiously. ‘Granny remembered to give you a good tea?’

‘Oh, yes! But to tell the truth, I was so wrapped up in what I was doing that I hardly wanted it. I’m afraid I let the tea get cold before I thought about it.’

‘I *do wish* you’d tell me what you were doing!’ sighed Lexa wistfully.

But Miss Sparrow only laughed again.

‘That’s my secret,’ she said.

CHAPTER VIII

A BIRTHDAY PICNIC

Queen Lexa could no longer complain of being lonely. She was deluged with invitations to tea, and before the month of school was up had visited the homes of all her subjects. She spent a quiet evening with Isobel Ferguson and her mother, and a noisy one with Tibbie and Roy Macgregor, and enjoyed both.

The next meeting was to be when the badges were ready. It was an exciting moment for the Queen when the steamer brought them from Glasgow. She called Granny and Mr Mac to look, and carried one off to the lodge to show to Janet.

They were round bronze medals, shining like new pennies and about the same size. On one side across the centre was the word 'MORVEN'; above was the motto, 'Friends for aye,' and below, the date of the forming of the Band. On the other side was a tiny Scottish lion, like the one on the banner. The children at the lodge thought them beautiful, or, as they said, 'rale bonny,' and so did the members of the Band, from Jim down to Isobel, when in due course a meeting was called and they were distributed.

Queen Lexa was so very busy now that she hardly had time for picnics and sailing. With her notebook before her, she arranged her friends into cricket, cycle, and tennis clubs, stamp, bird's egg, coin, and autograph clubs, and arranged for holiday meetings of the various collectors. She found out who were likely to have season tickets for the steamers during the holidays, so that they might plan trips together.

Then one day, a fortnight before school broke up, she posted invitations to the Badge Meeting for the following Saturday. The members of the Band met in a state of suppressed excitement, and their delight when she distributed the badges gratified her greatly.

On the way home that night, after taking Isobel back to her mother, the Queen confided to her Prime Minister a matter which was troubling her.

'Jim,' she said, 'you know the MacTaggarts, those children who help with the tea?'

'Yes. Their names all begin with J.'

'They do,' she laughed. 'Well, they are very fond of me, and they like helping at the picnics. Yes, Nanny?' for Nanny had been invited to come for the ride and go home on the step of Jim's bicycle.

'Jim says he 'spects you've been good to them, that's why they're so fond of you, Queen Lexa.'

'I want to tell you something that happened the other day. They had a half-holiday last Wednesday, so I expected to see them about the garden or menagerie. Mr Mac gave me a present the other day—the loveliest pair of baby white mice, in a cage, with a wheel to turn round! Wasn't it good of him? Well, I wondered what had become of the children, and thought maybe I had made a mistake about the holiday. But I came home to tea earlier than they'd expected, and as I went up the drive I heard voices on the lawn. So I went on very quietly, and peeped through the trees, and what do you think they were doing? They were playing at having a meeting like ours! Janet was trying to make a speech! For tea, they had slices of thick bread-and-butter, saved from their dinner at school the last two days. They must have gone without any. That was all they had, just very stale bread-and-butter! How would you like that kind of picnic, Nanny?'

‘I wouldn’t come,’ Nanny said frankly. ‘But then you wouldn’t give us that kind. Jim says _____,’

‘I know what you did, Your Majesty,’ Jim interrupted. ‘You went and fetched ’em something better.’

‘Of course I did. Granny had made scones for tea, so I filled a basket with them and all the cakes I could find. And I had just been buying some sweets, wasn’t it lucky? Oh, they were so pleased! I was just ashamed that I hadn’t done it before. I tell you, it nearly made me cry! I went away and left them, for I knew they’d enjoy it more alone, but their mother thanked me next day as if it was something big I’d done. Now I don’t believe they have much fun, you know, and it doesn’t seem fair that we should always be having good times, and they not at all. I can’t ask them to join our Band, for they wouldn’t enjoy it. They’d be dreadfully shy, and have no fun at all. I once asked them to tea, and really it was like entertaining dummies! I had to talk all the time, and they would scarcely open their mouths. What do you think we should do, Prime Minister?’

‘You’ve made some plan already, Your Majesty. I can hear it in your voice. Let’s have that first.’

‘Jim says it’s generally worth while hearing what you have to say, Queen Lexa. He says, as a rule, girls aren’t worth listening to, but you *have* got *some* brains.’

‘Only some?’ Lexa laughed. ‘Dear me! Jim, you mustn’t try to stop her! You don’t know how I enjoy it. She’s great fun.’

‘Fun for you, no doubt,’ grumbled Jim. ‘Hardly such fun for me! I daren’t speak when she’s about.’

‘Well now, I have a plan. I think we ought to give them a picnic.’

‘So do I. When shall it be?’

‘It’s not much use taking only the MacTaggarts. They want some one to play with. Jim, I want to invite all the children in the school they go to—there are only about thirty—and give them a real good picnic for once. I’ll be glad if you and Nanny will help, and I’ll ask the Macgregors and Isobel too. That will be enough. You will help, won’t you?’

‘Of course, but it will be a big undertaking, Your Majesty.’

‘I’ll manage it. I like managing things. I shall take them somewhere by steamer.’

‘Steamer! But think what it will cost! Look here, Your Majesty! Take them all in the cart across to the wee loch in yonder, and give them tea on the shore. It would be much easier, and they’d enjoy it just as much.’

‘I don’t believe they would. I thought of that, but it’s so close that they must have been there often already. Their fathers can’t afford money for the steamers, and I’m sure most of them have hardly ever been sailing in their lives. Do you think Lizzie and wee Willie, up on the hill there, often go on the water?’

‘Never, I should say, from the look of them. But it will be a very big job, Your Majesty. What will your grandfather say?’

‘I’ll ask him to arrange it with the steamer people. They won’t charge nearly so much for so many. If he thinks it’s too expensive, I’ll tell him to let it be instead of a birthday present. He always gives me something nice. He has an idea that girls should have jewellery given them—rings and bracelets and necklaces and things—so that when they grow up and go to dances they’ll be able to wear them.’

‘How jolly!’ said Nanny.

‘How rotten!—I beg your pardon, Your Majesty.’

‘You needn’t. I feel the same myself. I’d rather wait for those things till I am grown up, and have something that I’d like now. I wouldn’t mind a monkey or a cockatoo for the menagerie, but he’s hardly likely to give me those. I’ll tell him I want this picnic instead of any other present.’

‘But when is your birthday, Queen Lexa?’

‘Midsummer Day, Nanny.’

‘Why, that was yesterday!’ cried Nanny in dismay.

‘And you never told us! Well, I do think you’re mean! I’m sure we had a right to know,’ Jim said indignantly.

‘I thought if I told you, it might seem like asking for a present, and I couldn’t do that, you know,’ Lexa said demurely.

‘Well, you don’t deserve one. It serves you right if you don’t have any at all.’

‘I think I can arrange the picnic,’ Lexa said, to change the subject, ‘and I think it had better be next Friday. Their school closes on Thursday. Will that suit you?’

‘Fine. What will you do about tea?’

‘I’ll see to all that. Here we are at the gate. I’m very much obliged to you for coming all this way with me.’

‘What will you do if it’s wet?’

‘It won’t be wet. That would be too dreadful! Good-night!’

‘Good-night. Many happy returns of yesterday, Your Majesty!’

True to her custom, Queen Lexa had not yet mentioned her idea to Miss Sparrow. When her plans were made and she had decided on all her arrangements, then she was ready to consult and see if any improvements were suggested. So after discussing the matter with Jim, and before writing to Mr Stewart, she told Miss Sparrow all about it.

‘Don’t you think it’s a good plan? Won’t they enjoy it? I’m longing to get Grandpa’s leave, so that I can tell Janet. I want to see her face.’

‘It’s a splendid plan!’ Miss Sparrow said heartily. ‘I’m sure they’ll remember it for a very long time. But it will be a big affair. Won’t you want my help this time?’

Lexa looked at her doubtfully. ‘Would you mind very much if——’

Miss Sparrow began to laugh.

‘Not in the least—if you think you can get on all right without me! I assure you, I’m quite happy while you have your meetings, and I’ll be glad of a little more time for my work. It’s very interesting, and an afternoon now and then is hardly enough to give to it. I’ve heaps to do.’

‘I *do wish* you’d tell me what it is!’

‘Oh, dear, no!—not unless you’ll invite me to join the Band.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t do that. But I do want to know what you do all the time.’

Miss Sparrow’s eyes twinkled. ‘That’s my business. But do you really think you can manage this affair alone? How are you going to make all the arrangements?’

‘I thought if Grandpa says yes, you and I might go down to Rothesay the day before and see to that. If you wouldn’t mind helping me beforehand—you see, people would pay more attention to you than they would to me.’

‘Then we’d better talk it over and decide what will be best.’

By Wednesday evening, Queen Lexa cycled over to the post-office and received her grandfather’s reply to the long letter she wrote on Sunday night. The postman only called at

Morven once a day, so if she was in a hurry for her letters by the afternoon post she had to go and fetch them.

Mr Stewart gave permission for the picnic, on the terms she had suggested.

'You have been such a very expensive young lady lately, with your badges and season tickets and all,' he wrote, 'that if you want to give as big a party as this, you really must not look for another present too. I had meant to give you something worth keeping, but you seem to think you will enjoy this more. I have arranged for you to go on Friday, by the eleven o'clock boat, as you wished, and I hope you will have a very pleasant day. The children will enjoy themselves, I am sure. Make your arrangements for catering as you suggest, and send the bills to me.'

So before breakfast next morning, Queen Lexa sought out Janet.

'Janet, would you like to go for a picnic?'

'Me, Miss Lexa?'

'You and all the little ones?'

'Oh, Miss Lexa!'

'I want you to come for a picnic to-morrow, and you are to invite all the boys and girls in the school to come too. One or two of my friends are coming, but they are only coming to help. It's to be your picnic, not ours. Tell them all to be on the pier at a quarter to eleven on Friday morning. We're going by the steamer.'

'Oh, Miss Lexa!' and words failed her.

'Go and tell the others. Mind, everybody is to come. I don't want any excuses. And, Janet, tell them all to put on warm things for the steamer.'

Later in the morning, she and Miss Sparrow went on board Captain McNab's steamer, and sailed down to Rothesay and spent a busy day in making the necessary arrangements.

'It is going to be jolly!' she said, with a sigh of happy anticipation, as they drew near the pier on their way home.

'You're going to be very good to them, but you'll have a tiring day, Lexa.'

'But very jolly! Won't it be fun? You're sure you don't mind staying at home, Miss Sparrow?'

'I'm looking forward to it,' and that mysterious smile crept about Miss Sparrow's lips once more.

Lexa eyed her curiously. 'You do look mysterious! *Is* there a secret, or are you only teasing? I don't believe you do anything but write letters, after all!'

Miss Sparrow laughed. 'Oh, very well! If that's what you think, don't tease me about it any more.'

'Will you tell me some day?' begged Lexa.

'Some day, perhaps! Yes, on the whole, I think some day I will!'

Lexa wriggled impatiently. 'You *are* aggravating! Won't you tell me now?'

'I shouldn't think of it!' laughed Miss Sparrow. 'Here we are! I want to call at the post-office, and see if there's a newspaper waiting for me.'

'Why, what do you want it for? We've had one this morning, and you could have had as many as you liked in Rothesay! Why do you want one by the post?'

'Yes, here it is! I was expecting one to-day. Oh, this is a very special newspaper!' and Miss Sparrow's eyes grew mysterious, and she laughed as if something had pleased her.

'What *do* you mean? Mayn't I see it?'

But Miss Sparrow laughed again, and slipped the mysterious paper inside the breast of her coat.

‘I’m afraid not. It’s—something to do with my secret!’ and she mounted her bicycle and rode off towards Morven.

Lexa followed, wildly curious. But question as she might, she could draw no more from Miss Sparrow, and try as she would, she could not get a sight of that newspaper.

‘I hope you’ll have a fine day to-morrow!’ was Miss Sparrow’s answer to all her hints and queries, and she had to remain unsatisfied.

The picnic morning was all that she could have wished—warm and sunny, clear and calm. She had written to the Macgregors and Isobel, asking them to join the steamer on Friday morning. Jim and Nanny rode over to help in the start, and when they had piloted all the excited children safely across the gangway, they found Roy and Tibbie already on board and eager to know the meaning of it all. The matter had to be explained to them, and then to Captain McNab, who had watched the crowd come on board in great surprise. He had Duncan and Katie on the bridge with him, to celebrate the beginning of the holidays, so they were invited to join the party.

Isobel, when she arrived, looked scared at the number of strange children, but Queen Lexa knew she would soon forget her shyness. Nanny Macfarlane took charge of Joanna and Baby Joe, and fed them with sweets, and told them stories about the different places, and explained what the lighthouses were for, till they looked at her in deep admiration.

The children never forgot that day. They talked of it for months. The sun shone its best, and everything was delightful. Even crossing the gangway was exciting to them. The yachts, the screaming sea-gulls, the hurrying steamers pouring out clouds of black smoke, all came in for their share of admiration. And Miss Lexa could answer every question and tell everything they wished to know, or if she was puzzled she appealed to her friend Jim, whom Lizzie and wee Willie from up on the hill had recognised and greeted with shy smiles.

At Rothesay, a great motor bus was waiting on the pier. They were all packed in somehow, but there was no room for Lexa and her friends, so they crowded into a taxi and followed. It was a tight squeeze, but Duncan McNab sat in front, and Lexa and Katie took Nanny and Isobel on their laps.

The children gazed with startled eyes at the cars and the crowds of people on the esplanade. But these were soon left behind, and by a lonely road through the hills they reached a farm near the water, with smooth green slopes behind and the beach in front.

Dinner was waiting, spread on long tables out in the sunshine, and Miss Lexa and her friends made them all sit down and insisted on waiting on them themselves. Then Lexa made a speech, informing them that it was now two o’clock, and that tea would be ready at five. In the meantime, they were to play games on the shore, or to paddle if they liked.

Jim organised cricket and rounders, and he and Roy and Duncan played with a will. Katie and Tibbie set the girls to games also, and Nanny looked after the little ones.

But after a time Lexa noticed that Janet had dropped out of the game, so went to look for her. She found her in a corner of the shore, sitting gazing at the quiet water and the great blue hills of Arran beyond.

‘Why, Janet, don’t you want to play?’ she asked.

‘I wis lookin’ at the hills. Oh, Miss Lexa, I dinna ken how to thank ye! The weans are havin’ a gran’ game, an’ that’s a’ they think aboot. But I’ve seen things the day I’ve never seen before, an’—an’—they’re better nor *any* book, though I love the books dearly!’

‘Yes, the hills are better than books,’ Lexa said thoughtfully.

‘They’re jist grand!’

‘But we have hills at home, Janet! Some of them are quite as high as these.’

‘Ay?’ Janet said doubtfully. ‘They dinna seem so grand.’

‘That’s because you’re used to them. You must think more of our own hills after this. Have you never been here before?’

‘Fayther brocht some o’ us ance, but, ye ken, mither canna do that noo.’

It was a very tired party that sailed home in the evening, and a still more tired Queen, for she had felt her responsibility all day. But they had all enjoyed themselves, and there had been no casualties. No one had been hurt and no one left behind. They had spent a very happy day, and would not soon forget it. And as Lexa said good-bye to Nanny and Jim, after dismissing the company on the pier, she exclaimed:

‘Thank you for coming! It has helped me ever so much! I’ve enjoyed this far more than any birthday present!’

CHAPTER IX

BIRTHDAY PRESENTS AND BURIED TREASURE

The day after the birthday picnic, Lexa was busy in the menagerie, watching the white mice and feeding the rabbits, when little Joanna came running in.

‘Miss Lexa, them twa wee lassies that was with us yesterday are at the gate wantin’ ye.’

Much surprised, she hurried out, and found the Macfarlanes’ car waiting there, with Nanny and Isobel, one looking very important and the other very shy. Two big paper packages stood on the front seat.

‘Queen Lexa,’ said Nanny, ‘we are requested by the Prime Minister and the rest of your loyal and affectionate subjects to bring you these tokens of our love and esteem. I don’t know what all that means, but it’s what Jim told me to say. Anyway, they’re birthday presents, and we hope you’ll like ’em.’

‘Oh!—But I don’t want—I didn’t expect——’

‘Well, they’re here now! Don’t you want to look at them?’ asked Nanny, dancing with impatience. ‘You might undo them anyway. They don’t like being tied up in brown paper a bit.’

So Lexa, greatly puzzled, cut the string of the first parcel. Then, with a cry of delight, she snatched off the cover of a cage and stood gazing at two fine fat canaries, who looked terribly scared and shaken by their drive.

‘They’re for the ‘nagerie! Aren’t they beauties? They sing like anything, only just now they’re frightened.’

‘Oh! I’ve always wanted one! How good of you all! But they shan’t go in the menagerie. They must live in the house, where I can hear them all the time. Aren’t they sweet? And is the other for me too?’

‘Yes! They’re to make you laugh, Queen Lexa. The canaries were to please you.’

The other present was a bowl of goldfish in a box, much shaken also by the travelling, and Lexa laughed.

‘They shall go in the menagerie. Aren’t they funny? Look at their great eyes! What, something else?’

A clumsy tortoise was produced from under the seat.

‘He’s a present from Jim. He’ll eat all the snails in the garden, and do it ever so much good. And Rob Cameron says if you’d like some frogs or tadpoles, he’s sure he could get them for you.’

But Queen Lexa, with a laugh and shiver, declined the offer, with many thanks to Rob. Then she carried off the little ones to show the presents to Miss Sparrow and to have tea in the summer-house.

After she had seen them drive away, she sat down to write her notes of thanks—for Nanny had assured her that every member of the Band had been consulted—and a special letter to Jim, for, though Nanny had not added this, she guessed that he had been the prime mover in the affair, and knew he must have had some trouble in connection with it. At the same time she summoned them to a meeting on the following Tuesday.

‘I hope you’ll have a nice meeting!’ said Miss Sparrow, when Tuesday afternoon came, and retired to her own room and her mysterious occupation, while Lexa received her subjects

on the lawn.

She sat on her throne beneath the banner, and awaited the arrival of the cart. Isobel was to come by boat, in charge of Ruth Macdonald, but Lexa intended to drive her home at night, for the sake of the private chat with her Prime Minister on the way back to Morven.

Each member of the Band on arriving saluted the Queen in true soldierly fashion, a custom instituted at the Badge Meeting. Lexa, wearing a gilt paper crown on her reddish-gold hair, rose and returned the salute gravely, then bade them take their seats, and called the little ones to sit at her feet.

When all were assembled, she rose.

‘I want to thank you all again very much for the jolly presents you were kind enough to send me. It was very good of you, and I’m very much obliged to you all, and especially to whoever was the first to think of it.’

‘It was Jim,’ said Nanny, putting up her hand for leave to speak.

Jim groaned. ‘No use trying to keep anything quiet while that child’s about! It’s a wonder she didn’t give the whole thing away on the Rothesay boat that day.’

Lexa laughed.

‘The goldfish are quite well, and very funny,’ she continued, ‘and so are the canaries, though they felt bad for a day or two after their journey. But they’ve been singing straight on for the last two days, so they must be all right again now. You must see them before you go. Now we’ll have some games, but first we’ll arrange about our next meeting. I propose a trip to Arran by the early boat on Friday. We’ll hold our meeting on the boat, and picnic on the paddle-box, if they’ll let us——’

‘Which they won’t,’ said the Prime Minister.

‘Then Brodick beach will do. We’ll all have lunch together. Now, has any one anything to say?’

‘Yes, please, Your Majesty!’ and Rob Cameron sprang to his feet.

‘Well, Sir Rob?’

‘You spoke about a cricket team, but we’ve only six boys, counting young Alfie there. There are thirteen girls, counting Your Majesty. Can’t we do something to level up somehow?’

‘Hear, hear!’ cried the Prime Minister.

‘I’ll be in the team! I can bowl!’ cried Tibbie Macgregor.

‘You! Under-arm! Girls’ bowling!’ Roy was beginning derisively, when Jim strode across and sat down between them.

‘Shut up, you two! The Queen wants to speak.’

‘Certainly, Sir Rob!’ Lexa was saying, ‘we must, if we’re to have cricket, and I know boys can’t live without cricket in the summer. Are there any boys you would like to ask? Or have any of the girls brothers who would come?’

The Duncans had two brothers who, they said, were ‘wild to come,’ and the Macphersons one. Jim and Rob consulted, and were able to suggest two of their schoolfellows.

‘That will do nicely. Please ask them to join our picnic to Arran on Friday. That will make twenty-four members. Now, has any one else anything to say?’

Then Jim rose to address the company, and told them all about the picnic to Rothesay. Lexa added a few words, explaining what had suggested the idea, and telling how the children had enjoyed the treat, and then Ruth Macdonald rose to her feet.

‘It was a splendid plan, Your Majesty, and I just wish you had told us about it, so that we could all have had a share in it too. I beg to propose—do you mind sending Janet and the

others away? They ought not to hear about it at present.' Lexa nodded, and Janet, in much surprise, led the others towards the house.—'I propose, Your Majesty, that we pass a bag round at every meeting, and every one who wishes can put something in. You will take care of the money, and by the end of the holidays we may have enough to give them another treat before the winter. Then we would all feel we had helped.'

'A very good plan, Lady Ruth,' Queen Lexa said warmly. 'It shall certainly be carried out. I create you Countess of Dunoon. You are the first to earn a title, and I think everybody will agree that your suggestion deserved a reward.'

'Three cheers for the Countess!' cried the Prime Minister, and the Countess blushed furiously.

'I just wish we could begin now!' sighed Tibbie the impatient. 'I've twopence-three-farthings in my pocket. But I suppose we can't without a bag.'

'How like a girl, and Tib in particular!' and Roy pulled off his bonnet. 'Pay up, ladies and gentlemen!'

'The Prime Minister and I will take care of it,' said Queen Lexa, when the result of the collection, in sixpences, pennies, halfpence, and Tibbie's farthings, had been emptied into her lap. 'We'll keep it safely in a strong box, and bury it in the depths of the earth, for fear Morven should be burned down.'

When every one had gone home, on bicycles or in the cart, except the Macfarlanes and Isobel Ferguson, Lexa produced a money box with a lock and key. The money was locked up in this, and Isobel and Nanny were told to wait in the pony-trap while the Queen selected a suitable spot and the Prime Minister dug the hole.

For Lexa insisted that the treasure must be buried. One always heard of buried treasure.

They disappeared among the pines, and made a big circuit to be out of sight of Nanny and Isobel, and so came back to the summer-house and the flagstaff. The Prime Minister dug a hole beneath the throne by the banner, and Lexa solemnly placed the box in it. Then he filled in the earth again and replaced the grass, stamping it down firmly.

'Now,' said Queen Lexa earnestly, 'this hiding-place is secret, Prime Minister, and you must never reveal it to a single person. No one must know but you and me. Promise!'

'I promise, Your Majesty,' said Jim, and they shook hands on it.

And now, as if it were enough that the weather had been fine for the institution of the Band, and for the birthday picnic, there came days of rain from morning till night, and cloud and mist and showers. Life among the mountains was delightful in fine weather, but when the bad times came, the rain seemed heavier and the mist denser than anywhere else. There were days when not a hill was to be seen, when the world seemed wrapped in cold gray cloud, and the fog-horns on lighthouses and the sirens on steamers were going all day, and all night too. Mr MacTaggart reported Captain McNab's opinion that there had not been such a time of fog in summer since he took to the sea, and brought home tales of fishing-boats wrecked and yachts ashore on every loch.

Rain fell till the roads were impassable. Cycling was out of the question, even when for a day the sky was clear. Morven was some miles from a shop, and the Macfarlanes, Lexa's nearest friends, lived three miles away.

July, the beginning of the much-hoped-for holidays, was, at first at least, a failure as regarded the Band. The trip to Arran was indefinitely postponed. It was impossible to arrange even indoor meetings in such weather. Lexa could not ask anyone to come all the way to Morven, and it would not have seemed the same to hold the gatherings elsewhere.

On the very occasional days when it was not raining, she drove out to see some of her friends. Sometimes, in sheer desperation, she put on a mackintosh and tam, and went sailing with Captain McNab, for on a steamer there was always the cabin for shelter. Once or twice, when they were on the water, the wind rose suddenly, bringing rain with it, and the steamer tossed and rocked till Queen Lexa, though a good sailor, felt uncomfortable. She did not mind it being rough in fine weather, when she could cling to the railing and watch the waves. But when torrents of rain were falling and the upper deck was streaming, she had to go below, and there the motion, combined with the heat and the odours from the kitchen, was anything but pleasant. So she gave up sailing, to Miss Sparrow's great relief, and stayed at home, and grew very tired of herself and every one else.

'Oh!' she sighed one night, 'when the weather here is good, it's very, very nice, but when it's bad, it's worse than any place I know!'

During this dismal time a great loss befell her—the loss of Miss Sparrow. For one morning after the postman had been, Miss Sparrow looked up from a letter and said gravely:

'Lexa, I'm going to leave you alone for a while. You won't get into any mischief, will you?'

'Miss Sparrow! Of course not! But how?—why? Where are you going?'

'I have a very dear friend, who is starting for Canada very soon.' Miss Sparrow looked at her thoughtfully, then added quietly, 'We hope to be married some day.'

'Oh! I didn't know! Oh, Miss Sparrow, I'm so glad! But—how nice for him!'

Miss Sparrow laughed slightly. 'Do you think so?'

'Of course I do! I do hope he's good enough! Is he nice, Miss Sparrow?'

Miss Sparrow laughed again. 'He's going out to Canada to settle there. When he's ready, I'm going to join him. I would go now, but he won't have me till he has a home to take me to. He sails very soon now, but he is to have a little while in Glasgow first. I'm going home to see something of him before he starts. Mr Stewart is willing that I should, if you will promise to be very good and not give Mrs MacTaggart any trouble.'

'Oh, I will! I mean, I won't! I'll be as good as good. I'm sure I always am?' she asked, a touch of indignation in her tone. 'Of course you must go, Miss Sparrow. He must be wanting to see you before he goes. How soon can you start? It's not that I want you to go, you know—I expect I'll be dreadfully lonely—but I do want you to have as long with him as you can.'

So Miss Sparrow packed her bag and drove off through the rain to catch the afternoon boat, and Lexa found herself, as she had foreseen, very lonely without her.

The canaries were a great comfort to her in those gloomy days. No matter how dark the day outside, they sang till the sound filled the house. Many a time they cheered Queen Lexa when she was growing low-spirited, as, indeed, did the whole menagerie.

She spent more than one day among her pets, and nearly killed them with kindness, for she could do nothing but feed and tease them. She tried to teach the dogs tricks. She talked to the goldfish and rabbits till she was sure they were beginning to know her voice.

She fetched Janet and Joanna and the boys into the menagerie, and acted a circus, to their great astonishment and—when they understood what she meant by it—delight. The dogs were performing ponies, she told them. The tortoise, crawling clumsily about, was an elephant. And since they had seen neither circus nor elephants, they were delighted, and at last joined in the game.

She made Granny and Janet give her lessons in cooking. She insisted on helping with the ironing. She read every book she could find, and wrote long letters to Mr Stewart. She even

did some sewing.

Several of these wet days she spent in the summer-house. She would set out directly after breakfast, with a basket packed with everything she might want during the morning, for the stretch of spongy grass to be crossed made running backwards and forwards impossible. Once there, she had to stay till she was tired of it, for if she came away, Granny would not let her go back.

The isolation of the summer-house in wet weather was one reason that she liked it. Once there, she was cut off from every one. Sitting in the doorway watching the rain, or with door and windows closed to keep it out, she was a castaway on a desert island, or, what appealed to her more, an explorer in his lonely hut, a thousand miles away from any one. These fancies were very real to her as she sat alone with a book, and no sound anywhere but the ticking of her watch, and the drip of the rain, and the swish of the pines on the roof.

Sometimes she played at housekeeping, and Granny had to provide an extensive lunch on these days. No 'piece,' as Janet called a slice of bread-and-jam, would satisfy Queen Lexa then. She wanted everything she could carry, or John and Jim could carry for her. A bottle of milk and a mug, cake, biscuits, fruit, sweets, oatcake, bread-and-butter, and a tiny pot of jam—she would not be satisfied with less. But it was not as food that she wanted all these, but only to have the pleasure of packing and unpacking the basket, and arranging her stores in the cupboards, and the plates on the shelves against the wall. She generally had to carry home half the provisions she had taken in the morning, but that did not matter.

Many a time she wished for a grate in the summer-house, for then she could have lit a fire and made some porridge. Not that she wanted porridge, but that she would have enjoyed the cooking. But Granny laughed, and said it was as well there was no grate, or the wee house might have been burnt down.

Sometimes Queen Lexa invited Janet to spend the morning with her, and they talked of books, and of their fathers' journey. Lexa told all she knew of Captain Stewart's earlier voyages, and showed maps and pictures and explained them, while Janet's stocking grew under her busy fingers, and her eyes never left Lexa's face, unless she happened to be turning the heel.

But generally Lexa preferred to spend the time alone with a book, until at last she grew tired even of reading.

Then one morning she discovered that it was not raining. That in itself was not enough to raise her hopes. The rain had often stopped for half an hour, only to begin again harder than ever. But by midday it was still dry overhead, and the clouds were breaking. A fresh wind sprang up and blew hard all afternoon. In the evening the sun broke through the clouds and the hills came into sight, and there was a brilliant sunset.

'Get ready the pony-trap, please, Mr Mac!' cried Queen Lexa. 'I'm going for a drive. It's too muddy to walk. No, I can't possibly wait till to-morrow, Granny. By then it may be raining again!'

CHAPTER X MISCHIEF AT MIDNIGHT

After so many days indoors, Queen Lexa was ready for anything, and longed for adventure. It was after half-past seven when she started, but there would still be daylight for at least two hours, and she was far too impatient to wait till morning. Judging from experience, she expected the rain to have begun again by that time.

Where should she go? Would there be time to drive over to see the Macfarlanes? Nanny would be in bed, but Jim would be glad to see her. Perhaps he would ride part of the way home with her.

But when she had crossed the bridge and gone a little way along the road, past the ferryman's cottage, she had to turn back, for the road was still under water. The streams were overflowing, and the low land was flooded. She had seen the water lying in pools in the park at home.

So she set out in the other direction to see the Macgregors. Perhaps that road would not be so bad.

It was bad enough, but the pony managed to carry her through the puddles, and she received an uproarious welcome from the twins. They had grown very tired of one another's company, and had almost come to quarrelling in earnest. They had not had a walk worth speaking of for a fortnight, and when at last Lexa had to go, they begged to be allowed to go with her and walk home.

She hesitated. She would like it, but would their uncle mind? He was out visiting a friend and would not be back till late, and Roy and Tibbie assured her that they always did just as they liked. She quite believed that, so let them climb into the trap, and they all drove off merrily together.

In the course of conversation Lexa had mentioned that the road at the head of the loch was under water, and Tibbie was anxious to see it. So they drove across the bridge and down the road. But it was growing dark, and they could not see far ahead, so they were turning back when Roy said:

'Don't let's go home yet! Soon it will be dark, and then it's more fun. Tib's frightened, and screams and clutches me if she hears anybody coming.'

'That's a fib, anyway! Who said he believed there were ghosts in Midge Lane? Who won't go into the old graveyard at night, and doesn't even like walking past the church?'

'You!' and Roy sprang out of the trap and fled, Tibbie in close pursuit.

They were back in a moment.

'Queen Lexa, here's the ferry, and nobody about! Where does the ferryman live?'

'That's his cottage up there. He rows out to meet the steamer, if any one wants to get on board without going on round the loch.'

'Is he anywhere about?' Tibbie asked cautiously.

'Now she's going to get into mischief! Tib's always up to something, and she generally makes a mess of it.'

'That's another fib! If anything goes wrong, it's because you've been meddling. I'm going down to have a look at the ferry. Come on, Your Majesty. The pony won't run away.'

So Lexa followed them down over the rocks to the wet sand. The sand-banks were partly uncovered, and the tide was still running out. The ferry, a big unwieldy boat, large enough to hold a number of people, was floating at the end of a rope, and the twins immediately began to pull her in.

‘What are you doing?’ Lexa asked, knowing very well that any meddling with the boat would be forbidden.

‘Going for a sail,’ said Roy. ‘We’ll show you. Jump in, Tib. My turn next. You can help to shove back with an oar.’

Tibbie scrambled in, and the boat slipped off the bank and floated out with the tide. Roy let her go to the full length of the rope, then began to pull in again. Lexa lent a helping hand, and Tibbie used one of the heavy oars to punt her in. The boat grounded on the sand, and she sprang out.

‘Now, Roy! It feels awfully funny out there alone in the dark. I could scarcely see you. It’s quite shallow ever so far out.’

‘The Queen first. I’ll go after,’ said Roy.

Lexa hesitated again, knowing that she ought to stop this. But after a week’s confinement to the house she was ready for anything, and after all, what did it matter? It could do no harm, and, anyway, the man should have been there to look after his own boat.

So she climbed in, and the twins let her float out with the tide. It did feel strange to be out on the water, apparently quite alone, for it was now so dark that she could hardly see the shore. Roy’s turn came next, and then Tibbie’s again, and when half an hour had passed, they were still playing with the boat.

Tib had made a discovery.

‘Look at this funny lamp fixed on the stern! I wonder how they light it? Wish I had some matches!’

‘Course you do! Girls are always wishing for things, but they never think of carrying them,’ and Roy scrambled into the boat to examine the lamp.

‘I don’t believe you’ve got any yourself, and if you haven’t, you needn’t talk! Boys always think themselves so superior,’ Tibbie sighed.

‘Oh, do they? See here then!’ and he proceeded to light the lamp. ‘There, miss! What do you say now?’

‘How jolly! Try it now, Queen Lexa!’

But at last they reluctantly decided that it was time to go home. Even then, though it was nearly ten o’clock, and they all knew they had no right to be out so late, they did not start at once, but stood discussing plans for the next meeting of the Band. Perhaps it was because they had had no one to talk to for so long, perhaps because they expected scoldings when they did get home.

So they were in no hurry to go, but stood leaning against the big ferry-boat on the shore, and talking so busily that they never glanced down the loch. They did not hear the beat of the paddles, and did not see the lights of the steamer crossing the loch. But they had left the lamp burning, and the helmsman naturally supposed that the boat had come out to meet them as usual, and steered straight for the light.

From the funnel came a roar of welcome to the ferry. The children jumped, and stood staring at the rows of lights from the cabin windows, so close to them.

‘She’s very close in,’ Lexa said anxiously, ‘and she seems to be coming straight——’

A dull crunching noise, a shout from the captain and sailors, a scream from the whistle, and the steamer was on the sand-bank, the paddles churning up the water, the steam escaping noisily.

Roy and Tibbie gave one glance and fled.

‘Come on, Queen Lexa! We’ve done it now! I knew Tib would make a mess of it.’

Lexa ran too, and tumbled into the trap. The Macgregors had disappeared across the bridge.

But Lexa stopped suddenly, and pulled up the pony. It seemed so mean to run away. She supposed they were to blame somehow, though she hardly understood yet what they had done. But she knew they should not have been playing with the ferry.

There would be passengers on board, and they would not be able to reach home to-night. She must at least go back and see what was being done.

A boat had come ashore, and the men were crowding round the ferry. The captain was shouting questions and orders from the bridge. Lexa was glad it was not Captain McNab. The sailors were stumbling angrily up the beach in search of the ferryman.

Lexa approached an officer. ‘Are there many passengers? Will you be able to get her off again?’

He stared, startled at her sudden appearance. ‘Not till high tide. When will it be, do you know?’

‘It’s not low till midnight.’

‘Then we’re stuck here till to-morrow morning. Sunday, too! It’s four miles by road round to the pier, I suppose?’

‘You can’t go by road. It’s flooded.’

‘Well, boys! got him?’ as the men came noisily out of the cottage.

‘Ay, sir, he’s here, dead drunk. Why he lit the lamp I dinna ken.’

‘I—I’m afraid—I lit the lamp,’ Lexa faltered.

‘You? You’d better come on board and speak to the captain,’ and the mate hurried her to the boat.

The captain listened to her story in angry surprise.

‘Were you alone?’

‘No.’

‘Who was with you?’

‘I should not think of telling you,’ Lexa said indignantly.

‘You’d better. Probably they led you into mischief. You don’t look like one to do this kind of thing on purpose.’

‘We didn’t. We lit the lamp for fun. We never thought you would make such a—an unfortunate mistake,’—she had nearly said ‘silly.’

‘Who was it then? If you won’t tell me, you may get into trouble. If you give me the names of the others, you may hear no more about it.’

‘I’d rather get into trouble,’ she said promptly. ‘Do you want my name and address? I’m Lexa Stewart from Morven.’

The captain shrugged his shoulders. ‘Very well. You’d better go home now. You’ve had enough fun for one night.’

‘Yes,’ she said meekly, and turned to go, then stopped. ‘What about your passengers? Are there many? What will they do?’

‘One young lady, and some gentlemen. She’ll have to stop here till we get off, I suppose. Some of us may row across in the boats, but it wouldn’t be fit for her. It’s a cold night, and stormy on the water.’

Lexa looked down on to the saloon deck. Standing there forlornly was a girl of about her own age, rather taller, perhaps, and oh, so pretty! That was her first thought on looking at her.

But how tired and white she looked! And she was to spend the night on the steamer!

The Queen ran down the steps and went to her.

‘I’m afraid you won’t get home to-night. Have you had a long journey?’

‘Since nine o’clock this morning. I’ve come from London.’

‘Gracious me! You must be tired! I’m so sorry! It’s a miserable end to a journey. I’m afraid it’s partly my fault. I wonder—look here! I’d drive you round, but the road’s under water. Won’t you come home with me for to-night? It’s not far, and the trap’s waiting. Oh, do! I’d like it so much! There’s no one at home but me and the housekeeper, and I do have such lovely breakfasts! I’ll be delighted if you will. What’s your name?’

‘Monica Howard.’

‘What a funny name!’ thought Lexa, accustomed to Nellies and Maggies and Janies and Jeans, and surnames which mostly began with Mac. But Monica was saying anxiously:

‘Do you think I ought to?’

‘Why, of course! Come along, it’s time I was home. I’m just starving for supper. Captain, this lady will go with me to Morven for to-night, and I’ll see her home in the morning.’

‘Ay? Well, it’s the least ye can do,’ said the captain ungraciously.

‘Horrid old man! Is that your box, Monica? Leave it here. I’ll lend you everything you need. They’ll put it ashore for you to-morrow.’

They were rowed to the beach, the captain seeing Monica go with much relief, for her presence had added considerably to his difficulty. Lexa led her through the rocks and grass to the trap, and tucked her up in the rug.

‘You must be nearly frozen, out on the water at this time of night! Coming from London, you won’t be used to steamers. Why didn’t you go below?’

‘I did, but I came up on deck when the boat ran ashore. How did it happen?’

Queen Lexa explained, only keeping back the names of her companions.

‘Of course, we shouldn’t have been playing with the ferry, but who could have expected that silly old captain to make such a stupid mistake!’

‘And what became of your friends?’

‘I think they went home,’ Lexa laughed.

‘And left you? How mean!’

‘Oh, no! They never thought I’d wait. I did run away at first, but I came back. Who are you going to stay with? I have a lot of friends over there.’

‘My uncle is Mr James Macfarlane——’

‘Of Creggandarroch?’ cried Lexa.

‘Yes, that’s the name of their house. Do you know them?’

‘I should think I do! Jim’s a great friend of mine. What fun! Then you’ll be my twenty-fifth member!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Ask the Prime Minister,’ Lexa laughed. ‘My name is Lexa Stewart, and we’ll be great friends if you’re stopping with the Macfarlanes. I suppose you are the cousin Jim said was coming in July. How long will you be here?’

‘About six weeks, I think.’

‘That’s long enough for some good fun, if only we have decent weather. It’s been raining for a fortnight, and we’ve had a dense fog, too. None of my friends live within three miles, and until to-night I have hardly been out of the house for a week. Do you wonder that I wrecked a steamer?’

Monica laughed, and said she really was not much surprised. Then Lexa had so many questions to ask about London and the journey, that by the time these were all answered they had reached the lodge.

Janet and her mother met them with anxious faces, which lit up at sight of Lexa.

‘Oh, Queen Lexa!’ cried Janet. ‘We’ve a’ been that feart ye were lost. Gran’fayther’s oot seekin’ ye.’

‘Why, you needn’t have been worried! I can take care of myself. It’s time you were in bed, Janet! Good-night!’

‘Why did that girl call you Queen Lexa?’ Monica asked curiously.

‘Because I am the Queen, and Jim is the Prime Minister. I’ll tell you about it later. Here we are. Granny—why, have you been crying? Did you really think something had happened to me? Oh, I’m so sorry! I never thought you’d be anxious!’ and Queen Lexa was suddenly ashamed of herself. ‘I’m all right, only I stopped for a game. Don’t cry, dear!’ for the old lady was sobbing in her relief. ‘Granny, see! I’ve brought a friend home with me. She’s come from London to-day, and she started at breakfast-time, so she must be starving. So am I, and we’re both dreadfully cold. Can you give us something to eat at once? That chicken we had for dinner will do nicely, and some very hot cocoa to drink, please.’

She turned to Monica. ‘Come and get warm. Let me help you off with your coat. Here are my slippers. Will they fit? That’s right! Now come and toast yourself at the kitchen fire. That’s the warmest place I know.’

‘I’m afraid I’m giving you a great deal of trouble,’ Monica said, as she sat on the fender. ‘On that steamer I thought I should never be warm again.’

‘Trouble! It’s just delightful to have some one to talk to. And even if it wasn’t, and you were just horrid, and it was dreadfully inconvenient, and I didn’t want you a bit, it would be only fair that I should look after you, wouldn’t it? But for me, you’d be at Creggandarroch by this time. I wonder if I’d better tell Granny about that, or if she would be too dreadfully shocked?’ and she looked up with a laugh at the old lady.

Granny was shocked, indeed, when she heard the result of the thoughtless game, but Lexa gave her no time to scold, but hurried Monica off upstairs for a wash, since supper would be ready in a moment.

‘You will sleep with me, won’t you?’ she begged. ‘I’ve never had any one to sleep with, because I haven’t any sisters. But I’ve often thought how jolly it must be to have some one to talk to in bed. You’ll be too tired for that to-night, though.’

During supper, at which she presided with much dignity and great enjoyment, she told of the Band, and the meetings, and the various members, and gave Monica a cordial invitation to become the one wanted to bring their numbers up to twenty-five, which was accepted with much delight.

It was midnight before they were in bed, and both were too tired to talk any more that night. But as Monica was dropping off to sleep, she heard Queen Lexa murmur drowsily:

‘I *am* glad I wrecked that steamer!’

CHAPTER XI

THE TWENTY-FIFTH MEMBER

Lexa woke next morning with a vague feeling of excitement, of something pleasant that had happened or was about to happen. It was not at all her usual Sunday feeling, and she did not understand it till she turned and saw Monica lying asleep beside her.

Something *had* happened. She had a visitor. Of course, she would have to give her up to Jim later on, but it was delightful to have her there even for a little while.

She slipped out of bed very gently, and crept into the next room to dress. The sun was pouring in, the hills were clear, the trees whispered that it was a fine day. The Queen began to find life good again.

She arranged Monica's breakfast on a tray, and carried it into the bedroom. How pretty she was! Lexa thought again, and stood looking down at her. Her hair was not dark, like Ruth Macdonald's and Tibbie's, nor tinged with red, like Lexa's own, but was pale yellow, and very tousled, and lay all across the pillow, for she had been too tired to tidy it. Yes, she was very pretty, prettier than any one in the Band, Queen Lexa thought.

She set the tray on the table, and pulled back the curtains and opened the shutters, letting the sunshine stream in. Monica opened her eyes, then sat up in dismay.

'Why, you're dressed! Have I slept too long? I am so sorry. Why didn't you wake me? I really didn't mean to be late, but I was so tired last night.'

'And you're sleepy still!' Lexa laughed. 'I wouldn't have wakened you for anything. Here's your breakfast. Here's my dressing-gown. Do you like porridge? Granny makes it beautifully. Will you take sugar with it? I've heard that English people like sugar with their porridge, though I don't know how they can! When you have eaten everything on this tray, Monica, you must lie down and go to sleep again. Oh, yes, you can! You're only half awake now. You can sleep for another hour or two quite well, and by that time I'll be ready to take you over to Creggandarroch. I can't go just at once, for I have twenty-five letters to write.'

'That sounds like business connected with the Band,' Monica said, smiling.

'It has something to do with it. It's such a glorious day that I'd like to have a meeting at once, if it wasn't Sunday.'

'I hope it will keep fine now.'

'Yes. Just look out of the window! Isn't it splendid to see the sun again?'

'What a big mountain! And what lovely trees! What a beautiful place to live in, Lexa!'

'That's Morven. I made friends with Jim Macfarlane on the top. I'm longing to show you what Scotland is really like. You couldn't see anything last night. You must have thought it horrid. Now,' she said presently, 'I'll take these things away, and you must just lie still. You'll be asleep again in no time. Later on, we'll go over to Creggandarroch together.'

'It's rather funny,' Monica laughed, as she settled down cosily again. 'You know my cousins much better than I do.'

'Have you never seen them?'

'Not since I was three, and Nanny not at all, of course. I believe there's some story about Jim pulling my hair and me boxing his ears, but——'

Lexa stopped on her way to the door, and laughed.

‘Master Jim seems to have been fond of pulling ladies’ hair! There’s precisely the same story about him and me, only I slapped him! That’s years ago, of course.’

Monica laughed. ‘That doesn’t tell me what he’s like now. But you say he’s nice?’

‘I like him. I don’t slap him nowadays, anyway. Nanny is a funny little thing. Now go to sleep. I must write my letters.’

‘It must make you very busy.’

‘Not very. When I formed the Band, I asked grandfather to have invitations printed for me, and that has saved me heaps of trouble. I left a space for the date and place of the meeting, so I only have to fill them in and address them. I think I keep our little post-office going by the amount I spend in stamps,’ she laughed. ‘Would you like to see one of the invitations?’

She brought one, and Monica examined it with interest—a gilt-edged card, stamped with a crown in one corner, and ‘MORVEN’ across the other in dark blue letters. Below was printed in Old English type—

A Meeting will be held on the inst. at (weather permitting). You are earnestly requested to be present.

By order,
Queen Lexa.

‘Short and sweet, you see. On the other side I write anything I have to say—what kind of meeting it is to be, or what I want them to bring with them, or anything like that. Even that makes plenty of work, but not so much as if I had to write it all.’

‘They’re very nice. It must keep you busy.’

‘It gives me something to think about, anyway. I used to be rather lonely here by myself before I started the Band. Now I must go and write these.’

‘Then there’s going to be a meeting soon?’ Monica asked curiously.

‘Wait and see, and in the meantime go to sleep,’ laughed Lexa, and carried off the tray.

She sought out Mr MacTaggart, and asked him to have the pony-trap ready about midday, as she must take her friend home, Sunday or not.

‘I was hearin’ what happened to the steamer last night,’ he said, a twinkle in his eye.

Lexa had the grace to blush. ‘Is she still on the sands, Mr Mac? We didn’t mean to do any harm, you know.’

‘Oh, I ken that fine. But it’s jist what comes o’ meddlin’. What were ye doin’ in the ferry at a’?’

‘Just having some fun. Don’t be cross, Mr Mac.’

‘Oh, ay—fun! Whiles there’s funny things called fun.’

Lexa laughed. ‘What about the steamer?’

‘She got aff about sax o’clock, an’ she’s awa’ to the pier the noo. Yon captain’s an angry man the day, Miss Lexa.’

‘I shan’t go sailing in his boat for a while. Shall I hear any more about it, Mr Mac?’

‘No frae him. Frae Mr mebbe.’

‘Oh, well, he’ll know I didn’t mean any harm! I’m not afraid of what he’ll say!’

She ran off to the menagerie, but stopped short before the house, for Jim Macfarlane, in his Sunday kilt, was walking up the drive.

‘Well?’ she asked. ‘What do *you* want?’

‘Good-morning, Your Majesty! I’ve come to fetch my cousin.’

‘Your—*what*? Your—*cousin*? Whatever do you mean?’

‘Don’t tease. My cousin Monica?’

‘My dear boy, what do I know about your cousin? *What’s* her funny name, anyway? And can’t you look after your own cousins?’

‘Don’t be a goose, Your Majesty. I know she’s here. It was very good of you to take her home last night, and we’re very much obliged.’

‘What *is* he talking about?’ Lexa asked of the dogs, who were jumping about her. ‘Stop talking nonsense, Jim. I want to ask you something. I’m glad to see you after all this time. Hasn’t it been atrocious weather? Do you think it’s going to keep fine now?’

‘Who wrecked the steamer?’

‘Steamer? What steamer?’

‘Who played with the ferry?’

‘Ferry?’ Queen Lexa asked vaguely.

‘Who kidnapped a young lady and carried her off in her chariot to her fortress, and now holds her captive against her will?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know. *I* didn’t. What a lot of new riddles you’re asking this morning, Prime Minister! Have you been making them up during the bad weather? I can’t say I think they’re very good ones.’

‘Who refused to reveal the names of her accomplices, and is liable to be fined ever so much?’

‘Couldn’t say, I’m sure.’

‘Who’s telling fibs?’

‘I’m not.’

‘Oh, aren’t you? You’re pretty near it, then. By the way, Your Majesty, the Macgregors are on the pier, laughing at the captain and sailors of that steamer. Were they in the business too?’

Lexa laughed. ‘The monkeys! Jim, have you a toy yacht? I saw some boys with one the other day.’

‘Yes, a beauty. But she’s no more a toy than your big one is. She’s a racer, and can beat Rob Cameron’s into fits.’

‘Just what I want! How many of our boys have them, do you think?’

‘Our boys! I like that. Nearly all, I should say. Gordon has a ripper, and I’ve seen Charlie Macpherson with a little beauty. What’s up now?’

‘I just wanted to know, you know. Now don’t you think you’d better be going? You ought to be at church, and I have some letters to write.’

‘Another meeting? That’s good. We’re all ready for some fun. I’ll go as soon as you give me my cousin, Your Majesty.’

‘That cousin again! Are you going to carry her in your pocket?’

‘Where is she? You’re a provoking little monkey this morning, Your Majesty.’

‘You certainly won’t get her after that speech, my friend. Good-morning!’

‘Then I’ll go and look for her.’

He ran into the house, and she dashed after him and caught him at the foot of the stairs.

‘You silly boy! She’s not up yet.’

‘Oh, isn’t she! Why not?’

‘She’s sleepy. I made her have breakfast in bed.’

‘Well, I have the car waiting for her at the gate.’

‘Then the road’s dry again?’

‘It’s just possible to get along. You’d better get her up quick.’

‘I’ll do nothing of the kind. She’s sound asleep again. We weren’t in bed till midnight. I’ll bring her over to you later on. I like her, and I want a little more of her company.’

‘But they’re expecting me to bring her back.’

‘Tell your mother she was sound asleep and I wanted her to rest, as she was tired with her journey. I’ll bring her over in time for lunch,’ and with that Jim had to be content.

‘I assure you,’ said Queen Lexa, as she escorted him in triumph back to the car, ‘that she’s very nice, and you’ll like her. She’s the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen, and you know you like pretty ones. Nanny says so. But I do think you might have gone over to Greenock to meet her! It was miserable for her to arrive all alone like that.’

‘Father did meet her at the train,’ Jim said quickly, ‘and saw her safe on the boat. We thought he’d bring her home, but he had some unexpected business that kept him in town very late, so he had to stay over the week-end. That’s why I didn’t go.’

‘Oh, then, I’ll forgive you! I thought it was funny of you not to meet her. Good-bye!’

When Monica woke, Lexa insisted on giving her another breakfast of milk and scones and jam, before she would allow her to go out. Then she showed her the menagerie and the gardens, so far as possible, but everything was still very wet. They visited the pond and farm and stables, and it was nearly midday before the Queen was willing to start for Creggandarroch.

Monica was in delight at everything—the great purple hills towering above, the changing shadows on the slopes, the blue-green firs and pines, the emerald larches, and the silver gleam of the distant waters of the loch.

‘I never saw anything like it before! All the colours are so bright.’

‘Ah, that’s the rain, of course! It’s all washed clean.’

‘And everything is so still! It’s never quiet like this near London. Even at night we hear a rumble in the distance, and the trains are always going. There’s hardly a sound here.’

‘Except the trees! They keep talking all the time. But, of course, it’s Sunday. There’s an extra quietness on Sunday, somehow, even here. There are no steamers, you see, nor carts, nor anything. Everything seems asleep on Sundays.’

‘But suppose you want to get about? to go across the loch, for instance?’

‘You don’t. And if you do, you can’t, that’s all. You have to wait till Monday. There are some Sunday steamers that go down the water for a cruise, but most people think it’s very wrong to go sailing on Sunday.’

‘I’m afraid if it was London there would be steamers just as usual, or perhaps even more.’

‘How horrid! I wouldn’t like that. I like a real Sunday, and we certainly have it here. I wouldn’t be allowed to go driving to-day if it wasn’t for taking you home. It’s only because it’s really necessary that Mr Mac will let me have the trap. By the way, Monica,’ she said, as they set out, ‘your cousin Jim was here this morning to fetch you. You ask him to tell you about it.’

CHAPTER XII

TOO MUCH MONICA

After such a long interval, the first meeting of the Band was an important affair. No simple picnic on the lawn would satisfy Queen Lexa this time. So she made her arrangements carefully, with Granny's help, and fixed the time of the meeting as twelve o'clock, and the place, the nearest pier.

Some members cycled over, and were told to wait for the arrival of the steamer. The Macgregors walked, and were told to get into the trap and wait also.

'Did you see yon steamer ashore on the sands the other day, Queen Lexa?' asked Tibbie.

'Lady Tibbie, you're a monkey. I don't believe you're a bit ashamed of yourself.'

'Had those two anything to do with that, Your Majesty? We saw the steamer, but no one seems to know how she got there.'

'It doesn't matter how it happened, Sir Rob. Somebody was up to some mischief, I'm afraid.'

'I said Tib would make a mess of it. She always does,' Roy remarked, and at this self-betrayal the Band laughed.

'Here come the Macfarlanes,' said Lexa, as Jim and his cousin rode up, Nanny standing behind her brother as usual, Monica riding her own bicycle.

'What a very pretty girl!' said Nelly Hunter.

'She's our twenty-fifth member. Good-morning, Lady Monica! Have you recovered from the effects of your journey?'

'Quite, thank you, Your Majesty,' and Monica laughed at the gracious air and regal manner Lexa had assumed for the occasion.

'I am going to cycle too to-day. Lady Nanny, get into the trap with Lady Isobel. Here comes the steamer! Ah, Countess!' to Ruth Macdonald, 'will you drive the trap for me, please, so as to leave more room in the cart? Sir Alfie, get in here, and Lady Effie too. Now, is everybody ready? Off you go, then, Mr Mac! Come along, cyclists!'

They streamed through the village in a long procession, the cyclists surrounding the cart, and the village children said to one another that Miss Lexa had a big picnic the day. The big yellow flag, nailed to a pole, flew bravely beside Mr Mac, and added to the imposing look of the cavalcade.

Past the gates of Morven and along the road for another mile, across a bridge over a rippling stream, and then Monica, at the moment the foremost cyclist, gave a cry of delight. For before them lay the little freshwater loch to which Queen Lexa came for lonely picnics. It was very narrow, and stretched away among great green mountains, rising steeply from the water's edge. To the other members of the Band it was of course familiar, but to Monica it was a wonder and a delight.

'It's like a fairy lake, and those mountains are great giants sitting looking down at it all the time! Are we going to stay beside it, Your Majesty? Do let us!'

'You will see, Lady Monica. Come along, we are getting left behind.'

The road ran close to the water, with a line of trees between it and the beach. Presently a rocky bluff rose on the shore, while on the other side was the cliff, as if the road had been cut through the hill. Queen Lexa had chosen this great rock as a suitable place for a picnic in

damp weather, for as it was only thinly covered with grass and moss, three fine days had been enough to dry it thoroughly, and they could sit there with comfort. The rock ran out into the loch, making it even narrower than before, and had water on three sides and a broad strip of sandy beach at the foot.

‘Now, boys, leave your bikes against the cliff. Prime Minister, will you and Sir Roy Macgregor please find a place for the flag on the top of this rock? Sir Rob, will you lift out those yachts? Lady Tibbie and Lady Ruth, those hampers are full of scones and cookies and sandwiches. Please invite everybody to sit down, and give each one something to eat.’

Mr MacTaggart drove on to an inn farther up the road, and Lexa climbed to the top of the rock and looked round.

Northward, the loch stretched away among the mountains. To the south, the hills were lower and covered with pines. Opposite were the bare rugged sides of the mountain giants, seamed and furrowed with clefts, where streams came splashing down in a series of waterfalls. The loch lay like a sheet of glass at present, reflecting every rock and stream and tree, but in a very few moments the wind, rushing down between the hills, would raise it in waves. Sailing was not very safe in consequence, but on the beach at the foot of the rock lay two rowing-boats, which were necessary to Lexa’s plans for the day.

When the flag had been planted among the rocks, and all were seated up and down the sides of the bluff, Queen Lexa said, ‘I’m not going to waste time talking to-day, but I want to explain our plans. First of all, I must introduce to you Lady Monica Howard, cousin of the Prime Minister, who will, we hope, be at all our meetings for some time. Also I want to welcome very heartily our new boy members, who have not attended a meeting before. Now we can arrange cricket matches with the Dunoon boys and with your schoolfellows. The Prime Minister will see to all that.

‘I want also to assure you that the canaries and tortoise are very well, but I am sorry to say that the fattest goldfish overate himself last week and has not seemed very well since. You will be interested to hear that yesterday I received a present of a chameleon from Sir Roy and Lady Tibbie Macgregor, which I am delighted to have. It is a great addition to the menagerie.

‘The amount collected for the Picnic Fund at our last meeting was four shillings and eightpence three-farthings—a very good beginning. It will hereafter be known as the Treasure. Its hiding-place is known only to myself and the Prime Minister, and will not be revealed to any one under any circumstances whatever.

‘Now to-day I asked every boy who had a small yacht to bring it, and I see there are nine here. They will race in threes, according to size, and the winners will race again. Then I propose walking, and three-legged, and obstacle, and bicycle races, and throwing the cricket ball and jumping competitions. The Prime Minister and I will be the judges, and last thing before we go home I shall distribute the prizes.’

The interest deepened suddenly at the word, and the contests were entered upon with great zest. The yacht-sailing created great excitement and laughter, especially when the boats persisted in sailing directly away from the goal. The course was up the loch to a boat, in which sat Jim, and when the yachts set sail, and one went straight down the loch and another towards the opposite shore, there was much laughter among the girls on the rock.

Then Queen Lexa began to invent new competitions. Each boy must race carrying a little girl, on his back or under his arm as he preferred, and if any one dropped his girl he was disqualified. This provoked much heated discussion as to the weight of the little ones. Isobel was voted as light as a feather, and Nanny was very indignant when told she was the heaviest.

The girls raced to the spring with horn tumblers, which the Queen had provided for drinking-cups, and the prize went to the one who brought back most water.

By five o'clock they all sat down again on the beach, and the Queen distributed the prizes, doing her best to arrange that every one should have something, if only a consolation prize. She had ridden several miles to get these, and had spent a long time over her shopping. Practice balls for cricket, knives, and whistles for the boys, boxes of sweets and fancy trifles for the girls, were received with great delight, and when the distribution was over, Sir Roy Macgregor called for three hearty cheers for the Queen.

Then Mr MacTaggart came up with the wagonette. The collection for the Treasure Fund was hurriedly made, and they prepared to go home to Morven for tea on the lawn.

Queen Lexa made them all ride on, while she and the Prime Minister followed, for she wanted to discuss the next meeting with him. They sat for a time on the rock, to let the others get well ahead. Then they started slowly after them on their bicycles.

'You managed those prizes jolly well, Your Majesty. It was a fine idea,' said Jim, who had not been taken into confidence.

'Can you suggest anything new for next time? I think we must go somewhere by steamer.'

'We might have that trip to Arran. Monica is very anxious to see Arran. I'm glad you like my cousin, Your Majesty.'

'I don't like her *because* she's your cousin, you know,' Lexa laughed. 'Don't you think that! She's a very pretty girl.'

'Yes, rather! I'm quite proud of her,' he said. 'It's not often you see as pretty a girl as that. One can't help noticing her.'

Lexa looked surprised, for he had spoken warmly. But he continued:

'She's clever, too. She was looking at my school books the other day, and I found she'd been twice through the Latin book we're using now. I thought girls knew nothing about Latin. She's ahead of me in Euclid too. Fancy! A girl!'

'You don't think much of girls evidently.'

'Oh, don't be offended! Present company's always excepted. Ever do any Euclid, Your Majesty?'

'No,' Lexa said reluctantly, for she did not like confessing herself behind him, still less behind Monica.

'Awful rot, but Monica says she likes it. Says it makes her think of puzzles. She must be clever, don't you think so?'

'I suppose she is.'

'And yet she's such fun. Clever people are apt to be dull and stupid, but she's ready for anything. When you're at some game with her, you quite forget what a lot she knows, but now and then something happens to remind you. Last night we made up nonsense rhymes, like "There was an old lady of somewhere." I found it jolly difficult, I can tell you, but she proposed it, so I had to try. Her rhymes were simply splendid; they made Nanny scream, and father roared at some of them. Oh, yes, Monica's clever!'

'Evidently. Who won that cricket match last Monday?'

'We did, of course. Don't ask what I made. Monica was watching, and it made me nervous. D'you know, she can——'

'How were you out?'

'Clean bowled, middle stump.'

'Disgraceful! I'm ashamed of you! It wouldn't have been so bad if you'd been caught.'

‘Why, it would have been far worse!’ Jim cried indignantly. ‘Any one may be bowled, but it’s sheer carelessness to send a catch right into a man’s hands!’

‘Well now,’ said Lexa, delighted at the chance of an argument, ‘it seems to me pure chance if a fielder happens to catch your ball, and I’m always sorry for a man who’s caught out. But to lift up your bat and let the ball go under it into the middle of your wicket—I suppose that’s what you did?—is too silly for anything.’

Jim laughed. ‘How like a girl! I’m sure Monica would know better than that. Do you know—as I was going to tell you when you interrupted—she can bowl almost as well as a boy. Under-arm, of course, but straight for the wicket. She got me out several times yesterday.’

‘I’m not surprised at that. She’s so dreadfully clever that she’ll naturally beat you at everything.’

‘I say! If you turn sarcastic, you’ll have to talk to her, Your Majesty,’ said Jim in surprise, for she did not often speak sharply. ‘I’m not clever enough for that. What’s offended you?’

‘We’d better not have any more members at present,’ Lexa said. ‘There are enough now, don’t you think so?’

Jim looked at her in astonishment. It seemed as if he had offended her somehow, but he did not know what he had done. But presently they reached Morven, and Lexa had to attend to her guests.

She was thoughtful during tea, and looked anxiously at Monica several times. She hardly knew what was troubling her, but she felt that something was wrong, or rather, that something might be wrong soon.

It was Jim who had made her feel so, but she comforted herself with the thought that he would ride home with her as usual to-night, and perhaps it would be all right then.

He met her at the usual place, when she had taken Isobel home, but to-night Monica was with him.

‘I’ll come too, and keep Jim company on the way home,’ she said.

But the Queen did not mean to be disappointed so easily of her talk with her Prime Minister.

‘There’s no need. He’s often said he doesn’t mind the ride, and you must be tired after all we’ve done to-day.’

‘Oh, no, I’m not. I’m quite ready for another ride.’

‘I want to talk over some business with him,’ said Queen Lexa pointedly.

‘Oh, I don’t want to be in the way!’ Monica laughed. ‘Good-night, then, Your Majesty! We’ve all had a very good time.’

Lexa drove off, feeling uncomfortable and ashamed, for she certainly had not meant to talk business. Jim rode by her side in silence.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ she asked impatiently at last.

‘Why wouldn’t you let Monica come? She’s good fun, and you don’t generally have so much business to talk about.’

‘We never decided about the next meeting.’

‘What’s the hurry? We’re all quite willing to leave it to you.’

‘Well, we always have a jolly ride together, and—oh, of course you don’t understand, but I thought——’

‘Were you afraid Monica would spoil it? What a silly notion! I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but really——’

‘Oh, if you think I’m silly you’re welcome to say so, I’m sure!’ she laughed uneasily. ‘Let’s talk of something else.’

It seemed to Jim that in some way she had begun to dislike Monica, and that the best way to remove this dislike would be to make her know his cousin better. In this he was wrong, for she liked Monica very much, but to-day she had heard a little too much about her. So Jim proceeded to make matters worse.

‘Did you know she had a fiddle, Your Majesty?’

‘Who?’

‘Why, Monica?’

‘No, I didn’t know. Does she practise all day? You’ll soon be sick of that.’

‘She plays jolly well. You must come and hear her. Father says she’ll be a remarkably fine musician some day.’

‘Wasn’t it good of the Macgregors to give me that chameleon?’

‘Very,’ said Jim, surprised again by her sudden change of subject. ‘You haven’t shown him to me yet.’

‘You shall see him to-night, if you’ll come up to the house.’

‘I’d better not, thanks. It’s late already. If I may, I’ll come some other day, and bring Monica. We may be passing, for she said to-night she’d like to ride over to the place we picnicked to-day and try a sketch of the loch. She won’t let me look at her sketch-book, but mother has seen it and says she draws very well. I couldn’t make a sketch if I was offered a sovereign for it, could you, Your Majesty?’

‘Do you know, I really think Isobel Ferguson isn’t quite so shy as she used to be. I feel quite pleased.’

Jim looked at her. ‘Why do you always change the subject when I talk about Monica? This afternoon you said you liked her.’

‘I like toffee, but too much toffee makes me sick.’

‘Well! After that, I’d better go home.’

Lexa laughed uneasily again. ‘Oh, please don’t be offended. I know I am shockingly rude. But, Jim, you’ve hardly spoken about anything but Monica to-day. Now that she has come, can you think of nothing else? Aren’t you still interested in the things we used to care about? For if not, I shall be left very much out in the cold.’

‘Don’t be a goose!’ Jim said brusquely. ‘I may be interested in my cousin, surely!’

‘Yes, but you needn’t talk about her all the time. She’s not everybody’s cousin——’

‘Everybody would be jolly well off if she were.’

Lexa dropped the subject. ‘Here we are on the bridge. Will you come up to the house to see Cammy?’

‘I mustn’t, thanks. I’ve promised——’ he stopped.

Lexa sighed. ‘Well? Go on! Is it Monica again?’

‘I’ve promised to play her at chess before bedtime. She plays first-rate. She beat me out and out last night, and I want my revenge.’

‘Is there anything Monica can’t do?’

‘Not much,’ Jim said honestly.

‘Except keep out of your conversation. Then you’d better hurry back to her. Good-night!’

She drove off, and Jim rode home, puzzled and annoyed, and rather troubled.

CHAPTER XIII

FORSAKEN

Queen Lexa lay in bed, with the sunshine streaming through the open shutters, and thought it all out.

What had been the matter with her yesterday? Why had she been so impatient with Jim? He had only told her about Monica, and she liked Monica. She liked her very much. Then why had she been so unwilling to hear about her? Why had she been so rude to Jim?

She knew the reason well enough, but for a while she would not admit it even to herself. She had suddenly become afraid that Jim would be so interested in his cousin that he would forget his old friends—that, in fact, he would like Monica better than her. She was jealous of Monica, though she would hardly confess it. She was very much ashamed of herself. It was ridiculous to be jealous of a girl who was as nice as she could be. But she was afraid that Monica would take her place with Jim.

She sprang out of bed at last, angry with herself. The more she thought, the more foolish did her behaviour appear.

‘You silly! You silly! Stop this nonsense! She’s his cousin; of course he likes her. All the same, I do hope she won’t take up all his time. I’ll be sorry if he forgets the rest of us altogether. Now the best thing I can do to-day—it’s a fine day and there’s a good breeze—is to ask Monica and Jim to go sailing with me in the yacht. I know they’ll like that. Then we shall all be good friends.’

But Mr MacTaggart could not start at once after breakfast, and when Lexa climbed the beach to the road near Creggandarroch, Monica and the Macfarlanes were hurrying towards the pier.

‘Why, Your Majesty! We’re off for a sail. Come with us! There’s the steamer crossing now.’

‘I came to ask you to go sailing with me in the yacht. Won’t you come?’

‘Another day we’ll be delighted, but to-day we want Monica to see Rothesay and the Kyles. Will you come? Send the yacht home again.’

Lexa shook her head. Her season ticket was at home and so was her purse, for she had thought all they would need was in the yacht. She did not care to explain this, however, and they had no time to wait, for the steamer was drawing in to the pier. So they hurried off, and she went disconsolately back to Mr Mac. In the afternoon she took Janet and Joanna and the boys for a short sail, and their enjoyment was the only bright thing in a disappointing day.

The next morning was fine also, so she set out for Creggandarroch prepared to join in whatever plans her friends had made—sailing, cycling, or walking. But Mrs Macfarlane met her at the door.

‘Is that you, Lexa? Jim and Monica are away for a cycle ride to Toward Point. They would have come for you, but it would have been so far out of their way. There’s only Nanny at home. Would you like to see her?’

‘No, thanks, it was the others I wanted,’ Lexa said, trying bravely not to show her disappointment. ‘I thought we might go somewhere together.’

‘I’m sorry they didn’t wait to see if you would come. You see, Jim has never had any one of his own age to go about with before. Nanny is too small, but Monica is a splendid

companion for him, and they get on very well together.'

Lexa rode slowly homewards, with a heavy heart. It was as she had feared. Monica had taken away her best friend. Jim had not a moment to spare for her now. Very well, she would do without him! She would find other companions. So she turned and cycled quickly on to Dunoon, to call on the Macdonalds.

'Countess Ruth, have you made any plans for to-day?'

'None whatever, Your Majesty! We were just wondering what to do.'

'Then come and spend the day with me. We'll play tennis, and eat gooseberries and raspas. Sir Alfie must come too, of course. I'll leave my bicycle here, and fetch it in the evening, and we'll go across by steamer. Tell your mother you won't be back till bedtime. Bring your stamp album, and I'll show you mine.'

They walked along the shore to fetch Isobel Ferguson, and all went back by steamer. They spent a merry day in the gardens of Morven, with tennis, stamps, and the laden bushes in the kitchen-garden to amuse them, and Queen Lexa seemed the merriest of them all. She insisted on being treated as the Queen, and never forgot to call them by their titles. She demanded absolute obedience, and received it. She ordered them about to her heart's content, and they never murmured.

But she was not satisfied. Jim would not have been her slave for a whole day. He would have told her to stop talking rot and behave herself, or would have reminded her, as he had done more than once when she was becoming too domineering for his taste, that she could not climb a mountain without going to sleep at the top. But she would have enjoyed a little while of his company more than a whole day with these others. And she knew that her merriment was only pretence, to hide her disappointment from herself as much as from any one else, for she was annoyed that she could not forget Jim and Monica.

Next morning she set off very early for a trip by steamer, determined not to go to Creggandarroch again. She would not let Jim think she could not enjoy herself without him, even if it were the truth. She had gone to them twice. Now it was their turn to come to her. If they did not, she would know they did not want her.

Nelly and Maggie Hunter were on board, and also Duncan and Katie McNab, who had inherited their father's love of the water. So they had a merry sail, and Lexa did not reach home till late in the evening.

Granny had news for her. The Macfarlanes and Monica had been there, and had been much disappointed at hearing she was away for the day. She had shown them the chameleon, and the young lady had been delighted with it. They had no plans for the next day, so far as Granny knew.

So Lexa rode over to see them in the morning. Since they had come to look for her, she had forgiven them, and realised now that she could hardly blame them for the misfortunes of the last few days. They would all go somewhere to-day and enjoy themselves.

But Mrs Macfarlane began to laugh at sight of her.

'Dear me! You children are unfortunate in your plans! When you come here they are out, and when they go to you, you are out! You should write and make appointments, then you wouldn't miss one another like this.'

'If we did, it would be sure to rain. It always does when you plan beforehand. You just have to wait for a fine morning, and then make up your mind what you'll do,' said Lexa, struggling bravely to hide her disappointment again. 'We've been very unlucky. I'm sorry I was away yesterday. Where have they gone to-day?'

‘Well, you see, when Monica heard about your day on Loch Ridden yesterday, she thought it sounded so delightful that she wanted to do the same, so they won’t be back till late.’

‘I’m sorry. I’d better make arrangements now, or I shall miss them again. To-morrow is Sunday. Will you ask them to come over on Monday morning, and we’ll have a picnic?’

Mrs Macfarlane promised that if they could not come they should let her know, and Lexa went home, disappointed for the day, but hopeful for the future.

Monday morning came, warm and sunny and tempting for a picnic. But the hours passed, and Queen Lexa was still waiting for her guests. The postman brought no letter, and by lunch-time there was no sign of Jim and Monica. In the evening, Lexa rode over to the post-office, sure there would be some explanation awaiting her there. But there was no letter.

Her face was resolute and set as she rode home. She would never have believed they would treat her so. Even if Jim did prefer his cousin’s company, he might have told her so, when his mother had promised he should write. Or he might have come over on Sunday afternoon to explain. Perhaps he did not like to tell her that he had no time to waste upon her now. Well, she would not trouble him any more.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RUDENESS OF THE QUEEN

As Queen Lexa rode home after her fruitless visit to the post-office, her mind was made up as to what she would do. She would no longer expect the Macfarlanes. She would make no more plans which included them. Jim had failed her. She would not trouble him any more. She would leave him to enjoy himself with Monica. She would find other companions.

As for the Band, she did not know what to do. She could not call a meeting without telling the Prime Minister, but she did not want to invite him or his cousin. She might choose some other boy to take his place, but there was no one in the Band who seemed quite suitable. She would not have a meeting at present, anyway. Later on she would think about it.

But she must pretend to enjoy herself, or the Macfarlanes would think she was unhappy without them. It would never do to stay at home to-morrow. They would perhaps come to see her. Perhaps they would say they were so sorry, but it had been such a fine morning that it had seemed a pity to waste it with her, so they had gone for a sail, and had forgotten to write. She was determined not to be at home if they did come, and not to leave any message for them.

Where should she go, and with whom? She must have some one with her, so that no one could think she was lonely. Who should it be? She had seen the Macdonalds, and the McNabs, and the Hunters, and Isobel during the week; but there were still the Macgregors. There would be plenty of fun with them, though there might be mischief also.

But the next morning was wet. The rain cleared off during the forenoon, but it was too late for a picnic then. So Queen Lexa wrote a note to Tibbie, asking them to meet her next day, and sent it off to the post. Then she settled down for a lazy day with a book, hoping anxiously that Jim would not appear. She did not want to see him. She was afraid of an open quarrel if she said what she thought, and she knew she was more likely to say too much than too little.

She sat curled up in the corner of the sofa by the library window, deep in one book and with half a dozen others around. Lunch was over. She would have a fine quiet afternoon. The dogs were sleeping at her feet, and Granny's cat was purring in her lap. It made her feel warm and cosy and comfortable just to hear the cat purr, she said. She had a dish of raspberries by her side, and refreshed herself occasionally. A heavy shower was beating against the window, and she felt with deep satisfaction that there would be no need to move till tea was ready.

The sharp ringing of a bicycle bell made her look up in annoyance. Jim and Monica were coming up the drive as fast as they could pedal, to shelter from the storm.

Lexa caught up the fruit and her book, and fled to the kitchen, where Granny was baking scones for tea.

'Granny, there's some one at the door. Let them shelter and get dry if they're wet. I don't want to see them. You can say I'm ill, or not at home. You must look after them, for I'm not coming down till they're away. It will just serve them right for the way they treated me.'

She ran upstairs to her bedroom and locked the door, leaving poor Granny bewildered by this sudden display of eccentricity.

Monica and Jim were naturally much astonished when, after they had been welcomed and led to the fire to get dry, Lexa did not appear. They were still more astonished when told that she was at home and upstairs, but refused to see them, for Granny would not have dreamt of saying anything but the truth.

‘Oh, nonsense!’ cried Jim. ‘She doesn’t know who it is, that’s all. She’ll come if you tell her Monica’s here. Think not? Then I’ll go and fetch her myself. In her room? Come and show me which it is,’—to the housemaid.

He hammered and thumped on the door, and informed her through the keyhole that Monica was there and wanted to see her. But no sound came from within, and he began to wonder if anything was the matter, and went down to the kitchen again to ask Granny if the Queen was quite well.

‘Perhaps she has a headache,’ Monica said sympathetically, in spite of Granny’s assurance that there was nothing the matter, and that an hour ago Miss Lexa had eaten as hearty a dinner as she’d ever seen her.

‘Perhaps she ate too much,’ Jim laughed.

‘Perhaps she has toothache. I’m going up to ask her.’

‘Lexa, dear,’ she called through the door, ‘is anything the matter? I thought perhaps you had toothache. I’m always miserable when I have it. What do you do for it? I suppose you’ve tried camphor? It’s not much use if you’re really bad. Perhaps it would be better if you would come down and talk to us.’

‘I have not got toothache,’ came the answer in a clear voice from within. ‘There is nothing whatever the matter with me.’

‘Then why won’t you come down? We want to tell you about yesterday. We had a lovely time.’

This naturally did not improve matters. Lexa would not speak again, and after a few more questions, Monica went back to Jim.

‘She says there is nothing wrong with her, and she won’t speak another word, whatever I say. I can’t make it out. Do you think she can be offended at anything?’

‘If she is, and won’t tell what it is, she’s a silly kid. Maybe she’s in the sulks because of yesterday.’

‘Oh, I do hope not! I would be so sorry.’

‘She can’t have her own way about everything. I was sorry about yesterday, but we couldn’t help it. Whatever’s wrong with her, she has no business to behave like this, when we’ve come to see her. It’s rude, and I’m surprised at her. We’ll go home as soon as the shower’s over. It’s a pity we came in at all. You can tell her what we think of her, Mrs MacTaggart.’

Granny did not fail to do so, adding some pointed comments of her own, but Queen Lexa would give no explanation of her conduct.

‘I didn’t want to see them. I’m glad they went away so soon,’ was all she would say.

CHAPTER XV THE WRECK

A clear morning, bright sunshine, and a steady breeze came after the showery day. Queen Lexa said to herself that she would have a good time with the Macgregors.

Her conscience had troubled her during the night. She had been rude to visitors in her own house, and nothing could excuse that. It was no use to argue that they had been rude to her first. She ought at least to have treated them politely while they were her guests. But when she saw the fine morning, she put away all such thoughts, determined that they should not spoil her yachting picnic.

She left Granny packing a basket with good things for lunch, asked Mr Mac to be ready by ten o'clock, and went off to meet Roy and Tibbie.

They were already on their way, and greeted her with whoops of delight.

'Queen Lexa, are we really going in your yacht? I've been longing for a sail in her. She's so neat and pretty.'

'I'll see to the sail, Queen Lexa,' said Roy. 'I've been out with uncle dozens of times. I know all about 'em, and even Tib's some use, if I tell her what to do.'

'I like that! I know every bit as much about it as you do, my dear. I'll help you out, if you get in a muddle.'

'Hmph! Who wrecked the steamer?'

'You don't mean to hint that *I* had anything to do with it?' cried Tibbie indignantly, while Lexa stood and laughed at them.

'Of course it was you. You always do make a mess of things.'

'Oh, Roy Macgregor! You lit the lamp. If it hadn't been for that lamp——'

'You proposed it! If we'd never gone near the boat——'

'If I hadn't proposed it, you would have done next minute.'

'Suppose we drop the subject, and go on,' said Queen Lexa. 'We're wasting time, and we'll be keeping Mr Mac waiting.'

'That old man isn't coming, surely!' and the twins stopped short in dismay. 'Oh, Queen Lexa! We can't have any fun if he's there!'

'I'm afraid he wouldn't let us go without him.'

'But I'll manage the boat for you!' cried Roy. 'And Tib's a great help, really she is! Leave him at home to-day, Your Majesty, do!'

'He wouldn't stay. Come along! There are fishing-lines on board, and we'll see what we can catch.'

This proved an inducement, and they followed her, but evidently expected Mr MacTaggart to be very much in the way.

'Thought we were going just with you!' Roy grumbled. 'It won't be half the fun with that old fellow about!'

The yacht lay moored to her buoy, and the boat was drawn up on the beach, but there was no sign of Mr Mac. A small boy was sitting on a rock, throwing stones at the gulls, and Lexa went up to him.

'Has Mr MacTaggart been here this morning? I expected him at ten o'clock, and it's a quarter-past.'

‘Ay, he’s bin here, but he’s awa’ back to the hoose. He’d forgot his pipe, so he’s awa’ to fetch it. I wis to tell ye he’d no be mair nor hauf an oor.’

‘Half an hour! But I want to start now! Bother Mr Mac! If he’d come without his pipe, he should just have been content without it.’

‘A man wad no be happy wantin’ his pipe,’ said the boy, and ran off.

They sat on the beach for a time, throwing stones into the water, and growing more impatient every moment. More than half an hour passed, and still there was no sign of Mr MacTaggart.

‘Bother that old man!’ Roy said impatiently. ‘Fancy sitting looking at the yacht, when we know we could sail her quite well! Tib and I have been out alone in uncle’s, and got on splendidly.’

‘Your Majesty, let us try, just to show you!’ begged Tibbie. ‘Let’s have a wee sail, and come back for the old man! Then you’d see that we do know all about it.’

Lexa hesitated. It was forbidden, of course, but she had never promised. It would serve Mr Mac right for keeping them waiting. And she would like to be able to say she had been out in the yacht without him.

‘Better not tease her, Tib,’ said Roy wickedly. ‘Maybe she’s afraid to go without Mr Mac.’

‘Roy Macgregor,’ said Queen Lexa, ‘you’re a rascal to try to make me go like that. Come on then!’

Roy and Tibbie, with a whoop of delight, shoved the tiny boat down to the water. Roy rowed them out to the yacht, and unmoored her while they were making themselves comfortable.

The sails were spread, the luncheon-basket was on board, everything was ready but Mr Mac. Queen Lexa took the tiller, and Tibbie waited to help her brother with the ropes.

Away they went down the loch, the waves splashing at the bow and dancing against the side, the gulls screaming overhead, the sun shining, the wind blowing freshly in their faces and hair.

A steamer came along, and the Queen steered close to her. It was Captain McNab’s boat, and he recognised them and waved his hand. Lexa brought the yacht up close behind, and she rocked and danced in the tumbling waves of the steamer’s wake. Then they darted away towards the mouth of the loch, tacking across to catch the breeze.

‘Isn’t it just ripping!’ sighed Tibbie happily. ‘There’s really nothing like yachting! I feel like a sea-gull! And isn’t it jolly not to have that old man with us! Oh, need we go back for him, Queen Lexa? We can manage the boat all right, you see. Do let’s go without him! I’m sure you’d enjoy it twice as much. If we go back now, he’ll be cross and spoil the whole day.’

There certainly was something in that argument. Mr Mac would be displeased with them for venturing on the water without him. He might not be a pleasant companion for a picnic. They were sure to be scolded, in any case. Why not have the whole day’s pleasure first? Roy and Tibbie seemed quite at home in the boat, and Lexa had long been convinced that she could go sailing alone, if only Mr Mac would allow it.

She thought it over, while the twins waited anxiously. Then she exclaimed:

‘Very well! We won’t go back. We’ll spend the day without Mr Mac. Ready, Roy? We’ll go round the point and away up among the hills.’

‘Hurrah!’ cried both together. ‘You’re a brick, Your Majesty! We’ll tell him it was all our fault,’ and off they went.

Beyond the point another long arm of water ran up among the hills, till the mountains seemed to close in at the head. There were no other boats to be seen; the way was clear for the Queen's yacht.

At first there were houses among the trees on the hills, and shops and churches on the shore, with here and there a pier or ferry-boat. But as they went farther, the hillsides became lonelier, there were no more piers, and even cottages were rare. The yacht seemed to have the world to itself. The only signs of life were the gulls screaming on the shore, and some occasional porpoises.

So Queen Lexa and her friends enjoyed themselves exceedingly, and had a merry time. Lexa forgot the Macfarlanes in her amusement at the constant little quarrels of the twins, which, however, were never serious. Then Roy asked suddenly:

'When will there be another meeting, Queen Lexa?'

'It's only a week since the last one.'

'That's so, but they're such fun.'

'Roy only goes because you give us such a good tea,' suggested Tibbie.

Roy put his hand over the side and splashed her, then turned to Lexa again.

'Seen anything of the Prime Minister lately?'

'No.'

'Why, we met him yesterday with his cousin, and they said they were going to your house!' cried Tibbie. 'Were you out?'

'Pretty girl, that cousin!' Roy said critically, to Lexa's relief. 'If I'd only got a sister like that, now! Kind of girl every one looks at a second time. They do stare at Tib, but it's not because of her good looks.'

'I'd throw something at you, if I had anything to throw, my boy! As it is, I'll have to let you off.'

'Couldn't hit me! Couldn't hit the side of a house!'

Lexa laughed, and slipped a cookie from the basket into Tibbie's hand. She threw it instantly, and it caught him on the side of the head. He snatched it up to throw back, but, seeing what it was, ate it instead, while Tibbie laughed mockingly.

Then a steamer came along, pouring out clouds of black smoke, hiding the hills and darkening the clear bright air. As it passed, the paddles churning the water, some one leant over the stern, vigorously waving a handkerchief, and Tibbie cried: 'That's Nanny Macfarlane! I'd know her red cap anywhere. And there's the pretty cousin Monica. Wave to them, Your Majesty!'

But Lexa had found it necessary to rummage in the basket for a sandwich for Roy, and the steamer had passed before she found it.

Presently she steered to the shore, and they landed and spread the contents of the basket on the grass. Lunch was a very merry meal. The twins were enjoying themselves exceedingly and were very noisy, shouting with laughter at their own jokes, and quarrelling perpetually. After dinner they lay on the grass, and Queen Lexa told fairy stories, Tibbie asked riddles, and Roy, when called upon to do his share, gave them a whistling solo.

'Little Tommy Tucker, you know. But it was something better than bread-and-butter, wasn't it, Queen Lexa? Now didn't I hear something about fishing?'

So they rowed back to the yacht and got out the lines, and for a time were too busy to talk. They had good sport, and soon had a fine basket of fish to carry back to Granny as a peace-offering. Then Lexa asked Roy to see to the sail again, as it was time to go home.

Once fairly on their way, running down the loch before the wind, they took out the basket of fish, for Roy and Tibbie were anxious to count them, to be able to boast of the catch, as they frankly admitted. The counting was difficult, for the twins quarrelled over every fish, Tibbie claiming each big one as her own special catch, and insisting that she distinctly remembered seeing Roy catch all the little ones. Roy was equally certain that all the big ones should be credited to him, and it seemed from their talk that the Queen had not caught any at all.

‘When really, you know, I caught far more than either of you,’ Lexa laughingly remonstrated, ‘for you were quarrelling most of the time, and I’m sure that frightened the fish away from your side.’

So the reckoning was a difficult matter, and in their interest in it Lexa forgot to mind how she was steering, and Roy to keep a good look-out.

They did not notice that the sunshine was gone, the sky overcast, and the surface of the water ruffled into waves by the rising wind. The change did not take more than a minute or two, for the lochs are famed for their sudden storms. Presently it would all be sunshine and smooth water again, but the pretty little yacht, sailing so carelessly with sails spread to catch the wind, might have disappeared.

Lexa felt the sudden chill in the air. She looked up, and saw that the hills had disappeared in gray cloud. And she knew the meaning of that curious dark line travelling so quickly along the water towards them.

‘Hold on!’ she screamed. ‘Hold tight! Roy, *look!*’

Roy sprang to the sail. But his haste made him awkward, and he could not manage it.

‘To the shore, Lexa!’ cried Tibbie, and Lexa, clinging to the side with one hand, steered straight for the beach, careless of rocks or sands.

Then the squall struck them, and the yacht heeled over till the sail was almost in the water. The wind brought the rain, and it swept down upon them in torrents. The waves leapt up all round, and sprang into the boat on the under side.

With a crash the yacht righted again, and tossed and danced like a cork. Her mast was gone, snapped off a foot above the deck. It hung with the sail over the side and helped to steady the boat and to balance the weight of the children, clinging, breathless and soaked to the skin, to the other side.

Fortunately they were near the shore, and the wind came from across the loch and drove them towards the beach. Had it carried them out into the middle of the loch, the yacht could hardly have lived through the gale. In a moment the bow grounded on the shingle, and Roy sprang into the water to help the girls ashore.

Lexa and Tibbie ran up to shelter under the trees, caring nothing what became of the yacht, but before he followed them, Roy found a rope and moored her to the nearest tree. Then he joined the girls in shelter, for the rain was still pouring down, though the wind had slackened.

They were all wet through. Lexa was trembling from head to foot, and Tibbie had turned so white that the others thought she was going to faint, and they made her sit on a stone.

They waited there, glad of the covering of trees which kept off the worst of the rain, till the clouds broke, the hills cleared, and the sun shone out again. Then Lexa, recovered somewhat from the fright, but still much shaken, went down with Roy to look at the yacht.

It was a pitiful sight, with broken mast, tangled ropes, and sail dragging in the water. The side was battered and broken, the bow scratched by the stones. The pretty little yacht was a wreck, and the Queen’s eyes filled with tears as she looked.

‘It’s all my fault! We shouldn’t have come without Mr Mac. Oh, my poor dear little boat!’

Roy sympathised with her fully, and felt strongly that they were more to blame than she, and he most of all, since he had tempted her to come. But he did not think it wise to say so just then. He had always found that to sympathise with a girl made her worse, though she liked the sympathy. It always made Tibbie cry. It was far better to say there was nothing to cry for, and give her something else to think about. So he only said:

‘How are we going to get home, Your Majesty?’

‘I don’t know. I hadn’t thought of that,’ and she looked troubled. ‘I suppose we can’t row?’

‘I’d rather not try. It would be a long pull. We wouldn’t get home till after dark. Besides,’—he looked at the stormy loch,—‘I’d rather not have you two out in a small boat again to-day, if you don’t mind.’

‘I think we’ve had enough,’ Lexa shivered. ‘But we must get home somehow.’

‘There’s always the steamer.’

‘But how would we get on board? Would she stop for us? Where is the nearest pier?’

‘There’s a ferry goes out to meet her, like the one near your house. We can’t be more than a couple of miles from there.’

‘We’d better walk,’ Lexa said drearily. ‘I’d rather go home by steamer than in a small boat. But what about the yacht?’

As a rule, it was she who planned everything, but the shock had unnerved her, and she was glad to turn to some one for help.

‘We’ll tell the ferryman, and he’ll look after her till to-morrow. Then Mr Mac can fetch her.’

‘Yes, that will do. What will he say? Let’s go for Tibbie.’

They set off along the shore, Roy carrying the basket of fish. No one talked much, for they were all tired out with the excitement. They were wet, too, and their spirits were at the lowest ebb. Roy tried to whistle, in the hope of cheering the girls, but Tibbie turned on him and told him he was out of tune, and if he couldn’t do better than that he had better shut up. So they tramped on in silence, all very weary, but not daring to rest for fear of missing the steamer.

They seemed to have walked many miles before reaching the ferryman’s cottage. But there, when their story was told, they received a hearty welcome. They had still half an hour to wait for the steamer, so the ferryman’s wife took them in to the fire, to finish the drying process the wind and walk had begun, and made them drink hot milk to warm them thoroughly.

So as they sat in the big ferry, waiting for the steamer, they were all in much better spirits than they had been an hour before. The rest and food had done them good, and they had recovered from the shock and fright, and felt ready to face Mr MacTaggart.

As the steamer drew slowly in to meet them, Tibbie cried, ‘It’s the boat we saw this morning, with the Macfarlanes and Monica! D’you suppose they’re still on board? Won’t they laugh at us!’

Queen Lexa looked troubled. She would very much have preferred not to meet them. But this was the only steamer which would take them home.

Monica, Nanny, and Jim were among the crowd gathered on deck to watch the ferry. They had meant to go across to Loch Lomond, and home by Balloch and the Craigendoran train, but the storm had changed their plans. It was no use going to Loch Lomond in mist and rain.

‘It’s Queen Lexa and the Macgregors,’ said Monica. ‘Now we’ll be able to ask her what she meant yesterday.’

‘She was in the sulks because we didn’t spend Monday with her,’ said Jim. ‘She ought to be ashamed of herself. I wouldn’t have believed she’d be so rude. She ought to apologise. What are we going to do now? Just go and say good afternoon as if she hadn’t refused to speak to us yesterday? I want to know the meaning of that first.’

‘But she won’t be likely to tell you if you don’t go and ask her.’

‘She ought to apologise,’ Jim said again.

‘Perhaps she will. We’ll wait and see.’

But Queen Lexa had no intention of doing anything of the kind. She knew where they were standing, and led the Macgregors away at once to the other end of the boat.

Roy and Tibbie were much astonished.

‘Aren’t you going to speak to the Macfarlanes and Monica, Your Majesty?’

‘Well,’ said Roy, ‘I’ve no doubt they’d laugh at us for starting out in a yacht and going home by steamer, and Jim would probably scold you and me, Tib. We proposed it, you know—at least you did. And you’ve made a mess of it, as usual.’

‘Well, I never! What a boy! Who said he could manage a yacht? Who forgot to keep watch? But it does seem funny, Your Majesty, when we know they’re on board, and they know we know, and we know they know we know——’

‘Shut up, Tib! You’re mixed. You’d better think out that sentence before you try to say it.’

‘There!’ said Jim. ‘Still sulky, you see! I won’t run after her if she doesn’t want us.’

But Monica’s strong common sense would not allow this.

‘If you don’t speak to her, you’ll lose the chance of hearing what was wrong yesterday. She’d have to explain if you went and asked her now. If you don’t, it seems to me you’ll be as silly as she is, Jim. If you don’t ask her, I shall. I don’t like being cross with some one without knowing why.’

‘I wonder what they’ve done with the yacht,’ said Nanny.

‘So do I. Ask her that too, Jim.’

‘Well,’ Jim said thoughtfully, ‘I will. It will be better to know what’s wrong with her, anyway.’

He went towards the bow of the steamer, where Lexa and the Macgregors were standing. Nanny and Monica followed, the one to hear what the Queen had to say for herself, the other curious about the yacht.

Neither Lexa nor the twins saw them coming. They were all leaning over the bow, admiring the rainbow where the sun shone through the spray.

‘Lexa!’

The Queen turned defiantly. Roy began to laugh, and Tibbie cried, ‘It wasn’t anybody’s fault! We couldn’t possibly help it!’

Then they saw from Lexa’s face that there was more the matter than they understood. They waited curiously, and Queen Lexa leant against the bulwark and looked at Jim without speaking.

‘I want to know what you meant yesterday. Do you want to quarrel with us? For it looks uncommonly like it. If you do, please explain now what’s offended you, so that we’ll know. At present we haven’t the slightest idea.’

Jim annoyed was a very different person from Jim in a good humour. Lexa laughed.

‘I was rude to you yesterday, wasn’t I? Of course I was. I meant to be. After the way you treated me on Monday, don’t you think you deserved it?’

‘Monday! I said it was Monday! Look here, I didn’t think you were so silly. I explained in my letter how anxious Monica was to go that trip, and there may not be——’

‘What letter?’ asked Lexa sharply.

‘My letter of Sunday night, explaining about Monday——’

‘I had no letter from you. Your mother promised you’d write, but I never had a line from you, and I waited at home all day, expecting you every minute.’

Jim whistled. ‘No wonder you were upset!’ He turned sharply to Nanny. ‘You posted that letter all right? Where *did* you post it?’

‘I think I did—I don’t know where—I don’t remember——’ Nanny was hurriedly feeling in her pockets.

She pulled out a letter. ‘There! I must have forgotten it! Never mind, I’ll give it to her now,’ and she handed it triumphantly to Lexa.

‘You—little—monkey! If I don’t punish you for this! Queen Lexa, I’m awfully sorry. You must have thought us shockingly rude. I don’t wonder you wouldn’t speak to us. You see, there was that trip on Monday. Monica was awfully anxious to go, and there may not be another while she’s here. We wouldn’t have stayed away for anything else. But we would never have thought of not letting you know. It must have seemed awfully mean!’

‘It did,’ Queen Lexa admitted. ‘I must say I was surprised at you. I’ve been thinking all kinds of things of you ever since. Then of course I was very rude to you yesterday, but I thought——’ she looked at Monica.

‘You thought we deserved it. I don’t wonder. And I thought you had toothache!’ Monica laughed.

‘What have you done with the yacht, Queen Lexa?’ cried Nanny, and the quarrel was forgotten.

‘I wonder you aren’t ashamed to speak!’ Jim said severely. ‘You’re in disgrace, and don’t you forget it!’

‘Oh, all right! Queen Lexa, Jim says you——’

But Jim’s conscience told him it would be better not to risk any of Nanny’s revelations at present, for in his annoyance he had said things better forgotten.

‘Just you be quiet, my child. You’ve made trouble enough. Where’s the yacht, Your Majesty? And where’s Mr Mac? You were spinning along at a fine rate when we saw you before. Where did you shelter in that storm?’

‘We didn’t, that’s the trouble. We didn’t see it coming, and it caught us before we were ready.’

They described the catastrophe, and Jim gave them his opinion frankly.

‘It’s a wonder you’re not all drowned! It serves you right, you know, for going without Mr Mac. As for Roy, he deserves a good thrashing for not keeping one eye on the wind, and I hope he’ll get it. I’ve a good mind to see to it myself.’

‘Thanks! Just you come and try it, Jim Macfarlane!’

‘It was the fish! It was all their fault! We were counting them!’ cried Tibbie shrilly.

‘What will Mr MacTaggart say when you go home without the yacht, Your Majesty?’ asked Monica.

‘He won’t *say* much, but he’ll *look*. And Granny will cry, and that will make me feel bad, and Janet will tell me they’ve all been crying all day for fear I’d be drowned, and that will

make me feel worse. And Grandfather will write me such a letter, not scolding, but serious, all about obedience and responsibility, and about father and mother, and what might have happened, like he did about that steamer.'

Roy and Tibbie laughed, and Jim cried, 'I knew you two had something to do with it!'

'I didn't see them anywhere. Queen Lexa said they'd gone home,' Monica said, smiling.

'Were you there?' cried the twins,—so she laughingly explained.

Tibbie and Roy insisted on going home with the Queen, to protect her from Mr MacTaggart, they said, and to explain that they were as much to blame as she. But Queen Lexa was not afraid of Mr Mac.

'And even if Grandfather does scold,' she said to herself, 'I don't mind anything much, now that I know they hadn't forgotten me on Monday. But what a little monkey Nanny is!'

CHAPTER XVI

FAITHLESS JIM

Now that the mystery was explained, Queen Lexa was happy again. She knew that Jim had not meant to neglect her, and though she had not forgotten her loneliness of the previous week, she no longer blamed him for it. They had been very unlucky in missing one another so often, and they must try to manage better in the future. So she felt happier than before the misunderstanding. And Monica and Jim had no idea that she had been worried and miserable on their account.

By being careful not to trust letters to Nanny, they managed to arrange to spend several days together, cycling or on the steamers. Yachting was impossible, for the yacht was laid up in harbour, being fitted with a new mast and having her damages repaired.

Mr Stewart had written forbidding Lexa to go yachting again, even with Mr MacTaggart, and adding that, as it seemed he could not trust her at Morven alone, Miss Sparrow was returning immediately. Lexa dropped the letter in dismay.

‘I hope—oh, I do hope—he isn’t sending her back before she was ready to come! Oh, I shall be sorry if she’s had to come away too soon!’

When she met Miss Sparrow on the pier, that was her first question as she rushed into her arms.

‘Oh, my dear Miss Sparrow, I’m so glad to see you back! But please tell me—he didn’t ask you to come just because I went out in the yacht alone? He didn’t spoil your time with—*him*? You didn’t have to come away sooner than you meant, did you?’

Miss Sparrow looked grave. ‘I’m afraid I did, Lexa. I couldn’t wait comfortably in Glasgow knowing you were up to these wild pranks, could I?’

‘But—but—hadn’t he gone? Oh, Miss Sparrow——!’

‘We were hoping to have two or three more days together,’ Miss Sparrow said quietly, thinking it better she should understand; ‘but he wouldn’t have liked me to stay when we knew Mr Stewart was uneasy about you.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean—I never thought—about you!’ Lexa said brokenly. ‘Oh, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I didn’t do it on purpose, Miss Sparrow. I wouldn’t have spoiled your plans for anything! Oh, if I’d only thought——’

‘No, dear, I know you wouldn’t. I know you didn’t think how it would affect me, but, you see——’

‘If you’ll only go back to Glasgow, I’ll be simply perfect! I’ll never go outside the garden——’

Miss Sparrow laughed. ‘I’m afraid I can’t go back now. Don’t cry, Lexa! I had a very happy time, and we hope to see one another again in two years or so.’

‘Two years!’ groaned Lexa, and was very subdued and penitent towards Miss Sparrow for some time.

She told her about Monica, but said nothing of the misunderstanding, nor of her own jealous feeling. That was to be all over now. She liked Monica, and they were going to be good friends.

Though she could not take them out yachting, as she had hoped, they managed to spend several days together, Lexa and Miss Sparrow meeting Jim and Monica, and all cycling or

sailing by steamer to one of the many beautiful places within easy distance. Miss Sparrow liked Monica, too, and often paired off with her in these excursions, leaving the Queen and the Prime Minister together, and for a time Lexa was happy, and almost forgot the feeling which had so troubled her. They had many merry picnics on the shores of the lochs, or on the hills among the heather, and came home, tired and hungry, for tea at Morven or Creggandarroch.

So Queen Lexa saw more of Monica, and liked her quite as much as at first. She was not quite such a good walker or cyclist as the others, but she never complained, and would not let them give up their longer trips on her account. She kept up with them pluckily, and only confessed to being tired when they were near home. She was a merry companion, and was always ready for any kind of fun.

At the same time, she was undoubtedly clever, though she never tried to show it. Lexa's long illness in the spring had stopped her studies for some months, and she found herself behind Monica in everything. And when she saw her sketches, and heard her play the violin, though she looked and listened critically, she had to admit that both were very well done.

This was not very pleasant to her. The feeling which had made her exclaim that she would like to be a Queen made her also object strongly to being left behind in anything. Her ambition was her chief fault. She wanted to be first in everything, and to feel herself at least equal, if not superior, to her companions. So the presence of a girl who excelled in so many ways was not a little galling to her at times. She liked Monica very much, but she would have liked her very much more if she had not been quite so clever.

It was this wish to be first which had nearly made trouble between the Queen and Jim, for she wanted to stand first with him, as with everybody. He was to like her best, and his other friends were to come second. She was very good to her friends, as the members of her Band had found, but in return she expected to be considered before any one else. So when she had thought Monica had taken her place with Jim, and that henceforth she must come second, she had naturally been jealous and unhappy.

Her anxiety had been unnecessary enough. Jim was proud of his cousin, and was thoroughly enjoying her visit. She was only to be in Scotland for a short time, and he wished to make the most of her stay. She would soon go back to London, and then it would be Lexa's turn again. He never imagined that in the meantime she might feel lonely. As for which he liked best, he never thought of that at all, and would not have dreamt of comparing them.

For a time after the yachting cruise which ended so disastrously, Queen Lexa did not allow herself to think of these things. She was busy about the Band, arranging for cycle rides, steamer trips, and walking expeditions, not for all the members, but for a few at a time. She gave a picnic to the very little ones, inviting Isobel, Nanny, Alfie Macdonald, Nanny's friend Effie, Joanna and Baby Joe from the lodge, and Lizzie and Willie from up on the hill, and allowed no one above ten years old to be present except herself. She arranged a cricket match between the boys of the Band, captained by Jim, and an eleven from Dunoon, and was present with Miss Sparrow to watch her team win a glorious victory.

But gradually her anxiety on Jim's account began to grow again.

She heard so much of Monica. When she managed to find Jim alone, he talked about her till Lexa was tired of her name. He was so engrossed with his cousin that he could scarcely think of any one else. He would not arrange to spend even an afternoon with Queen Lexa till he knew what Monica was going to do. When he did come to Morven alone, it was with the remark that Monica was going visiting with Mrs Macfarlane, so would not need him—which

did not make Lexa feel any happier. For the time, he seemed to have lost interest in anything which did not concern Monica.

It must be admitted that he neglected the Queen, and that if she felt hurt, it was not without reason. No doubt she was exacting, and expected too much, but he certainly left her much to herself, and she was lonely in consequence. It was hard for her to see, as she believed, that Monica had taken her place, and Jim had forgotten her. Once that thought had entered her mind it grew rapidly, and soon she was feeling hurt and annoyed again. She tried not to show it, for she was ashamed of herself, and she did not tell Miss Sparrow what was troubling her, but once or twice she nearly lost her temper with Jim.

After the wreck of the yacht she wished to arrange for a meeting of the Band. But this proved a difficult matter. Indeed, there was nearly trouble over it, for the Prime Minister had to come to Morven to discuss the arrangements, and he was so very much engaged elsewhere that he could hardly spare the time. When at last he did come, they had hard work to fix the date of the meeting.

‘It should be some day next week,’ said Queen Lexa. ‘How about Monday?’

‘We’ve planned to take Monica to Arran on Monday, so I’m afraid that won’t do.’

‘Tuesday, then?’

‘Mother’s going to take Monica over to Rosneath to see our cousins there, so that’s no better, is it?’

‘Well, Wednesday?’

‘Mother’s “At Home” day. Monica couldn’t possibly come.’

Queen Lexa sighed. ‘Thursday?’

‘The girls are going to Glasgow. Monica wants to see if the shops are as fine as in London.’

‘Of course they are—better.’

‘Ever been in London, Your Majesty?’

‘No,—but I’ve lived in Glasgow. Well, Friday?’

‘On Friday there’s that trip round Ailsa that Monica’s so anxious to go. If Friday’s fine, I think we ought to do that, for she won’t have many more Fridays.’

‘Saturday?’ asked Lexa in despair.

‘No, Uncle Tom is coming to see Monica, so she couldn’t come.’

Lexa said nothing for a minute or two. He could not spare one day out of the whole week! She began to think it was a pity Monica was not the Queen, if the meetings were to depend upon her engagements. At last she said decisively, without consulting him this time:

‘We’ll have the meeting the day after to-morrow—Saturday—since you’re going to be busy every day next week. If that doesn’t suit Monica, I’m sorry, but we’ll just have to do without her.’

‘Oh, she’ll come. She’d be awfully sorry to miss a meeting. We had planned to go one of the Saturday afternoon trips, but that will have to wait,’ Jim said, knowing from her tone that something was wrong, but with no idea what it could be.

‘And what kind of meeting is it to be, Your Majesty?’

‘I’ll see to that,’ said Lexa, fearing that if she explained her plans he would say Monica would not like that.

When it was time for the Band to assemble on Saturday, Miss Sparrow turned to go to her own room, as usual. Lexa looked at her curiously.

‘Then you’re still busy? You haven’t forgotten about it while you’ve been in Glasgow?’

‘Dear me, no!’ said Miss Sparrow briskly. ‘I’m busier than ever—much busier than I was before I went away.’

‘I *do wish* you’d tell me what you’re doing! Must it still be a secret, Miss Sparrow?’

‘Well now, will you have me in the Band, Lexa?’

‘N—no, I can’t. You see, the others——’

‘Quite so! But I’m afraid you must leave me my secret, Lexa.’

‘I *do wish* I knew what it is!’

Miss Sparrow laughed. ‘Yes, you’d be interested, I know. But——’

‘Then won’t you tell me?’

‘Oh, I couldn’t think of it!’ and Miss Sparrow laughed and disappeared, having roused Lexa’s curiosity, which had died down during her absence, to the highest pitch again.

The meeting was a merry one. The Queen had arranged that it should be a ‘collectors’ day.’ Every one who collected anything was to bring specimens for exchange. Those who had postcard, autograph, or stamp albums were to bring them for inspection. Queen Lexa had a present for each—a packet of rare stamps, or three or four new postcards. A good deal of business was done, and the Queen and the Prime Minister were kept busy judging if the bargains were fair and equal.

Some of the collections caused much amusement. Lexa had provided for them all, for she had particulars of each in her notebook, but to many of her subjects there were some which came as a great surprise.

Ruth Macdonald produced a tiny jug wrapped in tissue paper, and remarked that she had seventy-nine more at home, all different. She kept them on her mantelpiece, and dusted them all carefully once a week.

Nelly Hunter brought a basket containing china animals of different kinds, and spread them out on a table, so was promptly nicknamed Mrs Noah. None of the animals cost more than sixpence, she explained, and she rarely spent more than a penny at a time. They stood on a shelf in her bedroom, and she had nearly a hundred of them.

Isobel Ferguson had the largest collection of picture postcards, having over five hundred from all parts of the world, sent by uncles and cousins and friends.

Nanny excited the envy of all the other girls when she produced a box full of dainty silver charms for coat lapels or chains, of every possible kind. Coins and tiny animals were common enough, but here were a pair of scissors, a shoe, a spoon and fork, a racquet, a teapot, a violin, none more than an inch long, but all perfect. The boys condescended to say that they were very neat, but the girls went into raptures over them, saying they had never seen anything so pretty.

After tea and the distribution of the Queen’s gifts, there were tennis tournaments on the lawn, while the little ones played ball for prizes of sweets and chocolates, and the boys practised cricket in the field given up to the purpose. When it was time to go home, it was voted that the meeting had been as great a success as any of the previous ones.

A substantial addition was made to the Picnic Fund, or the Treasure, as Queen Lexa called it. Her subjects were thoroughly in sympathy with its object, so every one contributed something.

When they had all gone home, and Nanny and Monica had been sent off together also, the Queen and the Prime Minister crossed the lawn to the flagstaff to dispose of the money in safety. Monica had asked laughingly if she might not wait and help, and Lexa had refused so sharply that Jim had told her he was surprised at her.

But he did not know what the burying of the Treasure meant to her. It was not simply an idea, a part of a game. It was their secret, his and hers, which was shared by no one else—the one thing in which Monica had no part. It meant a very great deal to Queen Lexa. She would not have shared the secret with any one, and least of all with Monica.

When the money-box was locked and safely buried once more, Lexa looked at Jim.

‘You will never tell any one about this hiding-place? Remember, it’s a secret. You won’t tell any one whatever?’

‘No one whatever, Your Majesty.’

‘Not even Monica? I’ll never forgive you if you do.’

‘Not even Monica. I promised before, Your Majesty.’

‘I thought you might forget. Shake hands on it, Prime Minister.’

CHAPTER XVII TROUBLE

It was on Saturday evening that Queen Lexa and Jim buried the Treasure after the 'collectors' meeting.

On Monday came the trouble that nearly wrecked the Band.

Monday morning was wet, and Queen Lexa had to stay at home. In the afternoon, Monica arrived to say that they had had to give up their trip to Arran, so would be delighted if Lexa would go back with her and spend the afternoon with them.

'We want Miss Sparrow to come too,' she said. 'She's such fun.'

'She's away for the day, so I'm afraid she can't,' Lexa explained. 'A friend of hers is starting for Canada, and she's gone to see him off, so she won't be back till late.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Auntie was hoping she would come.'

Queen Lexa had been feeling happier since Saturday. The fact that she and Jim still had something in which Monica had no part, that he had still been willing to keep it a secret, had comforted her. Perhaps after all she had not been quite fair to him. Perhaps there had been no need to feel hurt.

In any case she was not, and never had been, angry with Monica. On the contrary, she still liked her very much. It was not her fault if her visit had made Jim forget his old friends. She was certain Monica would not have wished anything of the kind. If there were cause for annoyance, it was only with Jim the forgetful.

So she was willing to go to Creggandarroch, and was glad of the chat with Monica during the ride.

They talked over the last meeting, and agreed that the different collections had been very interesting. But suddenly Monica asked:

'How much did you get for the Picnic Fund, Your Majesty? How much is there in the Treasure-box now? I know where you keep it,' she added, laughing, and just meaning to tease. 'Don't think it's a secret!'

Queen Lexa looked at her, and began to ride more slowly. Her face grew white, and Monica feared she was not well.

'Is anything the matter, Your Majesty?'

Lexa dismounted, and Monica, much astonished, did the same.

'What is it, Lexa? What's the matter?'

'*You know where we keep the Treasure?*' Her voice was strained and unnatural.

'Yes'—Monica wondered if she had suddenly gone crazy—'yes, I know. It's buried at the foot of the flagstaff, under your throne. You don't mind my knowing, do you?'

Queen Lexa felt as if some one had knocked her down.

'I think—I'll not come—with you. I'd better go home,' she faltered.

'Lexa, what's the matter? Aren't you well? Do tell me what's wrong!' Monica cried, thoroughly frightened by the look on her face. 'Don't you feel well, Lexa?'

'No—I mean—I'm going home.' She was recovering from the blow. 'I'm sorry. Tell Mrs Macfarlane I couldn't come to-day. Don't come with me. I'll be all right.'

She sprang on her cycle again, and rode off at such a speed that Monica knew she could not hope to overtake her.

She rode on, much puzzled and worried by the Queen's extraordinary behaviour. But when Mrs Macfarlane heard of it, she said at once:

'Ask Jim what he thinks. He knows her better than we do.'

But Jim was playing cricket with Rob Cameron, because, as he said, if the Queen was coming to tea, Monica would not need him. As for the suggestion that Lexa might feel hurt if he was out all afternoon, he had not thought twice about that. She had too much sense for such foolishness.

Rob kept him to tea, and he arrived home during the evening, feeling rather guilty. If Queen Lexa was a little offended, he could hardly blame her. He tried to satisfy his conscience by saying that he had not been sure she would come, but he knew that was only an excuse.

Monica met him in the hall. She was still thinking of the look on Lexa's face as she turned to go home, and the more she thought the less could she understand it.

'Hallo!' said Jim. 'Where's Queen Lexa?' and his tone showed distinct relief.

'She didn't come. It was so strange, Jim. We can't understand it. She started with me, but on the way I happened to mention the Treasure, and said I knew where it was buried——'

'But you don't know! You can't possibly.'

'Yes, I do. Nanny told me, on the way——'

'Nanny doesn't know herself!'

'Yes, she does. She saw you bury it the first time.'

'The little rogue! And never said a word about it! Has she gone to bed?'

'Yes, some time ago.'

'I'll talk to her in the morning!' Jim said angrily. 'Well? What did the Queen say?'

'That was the odd part of it. She didn't say anything at first, but looked at me in the funniest way and went as white as a sheet, till I thought she must be ill. Then she went off home, without saying what was wrong, or anything.'

'Didn't you follow her and find out?'

'I couldn't have caught her. You know how fast she can bike when she likes. I can't even keep up with her. What do you think was wrong with her, Jim? She looked as if she'd had a fright or shock that had dazed her for a minute.'

'I don't know. Girls are so queer. You'd be more likely to understand. She was awfully anxious you shouldn't know about the Treasure, I'm sure I don't know why. On Saturday she made me promise again never to tell any one, and then, after I'd promised once, she made me say particularly that I wouldn't tell you. I suppose—she couldn't think that, surely!'

'What?' asked Monica, puzzled.

Jim stared at her gloomily. 'That I'd told you. She couldn't think I'd break a promise I only made two days ago! If she does, I'll never speak to her again. But I don't believe she would. Did you say Nanny had told you?' he asked suddenly.

'No. She didn't give me time.'

'I don't understand it,' Jim said thoughtfully. 'I can't believe she'd be so mean as to distrust me, but if she does, there'll be trouble between her and me. I'll never forgive her. Would there be time to go over to Morven to-night? It's not very late yet.'

But he had no success at Morven. During the lonely ride, he thought over all that Monica had told him, but could come to no better understanding of the matter. The only explanation of Lexa's strange behaviour was that she thought he had betrayed the secret, but he could not believe she would think it of him.

At Morven he saw only Granny. Miss Lexa had gone to bed, she told him, and Miss Sparrow had not yet returned from Greenock. Miss Lexa had spent the afternoon writing letters, and had sent a great bundle away to the post. After tea she had gone for a walk with the dogs, and on her return had asked for early supper, and gone off to bed. Yes, there was something wrong, Granny was sure. She had seen at tea-time that Miss Lexa had been crying, and had asked what was the matter, but Miss Lexa had said it was nothing, and had been quite cross when she tried to find out. Granny did not think she was ill, but there was evidently something troubling her. Perhaps she would be all right in the morning. Perhaps Miss Sparrow would understand when she came home. Would Master Jim leave any message?

But Jim could leave no message that would be of any use. He said perhaps he would come back in the morning, and rode off, wondering if Lexa's letters had been notices of another meeting, and if so, why she was summoning them again so soon.

Next morning, the post brought one of the neat little notes informing them that a meeting would be held at Morven on Wednesday afternoon, and that their attendance was requested.

'I do wonder what it means, and what was wrong with her yesterday!' Monica said. 'But we can't go to this meeting. I must stay and help auntie receive visitors.'

'And she knows that,' Jim said, frowning. 'Couldn't mother do without you for once?'

'I'd rather be at home. She likes to have my help, since Nanny is too small to be useful.'

Jim glared at his sister. 'She's too small to do anything but make mischief. You're going to apologise to the Queen, young lady, and be punished as she thinks fit. But not till after this meeting,' he added, looking worried. 'I'll go alone on Wednesday, and we'll see then what's the meaning of it.'

CHAPTER XVIII

A TRAITOR IN THE CAMP

If Lexa had not already been suspicious of Jim where Monica was concerned, she would not have dreamt of distrusting him. She would have been greatly puzzled, for she had no idea that Nanny knew her secret. But it would have been hard to convince her that her friend had proved faithless. She would not have believed it till she had heard it from himself.

But for days her irritation at his conduct had been growing. Several times she had nearly lost her temper and said things she would have regretted afterwards. His constant praises of Monica, and the fact that he preferred Monica's company to hers, for the time at all events, could not fail to annoy and distress her. So now she was ready to distrust him as she would not have done a month ago, the more so since Monica was concerned in the matter.

He liked Monica best. He spent all his time with Monica. Only he knew the secret; and now Monica knew it too. The conclusion was inevitable, and Lexa never doubted it.

It distressed her terribly. The knowledge of it had been a great shock, as Monica had seen. She had never in her life been so miserable as she was that night, for Jim had been her friend far more than any one else in the Band. She had taken him in place of the brothers and sisters she had never had. When he had deserted her for Monica, she had tried to comfort herself with the thought that soon Monica would go away, and then they would be friends once more. But now he had broken his word, and she could never trust him again, so they could never be friends.

She had not the slightest doubt of his guilt. No one else could have told Monica. If she had merely suspected him, she would have gone to him at once to hear what he had to say for himself, but she was satisfied as to what had happened, so that would have been waste of time.

She thought he would probably deny it. If he could break his word, he might tell a lie. If she could not trust him in one thing, then not in any.

She did not tell Miss Sparrow of her trouble. She could not speak of it to any one. So though Miss Sparrow, troubled by Granny's report, questioned her, she would say nothing.

Miss Sparrow watched her closely, quite aware that she was in trouble. But she knew there was to be a meeting on Wednesday, so waited till that should be over, in the hope that Lexa would either forget her trouble in the Band, or that the meeting would in some way set matters right.

During the day before the meeting, Lexa was intensely unhappy, and neither the dogs, nor the menagerie, nor Miss Sparrow could comfort her. But she never hesitated as to what she must do.

The members of the Band were much astonished to hear of another meeting so soon. It was only four days since the last one. The Queen must surely have something very important to say. So they felt from the beginning that this meeting was somehow to be different from the previous ones.

Queen Lexa was not at the pier to meet them, but Mr MacTaggart was there with the big cart, and they all squeezed in.

When they reached the gates of Morven, it was evident that some members had already arrived, for a row of bicycles stood beside the lodge. Among them was an invalid chair, which

excited much derision. Did it belong to Isobel Ferguson? Why had she not come in her perambulator?

They hurried to the lawn, expecting to find Queen Lexa there, but only Jim Macfarlane and the other cyclists were to be seen. Janet met them, however, and begged them just to sit down and wait till the Queen came.

When at last Lexa came out of the house and across the lawn, every one saw in a moment that something was the matter. Whether it was anything connected with the Band, or some private matter, they could not tell, but there was certainly something wrong. Her face was resolute and very grave. They greeted her with a shout, but she responded quietly and with none of her usual high spirits.

Jim had a very faint idea of the meaning of it all. His guess might be wrong. He sincerely hoped it was. If it were right, this was the last meeting of the Band he would ever come to, for he would have no more to do with Lexa.

She did not speak to him nor look at him, and his suspicion grew stronger. He rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, and sat with his eyes fixed on her, waiting for the blow to fall.

Queen Lexa took her place on the throne beside the banner, and looked round at them all. She scarcely glanced at Jim, and would not meet his steady gaze. That told him what was coming, and his face hardened. She said to herself that he understood, and was going to deny it. Well, she had expected that.

She was used to making speeches by this time, but to-day's business was strange, and she dreaded it exceedingly. Yet it had to be done. It was only fair to the others. But she put it off as long as possible.

'I am very glad you were all able to come to-day,' she began, rising and leaning against the flagstaff as she spoke. 'I gave you very short notice, and I was afraid some of you might have made other plans. Lady Isobel Ferguson is not here to-day, because I did not go to fetch her. Lady Monica Howard and Lady Nanny Macfarlane were not able to come. Except for those, I think it is a full meeting. Now, has any one anything to say? I see some strange faces.'

She looked round anxiously, hoping for some answer to delay the real business of the meeting.

Mary Duncan rose, looking very nervous, for she had never spoken at a meeting before.

'Your Majesty, this is our little cousin, Teddy Murray. He's going to live with us, so I thought perhaps we might bring him too. It would have seemed so mean to leave him at home.'

Queen Lexa smiled faintly. 'If you had left him at home, Lady Mary, I would have been very sorry. Sir Teddy, I am very glad to see you. You are one of my knights now, you know. I hope you will always behave like one. Sir Roy Macgregor, you have something to say. I can see it in your eye. Speak up, sir!'

Roy rose, and made a very low bow.

'Your Majesty, may I present to you our friend, Nigel Scott?' and he put his hand on the shoulder of a delicate-looking boy, who sat between him and Tibbie. 'He'd get up and bow, but unfortunately he can't. I'll tell you all about it, if I may.'

Queen Lexa nodded, and sat down to listen, much relieved at the delay.

'He lives at Cove.' She raised her eyebrows in surprise, for Cove was across the loch. 'We met him one day when we were over there, and Tib went and spoke to him. I can't teach her to

mind her own business. She will try to manage other people's too, and as a rule she makes a mess of it——'

'Oh, you fibber! Who wrecked the Queen's yacht? Who ran the steamer ashore?'

Tibbie was gathering a handful of grass to throw at her brother, but Lexa stopped her with a look, and Roy went calmly on.

'This time, for a wonder, she didn't. We're glad we spoke to him, for he hasn't many friends, and doesn't get much fun. He's lame, you see,' and they saw that Nigel had crutches at his side. 'Somebody dropped him when he was a baby, and he's never been able to walk. She must have been something like Tib, I guess. Perhaps her name was Isabella——'

'Try to leave your sister out of the story, Sir Roy. Sir Nigel, will you keep Lady Tibbie quiet, please.'

'Well, he's to stop talking about me, then! You wait till I make a speech, Roy Macgregor!'

'So he doesn't get much fun, Your Majesty,' Roy continued, ignoring his sister, 'and we thought it would be so jolly for him if he could join the Band. We told him about it, and he said he'd like to awfully.'

'I'm delighted to see him. But how did he get here? It's a long way.'

'Yes, and he lives with his grandfather, who's a stingy old—— Oh, I say, don't!'

He turned on Nigel, who was thumping him vigorously about the ankles with a crutch.

'Then stop talking about my relations. It doesn't matter to you what they're like.'

'Oh, all right! If you're satisfied, I don't mind! But, Your Majesty, he won't even give Nigel money for the boats, and he scarcely ever gets a sail. So Tib and I rowed across this morning and fetched him.'

'Across the loch? Why, it must have taken you hours!'

'Two hours, going and coming. He wasn't expecting us, so we had to look for him.'

'And how did you get him here, if he can't walk? It's a long way.'

'Invalid chair. That was easy. We took turns at it. It was Tib's idea. We'll take him back the same way, so we'll have to start early.'

Queen Lexa rose. 'You would like to join our Band, Sir Nigel?'

His glowing face was sufficient answer. Lexa smiled faintly again.

'You must thank the Macgregors. I hope they'll bring you to all the meetings, and we'll try to make you enjoy them. Sir Roy and Lady Tibbie, I create you Earl and Countess of Balquhider.'

Tibbie gasped. 'What's that for?'

'Oh, I say, Your Majesty!' and Roy actually blushed.

'Hear, hear!' said Jim Macfarlane, then relapsed into gloomy silence once more.

Queen Lexa shot a quick glance at him, and her face grew grave and troubled again.

'Is there anything else?' she asked of the company.

Lady Nelly Hunter rose.

'Your Majesty, during that wet weather in July, mother gave Maggie and me cookery lessons, and taught us to make shortbread and fancy cakes and biscuits. We spent all yesterday morning cooking, and in the afternoon we had a sale in the garden, and invited our friends. We sold everything, and had orders for more, and we want to give you the money for the Picnic Fund. There's fifteen shillings and ninepence.'

'Oh!' cried Lexa, surprised. 'But that's very good of you! I don't think I ought to take it.'

'Mother wants you to. She thought it was a very good plan.'

‘I am very much obliged to you both. At this rate, we’ll be able to give the children a splendid treat. You certainly deserve something for that. We have two Countesses already, so you shall both be Marchionesses of Monzie. Now, has any one else anything to say?’

No one rose to speak, and Lexa drew a long breath. She could no longer put off the business of the meeting.

‘I’ve something to tell you,’ she said at last. ‘I’m very sorry to have to say it, especially after all we have heard to-day, but I must tell you, or I wouldn’t be treating you fairly. At our first meeting, when I said the boys should be knights and the girls ladies, I told you that if any one did not deserve the title I would take it away. I hoped I’d never have to do it. But there is one boy who does not deserve it. Oh, I’ll tell you his name presently! You needn’t begin looking at one another! This boy was my best friend among you all. I needed some one to help me, and I chose him. He knew my plans and my secrets. We planned the meetings together, and he advised me in everything. I called him my Prime Minister.’

They had guessed it already, but thought they must be mistaken. How could Jim Macfarlane have done anything to deserve this? The Queen was not speaking angrily, but clearly and steadily, as one who had thought it all out. But there was no doubt from her face how she felt. The others had often envied Jim, but they would not have cared to be in his place now.

But how was it possible that Jim Macfarlane could have done anything really wrong? They all liked him, and his schoolfellows knew that he would do nothing mean or dishonourable. Perhaps he had offended Queen Lexa. If that was all, she had no right to speak so bitterly.

They all turned to look at Jim. He was as white as the Queen, but it was with anger. But he would not speak till she had finished. He sat very straight, lest they should think he had anything to be ashamed of, and waited.

Lexa continued, in that clear hard voice:

‘He knew all my secrets. He knew the most important one of all—where the Treasure was hidden. None of you know where it is. It was my secret, and I shared it with him. He helped me to hide the Treasure-box after each meeting. Each time I made him promise never to tell any one where it was. The last time he promised was Saturday evening. On Monday afternoon I saw his cousin Monica Howard, and she knew the hiding-place. He had told her. No one else knew. He had broken his promise two days after he made it. That’s all.’

She leant against the flagstaff. It had been harder than she had expected. She felt tired out, though she had done nothing but speak. But the strain of telling them had been great. She would far rather have kept the trouble to herself, but that would not have been fair. They had to be told, but the telling had been very hard.

There was tense silence for a moment. They could not grasp it. Yet if only Jim knew the secret, Monica must have heard it from him. It was very strange. They could more easily have believed it of any one else.

Queen Lexa looked straight at him now. But he was gazing at the others, and especially the boys, to see if they believed it. From their faces, he rather thought they did. But they were plainly puzzled.

‘Then you aren’t going to deny it?’ said the Queen at last, speaking to him for the first time. ‘I thought you would.’

‘Then you expect me to tell a lie, since you’re so certain I did it?’

‘I dare say you will. If you could do the one, you can do the other.’

Jim laughed harshly. 'Go on! Anything else? Do you think I've stolen your money?'

'I looked to see, and I've hidden it somewhere else,' said Queen Lexa calmly.

The girls waited, with anxious excited faces. The boys held their breath. Not even Rob would have dared to say that. The Queen was taking advantage of her safety as a girl.

Jim looked at her. Then he said scornfully, 'You know I can't hit you. I'm not going to talk to you either. It's not worth while denying such rubbish, but perhaps I'd better, to satisfy you. I didn't tell Monica your secret. I didn't break my promise. I don't tell lies. I'll never speak to you again. There's your badge. I shan't want it. I wouldn't think of having any more to do with you and your Band.'

He flung the badge on the grass at her feet. She put her foot on it.

'Stop a moment. I knew you'd deny it. It makes no difference, of course. You can leave the Band if you want to. Perhaps you'd better. But if you stop Nanny and Monica from coming, it will be very mean. They've nothing to do with this.'

'Nanny!' he laughed harshly, and turned his back on her and spoke to the others. 'If any of you want to know how Monica heard the secret, ask her or Nanny. They'll tell you. I'd tell you now, but you're more likely to believe it from them. I can see you half believe I did this. I think some of you might have known me better. As for Lexa Stewart, of course I shall have no more to do with her. I wouldn't speak to her again if she went down on her knees and begged me to.'

He turned to go. 'Care to come to Whistlefield to-morrow for some fishing, Cameron? Meet me at nine o'clock, and we'll have a decent time, with no girls about.'

He strode across the lawn and down the avenue. The Queen's subjects looked at one another, and then at her. She seemed tired and worried, and stood silently for a moment with bent head, as if thinking. Then she looked up.

'Janet! Let us have tea, please! Boys, will some of you help to hand round?'

During tea she chatted with the new-made Marchionesses, and with the Duncans' little cousin, and Nigel Scott. After tea she set them to games, and played herself, as if nothing had happened. But a shadow was over the Band that day, and although they played to please her, most of their gaiety was pretence. Nigel could not join in the games, of course, so part of the time Queen Lexa sat and talked to him, and took care that he was never lonely.

So they thought she had forgotten Jim, or that she did not care.

CHAPTER XIX CONFESSIONS

Left to himself, Jim would probably have told Monica and Nanny nothing of what had happened. At first he was too angry to feel sorry for the quarrel. He was bitterly hurt that Lexa had not known him better, and he did not want to think about her any more.

But as he rode home he found it was not easy to forget. The words she had said kept coming back to him. All his thoughts of her were hard, and he was sure he could never forgive her.

He had gone about half-way home when he met Nanny and Monica in the car, driving towards Morven. They were as surprised to meet him as he to see them, so they stopped, and he dismounted beside them.

'You're going home very early. What was the meeting about? Why, Jim, what's wrong?'

'Where are you off to? I thought mother needed you.'

'She only had one visitor, who didn't stay long, so she said we might come for the end of the meeting. Are we too late? Is it all over?'

'Oh, no,' Jim said, frowning, 'not that I know of. They're probably having tea now.'

'Then why aren't you there? What was the meeting for? What happened, Jim?'

'Well,' Jim said slowly, 'she called the meeting to accuse me before them all of breaking my promise and telling you the secret. That's all.'

'*Oh!* And what did you do?'

'I'm going home. I've had enough of her.'

'Did you explain that Nanny told me?'

'I didn't explain anything. I was too angry. You can go on and tell them, if you like.'

'Won't you come back with us? She'll be so sorry when she understands. Was she very angry?'

'Yes. Said she expected me to tell lies and steal her money.'

'Goodness me! And what did you do?'

'Threw my badge at her and came away. She'll say she's sorry when you explain, of course. Tell her I don't care whether she's sorry or not. I meant every word I said. Tell her that too. Will you go on, or come home?'

'We must go and explain, of course. Won't you come, Jim? You ought to give her a chance to say she's sorry.'

'I told her I'd never forgive her, and I meant it. Mind you're not late home, since I'm not with you.'

He went on his way, not having once spoken to Nanny, who had been listening with frightened face. Monica looked very grave as they drove on, and Nanny crept closer to her.

'Will she be very angry, Monica?'

'Don't you think it's enough to make her angry, Nanny?'

'Yes. I wish I hadn't told you!'

'So do I. But I didn't understand, and neither did you, I suppose.'

'Do you think she'll never speak to me again?'

'I think she'll be too sorry about Jim to be angry with you, Nanny. She'll probably feel too miserable to care about you. She was so very friendly with Jim.'

‘Will you tell her?’ pleaded Nanny.

‘I’m sure she would rather you told her yourself. You needn’t be afraid. She won’t do anything to you.’

As they drove up the avenue they heard shouts of laughter, and knew that the meeting was not yet over.

‘They seem to be enjoying themselves,’ thought Monica. ‘Don’t they care about Jim, or have they forgotten him already?’

A game of twos and threes was in progress. The Earl of Balquhider was rushing about in pursuit of Maggie, Marchioness of Monzie, the others excitedly cheering them on. Queen Lexa was sitting on the grass with Nigel Scott, whose eyes were sparkling over a book she had lent him.

Some one raised a shout at sight of Monica and Nanny. Lexa looked up, wondering what they had come for, and rose to meet them. The boys and girls were still standing in a wide irregular circle. She stood in their midst, and waited.

Monica led shrinking Nanny into the circle, and the others closed round eagerly.

‘Your Majesty, we met Jim, and he told us what had happened. Nanny has something she wants to tell you.’

‘I don’t! I don’t want to a bit! But they say I must,’ sobbed Nanny.

Queen Lexa sighed. Surely there had been enough trouble to-day! Monica noticed how tired she looked.

‘Nanny, don’t be silly. You won’t make it any better by crying,’ she said.

‘Is it important?’ asked the Queen, and Monica nodded.

‘Nanny, tell me what’s the matter. I don’t know what you’re crying about. Have you something to tell me, dear?’ and Lexa bent and put her arm round the child.

‘I’m—’fraid—you’ll be so cross.’

‘I? What about? I haven’t any reason to be cross with you, Nanny.’

‘It was me—told Monica—not Jim——’

Lexa stood up suddenly, and drew back and gazed at her with puzzled face.

‘I know you’ll be angry,’ faltered Nanny. ‘He’s dreadfully cross. He won’t speak to me.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said the Queen doubtfully. ‘You couldn’t possibly tell Monica. You didn’t know yourself.’

‘Oh, yes, I did!’ Nanny explained hastily. ‘I ran through the trees and watched you bury it that first night. You thought I stayed in the trap with Isobel. I only did it for fun, Queen Lexa. I didn’t think it would matter.’

Lexa looked incredulously at Monica, who nodded. ‘It’s true. Nanny told me.’

‘Then—Jim didn’t—break his promise!’

Every word she had said, everything she had thought of him, flashed across Lexa’s mind. She covered her face and sank down on the grass, forgetful of the others.

‘Three cheers for Jim Macfarlane!’ shouted Rob Cameron. ‘Three cheers for the Prime Minister!’

The cheers were very hearty, and full of relief. But as the noise died away, they saw that the Queen was crying. Monica knelt and put her arms round her and whispered to her, while the rest looked at one another uncomfortably. Then Mr MacTaggart appeared.

‘Time’s up, young leddies. Ye havena mair nor jist time to catch yon boat.’

Lexa did not move. Monica spoke to her, then looked up.

‘You’d better go. Queen Lexa will see you another day. It will only bother her if you stop just now.’

They went slowly, unwilling to leave her so, but it seemed the only thing to do. She could not have spoken to them at present if she had wanted to. Roy Macgregor stopped to clap her on the shoulder and say, ‘Cheer up, Your Majesty! He’ll know you didn’t mean it!’ Then he and Tibbie helped Nigel to follow the others slowly and painfully, and the Queen was left with Monica and Nanny.

Nanny lay on the grass, crying miserably. She had expected to be scolded, but this was far worse. She had made Queen Lexa miserable. She had made her cry. She wished Lexa would get up and scold her, as Jim had done. But Lexa was much too ashamed to blame any one but herself.

Monica sat thinking. She could not bear to leave the Queen like this. But Lexa would want to be alone for a while, and it was nearly Nanny’s bedtime.

‘Queen Lexa!’ she said at last. ‘I think I ought to take Nanny home. Good-night! Come along, Nanny!’

She led Nanny away, leaving the Queen still crouching on the grass. But when they reached the waiting carriage, Monica said:

‘Now, Nanny, jump in and go home. Tell them I’ll come by the late boat. I can’t leave Queen Lexa quite alone. If Jim will listen to you, tell him about this. If he won’t, never mind.’

‘Aren’t you coming?’ asked Nanny in surprise.

‘No, I’m going back to Lexa. It would be mean to leave her just now.’

She went slowly up the drive again, but Queen Lexa was no longer on the lawn. The big front door was standing open as usual, so she entered, and met Granny in the hall. She inquired for the Queen, but Granny said Miss Lexa had run up to her bedroom and locked the door.

‘I want to see her,’ Monica explained, ‘but I don’t think she wants me just now. So I’ll wait a while, and then go up to her.’

She was sitting in the library with a book when Miss Sparrow looked in.

She had spent the afternoon in her own room, as usual, and had only come down when the meeting should have been over, with hopes that Lexa’s trouble, whatever it had been, would now have vanished or be forgotten. But Granny’s report seemed to show that matters were worse rather than better. So, hearing that Monica was still there, she came to her for some explanation.

But Monica hesitated. ‘I don’t think I ought to tell. It doesn’t seem fair to talk about her. She might not like it.’

‘I’ve been up to her room,’ Miss Sparrow said thoughtfully, ‘and she only said, “Please go away!”’

‘I don’t think she wants to talk about it yet. We had trouble at the meeting; but perhaps she’d rather tell you herself. I hoped that by waiting I could see her later, and she might want a chat then.’

So Miss Sparrow waited also, and they sat talking for some time. But at last Monica sprang up, and ran upstairs to Lexa’s room.

She knocked, and called her softly. Presently the door was thrown open, and Lexa stood looking at her with startled eyes.

‘I thought you’d gone home,’ she said.

‘I’m going by the late boat. I wanted to see you again. It seemed so mean to leave you all alone.’

‘Come in. It was good of you to wait. I’m glad you did.’

Queen Lexa switched on the light, and turned to pull down the blinds.

‘Please sit down! I think I’ve been asleep. I was tired, and I had a headache.’

‘That came from crying,’ thought Monica, but said nothing.

‘I was lying on the bed, and I must have fallen asleep. You woke me when you knocked. I thought it must be Granny or Miss Sparrow coming to make me take some supper. I suppose we ought to go down and get some. I don’t think I want any.’

She spoke in a subdued, level tone very unusual to her. Perhaps she was hardly awake yet; perhaps she was thinking of Jim. Monica had her own opinion, and tried to turn her thoughts to something else.

‘Who was the boy you were talking to when we arrived, Queen Lexa?’

‘Nigel Scott, a new member—a friend of the Macgregors. Don’t call me Queen to-night,’ she said heavily. ‘I don’t feel like it. Do you know, I’m very glad you stayed. I’d made up my mind to tell you something, and if I’d had to leave it till to-morrow, my courage might have failed me.’ She laughed ruefully. ‘You’ll think me very silly, I know, but I must tell you. Have you been wondering what made me believe such a thing of Jim so easily?’

‘Yes, I have,’ Monica admitted. ‘I was surprised, and so was he.’

Lexa reddened, and turned to the window again. She stood gazing out into the twilight through the half-closed shutters.

‘It was silly, of course, but I’ve been miserable lately. Ever since you came, it’s seemed to me that Jim didn’t care about me any longer. It wasn’t your fault, of course. It couldn’t be helped. He liked you best, that’s all. But he hasn’t come to see me often, and when he did, he talked about you all the time, till I was cross. We were such friends before, but lately it’s seemed as if he’d forgotten me. He’s been thinking so much about you that he hasn’t had time for the rest of us. He would hardly arrange last Saturday’s meeting because he wouldn’t let it interfere with your plans.

‘That made me feel jealous of you, and so I made him promise again not to tell you the secret. Of course, I never dreamt that Nanny knew. So when you said you knew where the Treasure was, it almost knocked me down. If I hadn’t been angry with him already, I’d have known better. It was silly of me, and I dare say you’ll be angry, but it was because I thought so much of him. If I hadn’t cared about him I wouldn’t have minded.’

She stood with her back to the light, ashamed of herself, and afraid Monica would blame her. But Monica only said slowly:

‘I’m very sorry! I didn’t know you were feeling like that. I didn’t mean to——’

‘Of course you didn’t! I know that!’ cried Lexa, speaking more energetically than she had done so far. ‘You’ve nothing to be sorry about. It’s my business to be sorry to-night! But we mustn’t talk any longer up here. Come down and have some supper. Do you mind telling Jim what I’ve been saying?’ she asked wistfully. ‘He might understand better if he knew I’d been feeling bad beforehand.’

‘Won’t you tell him yourself? Wouldn’t it be better?’

‘I couldn’t,’ Lexa said, reddening. ‘He’ll think me so silly.’

‘Aren’t you going to speak to him at all?’ asked Monica, disappointed.

‘I must, of course. I thought about that a while ago. But he won’t forgive me. I know that very well. He said he’d never speak to me again.’

‘But he didn’t mean it!’ Monica said quickly.

‘Oh, yes, he did. He’ll never be friends again. I made him far too angry. You don’t know all the dreadful things I said. He’ll feel that a girl like that isn’t worth being friends with. I don’t know what to do about the Band.’

‘What about the Band? What do you mean?’

‘They all know I made this mistake. What must I say at the next meeting? I can’t take no notice of it. And now that I’ve made such a mistake once, they’ll think I may do it again, and they won’t trust me as they did before. I feel like giving up the whole thing.’

‘The Band? Oh, you mustn’t, Lexa! Everybody enjoys the meetings so much.’

‘I shan’t enjoy them any more. But I’ll think it over. Let’s talk of something else. Did you hear about the Hunters? I was so pleased. I made them Marchionesses on the spot.’

‘I heard nothing about it,’ said Monica in surprise.

‘Oh, we had a fine meeting—at first! I made the Macgregors Earl and Countess of Balquhiddy, too. I’ll tell you about it. Do you like porridge for supper? Granny often gives it me, and I like it very well. Let’s go down.’

‘I suppose I’ll have to tell Miss Sparrow,’ she said, pausing, and knitting her brows in distress at the thought of going through it all again.

‘She’s very worried,’ said Monica. ‘She asked me what was wrong, but I didn’t like to tell her without your leave.’

‘I wish you had. She’ll have to know, and I don’t want to talk about it. I wish you’d told her.’

‘I’ll run down now and explain, if you like.’

‘Will you? While I do my hair?—I do look a sight! I wish you would, if you don’t mind.’

So Monica hurried down to Miss Sparrow to explain the situation.

‘I don’t think she wants to talk of it,’ she added. ‘Couldn’t we try to make her forget it for a while? She’s feeling very upset.’

Miss Sparrow looked troubled.

‘I wish she had told me beforehand. I might have persuaded her to be less hasty and hear what he had to say for himself, but I didn’t like to tease her. She always keeps all the details of the Band and its meetings to herself, and I don’t like to seem to pry into her secrets. So I didn’t insist on knowing all about it, though I saw there was something wrong. I hoped to-day’s meeting would make it all right again.’

So when Lexa appeared, looking white and quiet and tired, and with eyes suspiciously red, Miss Sparrow only said, ‘I hear you had some new members to-day. Who were they, Lexa?’

Lexa answered with an effort, but cheered up a little presently, and told about the meeting with some enjoyment. But as they drove to the pier together, she grew quiet and depressed once more, and Monica made up her mind to tell Jim he must end the quarrel and be friends again at once.

When they had seen her safely on board the steamer, Lexa and Miss Sparrow turned to drive home again. The road between the pines was very dark and the night was very still, but the pony knew his way and was not afraid. They drove in silence for a time. Then Lexa broke out:

‘Monica said she’d tell you, Miss Sparrow.’

‘Yes. I wish you had told me of your trouble before, Lexa. I think I could have helped you.’

‘Oh, I wish I had! I know I was in too much of a hurry, and now he’ll never forgive me. But it was because—because—I was angry and suspicious already, so I never doubted he’d done it. Miss Sparrow!’

‘Yes, dear?’

‘Do you remember what you said to me when I was starting the Band—on the steamer in the Kyles—about being careful—about myself?’

‘Yes, Lexa, I remember.’

‘Well, I didn’t. I forgot. That’s what has been wrong. I haven’t been careful to be good. I’ve allowed myself to think bad things of him and Monica, and now this has happened.’ She broke off, stifling a sob. ‘You don’t know how bad it is. You don’t know the things I said. I didn’t know myself. I wouldn’t have believed I could be like that.’

‘Do we ever know ourselves, I wonder?—at your age, anyway, Lexa? It’s very difficult. I’m very sorry, dear. But surely you’ll ask Jim to forgive and forget?’

‘I’ll tell him how sorry I am, if he’ll listen to me, but it won’t be any good,’ Lexa said gloomily. ‘I know he’ll never speak to me again.’

‘Surely it won’t be so bad as that, dear.’

‘I’m afraid it will. I know what he’s like when he’s cross. I’ll try, of course, but I know it won’t be any use,’ Lexa said despondently.

CHAPTER XX

THE LOSS OF A FRIEND

Queen Lexa rode steadily along the road towards Whistlefield, her face resolute. It had been a dull morning, with smirring rain at intervals—fine fishing weather; so she knew where to look for Jim, and did not hesitate. Miss Sparrow had offered to come with her, but she had begged to be allowed to go alone.

She expected that the boys would come ashore for lunch, after fishing all morning. So she cycled over to the freshwater loch where they had held Monica's first meeting, and away along the road between hills and loch, and past the rocky bluff, keeping a sharp look-out for the boys.

Rounding a point, she came upon them suddenly. Their boat was drawn up on the beach, where a stream came tumbling down the hill, offering them sweeter water than that of the loch.

They had spread mackintoshes on the damp grass. Jim lay, stretched sleepily on his coat, his slouch hat drawn over his face; Rob sat mending his fishing-rod. Both were barefoot, with trousers rolled up to the knee, and looked very lazy. The remains of their lunch lay beside them, and the result of the morning's sport, three shining salmon and some small trout, lay near the baskets and Jim's rod.

It was Rob who noticed Queen Lexa, and waved his hat.

'Hallo, Your Majesty! Come to inspect our fish? Macfarlane's been giving me points. I'm not much good at it; but then he's a native, and I only spend the summers here. He got those big salmon. The little ones are mine.'

Jim sat up suddenly, pushing back his hat, and gazed at Lexa. Rob remembered the last meeting, and felt suddenly awkward and in the way.

'I'm going down to look at the boat,' he stammered, and hurried away and left them together.

Queen Lexa left her cycle beside a tree, and climbed the slope. Jim the polite, Jim the gentlemanly, neither rose nor took off his hat. She stood before him, feeling like a prisoner in the dock.

'Jim, I want you to forgive me. I think you would if you knew how sorry I am. I wouldn't have spoken to you so for anything, if I hadn't thought—but that's what's wrong, I know. You're angry because I thought it. Jim, I'm very sorry. I never was so sorry about anything in my life. Did Monica tell you I'd been feeling bad before?' she asked, flushing. 'It was very foolish, and I'm very much ashamed. Jim, won't you make it up? won't you be friends again? I can't tell you how sorry I am.'

Jim looked at her. 'What would you do yourself?'

'I'd be angry, like you are. But if some one was sorry, and told me so, I don't think I'd refuse to forgive him.'

'Yes, you would. When you were mad with Monica and me, you wouldn't speak to us, either at your own house or on the steamer, till you understood how it had happened. You wouldn't have forgiven us if I hadn't been able to explain. You can't explain anything now. You thought I'd told your secret. Very well; if you could think that of me, I don't want any more to do with you.'

He lay back, and drew his hat over his eyes again. Lexa's lips quivered, but she would not cry before him.

'Jim!' she said unsteadily, after a moment.

'Well?'

'There'll be a very important meeting of the Band some day soon. Will you come?'

'No.'

'I want you to come for a very special reason, Jim.'

'Look here!' said Jim sharply. 'I said I wouldn't speak to you. I can't help it if you follow me round and make me answer, but I won't speak to you of my own accord, and I wouldn't come to another of your meetings if you paid me. See?'

'Then I'll go away,' said Lexa, deeply hurt. 'I won't bother you again. Would Nanny and Monica be able to come if the meeting was fixed for Saturday?'

'If they wanted to.'

'I thought you expected visitors to see Monica?'

'They're not coming.'

'Then I'll fix for Saturday.'

She looked at him, hoping he would speak again; but he lay with his hat over his face and did not look at her. Then she remembered something more which must be said.

'Jim, I want you to do something——'

'Thought you'd gone,' he growled.

'It's not for me, but for the cottage children. I counted the money, and there's over three pounds——'

'The money you accused me of stealing?'

'Jim!' she cried sharply. 'You know I didn't mean it!'

Jim said nothing, and she went on eagerly:

'I want the children to have their treat. There's no reason why they shouldn't, just because you and I—because I've offended you.'

Jim expressed no opinion. She went on, looking at him doubtfully.

'I can't manage it alone. You helped last time. Will you help again? Not for me, but for the children. Won't you, Jim?'

'No.'

'Well, if I send you the money, will you see to it and leave me out of it altogether?'

Jim pushed aside his hat and looked at her.

'What's the hurry? It's only August.'

'I want to get it over. Will you see to it? The others will help, and if you'd rather, I won't have anything to do with it at all.'

'Rot! You managed the last one, and you can manage this, if you want to. It's not my affair anyway.'

'I thought perhaps you would like to arrange it. We had such fun last time. I didn't want you to feel left out,' Lexa explained anxiously.

'I'll look after myself, thank you.'

'Then you won't have anything to do with the treat either?'

'No.'

Lexa turned and went down to the road, disappointed and hurt. It was only what she had expected, but it was not pleasant to be treated with such scant ceremony.

Jim lay motionless till she was out of sight. Then he sprang up and went to join Rob in the boat, and was in a very bad temper for the rest of the afternoon.

That night, Queen Lexa consulted Miss Sparrow as to the next meeting—the first time she had ever done so. As a rule, she made her plans and carried them out without a word to any one, but her self-confidence had received a shock, and she was anxious to do nothing more which she would regret afterwards.

‘I’d ask you to come to the meeting, Miss Sparrow,’ she said doubtfully, ‘but I’ll have to ask them all to speak this time, and I’m afraid they wouldn’t, if you were there. I wouldn’t mind for myself, but I think some of them would be shy. You think I’m right this time, though, don’t you?’

‘I think your methods are inclined to be drastic,’ said Miss Sparrow, smiling.

‘What’s that, please?’ asked the Queen meekly.

‘You are so very thorough that you’re inclined to go too far. Do you think this new plan is necessary?’

‘I think it’s best. I couldn’t go on as before, and say nothing about that last meeting. But I wish I could ask you to come! Then I’d be sure nothing would go wrong.’

‘Thank you for the compliment!’ laughed Miss Sparrow. ‘But I don’t think anything will go wrong this time. We’ve talked it over together, you see. Besides, I want to get on with my work.’

And it was significant of Queen Lexa’s frame of mind that the reference to the mysterious work passed unnoticed, and she only said quietly:

‘Well, thank you for advising me, anyway. I don’t know if I’m doing right, but I must do something! I do hope it will be for the best!’

CHAPTER XXI

THE QUEEN'S RESOLVE

Queen Lexa's invitations for the next meeting bore the added notice: 'Cat and dog show. All pets welcome. Be sure to come. Prizes.' And the lawn was prepared for the event.

Long tables were arranged in a semicircle before the summer-house, and on one were the Queen's pets—the rabbits in their hutch, the squirrel, guinea-pigs, and white mice in cages, the chameleon and tortoise in boxes, the goldfish, and the canaries. The other tables were empty, waiting for the visitors. Outside the tables stood a row of posts, and an enclosure built by little John and Jim MacTaggart of earth and hurdles.

The members of the Band, arriving with Mr MacTaggart, looked for their hostess eagerly, but she was not to be seen. Those who had seen her last crying on the lawn wondered whether she would refer to the last meeting. They missed Jim Macfarlane, and asked Monica if he was not coming. But Monica shook her head.

'He won't,' she said briefly.

Then Queen Lexa drew back the curtain of reddening creeper before the summer-house door, and stood looking down at them. The noise had told her of their arrival. There had never been such a noisy meeting before. Dogs were barking, puppies yelping, cats mewing. Lexa's terriers, resenting the invasion, were fighting with half a dozen strangers, and the boys were trying to separate them. The girls had fled to the enclosure of tables, holding their baskets and cages carefully.

Queen Lexa looked round wistfully, hoping Jim had changed his mind. Nanny Macfarlane crept behind Monica at sight of her. Isobel Ferguson made her way towards the summer-house, tightly clutching a basket. Roy and Tibbie Macgregor had not yet arrived.

Rob Cameron was struggling with the dogs out on the lawn. Jim was not there.

The Queen hid her disappointment bravely. This meeting was to be a very special one, for various reasons, and everybody must enjoy it. So she threw herself into the work of making it pass off well, and tried not to think of the one absent member of the Band.

'Good-afternoon! Lady Isobel, you have something nice in that basket, I know! Why, Lady Mary, what a dear little goat! We'll call you "Mary had a little lamb," though it's not a lamb, is it? Countess Ruth, that's a very fine collie. Nanny, come and give me a kiss!'

Nanny flung her arms round her neck, nearly crying with relief. Then Rob managed to separate the dogs, and the boys came streaming in.

'Now we'll get to work,' said Queen Lexa. 'But the real business of this meeting is to wait till after tea. We'll have some fun first. Tie the dogs to those posts, please; put the cats in the sheepfold'—nodding towards the enclosure; 'put the cages on the tables: then I'll make a tour of inspection.'

They were still busily arranging the pets when the Macgregors came up the avenue. Roy was wheeling the invalid chair, with Nigel Scott nursing a small dog and two kittens in his lap. Tibbie carried a covered cage in each hand.

'Come away, Countess Tibbie! We had almost given you up. My lord, sit down and rest. I'm sure you're tired. Well, Sir Nigel, how did you like the story? What have you in the cages, Countess Tibbie?'

'Rats!' and Tibbie whipped off a cover. 'Magpie!'

‘Well done! He’s our only magpie. Are the dog and cats yours, Sir Nigel?’

‘Yes; the dog was run over by a cart, and some men were going to drown him, when I begged them to give him to me. He can only walk on three legs, so he limps rather, but he’s quite happy,’ and the Skye terrier looked up at Lexa through his tangled hair.

‘Rather like Tib, isn’t he?’ suggested Roy.

‘He can’t run about like other dogs,’ said Nigel; ‘but I know how that feels, so I try to be good to him to make up for it—like some folk are to me,’ with a glance at the Macgregors and the Queen. ‘I think he has a pretty good time, and anyway, it must be better than being drowned.’

Queen Lexa made no comment, but only asked:

‘And the kittens? What a pretty pair they make, one black and one white!’

‘Ah, they’re cripples too. The black one broke her leg a while ago, and she’s never been able to use it since, so she has to run on three too. The white one is blind, poor little thing! I’m sorriest of all for her. But she knows my voice, and she’s very clever in going about. I think she feels her way by her whiskers. See how long they are! She never runs into anything,’ and he stroked the soft head tenderly.

‘Now, Your Majesty!’ cried Rob Cameron. ‘Come and see the show!’

Every kind of pet was on the tables. White mice, dormice, tame rats, squirrels, and guinea-pigs; canaries, parrots, and Tibbie’s magpie; tortoises, lizards, tadpoles, and the Queen’s chameleon; frogs and snails brought by the boys to tease the girls; cats of all sizes, and dogs of every kind. The Queen inspected them all, then called up Janet and Joanna with great baskets. Scraps of meat for the dogs and fish for the cats, lettuce leaves for the rabbits, soon reduced the babel to comparative quietness, and while all were busy with the food, Lexa went round to decide on the prizewinners.

Isobel Ferguson was awarded a prize for a blue Persian kitten; the Countess of Dunoon received one for her collie; Mary Duncan had one for her goat; Rob Cameron for a very ancient tortoise, far older than the Queen’s. The Macgregors’ white rats received a prize, which Roy and Tibbie decided to share between them, as they indignantly denied that anything could belong to one and not to the other. Nigel Scott was astonished to get one for his three cripples; but the Queen gave no reasons, but awarded the prizes where she thought they were deserved.

The prizes were life-like models of animals—tiny cats and dogs and pigs and rabbits, and Queen Lexa caused much amusement by her method of distribution.

‘A prize is awarded to Pussy Ferguson. Will you take it for him, Lady Isobel?’

‘Here is one for Colin Macdonald. I will give it to you, Countess Ruth.’

‘This is for Tarty Cameron. Come and fetch it, Sir Rob.’

‘And this is for Pink-Eyes Macgregor. Here you are, Countess Tibbie.’

‘Now, Nanny-goat Duncan—oh, is his name Billy, Lady Mary? I beg his pardon—Billy Duncan!’

‘And this is for Skye and Kitty Scott, Sir Nigel!’

She did not refer to the real business of the meeting till tea was over. But at last she took her place beside the big yellow banner, and bade them all sit down.

‘Before we come to business, I have some remarks to make. Lady Monica Howard will henceforth be known as the Duchess of Ealing—that is the part of London you come from, isn’t it, Lady Monica? It’s a funny name, but I suppose it’s all right.’

‘I don’t think you need talk, with your Balquhidders and Creggandarrochs, and Monzie, that has to be pronounced Monnee!’ Monica retorted. ‘Some of your names give me toothache. “Duchess of Ealing!” Dear me! I shall think of that every time I see a General with “Ealing to East Ham” on it.’

‘A General with Ealing to East Ham on him!’ repeated the mystified Queen.

‘A motor-bus, you know.’

‘Oh! Well, to get back to business! Sir Nigel Scott will be the Marquis of Cove. Lady Nanny Macfarlane will be known as Miss Nanny Macfarlane in future. I will give no reasons for these changes. Think them out for yourselves,’ and Nanny blushed under the looks turned upon her, and hung her head, and tried to get behind Monica. ‘The collection for the Picnic Fund will now be taken.’

When this ceremony was over, Queen Lexa rose again.

‘First I want to speak about the Picnic Fund. It now amounts to three pounds ten shillings. Yes’—as they looked surprised—‘we have really done very well. You have all been very good. I didn’t expect to get so much. Of course, we have to thank the Marchionesses of Monzie for a good part of it. We have given the money so that the poor children from the farms and cottages may have a treat at the end of the summer. It was the Countess of Dunoon who suggested it, as you will remember.

‘These children don’t get very much fun. They’re poor, and they have no money for going about. They have to work hard even in holidays. We’ve all enjoyed our holidays, and the least we can do is to give these children a good time, even if it’s only for one day. Now we’ve plenty of money, and we’re having fairly good weather. So I propose that we have the treat next week,—on Tuesday, I think, and I’ll make the arrangements on Monday.

‘Will that suit everybody? I want you all to help, you know. We’ll fix for Tuesday, then. I propose that we take the children to the head of Loch Long by steamer, and give them dinner there. I’m sure they’d enjoy the sail. Then they can come home here for tea and games on the lawn. What do you say?’

‘Ripping!’ ‘First rate!’ ‘Splendid, Your Majesty!’

‘I never knew any one who thought of things and managed them like you do, Your Majesty!’ cried Marchioness Nelly enthusiastically.

Queen Lexa smiled. Then, remembering something she had not told them yet, she said quickly:

‘Any one else could do it just as well. It only needs a little thinking.’

Rob Cameron sprang up.

‘Your Majesty, I want to ask something. I hope you won’t be angry.’

‘I can guess what it is,’ Lexa said quietly. ‘Well?’

‘Isn’t Jim Macfarlane coming to the treat?’

‘I don’t think so. I’ve asked him to, but he won’t. I hope he’ll change his mind, but I hardly think it’s likely,’ and she looked at Monica.

‘I don’t think he’ll come,’ said Monica.

‘It’s because he doesn’t want anything to do with me,’ said Queen Lexa, reddening. ‘That brings me to the other thing I have to say. It is the most important of all, and is the real reason I called this meeting.

‘You all remember what happened at our last meeting. You haven’t spoken to me about it, but I know you’ve all been thinking how silly I was, and what trouble I made over nothing. Of course it was a mistake, but then I shouldn’t have made such a mistake. It’s the first trouble

we've had in the Band, and it's my fault. I'm more sorry about it than I can tell you, but being sorry won't put it right now. I've begged Jim's pardon, and told him how sorry I am, but he won't forgive me. Nobody can blame him for that. I was dreadfully unfair to him, and I suppose he thinks I might do the same again. He won't come to the meetings, or have anything to do with the Band, because he's so angry with me.

'Now you'll all see that it isn't fair that he should stop out of everything when it was I who was in the wrong. He liked the meetings, but he won't come to them while I'm the Queen. I'm very sorry for the mess I've made of things, and very much ashamed, and I'm going to show how I feel by abdicating. That, I will explain for the benefit of Lady Isobel and Sir Alfie and Miss Nanny, means giving up being Queen to some one else. You must choose who shall take my place.'

'Oh, I say, Your Majesty!' cried Rob.

'What rot!' said Countess Tibbie and Earl Roy together.

'That's Nanny Macfarlane's doing!' exclaimed Marchioness Nelly in dismay.

Nanny began to cry, and Isobel joined in. Queen Lexa had sat down to let them talk it over, but at sight of the tears she sprang up again.

'Nanny, Isobel, stop crying this minute! Don't be so silly! There's nothing to cry about—at least, there needn't be, if you'll be sensible. All you have to do is to choose another Queen or leader instead of me. If you get some one else to be head, you can go on having meetings, and enjoy them as much as you've done till now. If you can't find any one, I suppose we'll have to dissolve the Band; but that would be a great pity. I've started the Band, and done my best for it. Now it's some one else's turn. When you have decided who it's to be, I'll do all I can to help, if the new leader wants my help. If you'll let me, I'll go on coming to the meetings, but I won't be Queen any longer.'

'Perhaps if we wait a week or two you'll change your mind, Your Majesty?'

'No, I'm quite sure I won't. I'm not going to risk making any more mistakes. Thank you for wanting me to, but it's really no use.'

'Oh, we all want you to! We'll never get any one to do it as you have. The trouble is, you've done it so well that everybody will be afraid to take your place.'

'Nonsense! You'd better decide who to ask.'

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Rob. 'Is there any one here who'd like the job?'

'Rather not!' said Roy Macgregor.

Rob found every one of the same opinion. The girls were afraid of such an undertaking. If a boy were chosen, he would have to be one who was already something of a leader among them. Rob himself was the biggest boy present, and Tibbie Macgregor suggested:

'Try it yourself, Rob!'

'Not I! Not for anything. I don't mind helping any one, but I wouldn't like to have the whole job on my shoulders. I've never even been captain of a cricket team, and this is a much bigger affair. I know who would make a good Captain—but maybe you have some suggestion yourself, Your Majesty? We should have asked you before. It was shabby. You ought to choose who it shall be.'

'I don't want to, thank you. I'd rather not have anything to do with the choosing. It's better you should arrange it among you. I know some one who would make a good Captain, too, but I won't tell you who it is.'

'I know who the Queen's thinking of,' said Countess Tibbie.

'You! It's likely you know anything, isn't it? Since she made you a Countess, you've been too swanky for anything.'

'Shut up, Roy!' said Rob. 'We're too busy for nonsense. Who is it, Tibbie?' and Lexa looked at Tibbie anxiously.

'Isobel Ferguson,' and Tibbie ducked her head to avoid a blow from her indignant brother. But it was no time for joking, and the twins were frowned into silence.

'Who were you thinking of, Rob?' asked Countess Ruth.

'I'm afraid he wouldn't do it, but if he would, we couldn't do better. He'd be next best to the Queen herself. I mean Jim Macfarlane, of course.'

'Hear, hear! Hear, hear!' cried both boys and girls, for Jim was a general favourite, and Lexa clapped her hands softly, unseen by any save Monica.

'Do you think he would? What do you say, Monica?'

'I really don't know at all. We could ask him.'

'Then I vote we appoint a Committee to call on him on Monday, and tell him he's unanimously elected Captain of the Band. I suppose it is unanimous? Has any one any objections? No? That's all right. Now, who shall be on the Committee? Queen Lexa, of course.'

'No, thanks, I'd rather not. He's much more likely to be willing if I have nothing to do with it.'

'Do you really think so?'

'I'm sure of it. That's how he feels just now.'

'Pity! But perhaps he'll get over it. Well, choose the Committee, some of you. Don't leave me to do all the work.'

Rob himself, Ruth Macdonald, Ronald Gordon, Nelly Hunter, Mary Duncan, and the Macgregors were chosen as being prominent members of the Band. They arranged to meet on Monday afternoon, and Monica undertook to see that Jim stayed at home, but promised faithfully not to hint at what was afoot.

'I propose,' said Queen Lexa, 'that we hold a meeting here on Wednesday, the day after the children's treat, to talk it over. If Jim is willing to be Captain, he can come to that meeting. If he won't, you must choose some one else.'

'There's no one else who'd do it, or whom we'd like to have for Captain,' said Rob. 'It's Jim or nobody. If he refuses, perhaps you'll change your mind, Your Majesty?'

'No,' Lexa answered decidedly. 'I won't change my mind at all. If you can't find a Captain, the Band will break up, but it will be a great pity. Of course, by September, school will begin again, but there will still be Saturdays. We could have Saturday meetings if you chose a Captain.'

'We have chosen one. If he won't do it, we'll have to break up the Band, that's all.'

'I hope it won't come to that. Now, if you want to catch that steamer, there's no time to lose. You have to pack up the animals, you know! Remember the arrangements for Tuesday. I hope you'll come early to help me, Rob. I shall want to know what Jim said. I do hope he'll be willing to be Captain!'

CHAPTER XXII

THE BAND GIVES A PICNIC

It would be difficult to say whether the cottage children or the members of the Band enjoyed that picnic most. But to Queen Lexa the day began with disappointment, for Jim did not appear.

As soon as all the little Maggies and Lizzies, Janets and Jeannies, Willies and Archies and Jimmies were safely on board the steamer, she called the members of the Band together on the saloon deck, and, mounting on a seat, addressed them.

‘I want you all to give these children as good a time as possible. That’s what we’re here for to-day, not to enjoy ourselves. Talk to them, tell them the names of the piers, explain about the ferry-boats, and show them the trains on the West Highland Railway. Most of them have never seen a train, and won’t know what it is, so you must tell them. Get them to ask you questions, and answer them if you can. If you can’t, don’t try. Ask some one else. Make them play games, and take them over the boat. Show them the cabins and the engines. Don’t let them be too noisy. We aren’t the only people on board, and we mustn’t bother other folks. Here are bags of sweets. Roy Macgregor, will you and Tibbie and Ruth distribute them fairly, so that every one gets a share? Rob, I want a talk with you. Please come with me into the bow.’

She led him to one of her favourite seats—the extreme point of the bow, on the lower deck. In stormy weather the position was impossible, owing to the flying spray, but to-day the water was very calm, and the breeze scarcely strong enough to temper the heat of the sun.

Lexa hoisted herself on to the side, holding by a rope, and Rob said disapprovingly:

‘Hold tight, Your Majesty! That’s not safe. If it wasn’t so calm I’d ask you to come down.’

‘I often sit here. Now tell me about yesterday. What did he say?’

‘We met at the pier, and went up to the Macfarlanes’ together. Monica met us at the gate and told us Jim was in the garden, so we went to look for him. He was very much surprised to see us, and when I said why we’d come, he was more surprised still. I said you wouldn’t be Queen any longer, and we’d chosen him to take your place. At first he said, “No, thanks!” Then he asked why you were giving up, and I said I thought you were feeling bad about that other business. You hadn’t told us what to say, you know.’

Lexa nodded. ‘That was quite right. Go on.’

‘I explained that if he wouldn’t be Captain, it would mean the end of the Band. He said you’d change your mind. I said I didn’t think you would. So then he promised to think about it. I told him of to-morrow’s meeting, and he said he’d come if he was willing to be Captain. So we must wait and see if he turns up.’

‘I wish he’d said one thing or the other!’ Lexa sighed. ‘I wonder if he said any more to Monica? Let’s ask her.’

They found Monica loyally carrying out the Queen’s orders, distributing sweets to half a dozen eager children. But she could give them no satisfaction.

‘I asked him this morning. I knew you’d want to know. But he said he hadn’t made up his mind.’

‘Then we must just hope for the best,’ Lexa said, and went to sit with Janet MacTaggart.

The steamer crept up the long lonely loch, and the mountains drew nearer and rose more steeply. They were green and brown and purple, and the water between was dark like a shadowy mirror. It was all silent and very lovely, and Janet was speechless with delight and awe.

But at the head of the loch, ringed in with mighty giants, was a white village, and here they all went ashore, for dinner was spread on long tables outside the inn.

There was only an hour to spare, and then they hurried on board again, and the steamer slowly made her way out through the gap in the mountain wall and away down the loch towards home.

During the afternoon Queen Lexa called the Band together again, this time on the lower deck, in the stern of the boat. She seated herself on the steps leading to the upper deck, and addressed them.

'I hope you haven't forgotten that to-morrow there will be a most important meeting to decide whether the Band is to continue. I can't tell you whether Jim Macfarlane is willing or unwilling to be Captain. He hasn't made up his mind yet. If he won't, is there any one else who will?'

She paused, but they all shook their heads.

'Then if he doesn't turn up, will that mean the end of the Band? I'll be dreadfully sorry. We've had very good times together, and it's all my fault this trouble has come.'

'Won't you change your mind, Your Majesty? We all want you to,' said Rob.

'I really can't, Rob. Well, then, we'll just hope for the best till to-morrow. Come in good time, all of you. Now, when we get home we'll march up the road to Morven, and all have tea there. Then we'll play games till bedtime, and I think by that time the children will have had a very good day.'

When it began to grow dark she collected the crowd of happy children on the lawn. In their enjoyment of the new games they had been learning they had forgotten all about bed. It was only when they were seated on the plaids spread on the grass that they realised how very tired they were.

Lighted candles had been placed in the summer-house windows, and Queen Lexa stood between them on the steps. Here, in the shadow of the trees, it was very dark. The silence, broken only by the sighing of the pines and the hooting of an owl in the woods, was uncanny. Wee Willie drew closer to Lizzie, and Joanna crept up to Janet, who held Baby Joe in her arms. They half expected some wild beast of the night to jump out of that dark wall of trees.

'Ready, Mr Mac!' said Lexa softly.

With a whizz and a whistle a rocket rushed up into the quiet air. The girls screamed, the boys sprang to their feet and watched it open-mouthed. Even the members of the Band jumped, taken completely by surprise. Queen Lexa laughed, then called for order.

'I want to explain something to you, children! Perhaps you think you have to thank me for this picnic. That's quite a mistake. It's these other boys and girls who have given you this treat to-day. You must thank them before you go home, for I know you've all enjoyed yourselves.'

'Yes, you shall give three cheers presently, but let me finish first. I have something now to say to the members of the Band. When I had made all the arrangements yesterday, I found there was still some money left, so I bought some fireworks, to finish up the evening. You know, this may be our last real meeting, if our new Captain doesn't turn up to-morrow. So I want you to have as much fun as possible.'

‘By the way, I never thought of it before, but it was very good of you to leave the spending of the money to me, and trust me to make the best use of it. I once heard of a girl who was treasurer of a cycle club, and after the subscriptions came in she appeared with a new bicycle. But I’m not that kind of girl, as I think you know. I’ve done the best I could, and I think we’ve had our money’s worth of fun. I hope very much that the Band won’t come to an end to-morrow. If it does, it will be my fault, and I shall be very sorry. But perhaps Jim will turn up after all. Monica, will you tell him how very much everybody wants him to?’

‘And now for the fireworks! Rob, will you come and help Mr MacTaggart? There’s nothing to be frightened for, you know, little ones. If you sit still and watch, you’ll see something very pretty.’

The members of the Band went home in a state of suspense. Would the Band be broken up next day, or would it begin life afresh under a new leader? If it did, what kind of Captain would Jim Macfarlane make? Would there be many changes? Would they have as much fun under his rule as under Lexa’s?

But those were matters for the future to decide. The question of the moment was, would Jim come to the meeting to-morrow?

When Lexa had said farewell to the last of them all, she came slowly up the avenue. Her throne, covered as usual with its white fur rug, stood beside the flagstaff, and she sank down upon it and dropped her head on her arm.

Miss Sparrow came quietly from the summer-house, where she had been putting out the candles.

‘Lexa, dear, I’m afraid you’re overtired. It’s been a long day. You shouldn’t have kept them so late. Of course, they enjoyed it, but——’

‘It’s not that,’ Lexa said wearily. ‘It’s worry. I’m thinking about to-morrow. I wonder if he’ll come?’

Miss Sparrow carried her off indoors for supper, but she remained so anxious and burdened that Granny too looked troubled and asked what was the matter. Her state of suspense was such that Miss Sparrow feared she would not sleep, so did not send her to bed at once. Instead, she tried to divert her thoughts, and to do so resorted to a plan she had kept in reserve for some such occasion, when Lexa should seem to want amusement, new interest, or change of thought.

‘Come and sit by Granny’s fire, Lexa, and have a chat. Do you know, you never asked me a single question, either to-day or before the last meeting, about my secret—my mysterious work, in which you used to be so interested! Have you forgotten all about it?’

‘No, I hadn’t forgotten, but really, Miss Sparrow, I haven’t cared much about anything but the meetings lately.’

‘I want to tell you all about my work, and see what you think of it.’

‘Oh!’ Sudden interest dawned in Lexa’s face. ‘Will you really?’

‘There’s not much to tell. I hope you won’t be disappointed. But I think you can help me, if you will.’

‘Oh, I’d love to! Do tell me, Miss Sparrow!’

Miss Sparrow laughed, and reddened in some embarrassment.

‘When I lived in Glasgow, Lexa, I used to work among the very poor children in the slums, teaching them on Sundays, and we had a week-day class too. When I came here I couldn’t forget them, though I had to give up my work. Everything here is so beautiful, and the air is so sweet, and the wind so healthy, and so much room for everybody, and I couldn’t

help thinking often of my poor city bairns, who never see a tree or flower, and scarcely even the blue sky, but only smoke and dirt and filth.

‘And one day, as I thought of them, it all seemed to work into a little poem, just two or three verses. I wrote it down—about a child who saw the hills in the distance and wondered what they were like, and then a verse or two describing the beauty and loneliness here, with room for them all—and sent it to one of the papers. They printed it, and asked for more.’

‘Oh! But I didn’t know you were a poet, Miss Sparrow!’ cried Lexa, her eyes shining.

Miss Sparrow laughed. ‘I’m not. My verses aren’t anything wonderful, but people seem to like them. So I’ve written more, and put aside any money I was paid for them—it wasn’t much—in the hope of giving some of my weans a trip down the water and a taste of all this beauty.’

‘How like you! But you’ll let me help, Miss Sparrow? Let them come here, and play games on the lawn!’

‘That’s very good of you—but not on the lawn. Perhaps Mr Stewart would lend us a field.’

‘I’m quite sure he will!—and give them dinner and tea too. I’ll make him!’

‘Other people have been helping too,’ Miss Sparrow said quietly. ‘The editor who prints my things asked people who would like to help the children to send to him, and quite a lot of money has been given. We’re going to use it to give a few of them a while at the coast—a fortnight each. But with the money I have put away, we might give a great many more a few hours here, if you were willing, Lexa.’

‘I’d love it! I’ll write to Grandfather to-morrow,’ and Miss Sparrow was satisfied that this new scheme would help to counteract her absorbing interest in the Band.

‘Now let me see the poems! I suppose that’s what you wanted the Glasgow papers for!’

Miss Sparrow laughed and protested, but knew the uselessness of it. She had to produce her treasured newspaper cuttings, and Lexa pored over them till Granny remonstrated.

‘It’s time that lassie was in her bed,’ she said severely.

‘Just one more! I’ll go in five minutes, Granny! Oh, Miss Sparrow, they nearly make me cry! How do you do it?’

‘I don’t,’ smiled Miss Sparrow. ‘It comes. It comes out of the hills, and the wonderful trees, and the lochs, and the thought of those poor city weans, so near, and knowing nothing of it all.’

‘They’re wonderful. I am proud to have a poet living in my house,’ said Lexa, and Miss Sparrow laughed and blushed and hurried her off to bed.

CHAPTER XXIII

WAITING

‘Is Jim coming?’ asked Tibbie Macgregor anxiously.

Every member of the Band had asked the same question, and to all Monica could only answer:

‘He wouldn’t tell me.’

Queen Lexa met them with troubled face.

‘Well, Monica?’

‘I don’t know, Your Majesty. It doesn’t look like it. I asked him just before we started, and he said he hadn’t made up his mind. I hardly think he’ll come.’

‘We’ll wait and see if he turns up. Come and have some games.’

But no games were successful that afternoon. Every one was in suspense concerning the fate of the Band. They kept drawing together in groups to discuss the situation, and were all on the lookout for Jim, and played tennis with one eye on the balls and the other on the avenue.

The Queen tried to pass the time by showing them the menagerie, and then led a few of them into the house to find something else to interest them. The portraits of her parents aroused their curiosity, and they were so much interested in her explanations that they seemed almost to forget their anxiety. So she produced some of her precious curios, and was beginning to explain them, when the Countess of Balquhider interrupted:

‘Do wait while I fetch Roy! He’d love to hear all about it!’

‘And I’ll go for Monica,’ said Nanny eagerly.

Queen Lexa laughed. ‘Oh, very well! Fetch them all in, and I’ll give a lecture on the Far North. You must excuse it if it’s not very brilliant, for I haven’t prepared it, you know.’

‘They’ll all come,’ said Marchioness Nelly. ‘They aren’t playing very hard. They’re all thinking about Jim Macfarlane and the Band.’

Presently the whole Band was gathered in the big dining-room, which showed how half hearted their games had been.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ said Queen Lexa, ‘I have been asked so many questions about these curious things that I’m going to answer them by giving a five-minutes’ lecture, after which you may ask anything else you like. This is my father. That is my mother. The thing in her lap is me. They’re away looking for the South Pole. I hope you’ll all see them when they come home, for nobody ever had a father and mother like them.

‘Here are some things my father brought home from the North Pole. This is his sledge, and that odd boat is a kayak. He used to sail about among the ice-floes in it. Those are his snow-shoes, called skis. These are the tusks of a walrus, and that is a seal my father shot and stuffed. The Marquis of Cove is sitting on the biggest bear they saw, and here are the skins of some foxes. This is my father in his fur clothes, and here is a model of his ship. These are sketches and photographs. If you’ll look at them, I’ll explain anything I can.’

The lecture succeeded where the games had failed. Every one had questions to ask, and Jim was forgotten for a time. When the curiosities had been handed round and explained, Lexa proposed tea, which was waiting on the lawn.

But in time they returned to the matter uppermost in their minds, and all rose with very anxious faces, for Jim had not appeared, and that meant the end of the Band.

Queen Lexa looked worried, too. She had put off the business of the meeting as long as possible. But it was not likely he would come now. They had better get it over and be done with it.

She turned to her anxious subjects.

'Come along. I don't think Jim can be coming,' and she led the way to her throne and the banner.

'The first business to-day is yesterday's picnic,' she said, and looking round, saw relief on several faces. No one wanted to hear her say the words which would announce the end of the Band.

'I think we had a successful day, and I know the children enjoyed themselves. It was a very great treat to them, and I think we all enjoyed seeing them have such a good time. I spent all the money. There was a shilling or two over, so I bought sweets for them to eat on the boat. You were all there, so I needn't say any more about it. I'm glad Ruth Macdonald proposed that we should give them a treat. I think we enjoyed it as much as any of our own meetings. Now for the other matter. Jim Macfarlane evidently isn't coming. Will any one else try being Captain?—Rob, won't you?'

'I'd only make a mess of it, Your Majesty.'

'Well, I did that. Won't you try, to save the Band?'

'I'd much rather not. No, I really couldn't.'

'Ruth, will you try?'

'I? Oh, no, Queen Lexa, I couldn't.'

'I think you could, if you tried. Roy Macgregor, will you and Tibbie do it between you? I know it's no use asking one and not the other.'

'Roy would be no good,' said Tibbie.

'Tib muddles everything she meddles,' said Roy.

'Those two would be no use, Your Majesty. They'd fight all the time,' said Rob.

'Monica, would it be any use asking you?'

'I'm going home at the end of September, Your Majesty.'

'Yes, but till you go?'

'No, thank you. I'd rather not do that.'

'Nelly or Maggie Hunter, will you? Or Mary Duncan?'

But every one was afraid to face the task, and as Lexa knew some of its difficulties she did not press the unwilling ones.

'Then,' she said reluctantly, 'this will be our last meeting.'

There was a sigh of disappointment. Then Rob Cameron sprang to his feet.

'Won't you change your mind, Queen Lexa? We're all hoping you will.'

'No. Thank you for wishing it, but it's no use. Please stop calling me Queen. I'm not the Queen any longer. Then you're sure none of you will be Captain? In that case, I'm afraid the Band can't go on. I'm very sorry. I've enjoyed our meetings as much as anybody. We've always had good fun, and I'm glad to say there has never been any quarrelling, or complaints of one another. We've all been good friends, and I think the Band has helped us to enjoy the summer more than if we'd each spent the time alone and cared nothing for the others. I hope we shall be friends still, although the Band is at an end. Of course, it's all my fault, and you're

welcome to blame me as much as you like. I can only say I'm very sorry. I had no right to get so angry. But I thought—you see——'

She stopped, fearing she might break down and disgrace herself.

'Jim's a rotter!' Rob muttered, and Lexa fired up at once.

'He's not, and you're not to blame him! It was my fault, and he was quite right to be angry. I had no business to think so badly of him. I'm dreadfully sorry for it, but that won't do any good now. But none of you must blame him. I won't have it.'

It was a strange way to talk, just after her assertion that she was Queen no longer. But nobody pointed it out to her, and she sat thinking anxiously, her elbow resting on the arm of her big chair, her cheek in her hand, and her eyes fixed on their gloomy faces. Presently she said thoughtfully:

'I would like to know why Jim hasn't come! I thought he'd like to be Captain! Monica,' she said suddenly, 'is it because he doesn't want anything to do with me? If I promised to leave the Band altogether and not come to any more meetings would he be Captain then?'

'We wouldn't have him, anyway!' cried Rob indignantly. 'We wouldn't have him on those terms.'

'It would be better for the rest of you——'

But the very idea raised such a storm of indignation that Lexa withdrew the suggestion.

'Very well. I won't propose to leave the Band as long as there is a Band. But that will be no longer than this evening. I won't say any more. You know how I feel about it. We all feel the same. Has any one anything to say? No? Then I declare the Band at an end. I am very sorry. Suppose we say good-bye at once. Then you can take your time on the way to the pier. It's too early for the steamer, but I don't feel like playing games, and I don't suppose any of you do either. Good-bye!'

Isobel Ferguson began to cry. Nanny Macfarlane, feeling miserable and guilty, did the same. The boys looked gloomy and depressed.

Then Jim Macfarlane appeared at the end of the pine-tree avenue, and crossed the lawn.

There was so evidently something the matter that he stood gazing at them all. They were so taken by surprise by his late appearance that for a moment no one spoke. Then Lexa sprang up and stepped away from the throne.

'We are so glad you've come! I've just been saying that the Band can't go on any longer, and we were going to say good-bye. Now we won't need to, after all. Boys, give three cheers for our new Captain!'

She sat down on the grass between Monica and Nanny. In their relief they all gave very hearty cheers as Jim came forward and stood beneath the yellow banner. He took off his slouch hat and impressively made a very low bow, and there was a general laugh, for every one felt suddenly light-hearted.

'What I want to know,' Jim began, when there was silence, 'is, why you've pitched on me for this job? And what's the matter with those silly weans?' nodding at Nanny and Isobel.

'They were crying because this was to be the last meeting,' Ruth Macdonald explained.

'I thought she'd change her mind,' and he glanced at Lexa.

She shook her head, and Nelly Hunter remarked:

'She won't. We've asked her dozens of times, but she won't.'

'A girl never means what she says.'

They looked to Lexa to defend her sex, but she only laughed. So Tibbie Macgregor cried:

'Look here, Jim Macfarlane! We want you for Captain, but we won't have you making remarks like that. The Queen never used to, and you needn't either. We won't stand it.'

Jim laughed. 'Why have you pitched on me?'

'Because we couldn't get any one else. We thought even you'd be better than nothing.'

'Roy Macgregor, please keep your sister in order. If she interrupts any more, suppress her. Why didn't you choose Cameron? He's big enough!'

'He wouldn't. We asked him. So we fell back on you,' said Roy.

'Thanks!'

'We thought of you first, but we were afraid you wouldn't,' Nanny explained eagerly.

Jim glared at her, and Nanny subsided. He turned to the others.

'I've something to say before I'm willing to be Captain. How much do you expect of me? Because if you think I can entertain you all, and give you parties twice a week, as the late Queen has done, you're mistaken. My people wouldn't approve of it. If you'll be content if I arrange picnics and sails, I don't mind. But I can't do more than that.'

'We don't expect you to,' Rob said quickly. 'The Queen has been far too good to us. We don't expect any one else to do as much as she has.'

'He couldn't, if he tried,' said Tibbie Macgregor, and was promptly chased across the lawn by her brother.

'In future,' Jim remarked, when order was restored, 'I shall bring a bell and ring for silence. Any one who does not obey the bell will be fined; any one who interrupts a speaker will also be fined, and any one who makes faces at him.'

'One for Tib,' chuckled Roy. 'You'll make quite a lot out of her, Captain. She gets sixpence a week, and it's fivepence too much. She can't manage more than one penny properly.'

Tibbie had crept back to the outside of the circle. She began to make her way towards her brother, but Lexa and Monica stopped her, and sat down one on each side to keep her in order. Lexa whispered to her, and Tibbie sat meekly silent for the rest of the meeting.

'Well,' said Jim, 'if you want me to be Captain, I think it ought to be proposed and seconded properly. I always thought these meetings were too unbusiness-like.'

'We managed to get on pretty well, all the same,' said Ruth, unwilling to hear any criticism of the Queen.

'I propose that Jim Macfarlane be appointed Captain of the Band,' said Rob.

'I second that,' said Roy Macgregor.

'Any to the contrary? No? Carried! There, will that do, Captain?'

'That's better, certainly. Now we ought to call the roll, to make sure every one is here. I suppose there's no list of the members?'

'Please pass him this! He'll find all he wants in it,' Lexa said quietly.

Jim looked through the notebook. On one page was a list of the members, with the dates of the meetings, and marks against each name to show how many had been present each day. On another page was a list of the titled members, with the reason why each title had been conferred. The book also contained information as to who had cycles, who had season tickets for the steamers, the ages and addresses of the members, what was the special hobby or collection of each, and very much more.

There was also a record of the meetings, all very neatly written and carefully arranged. The trouble spent on it showed how the Queen's heart had been in her work. Her arithmetic and French exercise books had never known such care. As Jim turned the pages, he wondered

again, as he had been wondering ever since he heard of her abdication, why she was giving it all up.

He looked at her. 'There is a good deal here which would be useful to me. May I take it home and copy it?'

'Please keep it. I shan't need it,' she said quietly. 'There's a pile of the printed invitations in the house. I'll give them to you.'

Jim's reply was interrupted by Rob Cameron.

'Sorry, but there's barely time to catch the boat. If we don't go we'll have to walk home.'

'I forgot the boat,' the new Captain confessed. 'You'd better run. Come to our house next Saturday afternoon for a meeting.'

'But you said——'

'Oh, we can do with you for once! Here comes Mr Mac to fetch you all. Good-bye!'

Then Lexa and he were alone on the lawn, and the old cart was driving away to the pier.

'I do wish those two would make friends again!' Monica sighed.

'Why, they seemed friendly enough!' said Ruth.

'Friendly enough, yes! But not like they were before. They speak to one another when they have to, but that's all. Perhaps they'll make it up when they're alone together.'

An awkward silence fell on Lexa and Jim as they stood watching the crowd drive away. Lexa broke it, as it was growing uncomfortable.

'If you'll come into the house I'll give you those invitations.'

'Thanks,' said Jim, and followed her up the drive without saying more.

She led him into the library and handed him the parcel. He took it, and hesitated.

'Thanks,' he said again.

'If you would like to hold meetings on the lawn, as usual, you're quite welcome to.'

'It won't be necessary, thank you. We'll find somewhere else that will do just as well.'

'I've no doubt of that,' she said coldly.

'Good-night!'

They parted with a feeling of disappointment on both sides. Lexa was anxious to be friends again, but to tell the truth, so was Jim. He wished now he had accepted her apology when first she had offered it. But to say so would be to own that he had been in the wrong, and he was not willing to do that. If Lexa had made any advances that evening, if she had asked him again to be friends, he would have taken the chance gladly. But he would not take the first step.

As for Lexa, she felt that she had done her share to make up the quarrel. She had said she was sorry, and now she was waiting for him. When he wanted to be friends again he would surely say so. She had hoped, when he came to the meeting that evening, that he would say that the quarrel was at an end, or would behave as if nothing had happened. She would have been only too glad to forget the past. But the constraint and awkwardness in his manner had showed that he had not forgotten, and she had been bitterly disappointed.

The thought of repeating what she had said before never occurred to her, and she never dreamt that he wanted her to. He had accused her of forcing him to speak to her against his will. The charge had wounded her deeply, and she would not give him cause to repeat it. Beyond what was necessary, she would not worry him till he was willing to be friends again.

So each waited for the other, and neither would say the first word. Each was disappointed that there had been no result from that day's meeting, but neither guessed at the feelings of the

other. It seemed to both that it might be a long time before there was friendship between them again, for they were each too proud to make the first advance.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CAPTAIN IN DIFFICULTIES

As Captain of the Band Jim was not successful. His position needed tact and foresight, as well as common-sense, and if he had plenty of the last, it did not make up for his lack of the other qualities. He had not Lexa's inventiveness, nor her talent for management, and the members of the Band soon found the results of their change of leader.

The meetings, which had always gone without a hitch, became occasions of trouble and embarrassment both to Captain and subjects. Wanting Lexa's energy, they became formal and dull, and lost their friendly character. Jim's anxiety to be business-like and do things properly turned the gatherings for play and fun into solemn functions, where everything was a matter of routine and had to be done in the proper place, at the proper time, and in the proper way. Nobody enjoyed the meetings as before. They were attended chiefly as a matter of duty.

The Captain insisted on commencing proceedings by calling the roll, and every one must answer to his name. Any proposal had to be discussed thoroughly, then proposed, seconded, and voted upon. This gave plenty of opportunity for speech-making, but the speeches were generally not very good, and to the listeners decidedly dull.

One or two good speakers were discovered, indeed, and the Band gave a sigh of relief when Roy or Tibbie Macgregor rose, for then they were sure of a laugh, or when Monica began to speak, for her words were always few and to the point, and had a way of settling affairs which had been under discussion till every one was tired of them. But as a rule the speeches were long and dull, and the meetings were not enjoyed as they once had been.

The first, indeed, passed off fairly well, for Jim's methods were new, and therefore to a certain extent interesting. Mrs Macfarlane made arrangements for tea, and Monica was careful to keep all the visitors amused, so the meeting was fairly successful.

But the next few meetings gave rise to some grumbling, and for this Jim was to blame. He did not give as much thought to the arrangements as Lexa had done, and the result was disaster.

He sent out invitations to a picnic to be held beside the loch where he and Rob went fishing, and made no arrangements for taking there the members who did not cycle. He planned a meeting half-way up Morven Hill, then found that the little ones could not climb so far. He announced that on a certain date sports would be held, but when the races were over it was found that there were not enough prizes. He sent out notices of a meeting on 29th August, which fell on a Sunday, so no one knew whether he had meant the Saturday or the Monday, and when the mistake had been pointed out to him, he had to send a second set of notices to correct the first.

These and many more careless blunders were very annoying to his subjects, and many comparisons were drawn between past and present, much to Jim's disadvantage. Lexa heard the talk, and was very indignant. She scolded the discontented ones soundly, and would not allow a word against Jim to be said before her.

But she had to admit they had some excuse. The new Captain was strict. He instituted a system of fines, which was very unpopular. Disregard of the silence bell, quarrels or disputes at meetings, unpunctuality, were punished by small fines, which provoked great indignation

and many refusals to pay. Those who refused were suspended from attendance at the meetings till the fines were paid, and this caused endless trouble.

In fact, Jim tried to rule by force, to compel obedience where Lexa had invited it, and he failed miserably. Very soon he found himself overwhelmed with difficulties, and often wondered ruefully how the Queen had managed to keep things going so easily, with never a complaint or trouble of any kind. Before long he knew that he had set to work in a wrong way, and would have liked to begin again, but would not confess that he had made a mistake. He worried much over the matter, and sought a way out of his troubles, but could find none. The obvious course, to ask Lexa's advice, did not commend itself to him at all.

For they were no nearer being friends. Lexa came to all the meetings, and was a very great help, by quietly smoothing over matters when the Captain's despotic rule had made trouble, and privately talking the rebels into submission. It was owing to her that the fines were paid, and that Jim was allowed to rule for so long before matters came to a crisis.

But she showed no desire for the Captain's company, and he, feeling that he had treated her ungenerously, avoided her as much as possible. If he had understood that she was only waiting for him, he would not have hesitated. But the way she avoided him showed, he thought, that she was still offended, so he avoided her also, and to Monica's distress they only spoke to one another when necessary, and then were unnaturally polite.

He saw how she tried to help him, and at times felt grateful. But sometimes he felt jealous of her control over the boys and girls, and wished she would not interfere in his affairs. He needed her help, however, and she gave it quietly, unasked.

Yet his difficulties increased with every meeting. By the time school began, and he had been Captain for more than a fortnight, half the girls of the Band were banished for refusing to pay fines.

The girls undoubtedly gave the most trouble, but they had some real grievances. He was not intentionally unfair, but his meetings were certainly chiefly for the enjoyment of the boys. He understood what would please them, but found it difficult to think for the girls. It was easy to arrange cricket matches, cycle rides, and fishing parties, but the girls were not satisfied with these. Lexa had found no difficulty in pleasing the girls, and for the boys she had consulted Jim himself.

He tried to get Monica's advice, but Monica's answer was always:

'Ask Lexa. She knows more about it than I do.'

Jim would not ask Lexa, so the girls' grievances remained unredressed. Dissatisfaction grew with every meeting, and found vent in complaints. These were punished by fines, which were not paid, and the result was banishment.

Jim was at his wits' end. If he suspended everybody he would have no Band left. But he had made rules, and if he allowed these to be broken there would be an end of his authority. He did not know what to do.

The crisis came soon after the beginning of the term. There was no reason why the meetings should not continue although the holidays were over. The boys and girls went up to town by boat every day for school, but their Saturday afternoons were still at the disposal of the Band. The weather was warm and bright, with cold mornings and evenings. September was making up for July. So there was no reason why the Band should not meet on Saturdays.

Jim called a meeting to be held on the hill behind Creggandarroch. He hoped for a full muster this time. The last meeting had been very small, because most of the girls had been forbidden to attend.

Ruth Macdonald had arrived late at the meeting before that, and the Captain had reluctantly informed her that she was fined a penny. But Ruth had replied with spirit that she did not approve of the fines, and therefore would not pay. So she had been told she must not come to the next meeting. Nelly Hunter had protested against this, and had met the same fate. The Duncans were fined for complaining of the strict rules. Katie McNab and her brother caused a disturbance by discussing during the meeting the merits of their father's steamer as compared with any other boat on the river.

So at the following meeting, the Saturday before school began, most of the girls were absent, some by the Captain's order, others out of sympathy with the suspended ones.

But now, after a week of school, there was no reason why almost every one should not attend. Tibbie Macgregor had been forbidden to be present, indeed, for she was the most troublesome member of the Band, and was always interrupting and contradicting the speakers. And Nanny Macfarlane was suspended for informing the Captain in public that he was a silly conceited boy, and hadn't a quarter as much sense as Queen Lexa. But except these two, Jim expected every one to be there.

As he went towards the hill, he met Lexa going in the same direction. She let him pass with a brief 'Good-afternoon, Captain!' then, catching sight of some one behind him, hurried down the hill again.

'There's Tibbie Macgregor! She wasn't allowed to come! I do wonder what she means!' she said to herself; but Tibbie and Roy refused to explain their conduct in coming to the meeting.

Lexa began to feel anxious. She had felt sure there must be a rebellion against Jim's rule some day, and these two looked like making trouble.

When the Band was assembled, and Captain Jim looked round at his subjects, he began to feel anxious also. Lexa, Monica, and Tibbie were the only girls present, and Tibbie was there against orders. What had become of all the others?

He called over the roll, then asked:

'Where are the rest of the girls?'

'They aren't coming. They're tired of being fined for nothing. You wouldn't let them come last time, so this time they've stayed away,' said Tibbie promptly.

'Indeed! And did they send this message by you?'

'Yes. They had a meeting last week while you were having yours, and decided not to come to-day. I told them I was coming, so I'd tell you.'

'And what are you doing here? I told you not to come.'

'Oh, but I wanted to come, you see!'

'Are you going to pay the threepence you were fined a fortnight ago?'

'No, I wouldn't think of it. I won't ever pay you a farthing.'

Tibbie's eyes sparkled. She enjoyed defying him, and wondered eagerly what he would do next. When he was silent for a moment, she chuckled with delight, knowing that he was greatly puzzled. Lexa and Monica listened anxiously.

'I don't know why you've come to this meeting,' the Captain said at last. 'You've no business here, and the sooner you go the better.'

'I dare say! I haven't walked five miles just to go home again because you say it, Jim Macfarlane.'

'Roy, will you kindly remove your sister?'

‘No, thanks!’ said Roy, standing by Tibbie as a matter of course. ‘I’d rather not. You see, I’d have to carry her, and since she’s got so fat she’s an awful weight.’

‘Oh, you fibber! You know every one says how thin I am!’

‘Well, you kick and scream and bite so when any one carries you.’

‘That’s a fib, anyway!’ but Tibbie chuckled complacently. ‘You’re afraid to try, that’s all.’

‘Some of the boys had better put her out of the meeting,’ observed the Captain.

‘We can’t fight a girl, Captain!’ remonstrated Rob.

‘I’d just like to see you try!’ cried Roy.

‘I’m ready to fight any of them!’ said Tibbie in delight. ‘Charlie Duncan’s about my size. Come on, Charlie!’

Lexa sprang up.

‘Tibbie, I’m ashamed of you! How dare you behave like this? Sit down and be quiet at once!’

‘I’ve something to say to Jim Macfarlane,’ Tibbie protested. ‘He won’t give me a chance to speak. It’s as bad as the Suffragettes. “Votes for Women,” Captain! I want to ask a question.’

Jim saw it would be necessary to listen, so he said:

‘Ask it quickly, then. After that, either you go away, or I close the meeting.’

‘Really! Well, I want to know one thing, and I expect all the others do too,’ said Tibbie impressively. This was her revenge. ‘What becomes of the money you make us pay? What do you do with it? You’ve never told us. You don’t get very much, for we’ve too much sense to pay, but I’ve been counting up, and you must have had at least two shillings in fines. I want to know where the money goes to.’

Jim was angry in earnest now.

‘You think it’s not safe with me? How many more think the same?’

‘None,’ said Rob quickly. ‘Tibbie Macgregor, I thought you had more sense. The sooner you go home the better.’

‘Serves him right,’ Tibbie said sulkily. ‘He isn’t at all a good Captain. I only wish we had the Queen back.’

‘This meeting is at an end,’ said Jim shortly, and jumped on his bicycle and rode away.

The boys and girls looked at one another in surprise.

‘Tibbie, why can’t you behave?’ cried Lexa. ‘If this is the end of the Band, it’s your fault.’

‘Well, it serves him right.’

‘All the same, there was no need for you to make all this trouble,’ said Rob. ‘The sooner you go home the better, if you must behave like a silly child.’

Lexa checked Tibbie’s angry rejoinder.

‘Come along, both of you. We may as well go home. The Captain certainly won’t come back to this meeting. Now, Tibbie, I’m going to scold you till you see how silly you are.’

Tibbie followed her meekly, for though she might defy the Captain, she always obeyed the Queen.

When they had gone, Rob Cameron looked round at the others, sitting gloomy and silent in their places.

‘How long is this kind of thing going on? Everything’s wrong. Jim’s made more of a mess of things than the Queen did. And now he’s gone off in a temper. The girls are all in the sulks—Monica and Queen Lexa are the only sensible ones among them.’

‘Well, Rob, he has been rather hard on them,’ said Monica.

‘He didn’t mean to be. Can we do anything to put things right again?’

The others looked doubtful. Then Monica said thoughtfully:

‘We might think it over. Suppose we call a meeting without inviting either Jim or Lexa, and discuss the situation?’

‘That’s a good plan. We’ll have a meeting. When shall it be?’

‘Next Saturday. There won’t be a meeting of the Band. Jim won’t be ready for another so soon as that.’

‘Think not?’

‘Sure. It will be more than a week before he forgives Tibbie.’

‘Very well. How shall we manage about inviting those who aren’t here to-day?’

‘I’ll see to that,’ said Monica.

‘You won’t let Jim guess what’s up?’ asked Rob.

‘He shan’t know anything about it, nor shall Lexa—nor Nanny!’

‘And where is the meeting to be?’ asked another of the boys.

‘Come to our house,’ said Rob. ‘Then we can easily keep it secret. Next Saturday afternoon, at our house. Don’t invite the little ones, Monica.’

‘No, only those who would be of use. We really ought to meet at midnight, in a secret place, and post sentinels to warn us of the approach of the enemy, now that we are conspirators,’ Monica laughed. ‘But I hardly think that’s necessary, and it might be difficult to arrange. I hope some good will come of our conspiracy. The present state of things is very uncomfortable.’

CHAPTER XXV

THE CONSPIRACY

In the Camerons' garden was a stream, or 'burn,' as Nanny called it. It came tumbling down the hill in little waterfalls, and danced and bubbled among the tangled bushes on its way to the loch. The trees arched till the water ran through a tunnel, and even on a sunny afternoon the banks of the burn were cool and dark.

Monica looked round with much satisfaction, saying:

'The very place for a conspirators' meeting! It wouldn't have seemed quite the thing to hold it out on the lawn. This is gloomy enough for anything, a splendid place for secrets.'

'I thought you'd like it,' said Rob.

Those members of the Band who had been invited were gathered on the bank of the stream. Monica had written to them during the week, explaining the purpose of the meeting. Neither the Queen nor the Captain had heard of the meeting.

'Every one is here now,' said Rob. 'Let's get to business at once. I'm not going to make a speech, but I want to know if you all agree with me on one or two points. I've thought the whole thing over carefully, and I won't waste any time in unnecessary talk.'

'Hear, hear!'

'Please don't speak till you're spoken to, Tibbie Macgregor. Now, you'll all agree that the present state of the Band is very unsatisfactory.'

Yes, they all agreed to that.

'And it's because Jim Macfarlane and Queen Lexa have quarrelled. That's how the trouble began.'

'That's so. Go on, Rob,' said Monica.

'I can't say that Jim's been a good Captain. He meant well, I'm sure, but he started wrong, and the consequence is that the girls say they won't come to any more meetings, and everything is in a muddle.'

'We don't object to Jim himself,' said Ronald Gordon, 'only to his way of being Captain.'

'Of course. He's a good fellow, and great fun at school, but he can't manage girls. Perhaps it's no wonder—but I won't say any more, as present company might object.'

'Meaning *me*,' said Tibbie.

'The point is, we would like to have the Queen in her old place again.'

'Hear, hear! *Hear, hear!*' cried Tibbie enthusiastically.

'Of course we would; but how can we manage it?' asked Monica.

'How does Jim feel, do you think? Is he very keen on being Captain?'

'He's tired of it. He hasn't said so, but I think he's had enough of it,' said Monica.

'Well, now, that's just what I think too,' Rob said eagerly. 'I spoke to him about the Band at school the other day, and he said, "Bother the Band!" and changed the subject. It's worrying him, and he's tired of it. In that case, why shouldn't we ask the Queen to have another try?'

'Do you think she would? I don't believe it would be any use, you know, unless she had made it up with Jim, and he asked her to.'

'Then what we want to do is to make them friends again.'

'Certainly!' laughed Ruth Macdonald. 'But how are you going to manage it?'

Monica looked thoughtful. 'I had got that length too. It seems the only way, if things are to be really better. The question is, how is it to be done? I think you have a plan, Rob. So have I. Let's hear yours, and any others, and talk them all over. I think they're both willing to be friends, and I'll tell you why.'

The result of the consultation was that on Monday morning Monica rode over to Morven to see Lexa. She found her and Miss Sparrow preparing long tables in a field, for a big party of children from the Glasgow slums was expected by the midday boat.

'Lexa, we're going to ask Jim to call a meeting for next Saturday, and we want to arrange _____,

'Do you think he will? I'm so sorry about that trouble at the last one! I scolded Tibbie well, but it was very little use. Jim won't feel like another meeting yet, I'm afraid.'

'We're going to ask him, anyway. We want to arrange some very important business! You'll hear all about it at the meeting,' as Lexa looked surprised and anxious. 'We feel as if we'd like to have one more meeting before the winter, and this fine weather may not last much longer. Besides, people are beginning to talk about going back to Glasgow. After having such jolly meetings all through the summer, we wouldn't like last time's to be the end, when Jim was angry, and we were all cross with Tibbie. We would rather have something pleasanter to remember. So we're going to ask Jim to have a kind of good-bye meeting, and we wondered if you would let us have it here, for old time's sake—for auld lang syne, you know. We had so many jolly days here that we always feel as if the meetings ought to be held at Morven. Would you mind?'

'I'd be delighted, but I'm sure Jim wouldn't like it.'

'We'll ask him. I'll try to talk him into it. Then if he's willing, may we hold our next meeting here?'

'Why, of course! You know how pleased I'd be! But he won't be willing.'

'I'll let you know what he says.'

That evening Monica broached the subject to Jim.

'When is there to be another meeting, Jim?'

Jim was busy mending a fishing-rod. He answered without looking up.

'I don't know. Why?'

'We were hoping there would be one next Saturday.'

'Well, there won't.'

'Don't you think it would be an excellent plan to have a good-bye meeting? It will soon be winter now. The Camerons and Hunters go back to town next week, and the Duncans and Macdonalds propose leaving the week after.'

'Can't help it. I don't want a meeting at present.'

Monica began to despair. But there was a trait in Jim's character she had not reckoned upon, and her next remark, though careless enough, brought success.

'Rob Cameron had something important to say at the next meeting, so we hoped you'd have one soon.'

Jim looked at her sharply. Important business? He knew what that meant. They were tired of his rule. They had been discussing the state of the Band, and had decided that he was not a good Captain. They wanted either to depose him or to ask him to resign. Well, he would save them the trouble, by abdicating as the Queen had done. He knew he had failed. He had been unwilling to confess it, but it would be worse to be told of it by Rob. He would resign, and then they would have no chance of saying what they thought.

Then there must be another meeting. Since he knew how they felt, it would be cowardly to refuse.

‘I’ll arrange for a meeting on Saturday,’ he said curtly.

Monica was astonished. But there was something else to be arranged.

‘Jim, we’d all like it so much if the meeting could be held at Morven. So many of them were there. If this is to be the last before the winter, don’t you think it would be jolly to go there again? I’ve asked Lexa, and she doesn’t mind.’

‘You seem to have arranged the whole affair before mentioning it to me,’ said Jim, frowning and thinking hard.

He knew why they wanted to hold the next meeting at Morven. They were going to ask the Queen to take her old place again as soon as they were rid of him. Well, she could do it better than he. It did not matter to him. He could not possibly remain a member of the Band after his failure as Captain.

‘I don’t mind. It may be at Morven, if you like,’ he said gruffly. ‘But the girls won’t come,’ he added.

‘Oh, yes, they will. They’ve promised.’

Jim said nothing, but was not very well pleased. There had evidently been a secret meeting. He would very much like to know what had been said, and where it had been held.

CHAPTER XXVI FOR AULD LANG SYNE

The members of the Band awaited the next meeting with eager expectation. But Lexa was anxious, and Jim apprehensive. As Saturday drew near, he began to regret that he had called the meeting, for he grew more and more certain that he had rightly guessed its reason.

Monica was delighted with the success of her plan so far. She felt that Lexa and Jim had quarrelled about her, though she had not been to blame, and she was anxious to see them friends again.

When Saturday came, Jim would have been relieved to find it a wet day, and that the meeting would be impossible. But the sun was shining, and he had no excuse for not going to Morven.

It was part of Monica's plan that the Captain should not arrive till the meeting was about to begin. She was prepared if necessary to puncture her tyre, or do anything else to delay him on the road. But she found that unnecessary. Jim also was anxious to be late, so that he would have no time for talk with any one before the meeting. So they were late in starting, and did not reach Morven till every one was waiting for them.

The members of the Band had seated themselves on the lawn in a wide semicircle, wondering what had become of the Captain. Lexa was in the summer-house, admiring some postcards which Isobel Ferguson had just received from the English Lakes. That also was part of the plan.

All the members were present. Those not in the secret had discovered that something was afoot, and were speculating eagerly as to what was going to happen. The conspirators refused to explain, but admitted that this was to be an important meeting. Lexa had been closely questioned, but had assured every one that she knew nothing about it. She believed there was a secret, but did not know what it was.

So Jim was met by eager looks and questioning faces which surprised him. He had thought they would all know. Who then was going to ask him to resign? Rob? Monica? The Macgregors? Surely not Rob! And surely not Monica! Yet she had seemed to know all about it. He began to feel puzzled.

Rob appeared at the summer-house door.

'Can I speak to you before the meeting, Captain?'

Jim, surprised and puzzled, made his way towards him, and Monica held her breath. But Rob knew what to do.

He picked up Isobel, and dropped her lightly on the grass. Then Jim followed him into the summer-house.

Lexa was bending over the table. She looked up, startled at Isobel's disappearance, and Rob slipped out and closed the door.

Jim turned to follow, much astonished. To his amazement, he found the door locked.

'What on earth——' and he began to thump angrily, and then to kick.

Lexa, as amazed as he, sprang to one of the windows. Jim, finding no notice taken of him, hurried to the other.

Rob was urging Monica forward. She was hesitating, but at sight of the faces at the windows she stepped out in advance of the others.

‘Queen Lexa and Captain Jim, I have something to say! Jim, you can’t get through that window, so you needn’t try. You should remember that it’s the Queen’s summer-house, and you’re kicking the paint off the door. We’re sorry if you’re angry, but we couldn’t think of any better way. We want you two to be friends again. Things haven’t gone well since you—well, since you haven’t been friends! Jim is tired of being Captain. He hasn’t said so, but he’s shown it. We must have a Captain—or a Queen.

‘We’d like you to settle that between you, but anyway, we want you to be friends, and then perhaps the Band may get on better. And we think you’re both willing to be friends, only you won’t say so. I’ll tell you why we think so. The other day I asked Lexa why she wouldn’t speak to Jim if she could help it, and she said, “I’d be quite willing, but he doesn’t want me to. He told me not to speak to him.” And the other day Rob Cameron told Jim that he was mean not to forgive the Queen, and that he had no business to be offended with her for so long, and Jim said, “I’m not offended, but she is. She won’t speak to me, as you can see for yourself. I’d make it up if she would.”

‘Now don’t you see that you’re both waiting for one another? Don’t you think it’s rather silly? You may go on waiting till Christmas. And since it’s making us all uncomfortable as well as yourselves, don’t you think the sooner you put an end to it the better? You can’t get out till we open the door, and we’re not going to do that till you make up your minds to be sensible. The sooner the better, for all of us.’

She stopped, and turned to Rob. A round of applause greeted her, and Tibbie Macgregor cried shrilly:

‘Well done, Monica! Three cheers for the Queen! Hip, hip, hurrah!’

Jim banged his window shut. He would pay Monica out for this. He turned to attack the door again, then stopped, and stared at Lexa.

Her head was down on the window-ledge, her face hidden. She was shaking from head to foot. What could be wrong with her? Girls were queer things.

She gave a breathless gasp. Was she crying, or——?

Then, unable to keep it in any longer, she broke into a peal of laughter, and laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks. Jim stared. It had not struck him as funny. But her laughter was infectious. In a moment he joined in and laughed also, though less heartily, and with some annoyance.

Lexa looked up at last.

‘Oh, *dear!* Did you ever? Who do you think——?’

‘They’ve been having meetings on the sly. Monica and Rob are at the bottom of it,’ said Jim, and came over and closed her window. ‘We’d better arrest them on a charge of conspiracy.’

‘It’s the funniest thing——’ and she was beginning again.

‘Don’t!’ he said warningly. ‘It’s not safe. You’ll have hysterics in a moment.’

‘Then they’d *have* to let us out! Did you mean that—what you said to Rob?’

‘Yes!’ he said, looking straight at her. ‘I thought you were mad with me. I thought you had good right to be. I didn’t behave decently, and I was sorry, but I didn’t like to say so.’

‘Then don’t you think we’ve been rather silly for the last month?’

He laughed, then said ruefully:

‘A pretty mess I’ve made of things in the Band! Can you put it right, do you think? Why did everything go wrong? Did I have bad luck, or was it all my fault?’

‘It was chiefly your fault,’ Lexa said candidly. ‘You see, you tried to *make* them do things, and they didn’t like it. I wonder you didn’t have trouble with the boys.’

‘I was going to resign to-day, as you did. I thought they were going to ask me to. That’s what I thought the meeting was for. Monica and Rob have some cheek, you know!’

Lexa began to laugh again. ‘And I was so busy with Isobel’s postcards! I never suspected anything. What’s that?’

‘Some one tuning a fiddle. I’m used to that since Monica came,’ and Jim peered through one of the stained-glass windows. ‘It’s Monica. How did she get the fiddle here, and what can they be up to now?’

‘Nanny brought it by steamer. They wouldn’t tell me what it was for.’

Monica drew her bow across the strings, then began to play ‘Auld Lang Syne,’ and the Band began to sing.

‘That’s for our benefit, I suppose,’ Lexa said, laughing softly. ‘I presume we may go out now, if we like.’

‘I vote we don’t. Let’s keep them in suspense.’

‘All right. We’ll see what they do next?’

Monica followed the song with a solo, then called for a recitation. Tibbie Macgregor was ready and eager for this, and later on she and Roy gave a dialogue. Ruth Macdonald, Nanny, and Nigel Scott also recited, but the others were shy. Songs and violin music came between the recitations, and kept every one lively.

Then Rob and Monica held a consultation, and many curious glances were cast at the summer-house. But the windows remained shut, and there was no sign from Lexa and Jim.

Monica began to feel anxious. Had her plan failed? If they had not made friends by now, they might not do so at all.

The Queen and the Captain watched them through the windows with much interest, but with no intention of ending their suspense.

‘Serves them jolly well right,’ said Jim. ‘We’ll let them wait a bit longer yet.’

But when those outside scattered for games, he grew tired of being a prisoner.

‘Is there no way we can get out of this without letting them know?’

‘Why, yes! I forgot till this minute!’

She sprang on to the table, and reaching up, to the roof, slipped back a bolt, then with a stick pushed up a trap-door.

‘There! We’ll get out on the roof, and down at the back, and away to the house, and they won’t know what’s become of us.’

‘Won’t they see us on the roof?’

‘No, the trees will hide us. Lift that box on to the table to stand on.’

They crouched on the roof behind the fir branches, and watched the games below.

‘You will be Queen again, won’t you?’ Jim asked suddenly.

‘I don’t know. I said I never would again.’

‘I’m sick of it. I made a mess of things.’

‘I’d need to be asked,’ Lexa laughed.

‘I’m asking you now. You know they all want it too.’

‘I’ll think about it. Come on, we can’t stop here. You’ll have to help me down.’

He took her hands and lowered her as far as he could reach.

‘Now drop lightly, or you’ll hurt yourself.’

She fell in a heap, but sprang up as he dropped beside her.

‘Now follow me, and we’ll get round to the house and wait till they find us gone.’

She led him through the pines, keeping out of sight of the lawn, and they reached the house unnoticed, and looked out from the library windows at ‘Poor Jenny is a-weeping,’ in full swing on the lawn.

‘But they keep looking at the summer-house to see if we aren’t coming out!’ laughed Lexa. ‘They can’t imagine what we’re doing all this time.’

‘Serves them right,’ said Jim again.

Presently the group drew close about Monica, as if urging her to action. The Queen and the Captain watched, in breathless interest.

Monica seemed to hesitate. Then she went forward to the summer-house, unlocked the door, and threw it wide open. Jim and Lexa laughed.

Monica, in absolute amazement and dismay, turned to the others to show the empty room. They crowded up the steps, and the Queen and the Captain laughed again.

‘Quite so!’ laughed Jim. ‘The question is, where are the prisoners? What have Miss Monica and Master Rob to say now, I wonder?’

‘They’ll find the box on the table in a minute, and then they’ll discover the trap-door and come after us.’

‘Then you’d better be prepared with a speech,’ grinned Jim. ‘Goodness!’ he said suddenly, ‘look at the lovely Rolls! Which of your friends is this, Your Majesty?’

‘Rolls?’ and Lexa sprang up.

A motor-car had driven out of the pine-tree avenue, and was coming towards the house.

‘Gracious—me!’ gasped Lexa, and was gone.

She raced across the lawn, and the Band streamed down from the summer-house steps at sight of her, and at the arrival of the strangers.

Lexa was already in her mother’s arms, sobbing for joy. Then she sprang to her father, and the members of the Band gathered round Jim for explanations.

‘I know no more than you do, but they’re evidently her father and mother. They won’t want us. The sooner we clear out the better.’

Monica picked up her violin, the Macgregors ran to help Nigel Scott, Rob hastily fetched Isobel’s postcards, and they all hurried off, hoping not to disturb Lexa and her parents.

But she saw them, and drew herself out of her father’s arms.

‘You seem to do things on an extensive scale, Lexa,’ laughed Captain Stewart. ‘Surely it’s a big tea-party? How many are there?’

‘Only twenty-seven. You see, I never dreamt you were coming. Grandfather might have told me! I suppose he knew?’

‘Oh, yes, he knew some time ago!’ laughed the Captain. ‘But he thought it would be a nice surprise for you.’

‘Yes, but I wish I’d known,’ and she gathered the whole Band round her, and addressed them.

‘It’s very good of you all to go away! I just want to say good-bye. I can’t ask you to wait now, but I hope we shall have another meeting soon. I shall want to introduce you all to my mother and father, as soon as I’m used to them myself. Jim will tell you how we got out of the summer-house, and what we’ve been talking about. I consider Rob Cameron and Monica Howard have great cheek to behave so to the Captain and me, but I suppose we mustn’t say any more about it. Good-bye!’

Jim was the last to say good-bye to her and to congratulate her on her parents' safe return. When Captain Stewart saw him, he came forward.

'I know you, young man, if I'm not mistaken. Your name's Macfarlane, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir,' and Jim looked admiringly at the big man with the kindly sunburnt face, and said to himself that Queen Lexa was in luck.

'Your father and I used to go fishing together. Ever caught a salmon?'

'Yes, sir, several. But I go with Rob Cameron.'

'I know the Camerons too. I'll be round to see your father one of these days. I'm glad Lexa has made friends with you.'

Queen and Captain looked at one another guiltily, and Jim said, reddening:

'We've made it up now, but we haven't been very good friends for some time. It was my fault——'

'Father, we've had a dreadful quarrel! I'm afraid I began it. I was frightfully rude to him, and we wouldn't speak to one another. But I'll tell you all about it when I've explained about the Band. Good-bye, Jim! Father, here comes Granny Mac! Oh, have you brought Janet's father home safe?'

'Yes,' Captain Stewart laughed. 'We left him at the lodge as we passed. The weans were fair daft with joy at the sight of him.'

CHAPTER XXVII THE LAST MEETING

'To the Duchess of Ealing, Miss Nanny, and Sir Jim Macfarlane.

'A Meeting will be held on 29th September, at 9 p.m., at Morven. You are earnestly requested to be present.

'By Order,
'QUEEN LEXA.'

The Prime Minister laughed, and so did the Duchess. They had not seen Lexa since the last meeting, for she had been in Glasgow with her parents for some days.

'Then she is going to be Queen again!' cried Nanny.

'Well, I'm glad she is. But it won't be a big meeting,' said the Prime Minister thoughtfully. 'Half of them are away for the winter. Think of a meeting without Rob!—or the Macdonalds!'

'Or the Duncans, or the Hunters, or Isobel Ferguson! They're all in town,' said Monica.

'It won't be like a real meeting,' said Jim. 'Who can be there? The Macgregors, of course; they live here all the year——'

'I'm afraid they won't be able to bring Nigel.'

'Why not? Poor little chap, he did enjoy the meetings.'

'Well, don't you see, it's in the evening! They couldn't take him home across the loch in the dark!'

Jim had not noticed the time of the meeting.

'Nine o'clock! What does she mean? At that time of night? But—how funny!'

'More like a party than a meeting. How nice!' said Nanny.

But Jim very strongly disliked parties. He grumbled much at the necessity for best clothes implied in an evening invitation, and as they drove to Morven on the evening of the 29th, he openly expressed his fear that this meeting would turn out to be only a stupid girls' party—all dancing and no fun. Nanny and Monica were very indignant.

'Did you ever know Queen Lexa plan a stupid meeting yet? She always manages well.'

'It was Jim's meetings that were stupid,' said Nanny.

'But think of a meeting without Rob or Charlie Duncan!'

They agreed with him there.

'Think of a meeting without Ruth and the Hunters!' said Monica.

'Or Isobel,—or Alfie!' cried Nanny.

As they drove up the avenue, every window of the big house was ablaze with lights, and a car was driving away from the door. The entrance hall was decorated with heather and bracken and rowan berries, and a great fire was roaring on the hearth.

As they paused in the hall, Janet MacTaggart came up and said softly to Monica, 'Will ye come this way, please, my lady! 'Tis the Queen's order.'

She wore a smart gray gown, reaching to her knees, with wide white collar and cuffs, and a neat cap, and she felt very important. When she was a little older she was going to be Miss Lexa's maid and never leave her. In the meantime she was playing at it.

She led them into the morning-room to take off their hats and coats. And here were Roy and Tibbie Macgregor and Nigel Scott—Tibbie, in a white silk dress, brushing her tangled

curls, Roy arranging his plaid before a long glass, and Nigel sitting while John MacTaggart took off his outdoor shoes.

‘I’m so glad to see you, Nigel!’ cried Monica. ‘But how did you manage to get here?’

‘The Queen sent a carriage for us, and I’m to stay the night with Roy. Isn’t it just like them?’

‘Won’t it be a small meeting?’ said Jim. ‘I suppose Cameron and heaps of others can’t possibly be here.’

‘I saw Ruth Macdonald. She was going upstairs as we came in—in a pink dress. She looked lovely!’

‘Ruth! But she’s in Glasgow.’

‘Can’t help it. I saw her on the stairs,’ Tibbie persisted.

‘It was probably some one else. Tib has a great imagination.’

‘I’ll fight you when we get home, my boy,’ said Tibbie cheerfully. ‘There’s not another girl in the Band as tall as Ruth, or as dark. I know it was her.’

‘Personal Pronouns, page 35. Look it up when you get home,’ said Roy, and they went off, wrangling cheerfully and helping Nigel.

When the girls were ready, Janet led them up the wide staircase. At the top was a long corridor, cleared of its furniture, and decorated with evergreens and strings of flags. And here against the wall was the Queen’s big yellow banner, and beneath it her throne, draped in its white fur rug.

Queen Lexa, dressed in white, sat here in state, leaning on the arm of her throne, and talking to Ruth Macdonald and Isobel Ferguson.

Monica looked round in astonishment. Every member of the Band seemed to be present, even those who were supposed to be in town for the winter. All had taken the hint given by the hour of the invitation. The girls wore their gayest, smartest dresses, and had given more time to the arrangement of their hair than they usually did before meetings of the Band. The boys wore full-dress kilts, of the tartans to which their names entitled them.

The members who had been wont to come to meetings in flannel suits and everyday summer dresses looked very different to-night. The scene was very gay, and the noisy chatter very merry. Monica thought she must be dreaming. How could all these be here who had left the coast for the winter? Yet no one seemed to be missing. Her fears of a small meeting vanished.

Little John MacTaggart was waiting at the head of the stairs to announce them.

‘The Duchess of Ealing, Sir Jim and Miss Nanny Macfarlane.’

‘Your Majesty, you’re a genius!’ said Monica. ‘How have you managed it? We thought half of them couldn’t be here.’

Queen Lexa laughed. ‘I am so glad to see you. You’re late, though. Every one else is here. How long are you waiting in Scotland, Duchess?’

‘Only a few more days, Your Majesty.’

‘Oh, that’s bad news! I hoped you’d wait till Christmas.’

Monica laughed. ‘I’ve been away more than two months already. I’m longing to get home now. But I’m hoping father and mother will bring us all here next summer.’

‘That would be jolly! We’re going to keep on the Band, you know. I’d like to have your brothers and sisters at the meetings. Now it’s time for the fun to begin! Go and speak to Ruth.’

Jim was already talking busily to Rob Cameron and Charlie Duncan, and Nanny had found Isobel and Alfie. Monica, wondering how all these had managed to come and how they

meant to get home, went to speak to Ruth Macdonald.

‘We came by the evening boat,’ Ruth explained, ‘and we’re to stay the night. Queen Lexa begged that we might. She said she wanted to have one more real meeting. And there’s no school to-morrow, as it’s Saturday.’

‘Now then, come along!’ cried Queen Lexa. ‘It’s a month too soon, but the apples are ripe, and we’re going to play Hallow-e’en.’

A burst of applause greeted this announcement, and was renewed at sight of the tub and the rosy-cheeked apples floating in the water. Little Joanna MacTaggart, dressed like Janet in gray, with a white apron, brought the fork with which the apples were to be speared, and the fun began.

There was no lack of apples at Morven, and the game went on till every one had won several. The Marchionesses of Monzie and Nanny Macfarlane giggled so when their turn came that they were not very successful; but Isobel climbed on to the chair with so solemn a look on her grave little face that she speared an apple every time, and had a dozen fine ones to carry home next morning. The Macgregors were successful also, but they ate half their winnings during the evening.

Then Lexa, searching for Isobel to take her turn, found her in a corner, trying to make Joanna share her apples, and thereupon all the MacTaggarts had to come and have their turn.

Supper followed, with Janet and her brothers and the boys of the Band to hand round, and still there was no sign of any grown-up person. It seemed as if for that night the house had been given over to the Queen and her subjects.

But after supper, when they had gathered round the Queen’s throne again, there came the sound of the pipes, and up the stair and along the corridor came Archie MacTaggart, Granny’s son who had sailed with Captain Stewart, dressed in his kilt, bagpipes under his arm, blowing with all his might. He was playing a reel, and no one lost a moment. Even Jim enjoyed this kind of dancing. Waltzes and fox-trots he despised, as only fit for girls, but a reel, to the music of the pipes, and he in his kilt, was another matter.

He threw a laughing challenge to Queen Lexa. She nodded, and opened the dance with him. Monica paired with Rob, Isobel with Alfie, Ruth with Ronald Gordon, and Nanny with Roy Macgregor. Tibbie hesitated, then shook her head to Charlie Duncan, and went to sit with Nigel.

But Queen Lexa could not permit that. Presently she stopped.

‘I’m tired. Bring me two ices from the other room. Now go and dance with Tibbie,’ and she gave one ice to Nigel and sat down beside him.

One after another the boys asked her to dance, but she refused them all and sat talking to Nigel. Not till they were tired out did any of the dancers pause. When they could no longer stand they threw themselves on the floor by the Queen and Nigel, and lay there panting.

At last even Jim and Tibbie had to give in, and the others, who had been watching, gave them a cheer. Archie MacTaggart strode away with the pipes, and the children lay in a crowd round Queen Lexa and Nigel, and began to realise that they were a little tired.

‘Janet!’ said Lexa. ‘Lights out, please!’

They were sitting round the big fireplace, the Queen and Nigel in the corner of a couch, the others on the floor. When Janet turned off the light they all drew closer to the fire, and Queen Lexa laughed.

‘Now is the time for ghost stories, but we mustn’t frighten the little ones. Janet! Joanna! You have something for us, I think.’

The boys and Joanna made their way into the circle and distributed crackers, and Janet brought a tray with dishes of nuts for snapdragon. The Queen set light to these, and the blue flames leapt up in the darkness, while crackers were pulled on every side, and Isobel hid her face in Monica's dress because she did not like them.

They sat talking and laughing, resting and asking riddles, all wearing gaudy paper caps, the Queen decorated with a big gilt crown, and the Prime Minister with a dunce's cap. Suddenly Lexa cried:

'Silence, if you please!' and they heard the big clock downstairs strike twelve.

There was a moment's silence. Then Queen Lexa said regretfully:

'I hoped our sweethearts would come and look over our shoulders! Perhaps there are too many of us.'

'I'll go and peep over Isobel's, if it's not too late,' said Roy audaciously, 'and Rob can look over Monica's.'

'And Nanny Macfarlane can peep over Alfie's!' suggested Tibbie, 'and I'll look over Roy's.'

'You bad children!' laughed Queen Lexa, as Nanny giggled, Monica and Isobel blushed, and Rob sprang up to catch Roy. 'It's not really Hallow-e'en; that's why they didn't appear.'

'You're a month too early. You shall sit up next month to wait for yours,' said a voice in the darkness, and Lexa cried:

'Lights up, Janet! I've been waiting for you, father! Is mother there too? And Miss Sparrow?' for Miss Sparrow had come down from Glasgow to be present at a meeting of the Band at last.

'Boys!' said Queen Lexa. 'Please pull this sofa over by my throne! That's right. Now please sit down here!' to the elders.

She stood before her throne, and addressed her subjects.

'Please form in a procession. I'm going to introduce you, and you must march past. Father and mother, this is my Prime Minister, Sir Jim Macfarlane. This is Lady Ruth Macdonald, the Countess of Dunoon. This is Lady Monica Howard, the Duchess of Ealing. These are the Earl and Countess of Balquhider. These are the Marchionesses of Monzie. This is the Marquis of Cove. This is Lady Isobel Ferguson,' and so on, till all had shaken hands with Captain and Mrs Stewart, the boys first making a low bow, and the girls dropping curtseys, following the lead given them by Jim and Ruth and Monica. Some of the curtseys were very awkward, to be sure, but Mrs Stewart laughingly took the will for the deed, and greeted each with a gracious word.

'Now we want you to come downstairs and let us join in the dancing,' she said. 'We've seen nothing of you so far, by Queen Lexa's wish.'

'I won't say we haven't been watching the fun from some corner known only to ourselves and the Queen, however,' the Captain remarked.

'We'll come presently, mother, if you'll just leave us alone for a few more minutes. Really alone, this time—no listening on the stairs, father! I'm going to make a speech.'

'Mayn't we wait and hear it?' laughed the Captain.

'No, indeed! It's strictly private. You'd make me nervous.'

So they went reluctantly downstairs, and Lexa took her seat on the throne below the banner. Her subjects sat on the floor before her, and waited expectantly.

'Ladies and gentlemen!—So far we have said nothing about the Band, but of course this is really our good-bye meeting before the winter. I very much hope nothing will hinder us from

having meetings next summer. You must all come to live somewhere near, so that we can have as good times as we've had this year. I'll arrange a meeting as soon as I find most of you have come back to the coast, and I hope you'll all be here.

'Now you will have noticed that I've made myself Queen again. I hope nobody has any objection?—That's all right. I knew you wouldn't mind. In fact, I rather thought you wanted it. Don't interrupt, please! I really had to do it, for the Captain refused to go on being Captain, and wouldn't even call a meeting to tell you so. If you want me to be Queen next summer, I'll do my best not to let any silliness spoil our fun, as it did this year. I made a great deal of trouble out of nothing, and I'm very sorry——'

'If you begin to apologise, Your Majesty,' said Jim, 'I shall have to apologise to you, and Monica and Rob will have to apologise to both of us, and Tibbie Macgregor will certainly have to apologise to me, and I suppose I'll have to apologise to all the rest of the girls, and it will take ever so long.'

'I wouldn't do it!' Tibbie said promptly.

Queen Lexa laughed. 'Then I won't begin. Besides, I wasn't speaking to you at all, but to the others. Well, I will be Queen again, and I'll try to do better next year.'

'Shall you have fines?'

'Tibbie, you ought to be muzzled! You deserved the fines, at all events. The Captain has given me the money you paid in fines, and I have spent it in sweets, which Janet and Joanna will presently hand round. Now I have no more to say. To-night we'll say good-bye till next summer. Some of you, who live near, I shall see often during the winter, I hope, but for most of us it is good-bye till next year. We must try not to forget one another in the meantime.'

She paused, looking round at them all.

Jim sprang up.

'Three cheers for Queen Lexa! Hip, hip, hurrah!'

[The end of *A Holiday Queen* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]