A HEATHER HOLIDAY

May Wynne

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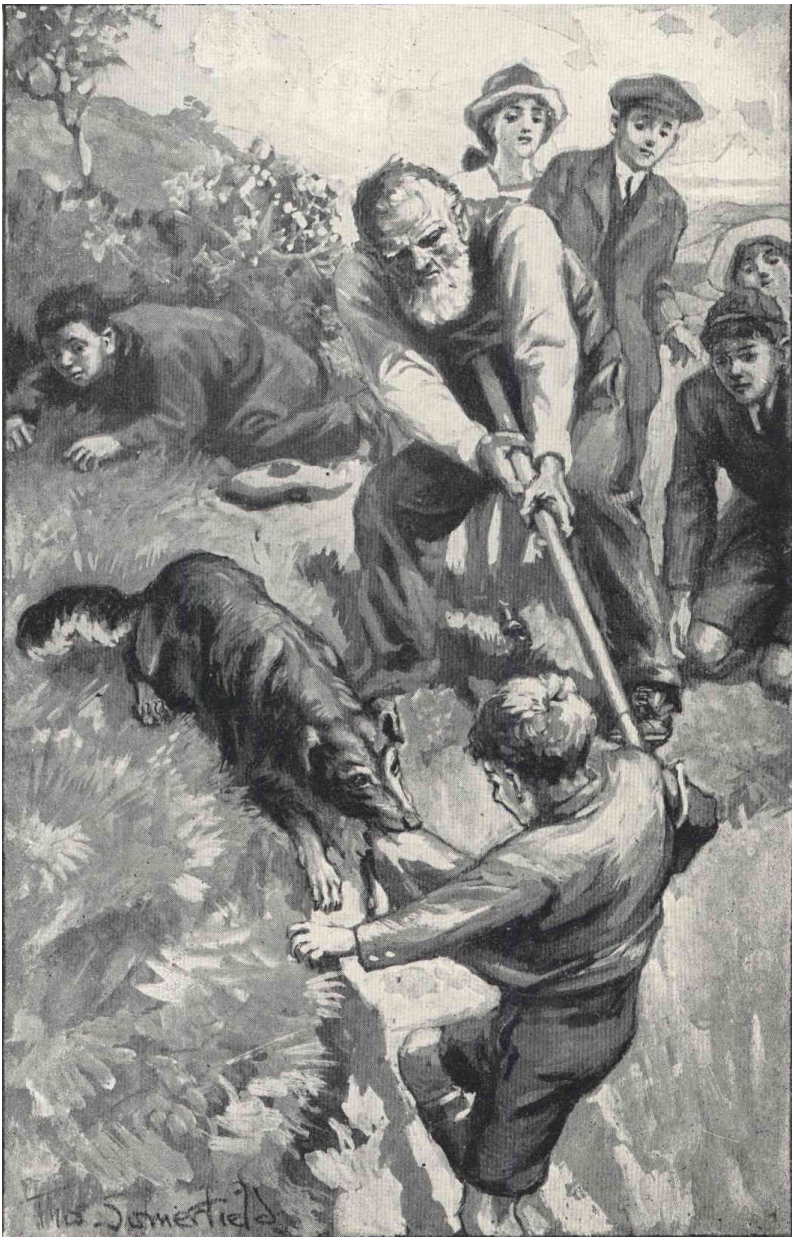

IT WAS DEAR OLD COL WHO GRIPPED DICCON'S COAT IN HIS TEETH

A
HEATHER HOLIDAY

BY
MAY WYNNE

Author of “Three Bears and Gwen” “Two Girls in the Wild”
“Christmas at Holford” &c.

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To Joan

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A Heather Holiday

CHAPTER I

Hurrah for Scotland!

"Is all the luggage out? Diccon, have you got the rug? Oh, please don't let the train go on till——!"

Ross and Diccon roared.

It was so like little mother Wendy to fluster, and, of course, there was no need, for already the very slowest and solemnest of Scottish porters was collecting their luggage and putting it upon a truck, whilst Diccon had rolled himself up in the rug, pretending it was a kilt and that he was dancing a reel.

"Aunt Margaret has sent a donkey-cart," said Ross, "but it couldn't possibly hold all our boxes and us. I shall walk. It's jollier anyway."

The boy in charge of the donkey-cart grinned.

"It's not a mile to the house if ye gang over the moors," he directed; "it's the only one in sight, so ye can't miss it."

"And it will be nice to stretch our legs," agreed Wendy. "Come, Diccon."

But Diccon was already ahead of them, scrambling up a heathery bank beyond which stretched purple moors.

"Hurrah!" he shouted. "Come on. There's a r-river."

Ross obeyed the summons at once, leaving Wendy to call and plead in vain, for what boy *could* resist the joy of tumbling head over heels in that gorgeous carpet of heather, after coming from a home, which, though it was the dearest of homes *really*, would have been a hundred times nicer had it not been set amongst scores of other houses in a long, dull street! Towns are very nice for lots of things, Ross used to say, but not to live in.

And this summer holiday was such a surprise. Never before had the aunts invited their nephews and niece to Scotland, and now they had been asked to spend a whole month at Glenagrie. It just fitted in, too, since Mother and Dad had to go to London. So everyone was pleased—and was

going to be more pleased still now the long-looked-forward-to time was here.

Mother had had a quiet talk with them last night. This was their first visit away from home without her, and there were several promises to be made. Not a *whole lot*, though. Mother knew if there were too many asked for, some would be rather like pie-crust! But she could trust her three to be loyal to their word, and really try not to worry the aunts, and to remember what she and Dad would like them to do. Wendy had explained that she would take care of Diccon, who had rather a way of forgetting things. Diccon was the youngest, and I really don't know *why*, but I do find myself that youngest ones are generally pickles!

"It will be tea-time," called Wendy, "and the donkey-cart will nearly be there first. Don't forget Glenagrie is near the sea, boys. The sea is better than a river."

"I'll tell you what," said Ross, as he and Diccon came panting back; "we must plan right from the beginning about collections. We ought to collect everything we can. I'm sure there are all sorts of ripping things to find. If only it is fine the aunts won't be troubled with us much."

"Look!" replied Wendy, "the donkey-cart boy has turned in at those gates. Shall we *run*?"

Each of the boys took a hand, and away they ran with Wendy between them, singing the most jumbly tune, which began and ended with: "Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah! here we are in Scotland!"

Flint Grange was a very old house surrounded by very old trees, so that there was no chance of looking out over the moors or getting a glimpse of the sea.

Diccon liked the trees best, but that was because he was a climber, and had been nicknamed "Squirrel" by Dad.

A very big woman opened the door to the travellers. She was not young, and her hair was quite grey, but she did not look cross, though her mouth snapped in a very determined way.

"Ye're just in time, bairns," said she; "I wouldn't have been keeping my leddies waitin' another five minutes for their tea."

Wendy looked at her shyly.

"Are you the Jean Aunt Meg wrote about?" she asked.

Jean nodded, and marshalled them along to a cosy, old-fashioned room with a long table covered with cakes and fruit. Such nice cakes, such luscious fruit, though only a passing glance could be given as the children went forward to greet the aunts.

What funny, dear old ladies, they thought, and there did not look to be such a lot of difference in their ages, though, of course, there must have been, as they were mother and daughter.

"I am your Great-Aunt Margaret," said the elder little old lady. "Dear me, Meg! how *young* it makes me feel to see Ella's children here in the old house."

Aunt Meg had not quite such white hair as her mother, and not quite so many wrinkles. Her manner was brisker too and she talked rather jerkily.

"I'm not your auntie at all, really, my dears," she told the three, "but your second cousin. Auntie, however, sounds more respectful, and so Auntie it shall be. Now, Jean will take you upstairs to your rooms to wash your hands, and by that time the kettle will have boiled; so run along, and don't waste time now peeping out of windows. You are going to have a whole month in which to learn all about Flint Grange."

Wendy felt the least bit shy. The aunts were not one atom like Mother, who was so cosy and so darling. Aunt Meg was rather more like a schoolmistress who had a great many orders to give; but before tea was over both Wendy and the boys began to discover that Aunt Meg's brisk way hid a very kind heart. Aunt Margaret was rather too deaf to enter into conversation, and indeed there was not much talking of *any* kind during the first part of the meal.

It was a lovely tea, too. Everything so homemade and scrumptious, from brown scones to golden honey.

Neither of the aunts seemed the least shocked at their visitors' appetites, though it must have astonished them to see plate after plate being emptied.

"Good children! Glad to see you don't gobble," said Aunt Meg. "And now I must put on my glasses to have a better look at you. Ross is the eldest, of course. How old are you, Ross? Bless the boy! you're the image of your father, my dear."

"I was thirteen last birthday," said Ross. "Wendy is a year younger, and Diccon a year younger still. Dad calls us the three steps. He was awfully sorry *he* couldn't come to Glenagrie. He told us all about the ruin and the moors and the sea."

"And about your coming back to Flint Grange after twenty years," added Wendy.

"I wish it was *our* home too," said Diccon.

Aunt Meg smiled at Diccon. Everyone did smile at him, he was *so* pretty, with fair curls and big grey eyes with curly lashes. Dad said appearances were terribly deceitful with Diccon, who looked as if he were a little angel of goodness instead of being the biggest pickle to be found.

Wendy and Ross were not pretty, but they had honest blue eyes and quite nice features. Wendy had long hair, which she wore in a pigtail, and such clever fingers for untangling fishing-tackle or planting ferns in the home rockery. And Wendy's fingers were forever wanting to be busy too. She loved jobs, and adventures, and always to be with the boys; and the boys loved having her, though just now and again they teased her for wanting to take care of them.

Ross was much too independent to want to be taken care of. If you had asked him what he meant to be when he was a man he would have told you a trapper in Canada, a prospector in Africa, or a cowboy in America. It all depended what book of adventure he had been reading.

There are not a great many adventures to be found in a town, where you attend day-school and are keen on gardening in a tiny back garden and trying to be a real companion to Dad; but Ross was already brimming over with the certainty that they were going to meet adventures by the score at Glenagrie.

"It is too far for you to go down to the sea this evening," said Aunt Meg; "but you may go out for an hour in the garden. Don't go too near the bees, though, as they are not in a very good temper."

No second invitation was needed. Away scampered the three to explore that quaint, old-fashioned garden, the big orchard, the sheds, the yard, the chicken-houses, and the piggery.

Alan, the garden boy, was just turning out the donkey into the orchard when the visitors came up to him. He seemed quite friendly, but said he was afraid a certain William would not be wanting him to show them around on the morrow.

"There's ower much work," said Alan, "and Mither always tells me when the pay's guid the work must match; but I'll take ye down to the cove to-morrow evenin' if ye like, and I ken ye'll want to see the old ruin. It was Kerstone Monastery in the old days, and a fine place for a climb."

"It's the sea I want to see most," said Ross. "And oh, you others, just look at that dog! Isn't it a topper?"

Alan went with them to introduce Kelpie, the sheep-dog, who welcomed the strangers with boisterous barkings and boundings, but in the friendliest spirit. The hour slipped by far too soon, and three very reluctant pairs of feet returned slowly to the Grange.

"Boys," said Wendy, "how funny we are! We've seen *everything* out of doors, and made friends of Alan and Kelpie, the buns, and Mollie the cow, but we've never even seen the kitchen."

Ross and Diccon were quite shocked at their own neglect. Cooks are such interesting people, they all felt, and ought to rank as friends at once. Off they trooped to find the aunts' cook, who happened to be making the soup when they entered. She was a nice cook, they all saw that! She had the rosiest face and the biggest smile, which stretched right across her face when Ross picked up Black Mark the cat.

"Isn't he fat," said Wendy, "and he's purring as loud as a kettle. Do you mind us coming into your kitchen, Mrs. Cook? We do at home, and we never steal things; we only like to help. Once I made a cake."

"And once we had a pain in our chests," teased Diccon; "but, never mind, Scotland's such a hungry place I believe I could almost eat Wendy's cake!"

Cook—her name was Elspeth—only laughed and said she had wee brothers at home; then she went to a larder and brought out a big round of shortbread, which quite made Diccon forget to be insulted at being called *wee*!

"It's a very old house, isn't it?" said Wendy. "I don't think we have been into half of it yet. Is it too late to take peeps this evening?"

Elspeth shook her head.

"Jean would be callin' ye in to bed if she wasna busy scoldin' her niece about the washing," she explained. "And for the house, there's the old wing ye'll not be allowed to go into. It's locked up and the key in Jean's pocket—and bairns, bairns, ye'd best be goin', for that's Jean's voice I hear." And, all in a bustle, Elspeth returned to her soup-making, whilst the children slipped back into the passage just as Jean came marching along.

It was no use protesting they were far too wide awake to go to bed, for really the long journey had made even Ross sleepy; so Jean had it all her

own way, as she packed them off to the two rooms prepared for them. Wendy's room was quite close to that of the aunts, and the window looked out on to the orchard. The boys' was at the end of the passage, and all the view *they* got was a high garden-wall and a shrubbery.

"I don't mind," said Diccon; "bedrooms are stupid places. When I'm a man I shall go and explore the country where the treemen live. It would be jolly to have an apple tree for a bed, and whenever you woke to be able to stretch up and pick an apple."

"Pig," retorted Ross sleepily; "apples aren't ripe all the year round. How would you like an apple-tree bed at Christmas?"

A snore answered him!

CHAPTER II

Cats and Clean Faces

"It's no use looking for Diccon any longer," said Ross impatiently; "he knew we were going down to the sea directly after breakfast, and it's past ten. He must have gone off alone."

Little mother Wendy looked distressed. Diccon ought to have waited, and, alas! so often his explorations ended in trouble. But Ross really had no patience to spare this morning, and it was just possible Diccon had gone off to the village with Alan, who went to the post at half-past nine. So away ran the two elders, eager to see if the tide was low and how "Dad's rocks" were looking. Dad's cave would have to be explored too, and friends made amongst the fisher-folk, some of whom might possibly remember about the boy called Graham Carsedale who had lived here a quarter of a century ago.

The tide was not very obliging, and the great jagged rocks stood out island-fashion amongst the tossing waves. Ross sighed. If only Wendy had been a *brother* he would have had a fine adventure jumping from rock to rock.

"No sign of a cave," said Wendy. "Shall we go back over the moors and come down to the shore this afternoon? We might bring those holland bags Mother made us and start collecting shells and stones, and perhaps seaweed."

"I suppose we shall have to," replied Ross. "I say, what jolly cliffs! That one over there looks as if it were split in half; it must be the Ravine. Isn't it horrid to want to do at least four things at once?"

"It's nasty—and nice," said Wendy; "but I think the best thing is to make a day's plan before breakfast. Then we shall keep together. Suppose we go back for Diccon and then explore the Monastery? We might have time before dinner."

Ross broke into a trot. He was certainly a young man in a hurry to-day! Excitement made him a little bit irritable; he hated delay in his plans, and, as is so often the way, it happened to be a morning of delays, for, as they neared the Grange, they were startled by the loudest and most indignant of caterwaulings.

Ross looked all round. Wendy clung to his arm.

“It must be a cat,” she said, so comically that Ross nearly laughed. No mistake about it being a cat! but where was it? Poor puss was evidently suffering badly, and it did not mean to suffer in silence either.

“Miau—mi-ow!” it wailed, and swore. Wendy had scrambled up beside Ross, and her sharp eyes just spied the sufferer half-hidden by dock leaves near the wood.

“It’s Black Mark!” she exclaimed; “he must be caught in a trap. Oh, Ross, do make haste!”

They both made so much haste that they nearly fell on their noses. Scottish walls were steadier than their own Yorkshire walls, but the moss made them slippery.

“It *is* a trap,” said indignant Ross; “how horribly cruel! Here, Wendy, put your cap over his head whilst I put my foot on the trap. He’d bite his dearest friend if he could at this moment, and it would not be his fault.”

Wendy pulled off her red-stocking cap and gingerly tried to place it over the cat’s head. It was a wonder she did not get bitten, for oh! what a temper Black Mark was in. He had been so busy lying there to pounce on a saucy, half-grown rabbit that he had never noticed the trap.

Ross’s weight soon drew the iron teeth apart, and the boy—who loved all animals—had no fear in lifting the sleek black creature up into his arms, soothing him with caresses.

Wendy tore a strip off her handkerchief and bound up the bleeding leg quite cleverly.

“He’s a wounded hero,” she said. “We had better take him to Jean. It would hurt puss awfully to put iodine on, but it would be safer.”

Ross looked wistfully across the moors. If they went back to the Grange there would be *no* time to explore the ruins, so that would have to wait till to-morrow; but Ross was too kind to regret lost minutes now, for what would Black Mark have done if they had not come along?

Meantime, you will be wondering what had happened to Diccon, who had left the breakfast table never in the least intending to hide from his brother and sister. But if there was one thing more than another Diccon loved it was climbing, and the ivied wall of the old wing of the Grange had proved too tempting for him.

Such strong roots would easily bear his weight, and he would love to peep in through the window of the shut-up room. He and Ross had discussed

and guessed all sorts of things about those rooms which no one ever entered. Perhaps they were haunted! Perhaps some mysterious prisoner had once been kept there! Perhaps a hidden treasure had been stored there and forgotten! It was not an easy clamber, and Diccon nearly fell back amongst the laurels when a great bird flew out in his face.

"There may be a nest," he thought; but there was not a nest at all, though Mr. Paul Pry found something which seemed to him far more interesting.

A *door handle*—actually a door handle—ever so old and dusty!

"There must have been a door here," thought Diccon. "How exciting! There *must* have been a mystery, or people would not have let the ivy grow up."

He looked up at the window and noticed that the blind was drawn so closely that he could not see into the room. No, the door handle was the most exciting. Out came his pocket-knife, and, opening the bigger blade, Diccon began to cut away at the ivy strands, which clung so fast round the old, old door. Bother! Of course the knife broke, but Diccon was much too interested to give up his job. Away he scuttled towards the potting-shed, where he had an idea all sorts of knives and tools were to be found. Here he discovered William, the gardener, who glared at him as if he were a natural enemy.

"Ye'll no be tramplin' over the flower-border, laddie," said William.

Diccon looked the picture of innocence.

"We *never* trample flower-beds," he replied. "You see, at home there aren't any. And we always *help* Dad with the rockery. But have you a knife? I wanted to help Aunt Meg by cutting the ivy round the little old door in the wall. I'm sure she'd be pleased."

William's eyes nearly goggled out of his head.

"Pleased!" he gasped. "Hechs! but when I heard there were children comin' I knew what it meant. You leave the ivy to gang its own gait, laddie, and say nothing about yon door."

Diccon was not the least abashed.

"Is it a mystery?" he asked breathlessly. "Do tell me! Is there a ghost in the old wing? Ross and I do want to know. We shouldn't tell Wendy, of course, in case she got nervous; but it would be ripping to——"

William laid his hand on Diccon's shoulder.

“Listen to me, laddie,” said he. “It’s a grand thing to mind your ain business. If the leddies wanted you bairns to ken the story of the closed wing they’d be the first to tell ye, just as I’d have had the ivy cut round the wall by that door if the door was for use. So now ye’re warned, and if ye’ve the proper sperrit ye’ll let well alone.”

Diccon sighed.

“That means I’m to leave the door alone, doesn’t it?” he said. “What a pity! And now I expect Ross and Wendy have gone. I did hear them calling, but I wanted the door to be a surprise. Never mind, I’ll help you instead.”

Even William could not help smiling. Diccon had such a cheerful way with him and he never doubted the finding of friends, so that William actually gave way and allowed him to weed the shrubbery path.

Weeding is quite a good job, but the shrubbery path was dull. Diccon preferred the one by the bee-hives. He wanted to watch the bees—and to see if those big red plums were soft and ripe.

Very few weeds were disturbed along by those plum trees, and Diccon worked well at eating all those plums which really would have gone bad had not some obliging person picked them. The largest and fattest, however, he put in his hat and carried indoors for Elspeth and Jean, who in return might tell him stories about Glenagrie, and if there were real smugglers’ caves to be discovered.

Alas! only Jean happened to be in the scullery, and at sight of Diccon she uttered a cry of disgust.

“Oh, laddie!” she exclaimed, “have ye been up the chimney to blacken your face like that? And those hands—smotherin’ all ye’ll be touchin’. It’s soap and water ye want this minute.”

And, taking no notice of the plum peace-offering, Jean swooped upon her victim, and, dragging him to the sink, proceeded to wash his face very much as she would have washed the hall floor. In vain Diccon wriggled; every time he opened his mouth to protest, the soapy flannel was plunged inside. He had to endure in silence, and emerged from the dry towelling to find Ross and Wendy shaking with laughter at sight of his discomfiture.

But Jean had no scolding to give the laughers, for the sight of her beloved cat’s bandaged leg melted her heart at once.

“Ye’re brave bairns,” she approved; “and if I catch hold of Red Robbie, who’ll have been settin’ that trap, it’s a flaying his father’ll give him. And

the dinner will be spoiling before I've changed my dress."

So away bustled Jean, leaving three hungry bairns to discuss with each other the affairs of the morning.

Ross was inclined to regret the impossibility of "digging out" the old door, but Wendy championed William.

"It might help to remind the aunts of something sad," said she, "and we shall have lots of places to explore. We are going down to the shore this afternoon, Diccon, so don't go wandering off alone. It's much better fun to keep together."

And Diccon, feeling the chafed skin of his *very* clean face, agreed.

Glenagrie boasted one of those coasts which are the delight of explorers, and when three happy young folk came down after dinner, golden sands and shining rocks met their gaze.

"It's just the sort of place for caves," said Ross. "And there are the Snake Rocks! Don't they look just like a serpent's body wriggling out into the sea?"

There were no other children to be seen, only two or three fishermen seated on rocks mending their nets.

"Let's try and walk along as far as the Ravine," said Ross. "We can collect shells as we go."

"Isn't this a sweet one?" cried Wendy, pouncing on a treasure. "Look! it's mother-of-pearl, and all sorts of colours, going up into a spiral. I shall give that to Mother when we go home."

The boys were quite as keen to find treasures of their own, and had it not been for impatient Ross they would have stayed all the afternoon poking about those delicious pools and boulders. Ross was more adventurous, and, leaving his brother and sister, began to climb along the zigzag chain of rocks which stretched out into the sea.

Several times he slipped, but managed to scramble back. It was jolly to see the waves rolling past him and to hear the scream of the sea-birds. He did not heed Wendy's cry to him to come back, he meant to reach the Snake's head. "Hurrah—ow!"

Master Ross had made a clever jump, but the rock on which he alighted was not at all steady. It wobbled and wobbled, so that, in spite of desperate effort, the boy slid off it into the deep water close by. Down—down! It was

an awful sensation to discover he was out of his depth, and Ross did not feel a hero at all as he came to the surface, clutching wildly at the seaweed-covered rock. He knew he would never be able to climb up on to it, and a gurgling cry echoed Wendy's scream. Then a strong hand came down, gripped his jersey, and lifted him as if he had been a drowning kitten on to the rock. Luckily for Master Ross, one of the fishermen had seen his fall and come to the rescue.

It was a very subdued laddie who listened to Sandy M'Gregor's lecture, whilst it was quite the easiest promise to make about not going along the Snake Rocks again.

"Ye're not the first to meet trouble yonder," added old Sandy. "It was there the minister's son was drowned, twenty year past. It broke his faither's heart, too. So gang to your play, bairns, but remember to think of the trouble ye may be bringing to others when ye're tempted to take risks for the sake o' being thought a grand hero."

Wendy was scrubbing her eyes. It was against rules to cry, but how could she remember rules when she had seen her darling Ross disappear under the waves?

"You'll have to go home and get dry clothes, won't you?" she said meekly, and actually Ross said "Yes" without a grumble.

Perhaps Sandy's lecture was bearing fruit.

As they went up the beach, Diccon pointed to a hollow in the cliff.

"Perhaps that is one of the caves," he suggested. "We'll go there to-morrow. If it's a boiling hot day like this we might be allowed to picnic there."

It sounded a grand idea, but Ross liked making his own arrangements.

"We must explore the Monastery first," he said, "because I want to write and tell Dad we've had our wishes in the Wishing Well."

Wendy stopped short.

"Shall we ask if we may take our tea to the ruins now?" she suggested, "and we could explore afterwards. If you'll run and change your clothes, Ross, Diccon and I will ask the aunts."

Ross was quite pleased. That dousing had been rather depressing, and wet clothes are so sticky and cold when the water is salt.

It was just as well Aunt Meg did not see the draggled figure of her elder nephew go tiptoeing off to his room, or she would certainly not have said "Yes" to Wendy's request. But Jean had been singing the praises of Black Mark's rescuers, and the aunts both thought reward was due. So off went Wendy and Diccon to ask kind Elspeth to pack a basket of provisions.

"We might have plums," suggested Diccon, "then we should not eat so many cakes."

Elspeth laughed.

"William's been in, talkin' of the plum-stones along the walk by the hives," she replied. "He'll not allow any more fruit to be picked to-day, but ye'll do well enough, bairns, if ye eat all that gingerbread."

And Wendy felt sure that if it was *all* eaten very little climbing would be done.

"We might take Kelpie," suggested Diccon, as they passed the shaggy sheep-dog's kennel; "he'll enjoy the run, and we might let him have a swim in the river."

Ross ran off at once to unfasten Kelpie's chain. How pleased the poor old fellow was to be free, and what a bouncer he was! Ross thought himself fairly firm on the feet, but over he went with a bump under Kelpie's playful caress—this time it was Diccon's turn to laugh, and he did it with a will as Ross rose with a most rueful expression on his face.

"Kelpie! Kelpie!" called Wendy, trying to grab the dog's woolly coat; but Kelpie was far too wideawake to be caught. He knew perfectly well these were not his lawful guardians, also that this was not one of his hours of freedom, and he meant to make the most of unexpected freedom. To tell the truth, although Kelpie was a perfect darling he was getting old, and not only blundered about over William's flower-borders but got into all sorts of mischief. That was why he had to be chained up, excepting when Alan went messages or had time to take him for a run.

"We had better persuade him to come back," urged Wendy, "or he might get lost. Alan says he is blind in one eye and can't see very well out of the other. The aunts only keep him because they've loved him for so many years."

Diccon pulled out his whistle and blew a blast. Ross began to run. Wendy looked about for Alan. But Alan was feeding the hens and knew nothing of the trouble.

“We’ll follow Ross,” said Diccon. “I hope Kelpie goes in the direction of the ruin. Can you manage the basket, Wendy?”

Wendy nodded. She was used to being the boys’ “carrier”. But the basket weighed her down, and she was only at the top of the heathery slope when she spied a girl on a white pony come cantering along the moor road below.

Ross and Diccon were both shouting to Kelpie—and Kelpie was just the other side of the road. Maybe he was coming back to explain to his new friends that he liked his jaunt; but the blind eye must have been on the side of the rider, for he blundered across almost under the nose of the white pony, which shied violently, flinging its rider into the ditch.

CHAPTER III

A New Friend

Wendy's legs felt very "wobbly" as she ran down the slope. Supposing —oh! supposing the little girl had been killed or even badly hurt! And it was all their fault—not poor Kelpie's!

It was wonderful, though, how Kelpie knew he was responsible for all this commotion, and away he scuttled in a shamefaced manner, as much as to say: "I really don't know what it is all about, but I must have put my foot in it somehow."

Before Wendy could arrive, Ross and Diccon were on the spot, helping the little stranger to sit up and asking her if she were hurt. Diccon picked up her riding-whip and then ran off to fetch some water from the stream, since he had the idea that the only thing to do when people faint is to pour water over them.

But the girl could not have fainted at all, for by the time Diccon returned she was sitting on a smooth boulder by the side of the road, her pretty face quite flushed and her eyes sparkling in indignation.

"It was all the fault of your stupid dog," she said, "and I might have been killed. Fairy never shies at anything as a rule, but what else could she do when that great ugly blunderbuss came tumbling up against her?"

"We are so sorry," replied Wendy, with tears in her eyes. "Are you sure you are not hurt? I was terrified when I saw you fall."

"Have some water," said Diccon; "it's quite pure, it's from the stream—ice cold. What a good thing the pony did not fall too!"

Ross had charge of the pony. He was looking glum. After all—the girl ought not to be so snappy when it was an accident.

Perhaps the girl was beginning to think this herself. Diccon looked so angelic with his fair curls roughed up over his head, whilst Wendy's sympathy and sorrow would have melted any heart.

"No, I don't want any water," she said, more amiably. "And I'm not hurt —only a hole cut in my habit, and Lucy can mend that. Who are you, and where did you come from? I've never seen you in Glenagrie before."

Wendy and Diccon explained. Ross pretended to be busy keeping the pony quiet. He was not at all sure that he liked being treated as this grand little girl seemed inclined to treat them all. Besides, he wanted to reach the Monastery.

But the explanation took quite a long time, and then the listener wanted to introduce herself. Ross reddened with vexation at her patronizing tones.

"I'm Lettice Macmorran," she told them, "and I live at Kerstone Castle —it's ever so old and big, and the gardens are lovely. Fairy is my pony."

"Have you lots of brothers and sisters?" asked Wendy.

Lettice shook her head.

"No, none at all," she replied, "and I'm rather glad. It's nice to be the only one."

"I think it must be horrid," said Wendy. "Whatever should I do without the boys!"

And she sat on her heels, looking so round-eyed about it that even Ross had to smile. But he thought it quite time to be getting on.

"If we are going to the Monastery we ought to get," he urged. "It's past tea-time, and I'm sure Diccon is hungry. Are you going to ride home?" he added, looking doubtfully at Lettice.

Lettice looked at him. She thought he seemed grumpy, but all the same she would rather have been friends with him than the others. He had a sturdy air which suggested the making of a good playmate, and Lettice was quite ready to find playmates, even though she preferred being the spoilt darling in her own home.

"No," she said, "I don't think I want to ride home. I expect Fairy feels the same as I do—all shaken up like a bottle of medicine. What are you going to do at the ruins?"

"Picnic," replied Diccon briskly. "A ripping tea. Elspeth *can* make gingerbread, and the scones look properly Scotch. This air is hungry air, too."

"Would you like to come and picnic too?" asked hospitable Wendy. She knew by Ross's frown the suggestion did not please him, but somehow it seemed as if they owed comradeship to the girl they had helped tumble off her pony.

And it was just what Lettice did want! These three strangers interested her. She suddenly felt she had been wanting comrades and jolly plays for a long time. There were no children round Kerstone and Glenagrie for her to play with—and grown-ups can never take the place of real playmates.

"Yes," she said, quite eagerly, "I would like to come. I expect I can tell you more about the ruins than you know. Only—bother Fairy! we can't take her. It's only the tiniest bit farther on, though, to the Castle. Will you come with me to the stables?" she added to Ross, who would have liked to say "No" but had to say "Yes".

Diccon was ready to help Wendy along with the hamper now. He didn't want to be parted too far from it. And it was Ross who suggested they should stay at the old ruins and find a picnicky corner whilst he went on with Lettice.

"Her name sounds like a vegetable," laughed Diccon, as he helped Wendy unpack. "I wonder if anyone has ever been called Cabbage—or Radish? And I wonder if there is a tower and dungeons in her castle?"

"Put the gingerbread on that round stone," said Wendy—far too busy to join in so much wonder, "and don't go off climbing till after tea. I believe, Diccon, you are worse than a squirrel. We ought to have nuts to keep you quiet."

"Gingerbread will do instead," hinted Diccon, but Wendy said they could not possibly start picnicking till the others came.

Ross would have told you he was dreadfully bored in going with a stuck-up girl to the Castle stables, but I believe in his heart of hearts he was curious to see the place. Ross loved history, especially Scottish history and border tales. He often said he wished he had lived in the good old days, and was sure *his* wife would never have had to dish him up a "feast of spurs" for his supper, as a hint that the larder was empty.

Kerstone Castle stood on a slope of the moors looking away towards the sea. It was a splendid old building of grey stone—and the glimpse Ross had of the gardens made him long to explore.

But Lettice was in a hurry to get back to the picnic. It was a new sort of fun, and she was sure she would like it. Even her bruised elbow was forgotten in her interest.

"Malcolm doesn't care for picnics," she told Ross. "He thinks they are dull. He's nearly a year older than I am, and is going to a public school next term. I expect he will be staying here next week."

Ross pricked up his ears. He sometimes got tired of being the eldest, and used to think how nice it would be to have a brother older than himself.

"Does he play cricket?" he asked.

Lettice nodded.

"He plays all games," she replied, "even archery. I like that. There's no rushing about. Is your sister a tomboy? She has a nice face."

"There's no girl to come up to Wendy," said Ross enthusiastically. "She is a real sport and always jolly."

Lettice did not answer. She was wondering what girls had to do to make boys speak like that! She must watch Wendy and find out.

Diccon had refused to wait longer for his tea, and was perched in the framework of a window eating a big cheese-cake when the others arrived.

"We've found the Wishing Well," he called out, "and had our wishes. If you haven't got any particular wish, Ross, you might ask for a table like the one in the story of One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes. Don't you remember? You only had to say 'Table appear', and there was your dinner ready cooked—and every day a sort of birthday choice. Top-hole!"

"Don't you have a table-cloth for your picnics?" asked Lettice, as she watched Wendy's preparations.

Ross laughed scoffingly.

"Why, it wouldn't be a picnic if you had all that sort of thing," he retorted. "Did you think we had chairs and a table?"

"We generally make a play of our picnics," put in Wendy hastily. You see, she knew Ross's moods, and saw he was inclined to be in a contrary one. You can guess why, I expect? Ross was one of those boys who can't bear being thwarted in his plans. He had planned so many things for this first day in Scotland and not one had been carried out properly.

Diccon from his window seat chirped in.

"Hurrah for a game," he applauded. "Shall we be Jacobites or smugglers? I'm the sentry, anyhow. What ho! who goes there? Stand and—deliver me some shortbread."

They all laughed, and Ross's grumpiness passed without comment.

"We'd better be Jacobites," said Lettice, "because some of my ancestors fell at Culloden. I love stories of the Pretenders, and I would have adored to

be Flora Macdonald."

"*I* wouldn't," said Diccon, "because I should have been dead now. You needn't pack away the last of the cakes, Wendy, as I'm sure to be hungry again after a good climb."

"Did you say you knew the history of the ruins?" asked Wendy of Lettice, half-shyly; "I should like to know it."

"The monks were turned out in Henry's reign," said Lettice; "but some of them came back and lived in the vaults under the Monastery. They are supposed to have done all sorts of wonderful things, and were mixed up in several plots in the Pretender's time. There's a hill beyond Glenagrie, called the Monk's Hill, where one of them was nearly hanged, only rescuers came just in time. I have an uncle, who lives at Braedale, who is very interested in the monks' legends. There are heaps of vaults under where we are standing now, but none of the entrances can be discovered. I get rather jumbled up over stories like that, but Uncle Bernard could tell you all the old tales. I believe there are ghost tales, and stories of escapes. Once a farmer's boy of seven years old brought a warning to the monks in the vaults, even though snow lay on the ground. Oh, *look* at your brother! He will fall!"

Wendy looked and held her breath. Diccon had managed to reach the broken arches which bridged across from wall to wall, and was now seated blowing out his cheeks and humming the tune which Ross said the old cow had certainly died of.

"Diccon, you little owl, come down!" shouted Ross, but Diccon only pointed across the moors.

"I'm sentry," he retorted, "and there is a squad of George's soldiers coming across the moors. We must find the—er—crypt."

"You ought to come and help us then," suggested Wendy, who felt this game was a bit too realistic. "You always were a finder."

But though the four searched eagerly—with much business-like tapping of stones and digging in likely corners—the old ruins kept their secret, and, in the end, the search had to be given up, because, as Wendy hinted, there would have been no time left for play.

"We can't *all* be Jacobites," said Ross. "Wendy and I had better be King George's soldiers, and you must escape from us. You see, you have come back to the ruins in search of family jewels. If you don't take care you will be trapped."

Lettice nodded. *She* had meant to arrange the Jacobite game, but actually she did not like to contradict Ross. And it was the first time Lettice had minded about contradicting anyone.

It was the merriest game. Diccon, in spite of being the youngest, made a most ingenuous "Jacobite heir", and found the neatest hiding-place, curled in between the ivy and the wall, where evidently a statue had stood.

Wendy was the only one who remembered that Aunt Meg had told them to be in by half-past six.

"We must run," she urged.

Lettice yawned. She had just made a plan to escape from "English tyrants" by way of the stepping-stones below the ford, of which her companions did not know.

"Do you always obey rules?" she asked, "*I* don't. Grown-ups don't expect it."

"Mother and Dad put us on our honour," said Ross shortly, "and though we don't always remember, we do try to."

Lettice laughed.

"I shouldn't have thought you were 'goody' children a bit," she said. "I expect you often forget. Are you going home with me across the moor? I want to ask Mums and Dad if you can come and play with me at the Castle."

Ross was busy wiping the blade of his penknife, which he had used to grub up a fern.

"I'll go back with you if you don't like going alone," he agreed; "but just honestly it's no use asking us to tea. You see, this is our holiday, and in holiday-time we hate wearing our best clothes. You can't have fun when you have to think of mucking up your Sunday suit, so I'm afraid we could not come to the Castle."

Wendy and Diccon were packing up the hamper again—at least Wendy was packing cups and plates in the hamper, whilst Diccon packed a stray cheese-cake or so and odds and ends of gingerbread inside himself—so they did not hear Ross's refusal. Lettice was half offended. She had been sure the Grange children would love to come to such a grand home as the Castle, and specially she wanted to impress Ross, whose independence vexed her.

Ross did not seem to feel that way at all, but he walked back over the moors with this "new girl". He did not make friends as easily as Wendy and

Diccon, who were quite ready to welcome Lettice as a chum, and, anyhow, he would not be patronized.

"Come and have a peep at the lake," coaxed Lettice, as Ross stopped short when they reached the gates, "and wouldn't you like to see the archery ground? There's lots of time."

Ross really was interested in archery, and Lettice did not speak in those condescending tones which had ruffled him.

"It's a ripping lake," he said, as they stood on the tiny bridge which stretched over a baby stream; "and you've got a boat?"

"Yes," said Lettice, "but it's not safe. Dad will have to have it repaired. Look, there is the target, and we keep the bows and arrows in that summer-house."

Ross's eyes sparkled. Shooting must be real sport. His fingers itched to try his skill, but, just as they reached the summer-house, a tall gentleman came down one of the side-paths, and Lettice ran to him at once.

"This is one of the boys who are staying at the Grange, Dad," she cried. "There are two boys and a girl. They are Mrs. Carsedale's nephews and niece, and I *do* want to be allowed to play with them. May they come to tea to-morrow?"

Ross's cheeks burned. He had told Lettice they could not come to tea, and now how could they get out of it?

Sir Walter Macmorran was looking at him with a smile.

"Mrs. Carsedale's nephew," he said. "I did not know she had such a youthful one. What is your name, my boy?"

Ross told him. He would have liked to add that he could not come to tea at the Castle, but he did not quite screw his courage so far. And Sir Walter was already giving the permission.

Lettice clapped her hands, and came dancing back to Ross as her father went on towards the house.

"You must all come early," she ordered, "and I will teach you archery. You will be able to look over the Castle, too. There's a dungeon."

Ross began to relent.

"A proper dungeon?" he asked. "Are there any chains—and a rack?"

Lettice shook her head.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I won’t go down there myself, because there are toads. But if you are nice, and let me play all the time with you, we’ll go one day to Black Michael’s Cave. You’d love that. It’s ever so dark, and on stormy nights the fisher people say you can hear the shouts of the smugglers fighting with the excisemen.”

This was too heavy a bribe to be resisted.

Ross actually smiled.

“Well, we’ll come early to-morrow afternoon,” he said; “but I suppose you couldn’t get the boat mended in time?”

Lettice shook her head.

“We shall find plenty to do without that,” she replied; “and if it is fine I’ll ask Mother to let us picnic in the wood. It is ever so jolly there. Perhaps you would like hide-and-seek, or just exploring about. I love woods; don’t you? We could have fun.”

This sounded better and better. Ross would have liked to ask Letty if there were caves in the woods too, or any special legends about the grand old trees. At home he had a book about the historical trees of Britain, and would have been delighted to add a Kerstone one to the list.

To-morrow perhaps he would be able to find out.

As Ross ran home across the heather he really felt it would be worth wearing Sunday clothes to go to such a jolly old place as Kerstone Castle.

CHAPTER IV

A Visit to the Castle

Aunt Meg was quite pleased to allow them to go to tea with Lettice Macmorran.

"She is a very lonely little girl," she said. "It will be good for her to have you to romp with, but you must take care of your clothes. Jean tells me, Ross, that your flannel suit was put in the dirty-clothes basket drenched with salt water. You *must* be more careful. And if you are going out in the afternoon you had better remain in the garden this morning. It is too hot and tiring to go down to the shore."

Ross groaned over this order after Aunt Meg had gone.

"She talks as if we were babies," he complained. "As if we were *ever* tired!"

"Still, there is a lot to do in the garden," coaxed Wendy. "We have not explored the field for mushrooms yet, and Diccon says there is a jolly old shed behind the greenhouse where all sorts of rubbish has been stored. We might turn it out and make a bonfire in the field."

This sounded promising, and off they all went towards the shed. It was quite true to say it was full of rubbish. Never did you see such a collection!

Diccon, of course, went clambering right over all the broken furniture, old boxes, and useless lumber to discover if there were any hidden treasures at the back. Hidden treasures naturally are put in the unlikeliest places! Ross took off his coat, and instantly shouldered the biggest box. It was much too heavy; but Wendy, being a wise sister, left him to find that out for himself.

"We'll stack the things in the middle of the field," said Ross, "and get William's permission to light them. Perhaps he'll want to do that part himself, and then lend us Alan whilst the fire is blazing."

Wendy brightened. She had regretted that suggestion of a bonfire as soon as it was made, for, of course, playing with fire without a grown-up was forbidden.

Ross was a very energetic worker, and it was easy to believe how delighted William would be to find how useful they had been.

Alas! William must have had very different ideas of usefulness from themselves, for, after one or two journeys to the field, the spring-cleaners found the shed door locked and a piece of paper nailed to it, on which was printed in very crooked letters:

PRIVATE.

"Old silly!" grunted Ross. "Does he mean to be funny? Of course it is not private. And what's the use of having rubbish?"

"Where's Diccon?" asked Wendy. "I do believe he must be inside; he did not come along with us the last time. I think he is still sure of finding a treasure."

"Diccon!" called Ross through the keyhole, and was answered by a very small voice.

"Hy-ar!"

"Locked in," said Wendy, shaking the door. "And the key is gone! William could not have known Diccon was inside, for he likes him best of all of us. We shall have to ask for the key. I wonder why he locked it? I thought he would be pleased."

Ross looked glum.

"You never know when people are going to be pleased," he retorted; "but I don't see any use in stuffing the shed full of such things. There's William over by the marrow-bed. We must explain about Diccon."

It was William who began the attack though, for, as soon as he saw those two small figures, he straightened his back and set his hands on his hips.

"No, ye don't," he said, "for it's that key ye've come for; and I might have known ye'd be mischiefin' round before ye'd been here a week. Rakin' and scratchin' over what's no business of yours—an' makin' all that work when a man disna ken which way to turn."

Ross grew very red; he didn't dare reply, lest he should be rude. This was nice gratitude for real hard work!

Wendy's soft little voice, however, poured oil on troubled waters.

"But Diccon will suffocate if you don't let him out," she begged. "And we really thought you would be pleased."

William looked suspiciously from one face to the other. He was terribly afraid of being laughed at, but those faces looked so honest and the two

pairs of eyes held such reproach that he softened.

"I didna ken the little lad was inside," he replied. "Come, and we'll let him out. As to helpin', weel, the best way ye can do that is to be awa' from the garden a'thegither."

Ross nearly said they wished they could, but he kept silent, with another great effort, and Wendy was already calling Diccon to come out.

"I can't," said the small voice—which sounded so humble that even Ross got alarmed.

"Where are you?" he called. "Are you hurt?"

"N-no!" said Diccon; "b-but it's beastly. If I talk loud the dust chokes me. It's awful. I—I think I'm stuck in a t-tub."

How William grunted! But he had to help with the rescue work, and Alan too was called. In search for buried treasure, Diccon had buried himself in an old forgotten flour tub which had been hidden by sacks.

"What will happen if you can't get him out?" moaned Wendy.

"He'll have to be Diogenes and live in his tub," chuckled Ross. "Like a snail in his shell. No more climbing, Diccon."

Diccon chuckled.

"All right," said he, "wait till I'm out. I'll have the laugh then. Ow—er!"

Alan and William were pulling so hard that it almost seemed they had forgotten he was alive. So Diccon spent the rest of the time in reminding them of the fact till he was out of his "shell".

What a pickle he was in. Never had there been so grubby a miller. Alan had to join Ross and Wendy in laughing, but William still grumbled.

"That's the last time ye go rummagin' here," he said; "and if ye take my advice, the sooner ye're indoors an' cleanin' yourselves for dinner the better."

Advice which his listeners quite meekly followed.

"Though I'm sure," whispered Diccon, "there were things worth having under all that rubbish. Even if it had only been one thing it would have been worth while."

But neither Ross nor Wendy was very ready to agree. Ross for one was bored. He had enjoyed stacking those boxes for a bonfire, he had liked

poking about the old shed, and thought William a regular spoil-sport; worse still, now it came to the "fag" of washing and dressing in Sunday clothes for the Castle visit, he heartily hated the idea of going.

"It would have been a ripping afternoon to go down to the shore," he sighed, "and we shall have a rotten time at that grand place. Everyone will be stiff, and shocked if any of us says 'Bo!' to a goose."

Diccon did not agree.

"There's the tower to climb, that's one thing," he said. "And Lettice didn't seem stiff. Let's be jolly. *I* mean to enjoy myself."

Wendy was the shyest. The thought of tea with strange grown-ups filled her with panic, and the boys were inclined to tease.

"You're sure to upset your tea," said Ross. "Or tread on the pug-dog's tail," added Diccon.

"Or catch your foot in Lady Thingummy-bob's dress," said Ross.

But Wendy struck in there.

"People don't have long dresses," she retorted. "And pug-dogs keep their tails curled out of danger. And if you tease any more I shall run home."

"Here's Lettice," said Ross, "so no escape. What big baskets she has got. I believe they are the picnic sort. I do hope we are going to have tea in the garden."

Ross's "hope" was granted, as Lettice soon told them.

"We are to have tea in the wood," she explained; "but would you like to see the Castle tower first—and the dungeon? Father has given leave. And then there is the archery. I hope you will be able to play. It will make it much more fun when Malcolm is here."

The young Carsedales all voted for the visit to the tower, and thoroughly enjoyed going one by one up the corkscrew stairs.

"I wonder if anyone was ever buried in the wall?" said Ross. "Have you ghosts in the Castle?"

"No—I don't believe in them," scoffed Lettice. "Now, look over the parapet and say if it isn't a grand view."

It was a grand view, and even Lettice was satisfied by the visitors' praises.

“Now for the dungeons,” said Diccon; “they are the best. Have people ever been left to die in them?”

“I expect so,” replied Lettice carelessly; “the old ancestors were terrible fighters. Shall we shut you in and see how it feels?”

But Diccon explained he had already been shut up once to-day.

The dungeon was not half so alarming as they had hoped, but it did look very uncomfortable. Ross went round and round, tapping the walls and longing to find a hollow place. Wendy was the most glad to be out again in the fresh air.

“Do you want to see the gardens?” asked Lettice. “I’m afraid it would take up most of the time, and you said you wanted to try archery.”

Wendy and Diccon would have preferred looking over the gardens, but Ross had already picked up a bow and was trying to fit an arrow into the string.

He did not like having to be taught by a girl, and Lettice showed some of her patronizing airs over this.

Ross’s first arrow went very wide of the mark and buried itself in a mulberry tree, Wendy’s fell harmlessly to the ground, and only Diccon’s touched the target.

“Let me try again,” urged Ross, and, when he failed, begged for a third trial.

“It’s Wendy’s turn now,” said Diccon. “If you want to practise all the time, Ross, we might as well go somewhere else.”

“This one will hit the bull’s-eye,” promised Ross, in great haste; but something must have gone wrong this time, for the arrow flew slantwise and struck Wendy on the arm. Brave as she was she gave a little cry of pain, and Ross, dropping the bow, rushed to her.

“What a fuss about nothing,” said Lettice. “Malcolm has hit me twice like that. It doesn’t really hurt.”

But she had to change her opinion when she saw the broken skin and blood oozing from the bruised flesh.

Ross wanted Wendy to go indoors, but she tried to laugh and say the pain was better.

"Diccon's handkerchief is quite big enough," she added. "And I shall soon forget about it. Do go on shooting. I can't think how anyone can *ever* get a bull's-eye."

But no one felt like more archery after the accident, and, as tea-time had nearly arrived, they were all glad to go and choose the best place for a picnic.

It amused the Carsedales to see the big white cloth and to find that a servant was coming out with the tea. But scrumptious cakes and two big baskets of grapes and peaches made up for too much grandeur, and the meal became merry chiefly owing to Wendy's cheeriness.

Lettice did not say anything more about the injured arm, but she told herself that Wendy *was* brave—and awfully nice not to have grumbled at Ross for hitting her.

"If you are going exploring to-morrow," she said, "I will meet you after dinner on the shore opposite the Snake Rocks and show you Black Michael's Cave. Uncle Bernard has often told me stories about Black Michael. He was as big as a giant. You will come?"

"Rather!" replied three voices. There was no hesitation this time.

After tea Sir Walter and Lady Macmorran joined them, but they were not a bit like ordinary grown-ups. They joked and teased their little visitors, ran races with them, and taught them a new sort of game—rather like rounders, only there were obstacles to be overcome at each "point" in the rounder, which added to the general merriment.

It was quite late when the Carsedales got back to the Grange, but they did not mind that. It had been solemnly decided on the way back from the Castle that Lettice was to be a "chum".

"For even if she's not quite a sport now," summed up Ross, "she soon will be. It must be awfully hard always to 'play the game'—when there is no one to play it with."

If Lettice had heard that remark she ought to have been quite proud.

CHAPTER V

The Tenant of the Cave

"Aunt Meg has written to Lettice's mother to ask her to let Lettice come and spend the day here to-morrow," announced Wendy, as she came in search of the boys next morning. "But whatever are you doing, Diccon?"

Diccon did not reply. He was standing still for Ross to finish tying yards of muslin round his straw hat.

"The bees have swarmed," explained Ross. "You needn't get the wind up, or tell anyone indoors. William is out, and Alan says we can help perfectly well if we do exactly what he tells us. We really must help, for they have swarmed on the branch of an oak tree, and it is such a thundery day they will be off and away before William comes to get them into the skep."

"Where are they?" asked Wendy doubtfully. Fond though she was of honey, she had been quite content to view the hives from a distance.

Ross led the way.

"Diccon is going to climb the tree and shake the bough," he explained. "And I am going to have the garden syringe in case the swarm tries to get away. Alan knows all about bees, and he says if the swarm goes high in the air a squirting of water brings it down. Diccon's got the worst job, but the bough is too thin to bear my weight."

"It sounds horrid," shivered Wendy. "Oh, oh! Are all those—bees?"

And she pointed in horror to a huge, cone-shaped mass which hung down from the slender upper bough above them.

"Solid," said Ross, who was acting like a showman. "How many bees did you say you supposed there were in it, Alan?"

Alan was very busy. He had spread a sack on the ground under the oak tree, and in the middle of this had set a straw skep, sprinkled with sugar, upside down.

"Thurty thousand maybe, sir," said Alan. "You and missie had best keep right away when Master Diccon shakes. It's a braw shake ye must give, Master Diccon, for there'll be trouble if ye don't shake down the queen. Bees aren't bad-tempered at swarming time as a rule, but the thunder i' the air upsets them."

“It’s a pity we can’t kill them all,” whispered Wendy. “I’m so frightened for Diccon. Look at those thousands of bees.”

“Diccon’s all right,” said Ross. “We shall have to look out though. The bees can’t get through his veil or those rubber gloves. Ready? For, if so, we’ll clear.”

He added the last words to Diccon, who stood perched on one slim branch with both hands circling the fatal branch above.

“Aye, aye!” said Alan. “Noo, Master Diccon, a big jerk; it needs a powerfu’ shake!”

Diccon gave a spring, clutched the upper branch, and shook. Down fell the swarm—a seething mass of buzzing insects—into the skep, which Alan promptly turned over, leaving a raised corner for “outsiders” to enter.

To the three children it seemed as if the whole place were alive with bees.

Wendy screamed and ran back in terror. Ross stood his ground gallantly, but, forgetting his instructions, fired a full charge of water from his syringe into the scattered hosts of insects. How they buzzed! You never heard such a din! Diccon seemed enveloped by bees. He would certainly be stung to death.

Ross sent a stream of water in his brother’s direction, but the next second was driven back by a bee-host.

“Put yer twa heids in the bushes,” they heard Alan call—and away they went. Ross had been stung on the cheek and wrist, Wendy on her leg and hand, and the pain sent them headlong to those bushes.

How funny they looked too, kneeling with heads and faces deeply buried amongst green leaves, whilst the enemy circled round and finally departed. Ross was the first to emerge. Now the panic was over, he began to think of no end of things he could have done and which would have appeared very heroic. Ross prided himself on his courage, and could hardly believe that a host of bees had put him so promptly to flight. It must have been the awful buzzing and the knowledge that there were thousands of bees in pursuit.

And now, how about Diccon? The high hedge hid the scene of the drama from view. Keeping very close, Ross and Wendy crept near.

“You stay here,” breathed Ross in his sister’s ear. “If the bees see us they may come again.”

But Wendy would not obey, she was only thinking of poor Diccon, and oh! what a relief it was to find the latter standing quite happily alongside of Alan close to the skep, whilst the cloud of bees had disappeared—no! not disappeared but covering the sack as they hurried like a quickly moving army in through the skep entrance.

At sight of Ross and Wendy, Alan—broadly grinning—rose from his knees, and, with Diccon, came tiptoeing towards them.

"The queen was in the skep sure enough," said Alan. "It was a lucky shake, and it's a grand bee-keeper Master Diccon will be one o' these days."

"Do take off this veil arrangement," urged Diccon, "it's awfully hot."

Wendy's eyes were round in wonder.

"Aren't you stung at all, Diccon?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Not once. They didn't seem to want to sting me. Aren't they awfully jolly. Alan says William will very likely let us see them hived this evening. It can't be done till the sun has gone down. I'm going to get William to tell me all about bees."

"We got stung," said Ross in injured tones. "I suppose the worst-tempered ones came after us."

Alan grinned.

"There's naething on earth sae wise as bees," said he. "They ken if a body's afraid of them, and ye were too noisy, Master Ross. Bees want ye to speak in whispers, and to treat them wi' respect. There was nae respect the way ye threw the water at them. That's why ye got stung."

Ross did not reply. He did not like to think Diccon had been braver than he, but he was resolved not to be mean about it, and, when Diccon was free of his muslin, he went up and patted his younger brother on the back.

"You *were* plucky, Dic," he applauded, "much pluckier than I should have been. I shall tell Aunt Meg about it."

And though Diccon said it was "all rot" he was very pleased.

The children were quite surprised to find the bee adventure receive nothing but praise from Aunt Meg, who took a great interest in her bees and would have been very sorry to lose such a big swarm. Aunt Margaret had a cold and was obliged to stay in bed to-day, and that was why more chatter

was allowed at dinner. Aunt Margaret was very old, and too much talking made her tired. Aunt Meg told them about telling bees secrets, and how the old country folk not only told their bees all the "happenings" but even hung their hives in crape if any member of the family died. Elspeth had made a fine jam tart for dinner with her new plum jam, and Aunt Meg gave the children leave now to pick the plums from the big tree in the orchard.

"We might take some down to the cave," suggested Diccon. "We are sure to be thirsty before we have finished, and plums are so cool."

So the plums were picked and given into Diccon's charge—which was not a very safe plan.

Lettice, perched on a rock, was waiting for them. She was in one of her sunniest moods to-day, and part of the reason for this was that the spoiled little lass had discovered that if she *did* try to rule these very independent comrades, or show off tantrums, they would very quietly have left her alone, as they did not seem to think it a bit grand to play with Miss Macmorran from Kerstone Castle.

"Robin Kilsyth has lent me a lantern," she said. "One will be enough, as I know the way and can lead you. It's quite a big cave, and there's a little inner one reached by a sort of tunnel."

But this did not suit Ross.

"If you just show us where the cave is," said he, "I'll lead the way. Boys have to be captains, and there might be danger. That's why I had better have the lantern."

Lettice's eyes sparkled, and for a moment her fingers curled rebelliously about that lantern; but Ross was so quiet and so sure that she had to give in, and the angry feeling melted away as she felt Wendy's hand in her own.

"Will you tell us about Black Michael," asked Wendy, "and his adventures?"

Lettice nodded.

"I'll tell you when we are inside the cave," said she; "it will be more real. Mother said there was going to be a thunderstorm. It *is* stuffy. Are any of you afraid of storms?" She rather hoped they would be, because she was not so a bit, and it was disappointing to find the little Carsedales rather enjoyed the "bustle" of a storm too.

But I am not sure that any one of the heroic four *did* quite enjoy that "bustle", as they called it, when the first long boom of thunder reached them

as they stood in the entrance of the cave.

"Perhaps now we shall hear the voices of Black Michael and his men shouting as they are supposed to shout in a storm," said Ross.

"Let's get right in out of the rain," urged Wendy.

Diccon sighed.

"I wonder how the bees are feeling," he remarked; "but I don't suppose they will get wet under the trees."

"It is a ripping cave," said Ross, as he held up the lantern. "What a height it is too, and look at the stone ledge running along the top!"

"That's where the smugglers climbed if they happened to be here when the cave was full," said Lettice. "It is only during the spring tides that it does get flooded, though the water often fills it to the depth of two feet."

"I must climb up there presently," said Diccon. "One of the smugglers might have left a cutlass behind him."

"I suppose we have to crawl through the tunnel," said Ross. "It would not do for a very fat person to come. It smells awfully strong of seaweed."

Wendy was not sure that she liked that crawl. Supposing the rocks gave way! But anyway, the noise of the storm was less here. And it was a big storm. Would the aunts be worried about them? But then Aunt Meg knew where they were going. Wendy felt very glad that it was so!

"Does the sea ever come through the tunnel?" asked Diccon, who was rather too fond of making this sort of suggestions at the wrong moment! Lettice gave a queer little chuckle. She rather liked being appealed to as the one who knew most about this exploration, and I think was inclined to exaggerate.

"I expect it does," she replied, "let's try to imagine it. It makes such a lovely *squiggly* feeling down one's back. Nearer and nearer come the waves ——! Oh dear, what a peal of thunder! It made me jump."

"There are such a lot of different noises," said Wendy; "just now I thought I heard a squeak—a long, thin squeak, but I must have been mistaken."

Ross and Diccon had crawled on ahead and did not hear this remark of Wendy's or I am sure Ross would have tried to reassure her. He always wanted to take care of his sister if she were frightened.

“I hope a sea-gull won’t come flying in our faces,” said Lettice; “do call the boys and tell them to wait.”

But there was no need, since Ross and Diccon were already waiting for them.

“Listen!” called Ross. “Keep awfully still and listen with all your ears. Do any of you hear any sound beyond the storm and the roar of the sea?”

The crawlers squatted down and strained their ears to listen. Of course they knew Ross was thinking of the legend about the “voices” of Black Michael and his men as they shouted to their enemies in the last fight.

But if those queer, high-pitched whimpers were the voices of smugglers raised in anger they must have been very squeaky ones.

“Boom!” rolled the thunder.

“Oo-ah—oo-ah!” roared the waves.

“Whimper, whimper,” echoed the thin little voice from the inner cave. But they all heard it and held their breath in excitement.

“I’m glad you’re going first, Ross,” said Lettice honestly, and Ross tried to laugh as if *he* were not afraid of anything.

“It must be imagination,” he said, “or the wind has got into a hollow cranny. I’m going on again.”

They all went on—one by one, with little halts to listen.

It could not be the wind—but what was it?

Ross rose stiffly to his feet and picked up the lantern. The “voices” sounded much clearer now, and Ross raised the light cautiously. He did not know what he was afraid of—but he was decidedly nervous. Then, as the yellow rays fell across the rocky floor, a cry of surprise and pity rose to the lips of the four explorers, for it was a dog—the prettiest and wisest of collies—which crouched there, tied by a rough cord to an old rusty bar fixed in the wall.

A prisoner! A half-starved, terror-stricken prisoner!

Lettice recognized it too at once.

“It’s Col,” she cried. “Old Tam the shepherd’s Col. He loves him better than all the world—and oh, what a cruel, cruel thing to bring him here!”

Col had recognized the speaker, and was responding with faint whimpers of delight. Even though the wise old fellow mistrusted strangers as a rule, he had nothing but grateful lickings and whines of joy to give the other children.

"It must have been dreadful for him," said Wendy, with tears in her eyes. "Could *anyone* have been so cruel as to mean to leave him here to starve?"

"Looks like it," said Ross grimly, as he cut the cord with his knife. "Here, Diccon, haven't you anything in your pockets bar plums?"

Diccon was already searching, and produced two broken biscuits and some very crushed-looking chocolate. But Col did not trouble about appearances, and gobbled the titbits up in a twink.

"We must take him back to the Castle and send for Tam," said Lettice. "He lives on the moors, and it will be too far to go now. I wonder if the storm has left off?"

Col did not attempt to leave his friends. He was very shaky and cowed by such a terrible experience, and he crept as close to Lettice as he could.

The finding of Col rather put smugglers out of the explorers' heads, and it was voted that Black Michael's secrets—if the cave held any of them—should be left till next day—or some other time. Col was much more important.

It was not till they were back in the bigger cave that they found how stuffy the small one had been. It was good to breathe freely, but not quite so good to find that the storm was not over yet. Rain fell heavily and the thunder pealed continuously, though it seemed farther off.

"Mustn't it have been exciting," said Lettice, "waiting here for the boat to come back with all the smuggled things? Can't you imagine it on a moonlight night—and then a pistol-shot from the cliff warning them of the excisemen?"

"Yes," said Ross, "it must have been grand, but I believe I would rather have been an exciseman. It's all jolly fine—but they hanged smugglers in those days. Hullo!"

The "hullo" came in surprise as a big wave came streaming in over the cave floor, creaming and swirling about their feet.

"Are you sure it is only in the spring tides that the cave is flooded?" asked Wendy anxiously.

“Quite sure,” said Lettice, “but storms *may* make a difference. I think we had better wade before it is too deep—and we shall have to run to get round the Scar before the tide catches us there.”

Off came shoes and stockings and socks in a second. It is quite good fun to read about being caught by the tide, but not so jolly an experience.

Col understood all about it—of course he did—and was as plucky as a human being in following those scampering feet. Splash! splash! splash! through the shallow water they waded, and it was easy to laugh when they discovered they would be able to reach the Scar before the water was too deep.

Four—or rather five—very draggled figures arrived at the Castle half an hour later.

“It’s been water below and water above,” laughed Diccon, whilst Ross—yes, actually Ross—added: “Don’t catch cold, Lettice, because you are coming to the Grange to-morrow.”

Lettice flushed with pleasure. She was sure Ross must like her better than he had done at first or he would never have said that, and it made her more determined than ever to be a “sport”. She was beginning already to understand what the Carsedale children meant by that word. It was just “playing the game” honestly.

Well, rescuing Col was a good beginning, and Lettice led the shepherd’s dog round to the kitchen door with a warm, happy feeling at her heart. She *had* enjoyed that day!

CHAPTER VI

The Secret

To Diccon's delight it cleared up enough after tea for the bees to be hived, and Aunt Meg said they might go out and watch William if they promised to stand where they were told.

William did not take much notice of them. He was too anxious to get the bees to bed, and, of course, there must not be any talking.

Diccon found this very hard; he wanted to ask so many questions; but William had his pipe in his mouth and could not have talked anyhow.

First of all Alan had laid a board from the ground to the hive entrance and covered it with a clean white cloth, then William brought the skep with the sack well wrapped round like a pudding-cloth. This "pudding-cloth" had to be taken away, though, and Ross, who was standing on the bough of an apple tree, got full view of the bees which quite filled it. Then down! one terrific shake, and there was no longer any white cloth to be seen.

"Bz-z-z!" murmured the bees—but they did not seem to want to fly around this time. At first they tumbled and struggled together in a big bunch which gradually straightened out, and lo, there were the bees in soldierly array marching home in perfect order. It was so interesting, and Wendy could not help asking a question, when William, who squatted quite close, smoking furiously, suddenly put out his hand and lifted one bee from the mass.

"Is she the queen?" asked Wendy, and William nodded. It was not till all the bees had disappeared that William rose and showed the young watchers his prize.

"She's the auld lady," said William; "that's bee gratitude. There never can be peace wi' two queens, and as soon as a young one is born, she up and drives the auld one out o' the hive wi' the bees that are true to her. Then the young one rules. But if I'd allowed the auld lady to gang back there'd hae been swarming to-morrow."

"*I* don't think bees are a bit nice then," replied Wendy, in a whisper. "And Aunt Meg says they make the men-bees—which are drones—do all the work of cleaning out the hives in the morning before they go out; and when the winter comes they kill them all off."

William chuckled.

"That's the bees' lesson against idleness, bairns," said he; "but it's not that ye'll be needin' at present, for it's too muckle work some young folks like to be at."

And the children guessed he was thinking of that shed.

It was such a wet afternoon next day for Lettice's visit, but Elspeth had been baking some wonderful oatcakes in her honour. One day, Elspeth was going to teach Wendy how to make those cakes, which could only be described as scrumptious, especially when eaten with honey still in the honeycomb.

Lettice had a long tale to tell about Tam the shepherd's joy at Col's recovery.

"He came to the Castle quite late yesterday evening," she said, "and when he saw Col he just hugged and cried over him as if he had been a lost child. I had to tell him all the story of how we found him; and have you ever seen anyone's hair bristle with anger? I never have till I saw Tam's! He hasn't much hair at all, and it is quite grey, but it seemed to bristle right up on end, and he went 'Gr-r-r' in his throat like old Marko, the watch-dog. Dad asked him if he could guess who had been so cruel, and he said he knew very well but did not mean to say till he had the means of paying him back. Dad tried to explain that that sort of debt was best paid by forgiveness, but Tam only said 'Gr-r-r' in his throat as if something was choking, and then he took Col away. He was awfully grateful to us, though, and said it was a braw welcome he'd give us if any time we came to his hut to see him and Col, and that if ever we lost anything he would be the one to help us find it."

"I vote we do go and see him one day," said Ross, "and he may let us go into the sheep-fold. I suppose there aren't any lambs at this time of year. I love lambs, they are so woolly and jolly—and none of us has ever been into a real shepherd's hut."

"Perhaps Aunt Meg would let us have a picnic on the moors one day," said Wendy, "and we could go and see Tam, too. Elspeth told me there were lots of adventure-places on the moors, and the loveliest glens beyond Glenagrie—the most lovely is the one the other side of the village."

"Wendy talks like a penny guide-book sometimes," laughed Diccon, putting his arm round his sister's waist and twirling her round; "but *I* know the best place for a picnic. Alan told me. It's the little islet beyond the Scar,

called Curlew's Isle. It's mostly rock, but ferns grow on it, and there are bushes too. I should think it is a regular Crusoe's Island. Have you been on it, Lettice?"

"N-no," replied Lettice. "Of course I've heard of it. Sea-birds build in the spring, and the boys go from the mainland to get their eggs, but I didn't think it could be exciting—Wendy's idea of the glens is really nicer. There is a big glen about four miles off which had a battle fought in it once. I expect you would like that."

"If only it is fine," sighed Ross. "Isn't this rain beastly? What shall we play at?"

That was an important question and not very easy to settle. Lettice refused to choose, because she said she was sure *their* games would be the nicest.

Wendy thought "Old Maid" or "Pope Joan" in the Den would be quite good fun, but groans answered her.

"We don't want to sit still," said Ross in disgust, and when Wendy suggested "Dumb Crambo" there were objections about having no clothes for dressing up.

"Shall we tell Elspeth we will cook our own tea?" asked Diccon. "Toffee-cakes wouldn't be bad."

"You could offer one to Jean," retorted Ross, "and then she wouldn't be able to tell us all the things we are not to do. But why shouldn't we play hide-and-seek? Aunt Meg is in the west wing with Aunt Margaret, and the double doors are shut, so she won't hear, and Jean has gone down to the butcher. Wendy and I will challenge you, Lettice and Diccon. That's fair by age, and we can toss for first hide."

Ross having finally settled the game problem, the three others had nothing to do but agree. The Grange was a very rambling old house with two wings, east and west. Aunt Margaret had the west wing, at least she and Aunt Meg slept together in the big bedroom, and there was a sitting-room leading out of it. Double baize doors shut this wing off so that the old lady could be kept quite quiet. This only left the main building for hide-and-seek, as the east wing had been closed for years—and Elspeth had confessed that she knew no more of the reason why than the children themselves. Of course Jean knew—but when Jean was asked she had very quickly told them it was none of their business.

Wendy and Ross won the toss, and, having left the seekers in the Den for home, ran off, laughing.

"Wendy knows of a good place," said Diccon; "it will be in the kitchen, because she and Elspeth are such friends. We must plan where we will hide next, Lettice. Do you mind climbing?"

"I don't mind anything as long as we are not caught," said Lettice, who was a wee bit vexed at not being chosen by Ross for partner.

"Coo-ey!" came the call—and away they ran. It was Diccon who caught Ross, who had daringly hidden behind the curtain just outside the Den, and Lettice captured Wendy as the latter wriggled from the big, empty bread-pan in the larder.

Hurrah for success! *Now* the seekers would teach those superior folk that they would be sought in vain.

Diccon, of course, wanted to climb as high out of reach as possible, and the portmanteau in the boxroom would have defied any Paul Prys had not Lettice believed Ross had gone downstairs and popped out her head, only to find him tiptoeing back again.

But being caught only made Lettice more determined to succeed. She wanted to show Ross *her* cleverness; and, as soon as she and Diccon had their next turn, she caught his hand.

"The mysterious wing," she urged. "We must go and hide there. No one will ever guess—and we shall be able to explore. Now's our chance."

Diccon gasped.

"But we can't," he retorted; "it is all locked up."

"No, it isn't," said Lettice, "for when we went past the big door on our way to the attic I saw the key in the lock."

"You couldn't," replied Diccon. "We've never seen it."

"Come and look for yourself," begged Lettice, "it must have been left by mistake. Perhaps the rooms had to be aired. Or your Aunt Meg may have been in a hurry and forgotten to lock the door. We will take the key and close the door after us. Then no one will suspect. Hurry up."

And Diccon, highly delighted at the idea of having found a safe hiding-place, obeyed.

Lettice had been quite right too. The key was in the big door, and Diccon managed to turn it in spite of its stiffness.

"It's a little bit like going into Bluebeard's closet, isn't it?" whispered Lettice, as they closed the door after them and found themselves in a narrow passage.

"Or Ali Baba in the Forty Thieves' den," added Diccon, too excited to allow that little guilty feeling to knock at his heart.

For this was an adventure. Not only was this the safest of hiding-places, but a chance for explorations.

"How many years has it been shut up?" asked Lettice. "And haven't you an idea why? Perhaps it is a ghost—or a treasure mystery, or a legend. There are all sorts of legends which stick to houses. Perhaps a hobgoblin like Red Etin lives here."

Diccon had never heard of Red Etin, and he was not particularly curious about him. He wanted to peep inside these mysterious rooms. He and Ross had often discussed them, and had had all sorts of queer ideas which made him thrill all the more as he turned the door handle on the right.

The room was nearly in darkness, for the blinds were drawn and the day grey. As they stood on the threshold they could hear the rain beating against the window. Lettice did wish Ross were here instead of Diccon, who was much too small to take care of her. But, as far as they could see, there were neither hobgoblins, nor Red Etins, nor chests of treasure in this very dull room with its round table, three chairs, several cases of stuffed animals, a writing-table, and some shabby travelling-boxes.

"I don't like it much," said Lettice; "it's dull, but it is creepy too. Shall we look inside the cases?"

"No," replied Diccon, flushing to the roots of his hair, whilst he added—very slowly—"I don't believe we ought to have come."

"Silly," scoffed Lettice; "that's because you're a *little* boy. Ross would have loved to explore. But the boxes are locked, and I don't think there can be anything worth having in them, they're too light. Let's go on into the next room."

And she ran out and along the passage before Diccon could begin to persuade her to come away. How the wind skirled round the old wing; how the rain blattered against the glass. Voices called to Diccon: "Go back! Go back!" But instead, he followed Lettice into the other room.

An even duller room, with a poky bedstead and mattress, a few prints on the wall, a wash-hand stand and jug and basin, and a big wardrobe.

"The secret must be in the wardrobe," said Lettice, "pull up the blind, Diccon, and we'll have a good prowl. How cross Ross and Wendy will be. They must have looked everywhere."

Diccon tugged at the green cord, and up went the blind. How the rain was pelting down! And it was under this window somewhere that the door in the wall must be. Diccon pushed open the casement, and, in spite of the rain, peeped out. He could not quite see the door—but he saw something else—and that was the figure of Jean marching down the path towards the house, with no umbrella, and a parcel wrapped in a regular bundle in one hand.

Jean looked up as Diccon looked down, and the latter never forgot the expression of blank dismay which spread over the old Scotch woman's face. She had realized at once that an explorer was in that room, and she raised her hands in horror and a gesture of entreaty as she hurried forward.

"Are you staring at the rain to magic it away?" asked Lettice. "Come over here and help me open this door, it's stuck."

Diccon crossed the room. He was rather pale, but he held himself straight.

"Jean saw me," he said, "and—and her face said we were awfully bad to have come. I—I don't mind if she or Aunt Meg scold—but it is worse than that."

"You mean punishment, I suppose?" said Lettice—but she knew quite well Diccon was not thinking of that, and it made her cross with the sort of crossness we all feel when we have done wrong and don't want to be told so.

With cross fingers she tugged at the old wardrobe door, which suddenly opened and swung back so sharply that it knocked against the wash-hand stand, sending the jug and basin crashing.

It did sound an awful noise, but not nearly as alarming as the opening of the passage door and the sound of Aunt Meg's voice calling to them in tones of real pain.

Lettice thrust out her chin and humped her shoulders, but Diccon opened the bedroom door at once.

"Yes—Aunt Meg," he said, in very small tones.

“My dears, my dears!” replied Aunt Meg, and then her voice quite broke down, and it was Jean, in dripping bonnet and mackintosh, who curtly ordered the culprits to “come awa” that instant.

And, as Lettice obeyed, she too wished very much indeed that curiosity had not made her choose that “quite safe” hiding-place.

But though Lettice wished it from the bottom of her heart, she did not feel inclined to own it.

What *could* be the reason for all this fuss? If there had been a real secret she would have been quite ready to say she had been wrong. It was just all Miss Carsedale’s fault for locking up dull rooms. Yet one glance at Diccon’s flushed face told Lettice that her companion in mischief was feeling quite differently about things. He looked really sorry, and bit his lip to keep back the tears at sight of Jean’s angry face.

It was she who whispered to the culprits as they passed, and, though she spoke to Diccon, Lettice knew it was intended for her too!

“Nice behaviour, laddie,” said Jean indignantly; “and after all your kind aunt’s care and pleasing of you! I’d be ashamed, I would, to grieve her good heart so.”

“I’m sorry,” answered Diccon quite humbly—and somehow Lettice wished he hadn’t said that, for it wasn’t his fault at all; and why *should* he be sorry for doing what was not so wrong after all? That was what Lettice told herself as the door leading to the forbidden rooms closed behind her.

CHAPTER VII

The Secret Told

Wendy and Ross were waiting on the staircase when the party from the closed wing came out on to the landing. Jean, muttering wrathfully, went past them downstairs; she seemed in a very bad temper, and Wendy wondered why she was not actually scolding.

Aunt Meg looked very white and shaken, but far more sad than cross. I am glad to say by this time both Lettice and Diccon looked thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

"Tea was ready in the dining-room when Jean called me," said Miss Carsedale, "so we will go down to it. I am thankful Aunt Margaret is in bed. Afterwards I want to have a talk with you all—about that wing of the house which is closed."

They all followed in silence excepting when Ross, glaring at Diccon, whispered, "Stupid!"—and Lettice interfered, saying it was all her fault.

Aunt Meg poured out tea for them all, and then said very quietly that she would return presently. When she had left the room Ross turned to the culprits.

"What in the world made you do such an idiotic thing?" he asked.

Lettice tossed her head—but she felt more like crying. Diccon buried his nose in the teacup.

"I suppose," he replied, in muffled tones, "it was curiosity."

"I should think it was," said Ross, "but you knew perfectly well——"

"You needn't bully, Ross," struck in Lettice, "it was all my fault—every bit. I suggested it. Of course I'm sorry now. I'm going to tell your aunt so. But you needn't roar."

Ross got very red. He hated to be called a bully. Dad had had so many talks about that very word, and about his being the eldest. Wendy, however, put in her gentle little oar before he could reply.

"It is dreadfully easy to be curious," she sighed, "and we all of us have wondered about that wing. It—it made me think of Mother's Adam and Eve story."

“There wasn’t any mystery, after all,” added Diccon, “only dull old tables and chairs. It’s just ordinary.”

“What is the Adam and Eve story?” asked Lettice.

“It’s awfully old,” said Wendy; “about the old man and woman who told the Vicar they couldn’t understand Adam and Eve being so wicked. They said they had no patience with such curiosity, and they were sure *they* would never have touched the apple. The Vicar didn’t say much, but he asked them to dinner, and when the dinner in a covered dish was on the table, a message came for him to go. ‘I won’t be long,’ he said to John and Mary; ‘but *be sure* you don’t peep under that dish-cover whilst I am away.’

“At first John and Mary sat very still, then they got impatient.

“ ‘I wonder if it be leg of mutton?’ said John.

“ ‘No’, said Mary, ‘that be pork.’ So they went on guessing till John lifted the lid—and out ran a mouse! When the Vicar came in, John and Mary were still looking for that mouse. They *were* ashamed.

“ ‘Ah’, said the Vicar, ‘how about Adam and Eve?’ Then he rang for the proper dinner, and afterwards John and Mary went home feeling they must not be so ready to condemn other people.”

“It’s a jolly fine story,” said Ross, more cheerfully; “and *I* won’t blame you two now. Of course, I have been curious myself about those rooms. Have another oatcake, Lettice—and some honey?”

Lettice smiled. She thought that was nice of Ross; but then these Carsedale children did not seem to know what sulks meant, or to find it one bit hard to say they made mistakes. That had always been what she hated. So instead of refusing to eat any of the good tea provided, as she had intended, she ate a very excellent one, and by the time Aunt Meg came back, the four children quite felt they were “all alike” about this business of curiosity and all equally ready to be sorry—and try to please everyone in future.

It is such a nice feeling, isn’t it?—and it so often comes after we have been setting things crooked.

If Aunt Meg had just asked them for their promise never to go near the closed wing again, they would have given it at once; but sometimes it does little people good to understand just where their thoughtlessness has brought suffering.

“Those rooms,” said Aunt Meg, “belonged to my brother Kenneth. He used the sitting-room for reading his college books, and all sorts of

experiments, for he was very clever. But, instead of giving his mind to his work, he got amongst bad friends and did many wrong things. Often he used to come home and say he would start afresh, but the starts always failed, because they were made in his own strength, and at last came the time when he did something worse than ever. After that he did not come home. And to pay his debts we had to sell our things and even the old home. One night—only two nights before we left—Jean came to tell me someone was coming in by the side door we called Mr. Ken's door. We thought at first it was burglars. At last we went to see. Kenneth had come home for the last time of all—but—he was dying. He died that night—brokenhearted—praying for God's forgiveness—and ours. It nearly killed Aunt Margaret—the grief of it. And it was not till twenty years later that an old uncle left us the money to buy back the Grange. We came home last year—but we neither of us felt we could bear ever to go into those rooms. The house had been let furnished, and, strangely enough, that wing had been unused. We closed it up—and never speak of it, for fear of upsetting Aunt Margaret. Jean goes in once a week to air and dust it. But—ah, my dears—you cannot understand how—the sight of those chairs and tables—and my brother's bed—makes my heart ache—I cannot bear it!"

Four tearful comforters gathered about poor Aunt Meg, four pairs of arms tried to find place about her.

Lettice was crying bitterly.

"It's all my fault," she sobbed. "We thought—it was an exciting mystery. We—we did not mean to hurt you."

"My dearie, I'm sure of it," said Aunt Meg, "and indeed I forgive you. But the lesson will help you all, I do believe. The lesson of thought for others who hide what may not really interest you but is sacred to them."

Four very subdued little folk went quietly back to the Den for a game of "Pope Joan". They did not feel one bit like romping, even though Aunt Meg had told them to run away and play.

"I don't think I shall want to remember the Adam and Eve story next time I'm curious," said Lettice, as she kissed her friends good-bye. "I shall think of the closed wing—and the sad, sad man who came home to die."

The heavy rain had ceased now, and Ross offered to go home with the little visitor if the car were not coming for her.

Generous Ross! He would never have offered had it not been for the affair of the closed wing, but to Lettice's disappointment the car had come.

“Never mind,” she said. “You will come round for me to-morrow, won’t you? I want to plan games for the time when Malcolm is here. He comes on Thursday, and he will be ever so pleased to have boys to play with as well as me. We used to squabble sometimes in the old days because he went with the village boys.”

Ross nodded. He was glad about Malcolm, too. He hoped he played cricket.

But next day—such a kind, sunny day after the rain—Lettice met them, brimming over with a new scheme.

“I’ve an idea,” she called, as she came hopping and skipping down the avenue. “Instead of having fun shall we do something to please your aunt?”

The Carsedale children looked surprised.

“I don’t quite know what would please her,” replied Wendy. “I believe she likes it best when we are out at play. Aunt Margaret has to be so quiet.”

“Mother says your aunt goes to the hospital at Horringford twice a week to see the sick, poor people,” said Lettice. “Did you know that?”

“Yes,” answered all three, and Diccon added: “She is going this afternoon, for I heard her ordering a chaise. Ross and I want to see what a chaise is like.”

Lettice laughed.

“It belongs to Daniel Gregory,” she said. “He has a horse called Jeremiah, and it jogs, jogs, jogs, and the chaise goes creak, creak, creak. It makes anyone laugh, but it holds a lot of people. My idea is to pick your aunt just oceans of flowers to take to her sick people.”

“Topping!” said Ross and Diccon, who loved picking flowers. Wendy clapped her hands.

“There’s heaps of heather,” she added.

“They wouldn’t care for heather, I fancy,” said Lettice. “When you’re ill you like flowers with a nice smell, so Mum says we may have as many sweet-peas as we can pick. Come along, we shall get armfuls before dinner.”

The sweet-peas grew in the middle of the Castle vegetable garden and bordered a wide, grass path, rows and rows of sweet-peas in full blossom.

“We must get some bass to tie the bunches,” said Lettice, “and I’ve got a sheet to put them in. It will take a long time.”

Diccon was already beginning to pick. How sweet the flowers did smell, and what numbers there were. They would never be able to gather them all.

"What big sweet-peas they are," admired Wendy. "I love the white ones with the pink frills."

"I am picking all the mauve ones," said Ross. "I like seeing all the colours singly." Ross was far the quickest picker. Whatever he did he threw his whole heart into, and he liked this idea of gathering flowers for the hospital patients.

"Malcolm would call this waste of time," laughed Lettice, who was delighted to find her friends so pleased with her plan. "He likes knockabout games all the time. Perhaps they will be too knockabout for you, Wendy?"

"Not they!" retorted Ross. "Wendy's a sport. She always joins every game—except cricket. I don't believe you've ever been keen on cricket, have you, Wen?"

Wendy shook her head.

"I think I've got a crooked eye," she confessed. "All the balls I bowl are 'wides', and I can't do over-hands at all."

"*I* play cricket," said Lettice, "but not well. I like scrambles and picnics and jolly adventures best. I say, Ross, what a bunch!"

Diccon was the slowest picker. Can you guess why? On the other side of the sweet-pea rows were the gooseberry bushes—on which hung numbers of those little red hairy gooseberries which are so refreshing after picking thousands of sweet-peas. Diccon was having little peeps between the sticks to see which tree had the most fruit on. He felt a hint might be useful too.

"Don't the birds eat most of your gooseberries, Lettice?" he asked, so innocently that the others burst out laughing. Diccon got red, and began picking sweet-peas very hard.

Lettice looked at her silver wrist-watch.

"If we go on picking till a quarter to twelve," she said, "it would give us half an hour amongst the gooseberries. Will that do?"

And Diccon for one thought it a sensible suggestion. Long before a quarter to twelve the sheet was covered by bunches of those dainty blossoms. Wendy had followed Ross's idea and had picked only "frilly" sorts. Lettice picked pink ones, and Diccon mixed his all up together. It was no use to question as to who picked most, for Ross was such an easy winner.

Diccon gave just the smallest sigh of relief as he knelt down before a very overladen gooseberry bush. He felt he had earned his reward. But the very best part of the whole morning was the sight of Aunt Meg's face when she saw those sweet-peas.

"It was Lettice's plan," said Ross, "and we loved doing it. Aren't they jolly?"

"I'm afraid there would not be room in the chaise for you all to come too," said Aunt Meg, after she had thanked them; "but I should have liked you to see what pleasure you are giving. Could two of you come without leaving some very dull person behind?"

"I'll stay and help William," said Diccon, who, by dint of great perseverance, had established a firm friendship with the old gardener. And so Diccon stayed with William, whilst the others climbed up beside Aunt Meg in the queer, old-fashioned chaise, in which they jogged along to the town at Jeremiah's own pace, which was that of a very lazy snail.

And oh! how pleased the sick people were with those bunches of sweet-peas, and how Ross and Wendy enjoyed giving them—especially to the children! Ross had quite a long talk with a boy who had broken his leg in a fall from a cart.

Ross's sympathy was most genuine; in fact on the way home he could talk of nothing else.

"Fancy having to keep still in bed for six weeks," he exclaimed, in such horror that Aunt Meg could not help smiling.

"But it is as well to think of that, Ross," she remarked, "before you do things which often lead to accidents."

Ross did not reply. I wonder if he took the hint! If so, I am quite sure he had forgotten it long before he got home!

CHAPTER VIII

Malcolm

Malcolm had come! Lettice sent a scrawled note down to the Grange with the great news, and the three Carsedales were all excitement to greet the hero, who had once made forty runs not out at a local cricket match and who liked fun of every sort.

And Malcolm was nearly fourteen. To Ross's thinking that was best of all. Diccon was not quite so enthusiastic. He liked going on in his own way, and thought if Ross was so keen to play with someone older than himself that no one could possibly be nicer than Alan. But then Alan had his work to do, and could not go holiday-making all day long.

Malcolm and Lettice came half-way to the Grange to meet their comrades. Malcolm *did* look a big boy; he was a head taller than Ross, and very thin. He was not a bit good-looking, being freckled and sandy-haired, with too big a mouth, but he seemed quite jolly, though Diccon fancied his chin was just a bit too high in the air.

Diccon had a way of noticing things, and it struck him that Malcolm would like ruling quite as much as Ross, who, having been "eldest" so long, might find it rather tiresome to take a second place.

Lettice had such a lot to say. No more sweet-pea picking now Malcolm was here, but lots of splendid games!

Malcolm shook hands hard with the three new chums. He couldn't say—before Lettice—how jolly fine he thought it to have others to play with beside his cousin.

In former days Malcolm had very often found his visits to the Castle rather mixed pleasures. Of course he loved the place, and the moors, the fruit garden and orchards, the sea and fishing; but Lettice had, in his private opinion, rather spoiled things by her domineering nature. Boys don't always want girls to be following them about—and when it comes to their ordering them about they do not want them at all! Still, even of old, Lettice had had her good points, and Malcolm was fond of her in his own way. The introduction, however, of three fresh playfellows, who had the word "jolly" written all over their faces, was very cheering.

Malcolm compared Wendy with Lettice, and felt at once this was much more the sort of sister he would have liked.

Lettice was already "explaining" a great deal he would rather have explained for himself.

"I've told Mal what sports you are," she said graciously, "and he says we ought to make a regular band—only I am afraid, Ross, he will have to be captain as he is the eldest. What did you say the band was to be called, Malcolm?"

Malcolm laughed, as he took aim at a plover perched on a heathery knoll.

"How you do gas, Letty," he said; "but, I say, don't you all think it would be rather sporty? We could call ourselves the Band of Wild West Boys. I have an uncle who is a cowboy in Nevada, and he tells jolly yarns about the James Boys and rustlers and Mounted Police. When I am a man I am going out to those parts. I think I shall be a prospector and explore the Skeleton Range."

"What a horrid name," said Wendy; "but if we are the Band of Wild West Boys what can we do? We can't ride about, or find nuggets, or have real adventures and escapes."

"Oh, we shall find plenty to do," replied Malcolm airily. "We could have raids, and hold the glen against each other. Better still, there is the Pele Tower. Letty and I always did want to have some sport over that. Shall we take a picnic basket and go over the moors to it?"

Ross would have liked to ask what a Pele Tower was, but he was a trifle shy about questions, and Diccon was already putting forward his own suggestion.

"Have you ever been over to Curlew's Isle?" he asked. "That's where I want to go. We've not been on the sea yet. None of us can row, and the fishermen are always busy. Alan is going to take us out, but that won't be till next week."

"Curlew's Islet," said Malcolm; "why, yes. I never thought of that. We might begin there if you are so keen. It's a rare place for a scramble, and there is a topping pool for fishing. We'll take a net and bring home some fish *or* cook them there."

"That's settled then," said Lettice. "We'll go to the islet to-day. Shall we take our dinner? I'll run back and ask Mums, if you like."

Malcolm said they all did like very much, and he asked Ross to come off and look at the river with him whilst they were waiting. Diccon and Wendy went back to tell Aunt Meg.

Lettice was the first to return to "headquarters", but then she had Donald the scullery-lad to carry her hamper. Wendy and Diccon were not far behind, and brought contributions of tarts and shortbread.

"We shan't starve," said Malcolm, taking charge of the net Donald carried too. "And if we *are* hungry we can fall back on the fish."

"Did you tell your mother you were going to the isle?" asked Malcolm of Lettice; "but I'm sure you didn't, or she would have been certain to get the wind up!"

"All she *did* say," replied Lettice, "was 'Be sure you are in by four o'clock, as Uncle Bernard is coming over.' "

Malcolm was pleased at that, for Uncle Bernard had been a traveller over half the world and had some most interesting yarns to tell.

"I expect we shall be sick of it by three o'clock," said he, "and I wouldn't miss Uncle Bernard even for fishing."

The Carsedales had not heard this little chat between the cousins, who now joined them in the gayest of spirits.

"Everything in order," said Malcolm; "but if we do happen to see old Tam Wetherbanks we will ask him for another net. I suppose you didn't bring any sort of a pot, er—Windy?"

"*Wendy*," said Wendy, joining in the laugh. "And I have got a pot which Elspeth says won't break in an oven, so perhaps it will be all right over a fire."

"First catch your—fish—then cook it," teased Ross, but in his heart he was longing to "do" the successful fisherman.

Tam Wetherbanks was smoking outside his cottage door and discussing onions with a neighbour. He was so interested in boasting that his wife kept onions, hanging up in a cellar all the winter, fit to eat in February, that he only listened with "half an ear" to Malcolm's request for the net and loan of his boat.

"We are only going over to Curlew's Isle," added Malcolm, "so we shan't want anyone to go with us. The sea is like a mill-pond."

“That’s a’ richt, Maister Malcolm,” agreed Tam. “And as I was telling ye, man, Geordie, thae onions——”

But the Band of the Wild West Boys waited to hear no more. Shoes, socks and stockings were dispensed with as soon as the sands were reached.

The *Queen Maisie* was an old tub of a boat which needed a lot of launching. Ross squared his shoulders and put on a very professional air, which came to an untimely end as he went sprawling down where the beach shelved unexpectedly.

“Salt water never gives people cold,” said Lettice; “but what a good thing it wasn’t the hamper!”

Everyone but Ross heartily agreed, and he himself soon got over the ducking and took an oar with less bumptiousness, but no less determination to avoid “crabs”.

“Is this what you call a smooth sea?” asked Wendy, as the boat slid up on to the crest of a deep swell and then sank quietly into a hollow.

“Got a bit of a roll on,” replied Malcolm, “but you’ll survive. There’s the islet, mates—a desert one too, though we shan’t find any coco-nuts.”

“It’s more like a jumble of rocks than an island,” said Diccon. “I wish I’d brought my hammer to chip off some of the granite. Whew, what flocks of birds!”

Dozens and dozens of the big grey-and-white birds rose with hoarse cries as the boat approached.

“Steady, mates!” ordered Captain Malcolm. “Grab that spur of rock, Diccon, and glue yourself to it. Now, Letty, you can climb up there.”

It was not nearly as easy as it may sound, for the boat rose and sank on the swell, and Letty had to watch her chance in making her jump to reach the boulder, which stood out of the water like a great grey step. Wendy’s heart sank. If she missed the step she would go down into deep water—but Wild West Boys ought not to be on the look out for danger, and Ross kindly gave her a good push up.

Malcolm came last, and, after making fast the boat to the rocky spur, they scrambled together to the first “landing” of this queer island.

Old nests were built in every cranny, and in sandy nooks quite a number of pretty shells were to be seen; but it was a big surprise to the three visitors, as they climbed round a buttress of granite rock, to find that, sheltered by

those grim sentinel boulders, was quite a jolly little "desert island" with scrubby bushes, sandy soil, and shaggy grasses.

"Arrived!" proclaimed Captain Malcolm. "Now, what about a fire in case we get the fish?"

"And because we've got some eggs," replied Lettice. "And you remember, Malcolm—the rock cave where we hid all those sticks at Easter? Ugh! you couldn't ever forget those eggs we cooked. But these are new-laids—not sea-birds'."

Ross, Diccon, and Malcolm went scrambling off in search of fuel, while the girls unpacked the hamper with its pies and tarts, its sandwiches and ginger-beer.

"We shall never eat half," said Wendy. "Don't you think we had better have the eggs?"

"Oh, but we must light a fire!" retorted Lettice. "Look at Malcolm. He's tying his handkerchief to a stick for signalling. Have you ever practised Morse code? It's all 'iddy umpties'. And I know those sticks will be damp."

The sticks were not very damp, and the big pot was soon set in the midst of a blazing fire; but the six brown eggs Lettice had unpacked all ready were destined never to be eaten hard-boiled between bread-and-butter, for a piece of paper had blown over them, and Malcolm—never dreaming eggs were underneath—sat down on it.

Lettice shrieked "Eggs!" just one second too late—and you should have seen Malcolm bounce up—but it was no use, eggs once smashed can't be repaired, and dinner had to be eaten without them.

"We'll catch the fish for a snack afterwards," said Malcolm. "This isn't a bad desert island, but there's too much eating and too little adventure. Come, Ross, the pool is this side."

"We had better take it in turns," said Lettice firmly. "You called us Wild West *Boys* yourself."

"Of course," said Ross hastily, "and you ought to have the net before me, Lettice, as you are older."

But Lettice would not hear of it.

"We'll come down when it is our turn," she replied. "Wendy and I are going to get shells and climb about. Come with us, Diccon."

But Diccon had other fish to fry—or rather to catch!

Malcolm and Ross might be lucky in securing a prize in one of the pools, but *he* meant to try the sea. But he didn't talk about it, he just made his queer line with its meat bait and climbed down to his corner.

Ross had to keep near Malcolm, because he was not very sure how the nets ought to be thrust, and Malcolm showed him once; but it took a lot of skill to handle the cumbersome pole properly.

And the fish were very wideawake to-day! Not a sign of one could be seen. But the boys were very enthusiastic, and quite sure they were on the eve of a capture, when the girls came for their turn.

"Hoo—yow!" sounded a yell from a rock ledge to the right. "Hoo—*yow*!"

"For a whale?" shouted Ross, as he and Malcolm threw the nets to the girls and slid down to the ledge from whence came the cries.

It was an unlucky moment, for Diccon, having found a great-grandfather lobster at the end of his line, gave it a furious tug, and still more furious toss, so that the tarred string swung round with the lobster dangling till it fell close to Malcolm.

"Hul-lo! Is it raining lobsters?" the latter called—but he didn't make a second joke, for a remarkably fine claw curled round his toe and gave it a vengeful pinch. Malcolm yelled, Ross shouted, Diccon squealed, but the lobster held on—drawing blood in his spiteful squeezing, till Ross—more by good luck than management—succeeded in making it free its victim.

"The brute!" stuttered Malcolm, in his wrath. "It's nearly had half my toe."

It was not as bad as that, but whilst Ross—gingerly holding his captive by his whiskers—stooped to examine the much-pinched member, a cry from Lettice startled them.

"The boat!" called Lettice; "it's got loose—Malcolm—and—and the waves have carried it right away, back to the shore."

CHAPTER IX

Curlew's Isle

"*That's* a nice kettle of fish," said Malcolm grimly. "What in the world is to be done? Even if we all yelled our loudest they would not hear us from the shore."

"Let's try," pleaded Wendy. "One, two, three——"

They all shouted, finally scaring off the birds which had begun to return to their rocky home.

"I wonder if I could swim that distance," hinted Malcolm. But Lettice administered a prompt and cousinly snub.

"You wouldn't go ten yards," she retorted, "so don't swank. Oh dear—it's no use yelling 'help' when there's no one to listen."

" 'And but the booming guns replied, and fast the waves rolled on'," quoted Diccon.

Malcolm had been staring grimly round at the rocks—his glance fell on the handkerchief he had fastened as flag.

"We might signal!" he exclaimed. "If we go on long enough someone may see it. But the nuisance is that we shan't be home in time to see Uncle Bernard."

"Perhaps Lady Macmorran will send to find us, as she knows where we are," suggested Wendy.

Lettice grimaced.

"That's what she doesn't know," she confessed; "I only said a *picnic*. Mother would have fussed if she had known Malcolm was rowing us out here."

Ross whistled, Diccon stared, Wendy looked as if she could not believe her ears. Of course *they* got into mischief a dozen times a day—but they could not imagine treating Mums as Lettice had treated her mother.

Lettice hunched her shoulders and frowned. She knew her new friends were shocked—really and truly shocked—and it made her cross, not only with them but with herself.

“It was Diccon’s idea to come here,” she grumbled.

“But we never would have come if we had known your mother wouldn’t like it,” said Ross bluntly.

“Pooh!” scoffed Lettice, watching Malcolm, who had climbed up to fetch his handkerchief and escape out of the way of a squabble; “you needn’t all pretend to be so good. Wendy and Diccon didn’t tell when they went to the Grange.”

“Yes, we did,” said Diccon. “Aunt Meg met us and Wendy told her. She said she hoped we would have a nice day.”

“So we have,” retorted Lettice defiantly, “and there’s no need to spoil it now by grumpiness. We came for adventure—and we’ve got it.”

“If we have to sleep all night on the island,” said Diccon, “we had better save up enough tarts for breakfast. I wonder if I should like a storm to break!”

Malcolm was signalling. He did not want Ross to think he had known this was a stolen adventure. Ross had such a blunt way of calling a spade a spade. It was awfully stupid—but it did make a chap more careful.

No one took any notice of Diccon’s hint about the storm. Lettice knew that the others were blaming her for this trouble—and she called it most unfair. *She* had not cut the boat adrift.

Anyhow, if they did not want to speak to her she didn’t want to speak to them.

When Malcolm rejoined them, all were as glum as mutes. Even Wendy looked worried and sad.

“No chance of seeing Uncle Bernard,” sighed Malcolm, as he climbed down, “and I brought a specimen of a lesser fritillary on purpose to show him. Let’s try another shout.”

They tried another shout—but missed Diccon’s voice. Its owner had gone climbing, but returned with a broad smile on his face.

“The fire is out,” said he, “but I’ve put the lobster in the pot and brought it along.”

As if anyone cared about lobsters!

Perched in a row along the ledge of rock, the poor desert-islanders sat watching the dancing waves, the wheeling birds.

“It must have been dreadful to be the man who was monarch of all he surveyed,” said Wendy. “Do you think it would be any use to light another fire as a sort of beacon and make it very smoky? Someone might see the smoke and think of us.”

Anything was better than sitting still, and many hands made light work in building the beacon fire. It is always wise to make the best of a bad job, and the Carsedales were far too sunny-natured to say anything more about what they thought had been deceit on Lettice’s part. So it was the Wild West Boys who piled cut bushes and dry seaweed on that smoky fire, and made bold plans for escape should this fail.

But it did not fail, and Sentry Diccon sent up a shout of welcome as he proclaimed good news.

“A sail, boys, a sail! Rescued!”

Old John M’Lean shook his head gravely at the cluster of castaways who crowded to embark.

“There’s the laddie frae the Grange and Johnnie M’Ewen frae the Castle been spierin’ after ye,” he said, “an’ auld Tam just findin’ the *Queen Maisie* among the Snake Rocks. It’s anxious hearts ye’ve made, bairns, wi’ yer bit fun.”

“It was a punishment to us too, John,” owned Lettice humbly, “but we shan’t do it again. We’ve seen quite as much of Curlew’s Islet as we want to last us a lifetime. And *what* time is it?”

John thought it must be past seven o’clock, and, though this news was not surprising, it threw them all into a panic. No Uncle Bernard! No supper for the Grange visitors—plenty of lectures!

It was quite dusk by the time those weary voyagers arrived at their destinations, and if Lettice had been ashamed before, she was ten times more so when she saw her mother’s white face and anxious eyes.

“We’ll let Ross choose the next adventure,” she told Malcolm. “Don’t you like him awfully? They are all sports too.”

And Malcolm agreed, though he did so in rather a lordly way.

“They’re a bit young for me,” he added, “and too old-fashioned. I wonder if they would be up to a *real* lark?”

Lettice laughed.

“Don’t pretend to be grown up, Mal,” she said, in her most put-you-in-your-place tone, “because you can’t do it, and you know Ross Carsedale would love any real fun.”

But the Wild West Boys did not find an immediate chance for fresh adventure. The Glenagrie school treat had been fixed for the very next Saturday, and Aunt Meg had asked her nephews and niece to help.

“What are we to do?” asked Ross. “Will they have races? If so, do let us help arrange *those*. We did once at home, and it was such fun.”

So when Malcolm and Lettice came in search of adventures they found very busy people drawing up a programme of village sports.

“I’d wanted you to come up for cricket,” said Malcolm to Ross. “Uncle Walter always has a cricket match for me in the summer hols and I want you to play. Diccon is too young.”

Ross was very flattered. He liked cricket, but he had to refuse to show his skill at present.

“The treat is to-morrow,” he explained, “and we promised Aunt Meg to do this part. Diccon suggests a crawling race. I think it would be all right, and, of course, sack, and three-legged, and egg-and-spoon.”

Malcolm thought village sports would be quite dull, but Lettice was already helping Wendy in her part of the programme, so he thought it best to put a good face on it.

Ross was quite as enthusiastic over this as he was over his own games, and Diccon was applauded for a bright suggestion he called the brown-sugar competition.

For this about twenty little bags of brown sugar had to be fastened up, a job Diccon got quite busy over. These were to be tied up to a branch of a tree, dangling well out of the competitors’ reach, who, with arms tied behind them, had to jump up, bite the bags, and eat the sugar without letting it fall to the ground.

Aunt Meg was very pleased with the help so willingly given. Although she had felt it right to ask her nephews and niece to Glenagrie she had rather dreaded their coming. And they were not perfection now they had come! But possibly Aunt Meg thought that those honest young pickles, with their loving hearts and readiness for any job they were asked to do, were better than many others who never played mischievous pranks—and never brought any love or sunshine to those they lived with.

The school children were lucky in their weather, and the tea, which was spread on long tables in one of the Castle fields, was a grand meal.

Oh, those plates of cake and sandwiches! those bushels of gooseberries and piles of bread-and-butter! Diccon and Lettice took a special delight in seeing how much two very hungry laddies could eat. It was amazing!

"I wonder if people ever do burst," said Diccon. "Those boys would go off with a good bang if they did!"

The races were almost as important as the tea, and required still more organization.

Ross had his eye on one very rude, red-haired boy, who, he soon found, was up to any sly trick to win a race.

"Yon's Red Robbie," one of the other boys told him; "he always wins. You'll see. He always wins in these races."

"He won't win to-day," said Ross, and, sure enough, he pounced on Red Robbie at his cheating and hauled him off.

"You're disqualified," said he, "and if I catch you doing that sort of thing again you'll not be allowed to race."

Red Robbie scowled and slunk away. He had always done as he liked before, and he did not mean to stay and listen to the other boys' jeers.

Alan beamed on "little maister".

"He's a sneak, Red Rob," he told Ross confidently, "and there's some say old Tam has his e'e on him for the business o' Col bein' tied up i' the cave."

Ross nodded. He thought Red Robbie looked bully enough for anything, and he had heard the boy muttering threats as he went off. Not that Ross minded that! He felt quite sure he was more than a match for bullies.

Diccon's brown-sugar sport was quite as popular as the sack race, and oh, what dear sticky faces those children did have after it was over!

Diccon and Ross entered for the sack race, and shouted as loudly as any over the fun of rolling about, staggering up, flopping down, and charging into other living sacks.

There were louder cheers than ever before when those fisher bairns went home, and special yells for the young "leddies" and gentlemen.

The Wild West Boys had made firm friends that day.

“And to-morrow,” whispered Lettice, as she said good night to the three Carsedales, “we are going to the Pele Tower. Malcolm has some grand ideas. Will you be at the crossroads by two o’clock? We have to go into the town in the morning on the horridest job. Haircutting! Don’t you hate it?”

They did!

CHAPTER X

The Pele Tower

"What is a pele tower?" asked Diccon, as the heroic band set off next day under the captainship of the Castle children.

"Don't you know?" asked Malcolm. "You must have read Wilson's *Tales of the Borders*. Haven't you? Well, be sure you get the book. It's *ripping*! You hear all about pele towers in it. Of course, in the old days the Scotch and the English hated each other, specially on the Border, and were always coming across to raid and steal."

"Yes," said Ross, "we know that. The women used to dish up a set of spurs for supper when the larder was empty. I wish people did that sort of thing now."

"Well," went on Malcolm, "the pele towers were built along the border, and just where they were wanted for the raiders to drive in the stolen cattle, and then defend the tower against pursuit. They are very old, and the walls are frightfully thick. The lower part is like a big cattle-shed, and then you climb up by ladder to the upper story. Only in this tower there is a corkscrew staircase built in the thickness of the wall as well—called Dugald's stair. Dugald Kennedy was one of the boldest of the Border barons."

This news set the Carsedale's children's feet tingling to arrive. The Pele Tower sounded so romantic—and just the place for bold Wild West Boys, though three of the latter at least were not quite sure what the adventure was going to be.

Up the glen they scrambled, turning aside to drink thirstily from the merry little mountain stream which raced down between mossy banks.

Diccon discovered bushes of ripe, red raspberries, and ate as many as he could in the time allowed.

"Those thieving Allerbys will be over the Border," urged the Captain. "We must make a forced march of it to the tower."

"We ought to have brought Kelpie," laughed Ross; "he would have done for the 'stolen kine'."

Malcolm chuckled.

“Don’t you worry, Trooper Ross,” he retorted. “No woman shall dish us the feast of spurs.”

“We are not going to be women,” said Lettice. “You promised we should be boys.”

“The Border women were better than any boys,” retorted Malcolm. “Look at Kate Kennedy who led the muffled men across the swamps and gained the enemy’s castle. And there simply must be someone—or rather two—to remain and open the gates to us when we come back from the raid. If we are playing Wild West Boys—who are Border thieves for the day—we must do it properly.”

“And we could take it in turns,” added Ross, who was a rare boy for playing fair. But at this Malcolm only chuckled.

“*If they want to*,” he hinted. “Grey Dugald the captain does not tell his riders all his secrets.”

This was rather aggravating, but had its exciting side. Plenty of imagination has to come into all plays of this kind, but the Pele Tower helped them a good deal. Such a sturdy, time-blackened place it looked, standing on a steep slope and bristling even now with defiance.

“There must be ghosts in this place,” said Ross. “I can feel that in my bones. Can’t you picture them in their armour and buff jerkins riding like mad up that valley driving fat kine before them?”

“There was a fight called the Fight of the Red Ford down there,” said Malcolm, “but we are not ‘riding’ that way just yet. Now, let us get inside the tower and investigate.”

“Shall we ever get in?” demanded Diccon. “The door is half rotten, but it’s stuck—and *isn’t* it heavy? They knew how to make doors in those days.”

“All together,” said the Captain—and all together it was. Crash! back went the nail-studded gate—and in flopped the Wild West Band—not only “all together” but all on the top of each other. Ross, who happened to be at the bottom of the pile, was quite breathless when he was pulled up by Malcolm and propped against the wall.

There was no ladder, and, standing in the dim old place, it was impossible to see any trapdoor of ancient make or mighty dimensions; but Diccon was the first to discover the slender stair, rough-cut in the solid wall and offering precarious foothold.

“You see, there is another story,” said Lettice, peering upwards. “And what huge beams! They did build strong places.”

“Up!” commanded Grey Dugald, “the dawn breaks—I mean, the moon is rising—and we must be off to the raid. You go first, Diccon, we’ll follow. We can’t go without seeing where the women will wait.”

“If we have to wait to open the doors, I should think we ought to stay down here,” said Wendy, but Ross shook his head.

“You have to watch for our return—or the coming of the enemy,” he explained, “but it’s all right. What sort of a place, Diccon?”

Diccon was out of sight, but his voice sounded very chirpy.

“Top-hole! Real window slits, only wide enough for arrows; heaps of dust—old chains, beams. I should think rats and bats too.”

“Hurrah for the raid!” sang Malcolm. “We shall have to be off now. You women keep your eyes skinned to those windows. We are riding east—to raid Farrell’s land.”

“That’s the farm,” said Lettice. “Come here, Wendy, and you will see it through the trees. It’s a big farm—and Andrew Farrell is ever so grumpy, I believe. Those are his stacks—and his fields. I can see the horses, Mal.”

“Hurry up!” called the latter to Ross and Diccon; “it’s full o’ the moon, lads, and the house-wives are bidding us go.”

“But what are we going to do?” inquired Ross, as the three boys quitted the tower and struck off to the right. “We can’t really raid anyone’s farm.”

Malcolm laughed.

“Old Farrell knows Uncle Walter,” he said. “I believe he rents the farm from him, and he wouldn’t say anything. His men may get the wind up a bit. I hope they will, it will be more realistic. What we’ve got to do is to try and catch two of those horses and then have a real lark. He has lots of cattle out on the moors, we’ll try and round some up into the Pele Tower.”

Ross came to a standstill.

“Not really?” he exclaimed.

Malcolm nodded. He was not sure what that “not really” meant.

“Haven’t you ever ridden?” he asked loftily. “I thought you were sports. It is the sportiest thing going, to ride bareback—and those horses are as

quiet as sheep. I've got plenty of rope." And he opened his coat, showing neat coils of thin rope wound about his waist.

It sounded tempting enough, but Ross's cheeks burned.

"*I'm* not going to do it, even though I can ride," he retorted. "It would be a beastly mean trick to play the farmer, and all the worse because your uncle is his landlord. Besides, Dic and I at any rate have no money to pay if we cut the horses' knees and damaged the cattle. Dad would say there was no true sport in a game like that. And I agree—don't you, Dic?"

"Of course I do," said Diccon. "I always agree with you, Ross, and I don't see where the fun would come in. Let's think of another game."

But Malcolm's face was very stormy, and his lips curled in a fine sneer.

"You're *afraid*," he scoffed. "Why don't you tell the truth right out?"

Ross planted his feet firmly, he was like a rock when really roused in this way.

"As you like," he agreed, "we are afraid of doing what would be breaking our promise to Dad. It is just the sort of thing he would hate—risking injury to animals—and other people's property."

"I never heard such stuff in my life," said Malcolm, in a rage. "You ought to be given dolls to play with! You're nothing but cowards without a bit of sport in you! Anyhow, I shall go by myself."

Diccon whistled. Ross thrust his hands deep into his pockets, but he did not budge, and Malcolm, who had made sure his biting remarks would induce them to yield, went off in a very bad temper. But he meant to show them what a top-hole game this could be, and, anyhow, Lettice would not let him down.

Lettice and Wendy were both at a loss to understand the raiders' movements.

"How they do talk!" said Lettice; "they must be quarrelling. No—they are dividing forces—Ross and Diccon are going to the right and Malcolm to the left towards the field with the horses in it."

"It looks as if Diccon and Ross were coming back," replied Wendy. "Perhaps something is forgotten?"

"We shall soon hear," agreed Lettice. "Oh, look, Wendy, look! Malcolm has got on to the big black horse—doesn't he understand horses well? Now

he's putting the rope in his mouth—and the horse does not like it. Why *did* Diccon and Ross go off?"

"They are coming back," said Wendy. "I can't think why. But I expect it is that Ross wouldn't borrow anyone's horse without asking. Just look at Malcolm—he's like John Gilpin."

Malcolm was up on the horse by now, but he did not seem to be enjoying himself. Away went the big black over the fence—or rather through the fence—and into the farm garden. In vain Malcolm tugged at the piece of rope. It was that which had upset Prince Charlie's temper, and he meant to give his rider a bad time. There he was careering amongst strawberry beds and winter greens!

Lettice and Wendy could see it all, and cried out in dismay.

"Look!" cried Wendy; "there's a man coming. He must be the farmer. Malcolm c-can't be feeling like Grey Dugald now! The farmer *is* in a temper. I'm sure he is shouting. Now he's making Malcolm get off. There are two other men coming up. They are making Malcolm go with them—no, one has stayed behind to look at the horse's knees. Now they are going. He must be a prisoner."

"Old Farrell wouldn't have such cheek," declared Lettice, getting very red. "Malcolm will have told them it was only a game. Anyway, we must go and let Ross and Diccon in. I—I hope they have not been cowards."

"I'm sure they've not," said Wendy, for, gentle though she was, she did not mean to hear her boys wrongly accused.

Outside in the sunshine stood the "troopers" who had deserted. They had no idea at present what the fate of their leader had been.

"Sorry," said Ross, "we had to come back. We didn't know what Malcolm wanted to do, and he would not agree with us. I suppose that will be the end of the Wild West Boys, but there was no other way."

Lettice looked at him. Never had Ross's chin been held higher, but she guessed it cost him a good deal to keep it there. Nothing Ross hated more than to be called a coward—but in his heart of hearts he had the comfort of knowing his part had been a brave one.

"I don't know what Malcolm's plan was," said Wendy, "but he got on a horse in the field, and it crashed through a fence and galloped all about a garden. Now the farmer has come and taken Malcolm off."

"You were *cowards* to leave him alone," added Lettice.

“Well, anyway, we shall have to go back now,” said Ross, “so it is no use squabbling. Come, Diccon.”

“W-what are you going to do?” asked Wendy—who was beginning to feel that the life of a Wild West Boy was not a bed of rose-leaves.

“Of course,” retorted the boys, in a breath, “we are going to the rescue.”

Lettice’s eyes sparkled. With all her faults she was a generous lassie, and out came her hand to rest on Ross’s shoulder.

“I beg your pardon,” she apologized. “It was horrid of me to call you cowards—and we will all go together.”

But Ross would not allow that. In his heart of hearts he guessed Miss Letty would be too quick to flare up if the farmer blamed that daring rider of his horse.

“You and Wendy must stay here,” he urged, “and we will bring Malcolm back. I believe it would be better—er—*fun* if you still went on with the game. You can both be at the door to welcome him—and we are the muffled men creeping in secret to the enemy’s castle.”

Lettice slowly nodded.

“I’ll try,” she agreed. “And—and you do really play the game. Only Malcolm may be awfully snappy—and say things. I hope he won’t—but, you see, he is my cousin and I must stick to him.”

Ross gave an odd little smile.

“We do understand,” he said, “and we’ll chance it. There always *are* two ways of looking at things.”

“You’ll be sure and come back yourselves,” called mother Wendy after them. I think of all his comrades she was angriest with Malcolm for not seeing where a game ceased to be a game.

Andrew Farrell, the tenant of Heaton Farm, was busy in his fields when the two boys found him. He was a big man, with ginger hair and a sunburnt face. Quite a “powerful enemy” for raiders to defy.

But these raiders were not in a defiant mood.

“Will you set our comrade free?” asked Ross, feeling considerably more like a twentieth-century schoolboy than a jack-booted raider. “We ought to be going home—and there are the girls in the Pele Tower.”

“Is that sae?” asked Farrell grimly, setting his hands on his hips. “Weel, laddies, what concerns me mair is that your freend is a thochtless loon, who, for his ain pleasure, riskit my horse’s legs and did braw damage in my garden. It’s nephew to Sir Walter he says he is, in excuse, but fine I ken that Sir Walter’s the last mon to allow that to excuse ill mischief. Sae, when the day’s work is over, it’s masel’ will tak’ the boy to the Castle.”

Diccon groaned. He felt it was time *he* did or said something, for Ross had had all the talk.

“We were Border raiders,” he explained, in the innocence of his heart. “Malcolm was Grey Dugald. He must have forgotten it was a game—you don’t know how easy it is to forget.”

The farmer’s eyes twinkled. Maybe he remembered those old Border games in the long ago.

“Hoots-toots!” said he. “And what part wad *you* be playin’ in the game then?”

Diccon grinned friendly wise into the old mahogany face.

“We were the cowards who wouldn’t join the fray for fear of the enemy,” he retorted, “and ran home for safety.”

Poor Ross! How red he got, but Farmer Farrell roared. He was beginning to understand.

“Cowards don’t gang to the rescue of a comrade to the enemy country an’ tak’ the blame on their ain shoulders,” said he. “Ye’re fine lads, an’ I’d wish to ken the name of ye both. It’ll be true Scottish, I’m thinkin’.”

“Carsedale,” said Ross, “from Flint Grange; and *will* you let Malcolm off? Lettice and Wendy will be in such a stew.”

“Come awa,” said Andrew Farrell genially. “Ye’ve won the day. It’s mony a Carsedale I’ve gripped by the hand, and I’m thinkin’ it’s not the last I’ll take.”

Ross and Diccon held out their hands.

“They are rather dirty,” said Ross.

“It’ll be clean dirt then,” said the farmer, “and honest hands.”

And he shook them heartily.

Malcolm had had time to think over a good many unpleasant facts during his brief imprisonment. After all, the Carsedale boys had been right

—and he knew Uncle Walter would be seriously vexed when he heard the story of that "raid". How angry Malcolm felt at first with everyone *but* himself. He quite made up his mind to have nothing more to do with Ross, who would be sure to jeer at him—or look superior. As for—— At this moment the big key turned in the lock of his shed-prison door, and Farmer Farrell's voice—pitched in far pleasanter tones than when he had last heard it—called him to come out.

"There's two Scots raiders come to the rescue, Grey Dugald," he chuckled, "and ended the feud between us. Awa wi' you, laddie! and, sin bygones are bygones, ye had best come round to the front door o' the farm next time ye need to be raidin'."

Malcolm came out. He didn't know what sort of a temper to be in—and was ready to flare at the least hint of chaff.

But Ross and Diccon did not give him time to get on his high horse. They were Hob o' the Cleugh and Tam o' the Glen still, and, as such, wrung their leader's hands nearly off.

"We must cut along like smoke back to the—er—women of the Pele Tower," said Ross. "This is the jolliest part of the game. Good night, sir, and we'll never forget the feud is over."

Farmer Farrell laughed. He liked those youngsters, and was pleased enough to take Malcolm's apology. After all, Sir Walter would have been rare vexed over that complaint, and he himself would have regretted having made it before his temper cooled.

So all was well that ended well—though quite the jolliest bit of the day was the welcome of the watchers in the Pele Tower, and Malcolm's honest regret at having misjudged his comrades, and his gratitude for their help.

"You were right as right," he said to Ross, "and next time, if you like, you can be Captain of the adventure."

But Ross smilingly refused the honour, and guessed by Lettice's hand-squeeze that she was thanking him.

After all, adventures are none the worse at times for going crooked, and when the band of Wild West Boys parted at the crossroads Malcolm was already asking what they should do next day.

"It's Wendy's turn," said Lettice, who felt she owed that to Wendy the loyal. "You choose now, Wendy."

“If you all think it would be nice,” said Wendy, “I vote we go and see Tam the shepherd. You know, Ross, you did say you wanted to go.”

And not only Ross, but the others too, declared it was a most excellent idea.

CHAPTER XI

Fairies and Fish

Tam the shepherd happened to be at home in his queer little hut when that bunch of visitors called to see him. The whole band of Wild West Boys were not represented, as Lettice was at home with a slight chill. Wendy had offered to stay with her, but Lettice had refused.

"I'd much rather hear all about Tam and his hut," she declared. "Malcolm is such a bad describer, he would just say it was 'jolly fine' or 'rather rot', and I like to hear everything."

Wendy could not help wondering, as she stood inside that hut, whether she would ever be able to describe the smell.

To begin with, Tam was a great smoker; to go on with, there was only a round hole in the peat wall for ventilation; then Tam—well! he evidently was not very fond of soap and water; and for dinner that day he had been cooking himself a "haggis" in which there was a great deal of onion. Col was his sole companion, and they slept together on the *very* dirtiest blanket you can imagine. But Wendy tried not to gasp or show there was anything wrong, for Tam gave them the warmest of welcomes, and at once asked them to sit down. Wendy had the best of it there, for she had the one and only three-legged stool. Col came snuffing from one to the other, as much as to say: "*I* remember how bravely you saved my life, you dear human things."

"Will ye be takin' a bite o' oatcake, bairns?" asked Tam hospitably, producing a thick slab of rough oaten cake from the quaintest of cupboards —and Wendy had to remember *very* hard about politeness as she accepted a lump of it.

After all, though, the cake was not half so bad as it looked, and Tam stood leaning against the rickety door whilst they ate their "bite", telling them stories of his "lammies" and the adventures he had met with during the long, long years of his shepherd's life. It was sometimes rather difficult to follow the Scottish words, but the story the children liked best was that in which Tam had been dragged one evening in mid-winter from his fireside by an excited Col, who had worried and whined and all but talked in persuading him to go out in the chill dusk. The snow lay thick on the hill-side, but Col had guided his master to where, huddled against a stone wall, was wee

Jamie, Tam's only nephew, who had come out early in the afternoon to tell his uncle of his mother's illness. Jamie had lost his way and wandered about for hours, to sink at last into the fatal snow-sleep from which he would never have awaked had not Col discovered and brought Tam to the rescue of this wee stray lamb. Tam had carried Jamie in his arms across the moors and home to Glenagrie, and oh, how thankful his sick mother was to see her boy!

"And does Jamie live in Glenagrie now?" asked Wendy breathlessly. Tam shook his head.

"The Lord ca'd wee Jamie home to the Far Country," he replied simply, "last Candlemas. It was a sair trouble to his minnie[1] and to us a', but I ken he's safer there, and it's a braw welcome he'll be givin' us yae day when we're brocht to the Guid Shepherd's fold."

When the oatcake was quite finished Tam took his visitors out to the fold, but this was rather disappointing, as the lambs had grown out of all their early prettiness and the sheep did not smell a bit nice! However, it had been a very nice way of spending the afternoon, and Tam's visitors promised quite readily to come again later and be shown the grandest places for blackberrying.

"*Did* you ever find out who shut Col up?" asked Ross, and for the first time Tam's smiles faded from his weather-beaten face.

"I ken weel eno', maister," said he, in very grim tones, "and some day the lad who thocht o' sic cruel dealings will be sorry for it."

But that was just all he would say.

Lettice's cold was much better next day, and pronounced to have got beyond the infectious stage. In the afternoon Malcolm, who had been out riding with his uncle all the morning, came down with a note to Miss Carsedale and a special message for Ross, who was helping Alan to clip the wings of certain obstreperous fowls which *would* fly over into the garden.

"Lettice wants Wendy and Diccon to go to tea with her," said Malcolm, "or rather we want you all to come to tea, and afterwards Auntie is going to show Diccon and your sister her collections of fossils and picture post cards."

Ross stood expectant. He could see Malcolm had some further suggestion to make—a special treat, perhaps, for themselves! Yes, that was it!

“Geordie M’Gregor,” said Malcolm, “is going to take us out fishing in his boat. Won’t it be topping? Have you ever tried deep-sea fishing with nets?”

“No,” gasped Ross, getting quite red with excitement. “I say, how jolly! but do you think the others will mind?”

“Not a bit!” replied Malcolm. “Anyhow, Geordie would only have room for us two, and Diccon will much rather look at the fossils. You know how keen he is, and Auntie will help him with his own collection.”

Ross could hardly contain himself with delight. He wanted to stand on his head, or turn somersaults, or cheer at the top of his voice—but he didn’t. He just thanked Malcolm, and then went rushing off to find the others and hear what Aunt Meg said.

Aunt Meg was very pleased, for Jean had toothache and it would make it easier for her to rest if the children were out to tea. Ross was half afraid that Wendy and Diccon might be disappointed, but not a bit of it! They seemed actually to prefer their part of the programme.

“When we went to Curlew’s Isle I didn’t think boating was great fun,” confessed Wendy. “It was horrid when the waves lifted the boat up and then went down into a hollow. If it were really rough I believe I’d be sick.”

Diccon agreed.

“Anyhow, fossils are nicer than fish,” he added.

So, having washed and brushed themselves into respectability, the three accompanied Malcolm back to the Castle, where Lettice gave them the warmest of welcomes.

“Mother is coming to tea in the schoolroom with us,” she said. “Oh, I have hated my cold, but I’m glad I stayed in and got rid of it. To-morrow it will be quite well, and on Saturday Malcolm is having his cricket match. You are playing, aren’t you, Ross?”

“Yes,” said Ross. “At least Malcolm has asked me, but I’m not much good.”

“Yes, you are,” retorted Malcolm, who had left all his superiority behind in that prison shed of Andrew Farrell’s. “You bowl quite well, and it was a bowler we wanted. Ah, here’s Auntie. Come to your seat of honour, Auntie. We were just talking about the cricket. I do hope it will be fine.”

Lady Macmorran smiled. She was such a gentle, pretty woman, and not one bit grand. Real "ladyships" seldom are, and this one was the very kindest of mistresses and friends to all around her. She was so glad Lettice had found three such good comrades in the Carsedales, and, though she had not said anything, she had noticed how much less selfish her little daughter was getting.

Diccon would have been able to tell you far better than I what there was for tea. Shortbread, plum cake, angel cake, honey, strawberry jam, scones, peaches, plums, and figs, besides lots of other nice things. Diccon felt quite sorry for Ross, who wisely did not eat a big tea at all. Ross would rather have starved than risked being sea-sick on that grown-up fishing expedition.

When the elder boys had gone, Lady Macmorran got Diccon to help her carry down her fossil cabinet, as she did not want Lettice to go running about the house; and then ensued the loveliest half-hour for Diccon, who not only admired all those queer grey pieces of stone, but was given quite a number of specimens for his own collection. When the fossils were put away, the big picture-post-card albums were brought out, and the children gathered close together to see the views of Egypt and Italy which their owner had collected on her travels.

"I would love to go to Egypt," sighed Lettice. "Mother, don't you think you and Dad might take us *all* there one day?"

Her mother laughed.

"Just fancy it!" she replied. "You four pickles wanting to peep and pry and explore all those wonderful old places, and either breaking your legs in a fall from the Pyramids or being lost in some mysterious exploration of forbidden places!"

"How thrilling," shivered Wendy; "but I do believe I like Scotland best. No place could be nicer, and the boys and I were saying yesterday we've never had such lovely holidays as these."

"I wish you lived at Glenagrie," said Lettice. "I shall hate it when you go. Shall I put the picture albums on this table, Mums? and now—I'll tell you what would be cosiest. You sit in the big chair, and we will sit on the rug here beside you, and you shall tell us one of your darling fairy stories about fairy land; wouldn't you like that, Wendy and Diccon? I know I am never going to be too old for Mother's fairy stories."

Wendy and Diccon clapped their hands. They had been wondering what they would do till Ross came back for them as had been arranged—and Ross

would not be home for the next hour at earliest.

So Lady Macmorran was installed in the big chair, and, with three eager listeners, began the story of

THE MAGIC STONE

Donald always wanted to find things out.

Have you ever met boys and girls like Donald? I have!

And the advice most of them need is to leave some things alone.

Granfer had given Donald that advice.

But I am sorry to tell you that Donald thought Granfer rather a stupid old man who didn't know what was best. So Donald still tried to find out.

He particularly wanted to find out what was underneath the pile of old grey stones called the Goblins' Cairn.

Those stones had been there for such hundreds of years that the people in the glen forgot who had built them into a cairn. So I suppose they thought it best to say the goblins had done it, just so as to keep mischievous children from pulling it about. For the mosses had grown so soft and green over it that you could hardly see the stones.

Donald went and looked at the Goblins' Cairn every morning before starting for school.

And every morning his fingers itched more and more to pull down those moss-grown stones and find out whether a goblin secret lay underneath!

Not that Donald wished to meet a goblin! He preferred the sort of adventures he could understand—like pulling wee Jamie out of the brook or saving Jennie Lee from Farmer Gale's cross cow; but he didn't like the idea of saying "How do you do" to a goblin with ears as big as sugar-loaves, and enough magic in his goblin-wand to change curious little boys into frogs or fireflies or even wasps!

"If only I could just pull the old cairn down," sighed Donald, "my minnie would be pleased, for she's always talking of tidiness and there's no sort of tidiness in having great stones like that all

over the place. And who can tell that there isn't a big fortune hidden away?"

After Donald had said this about twenty-four times he was sure that he would be doing quite the right thing in clearing the Goblins' Cairn away. At least, I don't think he could have been *quite* sure or he would not have waited till the day that Dad drove Granfer and Minnie to see Aunt Prue, leaving Tibbie, the maid, to entertain Jock to tea.

Tibbie was quite pleased to give Donald a basket of cakes and a bottle of milk, leaving her free to her entertaining.

Donald set his tea in the shade; like a true workman he never liked feeding till his job was done. And he tingled all over with the thrill of what that job was.

He had his tools ready. Donald was proud of his tools, they were kept well oiled and always put away clean after use, that is why when he wanted them he had none of the bother of hunting around and worrying everyone in asking if they were *sure* they had not seen his hammer, his trowel, or his axe.

The Goblins' Cairn was not at all big, only about a dozen moss-covered rocks piled together, but you can't have any idea what a time they took to pull down! Toil-drops ran down Donald's face and back; he longed for a big drink of milk, but he longed still more to find out if anything was really hidden under the bottom rock.

Granfer had never told him there was anything, but he had clucked with his tongue—"Tch! Tch! Tch!"—and told Donald he would be a wise boy to let the Goblins' Cairn alone.

But Donald thought he was a much wiser boy to pull it to pieces! and now, though tea-time was long over, there he stood, tugging and lugging at the bottom rock till—plop! up it came so suddenly that Donald fell flat on his back.

It gave him such a shock that he actually lay still for a whole minute. If he had not been so dreadfully curious he would have bellowed for Tibbie to come and pity him, for he was badly bruised, and his hands were both cut and bleeding.

But if Tibbie came she would be looking down the hole over which the cairn had been built.

Was it a hole? Jock had often guessed there must be one which might go down to the centre of the earth.

Donald crawled to the place where the cairn had stood, only half-hoping Jock were right, for he felt even *his* curiosity would not take him down to the centre of the earth.

There was no need to worry, for there was no real hole at all—only a tiny hollow where a few worms wriggled, and a small blue stone lay half-buried.

Donald nearly cried. So all his work, all his aching back and cut hands had been, in vain; worse still, he would be sure to get the stick when Dad and Granfer saw the awful mess he had made the garden in. It certainly was twenty times untidier than before!

But Donald had a brave spirit, and he knew quite well he deserved punishment, so he squared his shoulders and determined to make the best of a bad job. Anyway, it did not even enter his head to tell fibs.

"I wouldn't have minded the punishment," thought Donald, "if I had found something. But what's the use of a blue stone?"

And he picked it up.

He had meant to go and have his milk and cakes just to comfort himself a bit, but all at once he noticed what a lot of talking was going on around him.

Jabber! Jabber! Jabber! Talk! Talk! Talk! Donald put his fingers in his ears, then he pulled them out again. Who *could* be making all that noise?

You may be sure he wanted to find that out!

And yet, though he ran to the corner and looked down the lane, and peeped over the wall to see if a party of children had come to picnic on the moor, no one could he see.

"What are you doing, Mrs. Jay?" chirped a voice, "you look as if you were in a hurry to be off somewhere!"

"That I am, Mrs. Magpie," retorted another voice. "I am paying a visit to the Brown Rabbit to ask about his great discovery. He is as excited as a cuckoo over it."

“Tch! Tch!” scolded a third speaker; “how you females talk! And there’s Donald M’Rane under the fir tree listening to every word. Don’t laugh at me, for I’ve been sentinel of the woods six years to-day, and I watched him put the Magic Stone in his pocket.”

Donald had been holding his breath with excitement as he listened to this amazing conversation. At first he thought he must be dreaming, but he wasn’t. He was wide awake—and he had heard exactly what Mr. Blackbird had said.

The Magic Stone! So *that* was what the goblins of long ago had hidden under the cairn.

Donald shivered all over with little thrills of wonder and joy. He had got a magic stone! He could understand every word the birds said, and he would now find out all sorts of marvellous things!

To begin with, right now, what was the Brown Rabbit’s secret?

That most probably meant buried treasure which the rabbit had found when burrowing. Huzza! Ronald imagined a pile of glittering gold, jewels, and all sorts of precious things. But he had not time for too much imagining, since already Mrs. Jay had spread her wings and was off for her visit to the Brown Rabbit. It was only when he started to follow that Donald made a startling discovery.

He had been shrinking so fast that he was not more than a foot high! Oh dear! Oh dear! Donald had always been so proud of his height. Dad measured him every month against the back door, and Donald was as pleased as could be to see the mark rising higher each time. It took *months* to grow an inch—and now he had shrunk whole *feet* in less than five minutes.

At first Donald thought he would like to sit down and cry; he felt m-miserable. Then he remembered that even if he were quite a dwarf he could still find out things. Of course he would probably find out how to grow big again. Anyhow, he was still big enough to want to find out Brown Rabbit’s great discovery.

It was too late to catch up Mrs. Jay, for he hadn’t got wings, so he set off as determined as could be in search of the Brown Rabbit itself.

It was very slow work walking with such wee legs, and the clumps of grass grew in places as tall as himself.

He was staring up at a ragged robin, wondering what sort of *tree* it was, when he stumbled over something which lay along the ground.

"Stupid!" said the something. It was a green lizard.

Donald thought at first it was a dragon, and wondered whether St. George's legs had wanted to run away with him when he attacked his first monster.

But the lizard began wriggling away without showing the least intention of roaring or spitting out flames.

Then Donald remembered he was not a foot high, and that being shrunk oneself makes other things look big.

So, being egged on by his own curiosity, he asked a question.

"If you please, Mr. Lizard," said he, "can you tell me where Mr. Brown Rabbit lives?"

The Lizard turned its head.

"Oh, hum," said he, "so you're Donald, are you? I thought you were a goblin at first, and goblins are my enemies. I don't mind telling *you* that if you follow your nose long enough you'll find a hole. You'll know it is a rabbit's hole because it couldn't be anything else. Ta-ta!"

Donald had not time to thank the glittering dragon before it had gone.

Never mind! He had found out something. Only, if the lizard had not been in quite such a hurry he would have liked to ask how exactly one follows one's nose, since his own turned up inquiringly.

"I'll walk straight on till I meet someone else," he decided, "for it's common sense that rabbits don't make holes up in trees." He had grown quite used to the singing and chattering going on around.

There were so many voices that, unless he stopped to listen, all he heard was "Br-r-r-r-abbly—abbly—qui—quo—quickle." But he did not stop till he saw before him a monstrous hole.

It looked large enough for a stable till Donald remembered he was shrunk to the size of a dwarf, then his heart began to beat fast.

Did Brown Rabbits eat dwarfs? Was a Brown Rabbit a wild beast? Should he——

He had not got further than the "should" when he heard a blundering noise, and there, running up the path, was a monster rabbit.

It looked as big as an ox, and Ronald had to give a great jump to jump out of the way.

The Brown Rabbit stopped short.

"Are you a new sort of frog?" it asked.

"N-no," replied Donald, "I'm a b-b-boy."

"No fibs," snapped the Brown Rabbit crossly; "I've never seen a boy like you. If you don't speak the truth the spiders will catch you."

"I always speak the truth," said Donald, "and it's the truth that I came to look for you. I want to know your secret."

The Brown Rabbit turned a somersault in its rage. It felt better afterwards, which shows how easy it is to get rid of rages if you know how.

"I've been worried to death by that gossiping Mrs. Jay already," he explained. "How I hate curiosity! Anyhow, I'm not going to stay out here talking. It's nearly fox-time as it is. I had to run twice as fast to get home before the clock struck. Come in if you must, but I'm sure you're old enough to know what happens to curious creatures."

"I always like to find out," said Donald meekly. "Will you tell me?"

The Brown Rabbit chuckled.

"One thing at a time," said he. "You asked about my great discovery. Did you really want to find out about that?"

Donald stuttered in his excitement.

"Oh, y-y-yes—p-p-lease," he cried.

By this time they were both in Brown Rabbit's parlour, and, as Brown Rabbit was a bachelor, it was empty.

"Well," said Brown Rabbit, "it was this way. When I first came to this hole I thought there was only one door—which is most inconvenient when one lives in a wood. But yesterday I made a great discovery. There is another door to my home."

Poor Donald! How angry he was! So angry that he grew quite rude.

"I don't want to know about your old doors!" he shouted. "I thought you'd found a treasure. It doesn't matter to me if you have one door or fifty!"

Brown Rabbit turned a somersault.

"Quite sure?" he asked. "Right-o! Fox-time's struck, and, as you say it makes no difference to you, I'll leave you to entertain my visitor. Ta-ta!"

He gave another somersault and vanished.

Donald ran to the back of the hole to see where he had gone—no sign! Not a trace of the great discovery was visible.

Donald ran back to the entrance; he was feeling rather nervous, and I don't wonder, for, peeping slyly round the corner of the bank in which Brown Rabbit's home was placed, he saw the sharp nose of Mr. Fox.

Donald gave a jump back.

"Not at home to-day," he squealed.

Mr. Fox pushed boldly in.

"Where's Brown Rabbit?" he shouted. "Gone! That's magic. You little villain! You must be a goblin, and the best way to deal with you is by gobbling you up! However, as you're too small for me to taste, I'll take you home to my wife to stew in the chicken broth. Come on."

Donald tried his best to refuse. He ran round and round the little cave; he reached the path; he nearly swung out of reach on an ivy spray, but his grasp missed and down he fell.

“You’ll do best for the stuffing in the duck,” said Mr. Fox. “You’ve sauce enough to taste good.”

And he picked Donald up in his mouth.

I don’t like to think of Donald’s feelings as Mr. Fox trotted him back to his den.

“I’ll bring home the fat drake next,” he told his wife, as he dropped Donald on to the floor, “then you can start cooking. Some fun, eh, cubs?”

Then away he went.

Mrs. Vixen picked Donald up and put him in a basket full of onions.

“What a supper,” said she, and went to gather sticks.

As soon as she had gone, the five cubs came and sat round the basket.

“I wonder what he tastes like?” said one.

“He smells nice,” said the second.

“I hope we are allowed to stay up for supper,” sighed a third.

“If Ma’s in a good temper she’ll let us have a nibble anyhow,” laughed a fourth.

“I shall have my nibble now to make sure of it,” retorted the fifth, as he thrust his sharp little nose towards the pocket in which Donald had popped his cakes.

In this pocket too lay *the blue stone*.

Donald gave himself up for lost when the greedy cub began to bite at his pocket. Oh! how he wished he had left that Goblins’ Cairn alone, and never, never thought of finding out what was underneath!

Oh, how he wished he had listened to wise, clever Granfer’s advice. How he wished——

Something fell clitter-clatter to the ground; it was the blue stone against which the youngest cub had nearly broken its teeth.

“Oh, yow!” howled the cub.

“Hush,” urged No. 4, “or Mother will hear and give us a good biting.”

“I don’t like the thing’s taste,” said No. 3.

“Let’s push it back and pretend we’ve been out walking,” said No. 2.

“Oh, oh!” shrieked No. 1, “the thing is swelling. Look! look! it’s *swelling*—it’s twisting—it’s——”

“It’s—it’s——” screamed the other four, and away the whole pack of youngsters ran.

Donald crawled out of the den just in time. If he’d swelled a little faster he would have been stuck there for ever.

The cubs were scurrying off to find their mother.

As Donald stood on his two strong legs he guessed it was about time to look for his own.

He did not even remember the Magic Stone till he reached the farm gate.

There stood his minnie, his dad, and Granfer, all looking at the ruined cairn.

Donald rushed up like a whirlwind.

“Oh, oh!” he cried, “oh, how *glad* I am to be home. I—I—I don’t mind the stick, or punishment, or anything now I’ve grown out of a dwarf.”

It took quite a long time to tell all the tale, but when it *was* told Dad and Minnie decided that for once Donald had had his full punishment.

“It’ll be the finest cure in the world for the laddie,” chuckled Granfer; “didn’t I tell you, boy, it’s best to leave some things alone?”

Donald hung his head.

“I thought old people didn’t understand,” he whispered, “but they *do*. I—I won’t want to find out what’s best left alone another time, Granfer.”

Dad smiled.

"In which case," said he, "it'll be better not to find out what has happened to the Magic Stone?"

And do you know, they actually *never did*, whilst in future Donald had plenty of time to learn all his lessons and do all the work he was bidden!

"And that," smiled Lady Macmorran, "is the end of the story, and I am afraid I must run off to dress for dinner. How late Malcolm and Ross are. They ought to have been home by now. If they do not come back by seven o'clock I think Lucy had better take you two young folk home."

"They are sure to be here soon," pleaded Lettice, "and we will play 'Old Maid' till they come."

"A very short game, then," said her mother. "I don't think the boys can be much longer," and, kissing Wendy good-bye, she left the room.

Lettice wrinkled her brows.

"Ross and Mal had much better have stayed with us," she said. "I believe Mother is beginning to fuss, but there's no reason why she should."

Wendy did not reply. Was she beginning to fuss too?

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[1] Mother.

CHAPTER XII

The Unexpected Haul

Geordie M'Gregor and his two sons were waiting by their boat when Malcolm and Ross arrived. As Ross looked at the grey waves, which showed very gloomy and rough in the evening dusk, he felt glad he had said "No, thank you" to a third helping of angel cake!

Such enormous nets they were which the fishermen drew into the boat, and it was quite as much as the boys could do to find room to seat themselves. How fishy those old nets were, and how the salt spray dashed in their faces as the boat sailed away, the red-brown canvas billowing in the breeze!

"It's m-much rougher than the day we went to Curlew's Isle," said Ross, and Malcolm laughed. He had had more experience of sailing than his chum, and guessed that Ross was not feeling exactly happy at the moment.

But, as they sailed out and away from the shore, the sea did not seem so rough, and Ross grew hopeful. He really must not *think* of being sick.

"There's the Isle," said Malcolm; "look at all those birds on the rocks. Is that a sign of bad weather, Geordie?"

Geordie shook his head.

"It'll be a wee bit fresh," he admitted, "but no' too stormy for the fish. It's a guid haul we should be makin'."

Ross wished the fishing would begin. He longed to see those huge nets flung out, but he had secretly made up his mind that he did *not* wish to be a sailor.

At last the right place was reached, and there they were, out on the watery waste, with miles of water all round—ready to start their work of fishing.

Neither Malcolm nor Ross was allowed to "help" during this part of the proceedings, and they quite understood how practice and strong arms must be needed for such a task.

With long swishing sounds the nets were flung, and sank beneath the waves, only held near the surface by corks. And during the interval which followed, the boys again learned something of the need of patience. Other

fishing-smacks lay tranquilly on the waters around, whilst the purple haze deepened down into mysterious twilight.

Then—the word was given, and in an instant all aboard the *Peggy Maguire* were on the alert.

Heave ho! Yoh heave! Heugh!

Backs were bent, muscles showed taut in brawny arms, and up came the net with its silvery catch of fish.

Oh, those fish! How they leapt and curved, flapping and gaping in the shock of capture!

And heave ho! it was, till the net was safely landed and the whole of the jaunty smack was alive with flipperty, flapping fish.

Ross tried hard to believe this was famous sport, but he could not help feeling rather sorry for some of those captives.

Geordie's son Ben was very good-natured in showing the boys some of the "oddities" in the haul.

"Here's the auld de'il o' the sea," said Ben, "wi' a skinfu' of black ink to squirt at us frae under his fins. And yon's a pretty wee creature wi' a backbone like mother o' pearl. It's a guid haul. We're in luck. Fine fish they are, and it's an early market we maun get."

"Are we going home now?" asked Malcolm, when the net was cleared at last; but old Geordie shook his head.

"We'll try another cast," he replied. "It's a fine night for the fish, as Ben says."

So once again the net was cast, but this time the waiting was short.

What had happened to the net? Had a shoal of mackerel launched themselves into it—or what?

With hoarse shouts of amaze the three fishermen began hauling. But something was wrong—and the shouts of amaze began to echo with something like anxiety. *What* was it that seemed to be tearing and fighting like a mad thing amongst those strong meshes?

"Pull awa', lads!" called Geordie; "but I'm thinkin' it's the de'il's self we hae netted."

The next instant the captive came into sight, and there was reason enough for the cries of terror from the boys which were echoed by the men.

What ocean monster was this which lashed and curled like some grim dragon of old? Never had any man of the boat's crew, notwithstanding years of experience and many a strange adventure, seen such a creature as this.

Paralysed with fear the fishermen let go the nets, but these were tangled about the boat, and in the moment of crisis the cords could not be freed. Swift and unexpected, the danger seemed to have leaped out upon them from ocean depths. And the five gazers crouched, waiting for the catastrophe.[1] Then—with a furious lashing out—the creature struck the boat, damaging and nearly capsizing it.

"Hold on, lads, for your lives!" shouted Geordie. "It's the sea de'il we've waked."

Another onslaught and the wrecked boat would have sunk, but the monster fish had got its head free, and, twisting round, swam out to sea at a wild pace, actually dragging the boat in its wake.

Ross could never describe the experience. Through the waters the boat tore on its way, swaying, staggering, reeling, whilst grey dusk deepened, and it seemed to all aboard that their fate was certain. Ross had slipped down amongst the fish and covered his face with his hands.

"Oh, God, save us," was his cry, "save us!"

Yet it didn't seem possible they could be saved.

The water bubbled and dashed its salt spray over the occupants of that curiously drawn craft—transformed from a little red-sailed fishing-boat into a sea-monster's chariot.

Faster, faster, faster!

Ross looked up. He had heard one of Geordie's sons give a curious cry of excitement. What was happening? The boy never forgot what met his eyes.

Malcolm was kneeling at the prow of the boat, hanging at peril of his life half over the water in such a position that not one of the grown men could have taken; and, whilst his left arm encircled a stout hawser, he was stretching to cut the strands of net which attached the boat to the enmeshed monster. If the giant fish had lashed out at that moment, Malcolm must have been killed.

On—on—faster, faster, but the strands were being severed more quickly now. Again and again the knife struck, till it came to the last strand, when, with a shout of joy from the three fishermen, the monster leapt forward, still

tangled in the net, but free of the boat, which was left rocking far in the rear of the creature's trail. Strong hands were stretched to drag Malcolm back into the boat; fervent thankfulness echoed in the prayers which these simple fishers offered so instinctively for their preservation.

Saved! Saved! Thank God for their safety.

Then came hand-grippings with Malcolm, and husky words of praise and applause.

The young maister had played the hero, and the weather-tanned men who thanked him were not ashamed to let the tears course down their faces as they spoke of the gratitude the women at home would be showing Maister Malcolm.

"It's all right," panted Malcolm, when he had found breath. "None of you *could* have done it—but thank Heaven I managed. Wasn't it *awful*? But what could the thing have been?"

They all looked at old Geordie. Ross was beside Malcolm. He had not been able to applaud with the rest, for his throat had too big a lump in it, but the elder boy guessed what the hand-squeeze meant.

"Mon or boy, I've ne'er seen the like," declared Geordie, "but it maun hae been a *thresher*, as some call a fox shark. I've heard my grandfaither talk o' sic a fish—if fish ye can ca' it—and he'd tell a tale o' one visitin' the coast and doing muckle damage. But I hae never seen one till now, and I never want to see anither."

His listeners agreed there!

"A fox shark," whispered Ross. "I've never heard of one. It sounds almost as bad as it looked. And—we're *alive*! It doesn't seem as if we *could* be."

But they were—and not only alive but in great haste to reach home. No more fishing, since the thresher had carried off the net, which was a considerable loss, though the M'Gregors were not likely to grumble at that now.

Other fishing-boats, left far behind in the wake of the *Peggy Maguire*, now came up to inquire what mad race their comrades had set out on.

The story of the fox shark was received with consternation, and loud expressions of pity, and congratulation on their escape, rose from the M'Gregors' friends.

It was a great relief to Malcolm and Ross to step out of that boat. They felt rather shaky after the adventure, and very cold. It was almost dark too, and as they stood, receiving last words of thanks and praise from their fisher friends, Sir Walter came up.

"Malcolm," he said sternly, "you ought to have been home nearly two hours ago. Your aunt is quite ill with anxiety. What is your excuse, boys, for a broken promise?"

It was Geordie M'Gregor who made bold to answer. Coming to the boys' side he told the tale of what he declared to be no less than the "meericle" of their escape.

"We a' ken Maister Malcolm," concluded Geordie, "for a chip of the auld block, but it's the nicht has shown him a lad ony king or prince might be prood to own."

Sir Walter was very touched, and I think he was proud too, as he patted Malcolm's shoulder and said of course the circumstances justified all.

Poor Ross was *very* tired, and his head ached badly. He did not feel he wanted to talk about threshers, or sea-fishing, or anything; and Sir Walter, seeing how it was with him, packed him off with one of the Castle gardeners to Flint Grange.

Aunt Meg, Wendy, Diccon, and the servants were all waiting for him in the greatest anxiety, for Wendy and Diccon had been sent home by Lady Macmorran when the boys did not return.

"Please," begged Ross, as he stumbled into the sitting-room, "*don't* ask questions. We—we caught a sort of shark in the net—and Malcolm was a hero." He only got as far as that before Jean caught him in her arms as he fell fainting to the floor.

Of course Wendy and Diccon were very frightened, and Aunt Meg nearly sent off for the doctor; but Jean knew just what to do with fainting laddies whose strength had been overtaxed, and when Ross opened his eyes he was safe in bed with Jean beside him, telling him to drink the warm milk she had brought and to go to sleep—advice which Ross most obediently carried out.

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[1] A similar accident overtook fishers last year off the Yorkshire coast. They escaped by cutting the net.

CHAPTER XIII

Magpies and Ices

Ross for one did not feel exactly like adventures next day. His head still ached and he was tired, in spite of having his breakfast in bed.

"If you want to play in the Castle cricket match on Saturday, you ought to keep quiet to-day," advised Aunt Meg. "Indeed, if you were a wise laddie you would stay in bed."

But Ross was sure he was not a bit wise in that way, and after a lazy morning under the apple trees, with Wendy and Diccon ready to wait on him as slaves, he felt much better. But he did not want to go down to the shore, nor was he very keen to go up to the Castle. The fact being he didn't know what he did want, and it was a relief to everyone when the Castle motor came gliding up the short drive.

Sir Walter was behind the wheel, and Malcolm was soon out calling to his friends.

"Lettice is finally curing her cold," he laughed, "because of the cricket match, but Uncle is motoring over to Uncle Bernard, and he says we can all pack into the car if you like to come. You *would* like it, I'm sure. Uncle Bernard has got such a jolly old place—and collections of all sorts. He's an antiquarian and knows all the history of the Border."

Ross brightened at once. He was so glad Malcolm did not start talking about last evening's adventure. He, Ross, wanted to forget it for a time, and surely that motor ride was the very best cure possible. Over the moors, down into deep glens, along difficult cliff roads they went. In one place a tree—not a very big one—had been blown across the road, and the three boys, as well as Wendy, were delighted to get out and drag it away.

Mr. Bernard Macmorran's home was not grand like his brother's, but it was even older than the Castle, with ivy covering the walls, and such queer little windows with tiny diamond panes.

He greeted his visitors warmly and told them to make themselves at home whilst he had a chat with his brother.

It was a very rambly garden with magnificent trees, and at the back were the cow-sheds, piggeries, and other such places.

Wendy was charmed by a peacock which strutted proudly along the terrace, spreading his magnificent tail.

"I wish he would give me one of his feathers," said Wendy, "though I should not be able to take it home, as Jean thinks they are unlucky. Oh, Diccon, what are you climbing that tree for?"

"It's a walnut," replied Diccon, "and I want to see if the walnuts are ripe. I don't mind if their shells are soft. I love—ow!"

The "ow!" was caused by a magpie, which, hearing a voice just outside her front door, had flown out from her hole in the upper part of the trunk. Diccon was so taken aback by finding black wings flapping in his face that he turned a complete somersault off the bough, and would have had a most unpleasant fall had not a convenient and sturdy little branch caught the seat of his knickers and so kept him dangling.

Wendy screamed—quite forgetting she was a Wild West Boy—and Malcolm rushed off for a ladder. It was quite a commotion Mrs. Magpie had caused, which is a foolish thing to do when you have a secret to hide.

One of the gardeners came back with Malcolm, and the ladder was soon resting against the parent branch of the one upholding the walnut thief.

Diccon wisely kept very still. It looked an awfully long way off the ground—and any wriggling would be too much for the cloth of his breeches.

Adams, the gardener, chuckled as he brought the victim of that magpie's ill manners down to the grass patch below.

"You won't want to be trying gymnastics again, little master," said he. But Diccon was shaking himself back into his usual sturdy spirits, and already, to Adams's surprise, had his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder.

"Ye won't be hanging yoursel' up again that gait?" cried Adams.

Diccon smiled sweetly.

"The magpie must have a nest in that hole. Did you know?" he asked; "but I don't expect you did, for you can't see the hole from the ground—so I'm going up to see if she has stolen goods in there."

"Weel, weel!" said Adams, but he could not help laughing at the pretty little lad's spirit.

Up went Diccon, and safely reached the curve where the big branch stretched out from the trunk.

Ross and Malcolm had joined Wendy, and they all stood watching. The magpie was hopping about along the branch in a terrible state of trouble, but Diccon did not mind that. The wretched bird deserved punishment—and punishment she had at sight of this impudent human putting his hand into that hole and pulling out quite the oddest collection of stolen goods you ever saw.

There were a shilling, four buttons, a brooch, a tie-pin, some plum stones, and a queer little charm with a broken ring.

It was no use for Mrs. Magpie to chatter and scold—Diccon only mocked her.

"You sly old thief," he called, "serve you right." And down the ladder he went.

Adams was quite delighted as Diccon spread out his treasure-trove on the sundial near.

The brooch belonged to Jennie the housemaid; each article indeed had an owner, excepting the plum stones, and Adams declared his master would be overjoyed at the recovery of that charm, which he had lost some time ago.

So back they all went to Uncle Bernard's snuggery, where that kind gentleman had been asking Sir Walter to help him get out several collections to show the younger visitors. At sight of the crystal charm, Mr. Macmorran nearly wept for joy. It was not its value, he told Diccon, but old association, which made it so dear to him. Diccon did not say much, he only smiled as if to himself. It just showed, he would have liked to point out to Wendy, the value of *climbing*.

Tea came next, with plenty of fruit and home-baked bread. There were not many cakes, as their host had not had time to order them, but who wants cakes when he can have peaches? After tea Uncle Bernard gave them their choice between looking at his curiosities or making themselves peach ice.

He looked at Diccon as he made the offer, and Diccon got very red.

Peach ice was delicious, but curiosities were not seen every day—and, to Malcolm's surprise, it was the curiosities for which Diccon as well as they voted.

Mr. Macmorran had been to Egypt, Africa, and, in fact, over nearly all the world; so his collections were worth seeing. I can't tell you half his visitors were shown, but what interested them most were the tiny lamps—Roman lamps—and tiny statues dug out of some old buried city in Italy.

Wendy was given a quaint mosaic brooch; Malcolm a carved horn used by some wild tribe for summoning the warriors; Ross had a still queerer musical instrument; and Diccon received a number of Chinese ivory balls, each one of which lay inside another, making quite a nest of balls.

Certainly Malcolm's uncle was a very interesting man, and they all felt they would like to have been on his travels with him, especially when the Sicilian bandits took him prisoner and threatened to kill him if his ransom did not arrive. The ransom did *not* come, but the prisoner was set free and given many presents, after rescuing the chief's little daughter from falling over a precipice.

"Shall you ever go for adventures again?" asked Ross, but Mr. Macmorran shook his head and declared he was too old. He did not look a bit old, and his guests were telling him so when the door opened and the butler came in, bringing—what do you think?—why, the very peach ice they had been offered the chance to manufacture themselves.

Diccon called it a perfect ending to a perfect day, and though the others laughed they agreed.

CHAPTER XIV

The Cricket Match

It was fine for the cricket match—and Lettice's cold was quite well. Hurrah!

Jean said she should be glad when that match was over, since Master Ross had done nothing but talk of it and the weather for days.

He was tearing about the house all the morning too, fussing first about one thing then another, till Wendy, Diccon, and Aunt Meg could not help laughing at him.

"I shouldn't mind about my cricket shoes being properly white," said Diccon, "and I think cricket must be a very stupid game if it spoils your play to eat two helpings of treacle tart."

Diccon had a special fancy for treacle tart, and quite pitied Ross for his loss of appetite and general fussiness.

Ross did not take any notice, he had asked Aunt Meg's leave to get up from the table before the meal, or rather Diccon's meal, was over, and was studying his bat with quite comical earnestness when the other joined him.

Neither Wendy nor Diccon was quite so excited about the great day, for they were not playing, and Wendy felt she would be rather shy amongst so many people. Diccon was frankly bored at having to change into clean things and have an extra wash. If only he could have done so without being thought grumpy, he would have stayed behind and watched his beloved William taking off a crate of honey sections from the hive. Diccon still loved the bees, and knew quite a lot about their ways.

What crowds of people there were in the Castle gardens when the three children arrived—and Malcolm told them not nearly all had yet come. He and Ross went off to the cricket field at once, for the match would start in half an hour.

Wendy and Diccon felt very glad they were not so important, and decided they would try to hide out of sight as much as possible.

Lettice was quite as busy as Malcolm, saying "How do you do?" to her mother's friends. She looked very pretty—and very grand. Diccon told Wendy he much preferred her as a Wild West Boy—but she did not seem

grand when at last she discovered her own two little friends hiding away in one of the shrubbery walks.

"The match has begun," she told them. "You must come and watch. Malcolm has been up ever since five o'clock this morning. He is awfully excited, and we must cheer Ross when he makes a run."

"Ross has a presentiment he will make a duck's egg," said Wendy. "I do hope he won't. Oh, there he is! Is he going to bat soon?"

Lettice did not know, but she thought Malcolm's side had won the toss—and yes, sure enough, before very many minutes Ross did walk up to the wickets.

Wendy pitied him very much. She knew Ross had never dreamed there would be so many spectators, and he looked so white. Poor Ross! the very first ball went crashing amongst the stumps, and back he had to walk to the tent without a score at all. Wendy nearly cried. She would have liked to fly after Ross to comfort him, but she knew that was the very last thing he would allow. After Ross's failure the little girl did not find cricket very interesting until Malcolm went in. Malcolm was captain of his side, and the score was dreadfully low so far.

Something had to be done—and Malcolm did it. Right and left he hit, and away went the ball, giving the fielders plenty of exercise.

Wendy and Diccon forgot to be bored, and laughed, and clapped, and cheered as loudly as anyone.

Well played, Malcolm! He made an even better captain of the cricket eleven than he did of the Wild West band.

How everyone cheered him too when he was bowled at last. Perhaps after all it was as well Ross *had* got a duck's egg, for he would not have liked so much cheering.

Then the next side went in, and Diccon got very bored. Watching games was rather poor sport, he thought, and when Wendy was talking to Lettice he stole off by himself, and went to make friends with some of the Castle gardeners.

Tea was served after the first innings, and Wendy found Ross—keeping well in the background and inclined to be grumpy.

"If I'd known it was going to be so swell, I would never have played," he declared.

“You are sure to have better luck in the next innings,” coaxed Wendy. “And there was another boy who had a duck’s egg too.”

But Ross was not to be comforted. His cheeks still burned as he thought of that awful moment when his middle stump fell.

Diccon’s white flannels were no longer spotless when he sneaked back to the tea tent, and he was very busy trying to hide a tear in his blazer.

“Jock had mislaid the key of the henhouse,” he whispered to Wendy. “And I wriggled through the little door. Does the tear show very much?”

“It does *rather*,” replied Wendy in dismay; “but perhaps no one will notice. Keep close by me and don’t go off again. Look, they are going back to the field, and this is the second innings. I do hope Malcolm’s side will win.”

At present it very much looked as if Malcolm’s side would *not* win, but it is no use to “give up” at any time, and that sturdy eleven of boys meant to fight for every run. Ross even forgot the gay crowd of visitors, and stood at the wicket as Horatius must have stood on the bridge of old.

Wendy stood with clasped hands, hardly able to breathe in her anxiety, as she saw that ball leave the bowler’s hands; and then, hurrah, at any rate Ross would not have another duck’s egg!

One, two, three, four runs—and then the umpire’s voice calling that detestable warning about a leg before wicket.

Never mind! four runs was not so bad—and the other players all seemed better too for their tea. Still, when the other side went in they had not a very big score to make for victory.

Was it possible all hope was over?

Not at all! Splendid! Hurrah! One of the best bats of the enemy was walking to the tent with only one run to his credit. Malcolm was bowling some fast balls, and Wendy found herself cheering heartlessly every time a wicket went down. But when Maxwell and the captain were left to bring the score to a winning number by eight runs, the hopes of Malcolm’s supporters grew very low.

The captain of the other side was an Eton boy, who played a steady, useful game, and Maxwell’s score in the first innings had been fifteen.

Wendy and Diccon counted aloud in gloomy tones.

“One—two—three—four—five—— Only three runs to win—only two —— Only——” Oh, dear! it was all over, for Maxwell had sent the ball whizzing across the field for a “three” at least.

But even as Wendy echoed Diccon’s sigh of disappointment a cheer went up.

“Hurrah! Huzzah! A catch! A catch! Well played indeed. Bravo, Carsedale! Bravo, Ross!”

That last from Malcolm as he went rushing like a madman across the field to shake hands with the youngest member of his team. For, yes, Malcolm’s side had won! Victory had been snatched from the teeth of defeat by a really clever catch by Ross Carsedale.

Lettice was clapping and dancing with delight as she shouted herself hoarse, whilst Wendy and Diccon shook hands with each other till they nearly wrung their arms off—and Diccon quite forgot to hide that torn blazer.

Then the two elevens came back, very hot, very smiling, very pleased with themselves, for, as Ayrford, the Eton-boy captain, declared, it had been a “spiffing” match all through.

Ross was overwhelmed by blushes at his sudden fame, but he was pleased too.

After all, he had not lost the match for Malcolm, but had helped him to win it, and Malcolm had congratulated him as though he were the hero of the whole match, instead of being the hero himself, as Ross declared he was.

Altogether the long-looked-forward-to cricket match had been a far bigger success than even Malcolm had expected it to be, and the three young Carsedales ran back to the Grange all eagerness to tell Aunt Meg of a famous victory.

CHAPTER XV

Tam's Revenge

"Elspeth is awfully keen on our getting blackberries for jam," said Wendy, some days after the cricket match, "and Aunt Meg says we may take our dinner and go over the moors for a day's blackberrying. Do you think Malcolm and Lettice would like to come?"

"Rather," said Ross, driving a last nail into a bracket he had been making. "If you like, I'll run up to the Castle and tell them."

This seemed to be the best plan; for, of course, on such a busy occasion no time must be wasted, and indeed it was not much after eleven o'clock when the merry party, armed with baskets, sticks with crooks, and the all-important hamper, started off for the expedition.

Great plans and expectations were encouraged. Ross declared they would not come home till every basket was full, and Diccon was told that no eating of the fruit was to be allowed.

"Of course not," agreed Diccon; "but there'll be no harm in eating the red ones, will there?"

He was so innocent about it, too, that they all had to laugh.

At first the search was rather disappointing. Other blackberry pickers had been before them to some of the best places, and where the fruit remained untouched there were generally some difficulties in the way of getting it. Malcolm, who felt that as the eldest he ought to be the cleverest picker, got one nasty tumble amongst the brambles, and I think it was not only Diccon who was glad when a halt was made for luncheon.

If blackberries had been disappointing, luncheon was not! Never was a merrier meal. The ginger-beer cork flew across and hit Lettice on the nose, Diccon discovered he was sitting on a nest of ants, and a frog floated into the glass Wendy was filling with water from the brook.

"I vote we go and ask Tam the shepherd the best place to go to," said Ross. "We promised we would go and see him again, and that would just come in useful."

So off they set, still quite sure they would be bringing Elspeth back more blackberries than she could use.

But, alas! Tam was not in his hut, and they were turning away quite disappointed when Wendy spied Col.

"Tam can't be far off," she declared. "Col, Col, where's master, old fellow, where's master?"

The dog knew them, of course, but, after greeting them, he turned and ran off down a slope.

"We shall find Tam if we follow," said Malcolm, and away they went in pursuit.

Sure enough, there was Tam, leaning against a great big boulder, breathing heavily. He seemed to have been running, and the children were quite surprised when they reached him to see how ill he looked. Dreadfully ill—and almost frightened—at least they could not think of another word.

"Are you ill, Tam?" asked Lettice, who, of course, knew the old shepherd best. "Do tell us what is the matter."

For answer, Tam pointed to where the ground broke away sheer into a deep, bramble-covered precipice, the sides of which were lined with stumpy firs.

"Red Robbie," he muttered. "Red Robbie that stole Col. I—I always said yae day I'd punish him, and he kenned it. When he saw me he was afeard, and ran awa'. Wi' my big stick in my hand I came after the laddie, shoutin' out to him I'd punish his ill-doing. But he lookit behind to see how near I was, an' in the blink of an e'e he had fallen owre the edge o' the Black Hollow. I canna help him—puir bairn—and Col wonna either. I tried ma best, but it canna be done—the path is too narrow for a man to climb."

The five listeners stared in dismay. Of course none of them had ever liked Red Robbie, the village bully of whom Alan the garden boy had often told them tales of ill-doing, but the thought that he was lying or hanging in danger of his life was terrible.

"*Where* is he?" asked Malcolm.

Tam pointed a shaking finger.

"There," he whispered. "He's hanging yonder—when he fa's it will be into the Black Pool."

Wendy looked round.

"Why, there's Diccon gone already to see!" she exclaimed. "Diccon, come back! You—you mustn't go so near the edge."

They were all running now—and both Lettice and Wendy felt that curious wobbling about their knees which is so horrid.

Diccon was on the very edge of the path. He seemed to be talking to some one below, and when the others joined him he pointed down.

"There he is!" he said excitedly, "his belt has caught on that little stumpy tree above him. The tree is being pulled up by the roots. When it gives way, Red Robbie will fall, but if he could cut the belt and grab that ledge he might be able to let himself down on to that sort of narrow path which he would miss if he falls with the tree. You see, Robbie's just hanging by the belt."

Yes, the others saw—but seeing did not help.

"He couldn't catch the knife," said Ross, "and *we* couldn't reach him from the path below."

"I could," retorted Diccon. "I'm the smallest, and you know I'm the best climber. It's just my job—and I only sharpened my knife this morning. I've told Robbie I'm coming—so—I'm going."

He didn't wait for Ross or Malcolm to object. Of course the bigger boys could see at once that they *could* not have scrambled down that rocky face of precipice. Only a monkey—or Diccon—could.

"Diccon!" gasped Wendy. "Oh, stop him!"

Lettice flung her arm round her little friend.

"He's over the edge," she whispered. "You can't stop him. Let's—let's—ask God—to keep him safe."

No one spoke after that. Even Col seemed to understand that something breathlessly exciting was happening, and huddled back against Tam's legs.

Poor Tam! I think he was the most to be pitied, for he kept blaming himself for this terrible happening. If he had not sworn to have revenge on the boy who had treated Col so cruelly, that laddie would not have been hanging down there in danger of his life!

Red Robbie did not stir. He knew all about the Black Pool below, and what was likely to happen when that stumpy little tree above him gave way. And every second it was loosening.

Yet—down along that narrowest of paths, along the face of the precipice, crawled a gallant little rescuer. Nearer, nearer. Diccon had always adored

climbing the most difficult of trees or places, but never had he ventured on such a climb as this.

Ross stood watching with both hands clenched. He felt awful. If only he could have gone instead of Diccon!

Wendy and Lettice, white as ghosts, had drawn back a little. Sometimes they felt they could not go on looking.

Then a sigh from Tam and a deep breath from the boys brought them to the edge again. Bravo, Diccon! bravo, indeed! Down the rough side of the cliff he had squirmed, and now, kneeling on one knee, swaying over the precipice, he was cutting that belt.

Oh, the good, sharp knife! Robbie watched fascinated, the beads of perspiration trickling down his face. It was an awful moment—with the thought of the Black Pool far below. But oh, thank God! the belt had been cut in half, and Robbie's foot rested for one moment on Diccon's shoulder. Robbie was so much bigger than Diccon—and the latter swayed in what seemed to the watchers a dreadful way. But if Diccon was small he was wiry, and he buried his strong little brown hands amongst the roots of trees and just held on till Robbie had regained his balance; then, very gently, the boys slid together on to that narrow ledge below.

One by one—Robbie in front—they crawled rather than walked up. Tam was on the alert now. With his shepherd's staff firmly gripped, he leaned over, and Red Robbie forgot all about the way he had expected that staff to be used for his benefit as he grabbed the crook. Up, up, up! And *one* of the two adventurers was safe! Red Robbie sank all in a heap on the grass close to Col and began to sob. All the rough, bullying nature seemed to have gone out of him. Red Robbie would *never* forget the awful minutes when he hung over the Black Pool and felt certain that nothing could save him from death.

But Diccon was still clambering up that path. His shoulder had been slightly strained by Robbie's weight, and, though he smiled bravely up at the anxious faces above him, they could see how white he was and how fast his lips were set. Once he slipped, and Wendy had to put her hand over her mouth to stifle back the cry. It was Diccon, not themselves, they must be thinking of.

Tam was leaning over again with his shepherd's crook. Diccon stretched out to take it, but his arm was too stiff, and once again he swayed. But Tam was ready for him, and up went that sturdy crook under Diccon's armpit.

Nearer—nearer—but oh! it was dear old Col, who, with the saving instinct of his race, thrust down and gripped Diccon's coat in his teeth.

I could not exactly say who helped most in pulling Diccon finally up over that edge. Malcolm and Ross were helping, Tam had a firm hold—so had Col, whilst Wendy and Lettice wisely drew back to give the others more room.

Then—thank Heaven again—thank Heaven—as, sobbing, laughing, hugging, they drew the small, soil-stained hero into safety.

But it was Red Robbie who actually spoke the first understandable words.

"He's just a gran' laddie," said he, "and if you'll tak' my word, Tam, I'm sorry as ever I can weel be for bein' such a bad, ill lad."

And Tam, stretching out his big, weather-blackened hand, took that of the boy he had meant to be revenged on.

"Heaven be thanked for savin' us from a sad trouble in this," said he.

And so ended Tam's revenge. You may be sure from that day Red Robbie and the old shepherd were firm friends.

But this is not really the story of Tam and Red Robbie, so we must return to the five blackberry pickers who had forgotten all about blackberries for the time.

Diccon's hands were very cut and sore, and Wendy's was the only handkerchief which was anything like clean enough to tie them up.

Poor Diccon did not like being made a hero of at all. He got red instead of white when everyone told him how brave he had been.

"I liked it," was all he said; "it was a good climb." Then he smiled at Tam. "We wanted you to tell us where the best blackberries grew," he said. "You see, Elspeth has got all her sugar ready for the jam."

Tam grinned, but it was Red Robbie who meekly and eagerly came to the rescue here. *He* knew "verra weel" where all the finest blackberries were to be found, and how delighted he was when he was invited to help pick them!

There was only one hour and a half left in which to fill those baskets, but filled they were, right to the top. So it was a very triumphant party which returned home that evening to Glenagrie.

At the crossroads the three Carsedales said good-bye to their companions “till to-morrow”, and ran home to the Grange. In vain Diccon begged that the story of Red Robbie should not be told. It was no use. And, after all, it was Robbie who told the story to Alan next morning when he brought a big basket of mushrooms up for the little gentleman’s breakfast. So Diccon remained “hero” in spite of his modesty, and even William shook hands and congratulated him.

Between you and me and the door-post, Diccon enjoyed William’s praises most of all, and, during the rest of those joyous holidays, he and William and Alan became even closer friends, which was quite fair, as Malcolm had Ross, and Lettice had Wendy.

But, oh dear! how sad it is to find that even the nicest of holidays have to come to an end at last.

Soon it came to the “last week” then to the “last day”.

There was only one lovely part. They had the treat of going home to tell Mums and Dad all about this grandest of holidays.

“I wonder,” said Ross, as they sat on those fast-strapped boxes the night before their home-going, “whether we shall ever be asked to Glenagrie again?”

“I’m sure we’ve been fairly good,” retorted Diccon. “Anyhow, William and Elspeth think so, and Elspeth told me when she was packing our gingerbread that even Jean is sorry we are going, only she believes there’s a secret about our coming again. A secret which has to do with the—er—closed wing.”

Diccon had never spoken of the closed wing since his adventure with Lettice, but his words set Ross and Wendy off speculating. It was not, however, till breakfast-time next morning that the secret was told. Such a secret!

Hurrah! Hurrah! A secret which sent three excited children racing off to tell their Castle friends the grandest of news.

Malcolm and Lettice were feeling quite sad at the thought of losing their playmates, and were astonished when three radiant young people burst excitedly in on them.

“Hurrah!” sang Ross.

“Lovely!” cried Wendy.

“Grand!” said Diccon—using William’s pet word.

“Are you so *very* glad to go?” asked Lettice sadly.

“No!” shouted three voices; “but we’re glad to be coming back. Listen, Lettice! It’s the news—the news—the news! We’re all coming to live at Flint Grange with the aunties. The closed wing is going to be opened—and we’re going to bring Mums and Dad—and live at dear old Glenagrie altogether. Aren’t you glad? Hurrah! *We are!*”

But I will leave you to guess what Lettice had to say!

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *A Heather Holiday* by Mabel Winifred Knowles (as May Wynne)]