THE NEW PREFECT

DOROTHEA MOORE

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By the same Author

THE RIGHT KIND OF GIRL
HEAD OF THE LOWER SCHOOL
THE HEAD GIRL'S SISTER
THE NEW GIRL
A PLUCKY SCHOOLGIRL
MY LADY BELLAMY
CECILY'S HIGHWAYMAN
CAPTAIN NANCY
A BRAVE LITTLE ROYALIST
NADIA TO THE RESCUE
TERRY THE GIRL-GUIDE
With a Foreword by AGNES BADEN-POWELL
THREE FEET OF VALOUR

All these Books are Illustrated

NISBET & CO. LTD.
LONDON, W.1

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO THE KID?”

THE NEW PREFECT

BY

DOROTHEA MOORE

London
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22 BERNERS STREET, W.1

TO

A GREAT MEMORY

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The New Prefect

CHAPTER I

THE LISTS

"I'm not coming back next term; the Pater says it's a sheer waste of time and money."

Meriel Roper's voice sounded rather on the defensive; her companion, big, loose-limbed Cara Stornaway, answered the tone, not the words.

"Well, the School Certificate Exam was rather a bombshell, wasn't it?"

"There must have been some mistake—the Coll *can't* have messed the exam to that extent!"

"I don't know," Cara said. "We didn't make much of a hand at it last year. Any amount of failures."

"Yes, but a lot were through, if it was a scrape."

"I admit it wasn't the débâcle this has been," Cara acknowledged gloomily. "We've about touched bottom this time, I suppose."

"But it can't be true, at least not all of it," Meriel burst out wildly. "I suppose I am down; I did take it too easily. But we can't all have crashed, Juniors and Seniors."

"Except Peter Carey."

"Oh, Petronella; yes, they did put her down as passing, and with distinction in two subjects, too. That shows there must be something wrong with those awful lists, Cara. It's rankly impossible that Carol Stewart, the Head Girl, should fail and a kid of sixteen pass with distinction. They've got it muddled—everyone knows Peter isn't brainy."

"I'm not so sure; Sixth at sixteen."

"Oh, well, Peter sticks at it; but she *couldn't* pass with distinction and Carol fail. It must have been the other way about."

Cara looked thoughtful. "They don't often make a mistake in the lists," she said at last, unwillingly.

A rather small figure crossed one end of the garden path down which the two were strolling.

"Isn't that Peter?" Meriel asked quickly. "Then she's come down after her interview with the Governors. Let's ask her what was said, and if they're sure."

She shouted. Petronella looked round at the call, and then ran towards them.

She certainly did not look especially elated, was the thought of Meriel and Cara both. Peter looked as she always looked, a rather ordinary girl, with a face that was a thought too square, and eyes too deep-set for beauty. But it was a pleasant enough face for all that, and no one at Windicotes who had seen Peter Carey smile ever thought of her as plain.

"Wanting me?" she inquired, a little breathlessly.

"In a hurry?" Cara asked.

"I've got to pack for Aleth and Angela."

"Can't they do that themselves, lazy beggars!"

"Well, I'm the youngest," Peter stated placidly, "and they are getting rather fussed about the boxes being called for before we're ready, so if you don't want me for anything very special . . ."

"Half a tick," Meriel interposed, as Peter turned to go. "You've seen the Governors?"

"Yes." Peter looked grave all at once.

"It isn't true, is it?"

"What? The mess-up of the exam?"

"There's some mistake about it, isn't there?"

Peter added a touch of visible discomfort to her gravity.

"I . . . I don't think so, Meriel."

"*Is* Carol down?"

" 'Fraid so."

"And everyone?"

" 'Fraid so. Look here, Aleth and Angela will be getting frantic . . ."

“They’ve got to wait half a minute longer,” Meriel said doggedly. “Is it true about your passing, and with distinction?”

“It was just luck; I got the things I knew,” Peter stammered. “I say, do you mind if . . .”

“What did they say to you—the Governors, I mean?” Meriel demanded inexorably.

“Oh, they were ever so decent—shook hands and all that. I say, I really *must* . . .”

“And Miss Meldrum?” Meriel was determined to have it all, and she was more than a year older than Petronella, and ten times as important in the eyes of Windicotes.

“Miss Meldrum? She was ever so decent too. Of course, she was a bit upset about . . .”

“The rest of us? I’m not surprised,” Cara interrupted grimly. “Right you are, Peter; thanks for telling us. Go along and pack for your sisters if you like, but I think the one and only girl who hasn’t let the Coll down might have been exempted from fagging, if you ask me, which you haven’t.”

“Oh, shut up, can’t you!” groaned poor Peter, and departed hastily.

Meriel swallowed something rather bitter, as she looked after the short, sturdy figure of the junior who had succeeded where she herself had failed so lamentably.

“Good old Peter! I’m glad she had luck anyway. But who would have expected anything from her?”

CHAPTER II

PETER GOES MARKETING

People said that when you found Helver you went back seventy years. Perhaps it was because it lay so much out of the bustling world, folded away as it were into a crease of the great South Downs, that very few people ever did find it, and so it remained to all intents and purposes the Helver of ever so long ago. There, the irregular timbered gabled houses each side of the village street were the real things, no ingenious imitation, and disused "stocks" still stood on the village green, and Phineas Clutterby rang the curfew, night by night, as his father and grandfather had done before him. . . . The last smock-frock must have been seen at Helver, and Phineas always wore an ancient topper on Sundays, and Helver folk talked of the world seven miles away as "foreign parts," and resented the reeking char-à-bancs which occasionally crushed between the narrow hedges, taking Helver as a curiosity on their way to some haunt of tea-gardens.

It had never really struck Aleth, Angela or Peter that Helver was old-fashioned; it was the only home they knew, and they had all grown up in the little old house, set in a garden of high mellowed walls, and great clumps of rosemary and lavender, and deep-red clove carnations, heavenly to smell. They knew, of course, that you must bicycle or tramp some miles if you wanted anything not supplied by the exceedingly limited ideas of the village shop; they knew that Helver was rather a long way from everything and everybody else; but it was home, a place just to be loved, not criticised. Four generations of seafaring Careys had their roots there, and came joyfully back to the little old house when ashore.

Some earlier owner than the Careys had carved the name "Good Rest" above the old door, but great-grandfather Peter Carey had pronounced it the name of all names for a sailor's haven. And father had felt the same.

He slept under the North Sea, that jolly, cheery father, who used to come home to the little old house for brief glorious snatches of sunshine during the Great War—"leaves" when the best of everything came out, from the Dresden cups to the girls' frocks, and no one might go to see him off who could not be trusted to keep the tears from her eyes and a smile to the last. Now Mrs. Carey and the three girls and Robin lived there, upon an income which was a tight fit for all of them, but with the memory of those

wonderful leave-times and father's code to live up to—and they were very happy people on the whole.

Robin was four, twelve whole years younger than Petronella. He came as a present to them all the very day that the Admiralty telegram arrived—the telegram that told of the sinking of Commander Carey's ship—and, of course, they all thought there was no baby like him.

He was a long way removed, though, from a baby now, in his own eyes at least, upon that sunny August morning which was the beginning of it all. He and Petronella were digging potatoes; that is to say, Peter was digging and he was getting considerably in the way, when Mrs. Carey's voice came ringing across the garden.

"Peter! Petron-nel-la!"

Petronella straightened herself, and drew the sleeve of her blouse across her forehead, for it was really very hot, and the potatoes were growing scarce and hard to find.

"Let's hide!" suggested Robin, with a brilliant smile. "Somevone's calling; let's hide in a hole like the little worms do."

"No, it's Mummy; come on, Babs," said Peter, and hauled that unwilling young man along with her. Last time she left him to his own devices he climbed into the water-tank to keep cool, and it happened to be Sunday, when all his clothes were clean and starched. Peter was head nurse in the holidays, and the post was no sinecure where Robin was concerned.

She presented herself before her mother, standing on the garden path outside the drawing-room window. "What is it, Mummy?"

Mrs. Carey had an open letter in her hand.

"This ought to have come yesterday," she explained, half laughing, "but Helver posts *are* rather irregular. You remember Cousin Alan, my Peter; well, he is bringing Elena, the girl he is just engaged to, you know, over to see us, unless we wire to the contrary, and they'll be here by lunch-time."

"By lunch-time? Mercy! and it's after eleven now," Peter said. "And what's for lunch? Six feet three of Cousin Alan—he'll want a lot, unless love takes away your appetite."

Mrs. Carey smiled. "Peter, it isn't a laughing matter, we were just finishing up that scrag-end of mutton in an Irish stew."

"That—there wasn't much left but bones yesterday," Peter pronounced.

"Yes, it would have been a close thing for us, with the *enormous* appetite of this bonny boy," Mrs. Carey said, giving Robin a squeeze. "But we could have made out with pudding. What shall we do?"

"Chops," Peter suggested laconically, "Extrav., but very handy. Shall I bike in to Greenacre, Mummy?"

"My dear, you've been working so hard already," Mrs. Carey said, looking at the earthy hands and the hot face. "I wonder if Angela . . .?"

"Writing," Peter explained. "I'll go, Mum! I don't mind. Only what about Babs? You'll be making things for tea, I suppose."

"Yes, and Babs will help mother, won't he, like a good boy?" Mrs. Carey suggested hopefully, but unsuccessfully, for Robin at once announced his intention of going nowhere but with Peter.

"I'll take him behind me on the bike, shall I?" Petronella said. "I'll just finish those potatoes and be off. Come on, Babs; we must hurry."

Robin obligingly held the basket, and only spilt it once, so the potatoes were finished in a few minutes; and Peter scrubbed her own hands and her small brother's, pulled a jumper over her shabby blouse, pocketed her mother's well-worn purse, balanced Robin on a cushion on the carrier, and jumped into the saddle. The three girls owned the bicycle between them, but Peter gave it by far the most use, being the general one to do the marketing.

It was a gorgeous morning, and she pedalled gaily along the pleasant Sussex lanes, where blackberries were flowering, Robin hanging on to the belt of her red jumper, and chattering without stopping. Over the downs soft shadows chased each other; it was a lovely summer morning.

Presently the lanes gave place to roads—cars began to pass, smothering them in dust; then there was a level crossing to be negotiated—always a special joy to Robin—and the gates were shut, so that he had the added pleasure of waiting to see the train go by.

Peter jumped off her bicycle and stood holding it steady, with Robin's short sturdy legs sticking out each side of the carrier. She looked at her watch. "I suppose that's the eleven-thirty from Greenacre, but how late it is!"

"Hurry up, twain!" urged Robin, jumping up and down on the carrier.

The train appeared to hear him, and rushed through between the closed gates as he spoke; Robin drew a deep breath. "I *do* love twains. Will there be anover if we waited, Peter?"

“No; at least I don’t know, there may be, as that one was so late,” Peter said. “But we mustn’t wait, Babsie, or there won’t be any dinner for Cousin Alan and Elena.”

The gates swung back; Peter jumped on her bicycle and bumped over the level crossing, Robin shrieking with joy at every bump. Her mind was upon chops, and what else to get for dinner, if the butcher at Greenacre should be out of that useful stand-by in time of need. There was nothing to tell her that in another ten minutes chops would have ceased to be of any importance at all.

CHAPTER III

AND FINDS ADVENTURE

There are two ways into Greenacre from Helver—three, if you count the fields, but then that way meant stiles, and could not be negotiated with a bicycle. When Robin went to Greenacre with Peter, or indeed with any of his three devoted sisters, there was only one, and that the longest—the road that ran along under the railway embankment.

Robin's passion for trains never allowed his family to take another way, at least unless the one with him happened to be mother, who did now and again make a little stand for discipline. Peter pedalled cheerfully along the hot stretch of dusty road just under the embankment, for all it added nearly a mile to her ride, and time was rather scarce already; and Robin kept his round blue eyes fixed eagerly and hopefully upon the little single line above him. A goods train rewarded him by coming cautiously round the sharp curve where the dreadful railway accident had happened thirty years ago, an accident which Phineas still considered a warning against the new-fangled habit of travelling by train.

"Will there be some more twains, Peter dear?" Robin inquired, breathing heavily under Peter's arm.

Peter twisted her wrist round to see the time again. "We may see the London express go through, if we're lucky."

Robin gurgled joyfully. "Just get off the bicycle, Peter darlin', and let's sit on the embankment, you 'n' me."

"Babs, we haven't time, truly," Peter said.

"You could wide ever so fast, Peter! I'll be a good boy for ever 'n' ever if you'll let us sit on the embankment and see the twain from London. . . ."

Peter jumped off her bicycle and hugged Robin. They all hugged Robin when he coaxed; they couldn't help it, somehow.

"You couldn't be a good boy for ever 'n' ever," she told him. "It isn't in you, scaramouch. Well, come along, and just remember you stay outside the fence, and don't let go of my hand for one single instant."

She propped the bicycle in the ditch and climbed up the side of the embankment, holding tightly to Robin's hand. Of course it was a silly thing

to do, for Robin had seen the London express many times before, and got too much of his own way at all times, and it wasn't a day when anybody wanted to ride too fast along three miles of dusty high road and another three of bumpety lanes. But she climbed the embankment very carefully, all the same, and landed herself and Robin behind the slender fence which was supposed to keep trespassers off the line.

It was a splendid post of observation. She lifted Robin up and set him on the fence, keeping an arm firmly round his wriggling little body. They looked to the left along the glittering level of the line towards Ritchling, that tiny station through which London trains ran without stopping, except by signal; and to the right, along to the wicked curve where the accident happened those thirty long years ago. All the trains crawled carefully round the bend in these days, but it was "the accident place" still, and always would be to the people who lived round about Sellingby, Greenacre, Ritchling and Helver.

Peter and Robin had not long to wait; almost at once Peter's quick ear caught the distant throb from beyond the curve that meant a train from Greenacre.

Robin was staring in the other direction.

"Wrong way, Babs," she sang out.

"Dere's a twain my side, too," shrilled Robin.

Peter's heart seemed to herself to stand quite still for a second. Then it gave a great thud and began to beat at a truly terrific pace. She scrambled up on to the top rung of the fence; Robin was right, she knew; it was the London train which was bearing down upon them in that absolutely relentless way. Was she wrong about the train from Greenacre? Peter hoped desperately that she was wrong. If she wasn't—the engine-driver of the London train would never see that the curve wasn't clear till too late.

But she wasn't wrong—she couldn't see anything because of the sharpness of the curve, but she could hear. . . . The other train had been so late, and there must have been some muddling with the signals. She heard somebody's voice speaking quite monotonously, rather deadened by the scarlet jumper which she was pulling over her own head.

"Keep still, Babs, don't move whatever happens. Be a good boy!"

The jumper was off; what a good thing she had worn it—all because her old white silk shirt underneath was quite past mending, and she hadn't another one clean. She heard the rotten silk go as she tore the jumper off, but

raggedness wouldn't matter now. She scrambled down from the fence, feeling as though the train was almost upon her, shrieking hoarsely and waving the scarlet jumper above her head. It was the first jumper she had made—and she had meant it for the Christmas holidays—hence the flaming hue, and somehow there had seemed so much to do that it hadn't been finished, and it had only arrived at completion, a little pulled in places and with some dropped stitches inadequately picked up, when she came back for the summer holidays after the great fiasco of the Public Schools Exam. The history of that jumper flashed with absurd vividness before Peter's mind as she stood in the path of that rushing, roaring monster, waving the badly made garment at which the family had jeered so often, and conscious of the fact that there was a ragged hiatus between her skirt and her old silk shirt.

SHE SCRAMBLED DOWN AND WAVED THE SCARLET JUMPER ABOVE HER HEAD.

The awful earth-shaking roar seemed almost upon her; she wouldn't look behind her, and she was too sick and blind with fright to look in front; she fixed her eyes on Robin's tiny figure, sitting holding to the fence with both hands, his eyes absolutely round with amazement, but obedient still. Then there was a grinding screech that seemed to set every tooth in poor

Peter's head on edge, and sudden blessed silence for a second. And Peter, weak about the knees and dry about the mouth, made a futile attempt to tuck her gaping blouse into her skirt, with fingers that were oddly wet and sticky. She was physically incapable of putting on the jumper, which lay, a splotch of brilliant red on the glittering line, not three feet from the front of the engine of the London train. She was too close to the engine to realise that heads were coming out of every window; she only knew that somehow she, and the scarlet jumper between them, had stopped the Express, and presumably the other train as well, for there was no sound. She walked unsteadily towards the embankment, at the top of which Robin still sat obediently on his fence.

"Peter, darling, both the twains is stoppened still and one has tummelled over," he shrieked at her, and at that Peter found wings for her lagging feet and raced along the line.

The train from Greenacre was half-way round the curve, and at first Peter thought that Robin was drawing on his always decidedly vivid imagination. Then, as she scrambled up on to the embankment, just above the curve, she saw what had happened. Probably the driver of this other train had realised the danger of a collision and put on the brakes too hard in his agitation. The last two coaches had failed to take the curve and had become derailed, Petronella saw. The jerk must have snapped their couplings, and probably they had tried to run up the embankment, for both had turned over on their sides and lay there across the narrow line, half tilted up on the bank, a dreadful danger if there should be any further mistake about the signals.

A chorus of shrill screams from within the overturned coaches, decided Peter upon going to the rescue, even though nobody was in immediate peril. But the screams sounded as though they came from smallish children who were frightened, and Peter always had a soft spot for small children. Of course, people would come to the rescue from the other train, but they hadn't done it yet.

She climbed up over the wheel of the nearest overturned coach, and looked down through the windows which now formed a sort of skylight.

The compartment into which she looked was packed so tightly with small children as to suggest part of a Sunday-school excursion. Nearly all of them were crying dismally, in spite of the efforts of the only grown-up person there, a rather short lady, with a small thin face and glorious auburn hair from which the hat had fallen. She seemed to be trying to comfort the children, and force up the window from below at the same time.

Peter wrenched at the handle of the door, and nothing happened. Of course, the poor children were frightened; they probably thought there had been a dreadful railway accident, and anyway a railway coach on its side isn't at all a comfortable resting-place.

She wrenched again at the door and it wouldn't open—most probably it was locked. She shook the window violently, and it came down with a bang. She leaned across the opening and called down reassuringly.

"You're as right as rain. Cheer up, kids. Only two coaches tipped over, and people are coming along in two ticks to fetch you out."

The children stopped crying, partly in surprise, no doubt, and the lady with the auburn hair smiled up at Peter, even though her voice was anxious, as she asked in a low voice:

"The Express? It's due."

"Stopped," Peter said laconically.

After that men came scrambling up to the overturned coaches to rescue their unlucky occupants, and child after child was pulled or hoisted up to the windows and pushed through. There were plenty of volunteers both from the forepart of the wrecked train and from the Express, but Peter didn't go back to Robin just at once all the same, for when a big cheery-looking man arrived upon the top of her compartment, and directed the lady inside to pass the children up to him because he was too big to get through the window, it appeared that she was lame.

They were all quite little children, probably the infant class of a school. "I'll get through and pass them up to you," suggested Peter, and was scrambling through the window and slithering down into the compartment in a moment.

The children greeted her as a deliverer; poor little things, they were really very good, Peter thought, considering how dreadfully they had been frightened. They were most of them hugging sticky bags of buns or sweets, to which they were determined to hang on; but Peter persuaded them to look on the adventure as something of a joke, and she and the auburn-haired lady managed to hoist them up, one by one, to the strong arms reaching down to them through the window. They were all up at last, fourteen of them; and so were their buns and bananas, and most of their rather grubby pocket handkerchiefs. The man above had dropped them neatly over the wheels into the arms of a couple of kind elderly gentlemen below, who caught them and sent them scurrying up the bank, out of harm's way.

There only remained the lame auburn-haired lady, Petronella herself, and a neat leather dispatch case, labelled G. H. Peter smiled rather shyly at the lady.

"Look here, if I kneel on the edge of the seat, you could get on my shoulders."

"My dear, I shall be much too heavy for you."

"You won't, really," Peter protested. "You wouldn't be heavy anyhow, and we learn balance and all that in Gym at Windicotes."

The auburn-haired lady looked at her with attention. "Are you a Windicotes girl?"

"Rather," Peter told her casually. "Come on, I'm going to hold the door handle; get your feet on my shoulders. Never mind your bag, you know. I can pass that up after."

The auburn-haired lady did as she was told. Peter was right; for all her lameness, she was neither heavy nor awkward, and the big man above seized her and pulled her up with comparative ease. Peter watched her through, then picked up the dispatch case. It was not fastened properly; it opened, and a mass of typed manuscript fell out. Peter could not help reading what was written on the outside page: "*Lavender Lane.* By Georgia Harrington."

Peter gave a little jump. Then the little auburn-haired lady, who couldn't stand without a stick, was an author.

Peter had never come across an author, unless she counted Angela, who had published a whole story in *Fireside Chatter* only last holidays, and a poem of three verses in the local paper.

She put the MS. back with respectful hands, shut the dispatch case, firmly this time, picked up the black, crutch-handled stick, and passed them up to the big cheery man, who appeared to be enjoying quite an animated conversation with Miss Harrington. Perhaps he, too, was interested in authors, Peter thought.

To a girl used to gym it was not difficult to scramble up far enough to meet the cheery man's outstretched hands, and Peter landed on the top of the coach in a minute, to see a throng of women and children on the bank, and several men with coats off surrounding the overturned coaches, evidently hoping to achieve something even before the arrival of the breakdown gang.

"I wonder what they will do with those poor children," Miss Harrington said. "Their teachers are taking them to Hastings, I think; two teachers to

fifty children—that was why I took charge of a carriageful."

The man laughed. "I wondered why you had elected to take on a fresh lot of responsibilities. Oh, the kids will be all right—of course the line won't clear for some time, but we're quite near Greenacre. I'll cut along and send out a couple of char-à-bancs."

Recollections of Cousin Alan and Elena and the needs of dinner began to filter back into Peter's mind.

"I'll do that, if you like," she said quickly. "I've got my bike, and I have to go to Greenacre. I have to fetch my little brother and . . ."

"And this, I think." The big man finished her sentence for her. He picked up something that was hanging forlornly over the edge of the coach, as he had flung it when he scrambled up to Peter's help. She recognised it as her jumper.

He helped Miss Harrington down to the bank with great care. Peter followed closely on their heels, her jumper on her arm.

Once safely down, the big man turned and looked at Peter.

"Well," he said. "I've heard a good deal about the English schoolgirl since taking on my father's job as one of the Governors of Windicotes; but I'm slightly flabbergasted when I meet her all the same. I'd like to shake hands, young lady, and to know your name, too, if I may."

Peter found her voice, though she certainly wished the big man farther.

"I can't shake hands—I'm all oil and dirt. But my name is Peter—Petronella Carey."

The auburn-haired lady turned her head, and the corners of the man's mouth twitched a little. "So you are Petronella Carey!" he observed. "That's queer, when one comes to think of it."

Peter would have liked to know why it was queer that she should possess her own name, but she was desperately afraid of more complimentary speeches. Some of the people from the London train were beginning to look at her, and two or three seemed coming towards her. She bundled the tell-tale jumper underneath her arm, and made a dash for Robin, her bicycle, and enviable obscurity.

"Sorry I can't stop," she said. "If I don't rush, there won't be any lunch at home."

CHAPTER IV

THE AFTERMATH

"Where *have* you been?"

"Peter! Your new jumper!"

"My dear, give me the chops. Cousin Alan and Elena may be here at any moment—and then go and have a bath. You want it."

Peter dropped wearily off her bicycle and lifted Robin down.

"It's steak, Mummy, there weren't any chops; and he hopes it's tender, but guarantee things he cannot; and I'm fearfully sorry to be so long, but . . ."

"There were two twains, and Peter stoodened on the line and the twains stopped and one tummelled over," Robin explained shrilly, determined to get in his say; and then, of course, Peter had to tell her story, while the steak waited to be cooked, and the family hung breathless on her words.

They all fell upon her when she had finished a rather disappointingly brief account of her adventure. Mrs. Carey hugged her, oil, dirt and all; Aleth and Angela thumped her upon the back, and Robin, not to be outdone, embraced her leg ecstatically. They all forgot the steak and the imminence of the expected guests, until a dejected open fly was seen crawling up the lane which Helver called a street, with evident intention of stopping at their gate. Then Aleth flew to the kitchen with the steak, and Peter to the bathroom, while Angela dragged off the unwilling Robin to wash him and the ink-stains off her fingers at the same moment. Mrs. Carey, her eyes very bright and shiny, went to meet the guests.

The steak turned out better than might have been expected, and Peter found that a bath restored her to calm as well as to cleanliness. She came down in time to help lay the table, and relieve Angela from the task of keeping Robin respectable enough to meet the eye of his relations; and luncheon was only about twenty minutes late after all. She went out to tell her mother it was ready, and found the party in the garden getting themselves button-holes of crimson clove carnations—that is to say, Elena was getting one for Alan, and taking a long time about it too.

“Lunch is ready,” announced Peter cheerfully, coming forward to shake hands very properly with her relations.

“This is Peter, Elena,” Cousin Alan said. “She is the third of my cousins —you’ve seen Aleth the future R.A., and Angela the gifted authoress.”

Elena had pretty laughing brown eyes. “And what is Peter?” she asked, holding Peter’s hands in hers.

“Oh, nothing in particular, are you, Peter?” Cousin Alan laughed, and Peter realised, with a little pang, that that was quite a good description of her. Aleth and Angela had their line mapped out; she was just Peter, who would do her lessons, and take the Cambridge Senior next year, as other girls did, and leave school and teach, as lots of other people did, and be nothing in particular all her life.

“And here is the scaramouch,” Alan said, picking Robin up and tickling him till he screamed with laughter, and Elena hugged Robin and said, “Oh, you darling!” And they went in to lunch, and were very cheery, though the potatoes were overdone and the cauliflower boiled to nothingness.

Many lurid experiences had impressed on Mrs. Carey the need of making Robin hold his tongue at meals when any guests were there, so nothing was said about the adventure of the morning; for, of course, Mrs. Carey and the girls would have died sooner than have boasted about the achievements of anybody in the family. So although Elena asked many interested questions about Windicotes, she did not hear anything about the adventure which for the moment made Windicotes a place of no particular importance to the Careys.

“Did you know that my little sister is going this term?” she asked. “You will be good to her, won’t you? She has never been to school before, she has been so delicate.”

“How old is she?” asked Mrs. Carey hospitably. The three girls said nothing. They liked Elena, but it is the drawback of relations, new or old, that they nearly always want to arrange your friends for you. That is a practice which is bearable in the holidays, when you have no dignity to keep up and the serious business of life is in abeyance, but an unmitigated nuisance at school. Aleth and Angela heaved a sigh of relief when they heard that Vivian was sixteen.

“She’ll be Peter’s friend more than ours, I expect,” Angela remarked, and then Peter rose to the occasion and said, “Yes, I hope she will,” with creditable heartiness.

“But I am sorry the school is changing hands just when Vivian is going there,” Elena went on. “Miss Meldrum was so kind and sweet, everybody said.”

“Miss Meldrum going?” it was quite a cry of dismay from the three girls. “Why, she’s been forty years at Windicotes. It won’t be Windicotes without Miss Meldrum.”

“Perhaps I oughtn’t to have told—I only knew it because of Vivian,” Elena apologised. “I remember she did tell me that it wasn’t officially announced yet, for the notices for parents were still at the printers’. You’ll hear all about it in a day or two.”

“Who on earth is coming in her place? Did she say?” demanded Aleth, roused for the moment out of her customary calm.

“Yes, she did say—I noticed the name because it is such an odd one, and, I was sure I had seen it, in magazines, I think. A Miss Georgia Harrington.”

Windicotes was to reassemble in the last week in September.

Long before that date, of course, the expected notice had arrived—a very charming and dignified good-bye to her position as Head from Miss Meldrum, and a warm recommendation of her successor, Miss Georgia Harrington, under whose inspiring care she had no doubt at all that Windicotes would not merely regain its lost glories, but rise to heights hitherto undreamed of.

Mrs. Carey and the three girls had a long talk over the change one evening, when Robin was in bed, and the garden was cool and shadowy and sweet-scented, and the tobacco flowers under the wall gleaming ghost-like through the soft dark.

“I hope Miss Harrington won’t interfere with Windicotes ways,” Aleth remarked.

“She probably will,” Angela said gloomily. Angela hated change.

“She needn’t”—that was Aleth. “Carol could put her in the way of what we do.”

“She could,” agreed Angela, a shade more cheerfully. Peter said nothing, because she felt a shyness in mentioning even to her own people the way in which she knew the name of Miss Georgia Harrington. Also she had an idea

at the back of her mind that the Miss Harrington who had taken her danger so calmly was not quite the sort of person who would have all her arrangements made for her, even by Carol Stewart, the Head Girl at Windicotes in right of her seniority in age. It was Mrs. Carey who spoke.

" 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new.' I don't think it follows that the new order is to model itself entirely on the old, or where would progress be?"

"Miss Meldrum has been good enough for Windicotes, Mummy," Angela stated, a little defiantly.

"She has been wonderful, and Windicotes girls owe her an enormous debt of gratitude. But you won't pay it by deciding at the outset that there is only one road to your goal."

"Yes, Mummy, I know; but this Miss Harrington won't be popular if she tries to make much in the way of changes at Windicotes," Angela said obstinately, and Mrs. Carey did not pursue the subject then. There was so much else to talk about, including the important matter of clothes, always a problem where money is scarce. And then Aleth and Angela grew so outrageously; it was really lucky that Peter hadn't followed their example, for she could still wear their outgrown coats and skirts. The absolutely necessary garments had to be disentangled from the clothes that were wanted but could be done without, and then Aleth and Angela went off to bed. Peter stayed to help Mrs. Carey lock up.

"I wish everything weren't so desperately dear," she remarked, putting on the chain to the hall door. "The days of tenpence a sheep would be so handy now."

Mrs. Carey put her arm round Peter's shoulders.

"Don't worry, my Peter, we shall rub along, though, of course, the fit is tight. But I know you girls will manage to bring in some grist to the mill before we have to think of school for Babs—and you are all very good children, and a tremendous comfort to me."

Peter hugged her mother silently, and went off to bed, but not to sleep as easily and early as usual. She sat up in bed, considering the money-problem very seriously. It was all right for Aleth and Angela; they were almost eighteen, and would soon be leaving school and letting their united talents burst on an admiring world—Aleth as an artist, and Angela as an author of distinction. But, as Cousin Alan had said, she, Petronella, was nothing in particular, and she was only sixteen, and had another two years of being an

expense at school, and nothing very brilliant in the way of prospects to follow.

Peter felt rather unusually “down” that night, she remembered; not that she was in the least jealous of her pretty twin sisters, but it was a nuisance to be only sixteen when money was wanted so badly in the Carey family.

She lay awake so long that she was late for breakfast, and so missed the opening of the wonderful letter, which changed everything for her with the magic speed of a conjuring trick.

Mrs. Carey was reading it aloud to Aleth and Angela, and her beautiful dark grey eyes, the eyes which the elder girls had wisely inherited, looked bright and shiny, as they always did when she was specially pleased.

. . . “from what I know of your youngest daughter, Petronella, I believe she is the girl to make good in the post. The Governors of the school therefore empower me to offer her an exhibition giving her two years’ free education at Windicotes, on the condition of her accepting, with the exhibition, the responsibilities of Senior Prefect . . .”

“What, Mummy, me?” shrieked Peter, forgetting grammar, apologies, and everything in the excitement of the moment.

“Yes, you, my Peter,” Mrs. Carey answered, her eyes very bright. “Miss Harrington asks you to be Senior Prefect at Windicotes.”

CHAPTER V

ENTER VIVIAN

The Christmas term at Windicotes began on the 23rd of September. About three o'clock that afternoon the greater number of the Windicotes girls foregathered at King's Cross to go down to Windicotes by the special school train at three-fifteen.

The three Careys were on the look out for Vivian, all with a certain lack of enthusiasm about the business. She was a duty, not a pleasure. However, Aleth and Angela left the job to Peter as soon as they fell in with Carol Stewart, and Peter tramped up and down, looking carefully at every strange girl, exchanging greetings with friends, but not joining any group, though feeling a little victimised.

These were the occasions when Peter wished very heartily that she wasn't the youngest. She supposed that it would also fall to her lot to show Vivian round the school, and put her in the way of things, and comfort her when she was homesick, and generally devote herself to Elena's sister until she settled down. And that on the top of the altogether unknown duties of a Senior Prefect.

At the back of her mind Petronella felt distinctly nervous about those duties, but Aleth and Angela did their best to cheer her up.

"They won't have made a kid of your age anything that matters," Angela stated comfortably. "I expect all the Upper Sixth are going in for it, and Carol, of course, because of being Senior and Head Girl, and it won't mean anything really. Just a name, I expect."

Peter did her best to believe Angela; but remembering Miss Harrington's determined face, she could not feel it likely that anything arranged by her would be "just a name." It was all right for Aleth and Angela anyhow; they would never soar beyond Lower Sixth, for this was to be their last term at Windicotes. Peter did not feel that she could take those vague and unexplored responsibilities so easily and lightly.

A girl crossed her line of vision, a girl who was so unusually and extraordinarily pretty that Peter blinked. She had wonderful hair, that made a great rope of a plait, looking as though it had mopped up the late September sunshine; she had beautiful brown eyes, soft and lustrous and appealing,

with long lashes; she had a complexion like a pale wild rose, and with it all, features that were as delicately chiselled as Peter's were blunt, and a figure that was tall and slim and graceful as that of a young nymph. The great brown eyes were wistful and appealing now; she had "new girl" written all over her, but what a new girl!

Peter shook herself awake, and hurried forward. "I say, excuse me, are you Vivian Massingbird?" Her voice sounded unusually blunt, even to herself, just because she wanted so much to be nice and cordial.

The new girl smiled. "Yes, I'm Vivian. I don't know who you are, I'm afraid."

"I'm Petronella Carey. Your sister is going to marry my cousin. We were asked to look out for you: those are my sisters, Aleth and Angela—those two tall ones, talking to the Head Girl. Come along and be introduced," Peter said in a burst, and drew Vivian and her violin-case up to the august group of Seniors.

They were impressed by her beauty; Peter could see that at once. Carol Stewart was always nice to strangers—one could trust the Head Girl to be that—but she was more than gracious now, she was friendly; while Aleth and Angela accepted the quasi-relationship, over which they had groaned a good deal, with easy cheerfulness. They suggested at once that Vivian should travel down in their compartment with the great Carol Stewart; though only on the journey up from Helver that morning they had impressed on Peter that as she was the youngest, it was her bounden duty to take Vivian away, directly the few obvious civilities had been offered, and leave the Seniors of the school to travel together in peace.

Peter was not invited to join her sisters in this very select compartment, but that she didn't expect. Carol Stewart was two years older than herself, beside being Head Girl, and though Aleth and Angela were very friendly with their younger sister at home, they felt it only right to keep her in her place at school. Peter planted herself serenely in a compartment filled and over-filled with obstreperous Lower Third Babes, and travelled in their rather sticky company.

She didn't see any more of Vivian until after tea, a very informal meal on the afternoon of arrival at Windicotes, with no staff present. No special places were kept, but the Seniors congregated at the High Table, where the Mistresses usually sat, and discussed the changes in the Windicotes administration with great vigour.

Carol, whose father was a friend of one of the school Governors, had exciting though rather vague ideas about structural alterations; the old Sixth Form room had been done away with, she said, but what was in its place no one knew. Of course, it was unthinkable that the Sixth, Upper and Lower, should not be provided with a special room. Meriel Roper, back at Windicotes in spite of her father's uncomplimentary opinion of the education, had an idea, based upon nothing particular, that each member of the Sixth was to possess a study. As Windicotes had hitherto known no studies, this idea was hooted as chimerical, but everybody was sure about one thing—there were to be some rather startling changes.

Vivian did not have tea at this High Table, but she was not with Peter either. Aleth had handed her over to Catherine King of the Upper Fifth, and Peter from the next table saw that Vivian seemed getting on with Catherine very well indeed. It did not look as though Vivian would be on Peter's hands after all. Peter thought she might have been worrying herself just as needlessly over what might be expected from a Senior Prefect. A summons came both for Petronella Carey and Vivian Massingbird directly tea was over. Miss Rowley, the Junior Science Mistress, brought it, and Miss Rowley looked a little out of breath and flustered—even the great Seniors noticed that.

"Miss Harrington wishes to see Petronella Carey and Vivian Massingbird in her room at once," she proclaimed from the doorway. "Hurry, girls. And Miss Harrington wishes me to say that she will meet the whole school in the Great Hall at half-past seven."

Peter caught murmurs as she pushed her chair back hastily and made her way to Vivian's place. "What's up? The first evening. We always unpack the first evening. What a swizz," and so forth. Windicotes did not take kindly to innovations, in especial, innovations that touched arbitrarily upon their freedom. Peter did not think that Miss Harrington would find the school in a very easy mood to deal with, unless she had some very attractive alterations to counterbalance. For more years than anybody could remember, the first evening at Windicotes had been one of licence.

Followed by Vivian, she made her way between the long tables, out through the door, across the hall, and down the long corridor to the Head Mistress's Sanctum. She had been there before in Miss Meldrum's day, to tea, once or twice—a rather awe-inspiring tea when you wore your best clothes—and rather oftener for private interviews about her work. Also, there had been a terrible occasion not much more than a year back, when the devil had entered into Peter, and she had evolved an original poem about

Miss Trail, who in those days hustled the school with aggressive enthusiasm through its botany.

Peter could see again Miss Meldrum's study, as it had looked then—a study which had suddenly taken to itself the stern look of a Court of Justice, with Miss Meldrum putting on the "black cap." A sheet of blue-lined exercise paper was spread before her on the table, and she read aloud, with pained solemnity, the lines which Peter had thought gloriously funny when she wrote them.

> "Buttercups and daisies, oh the pretty flowers,
> Managing to give us several ghastly hours,
> Gazing at your sections in despairing hope,
> That we may see what isn't there through a microscope."

The study looked extraordinarily different on this late September evening. A small wood fire crackled cheerily in the grate—Miss Meldrum never had a fire before the fifteenth of October, whatever the weather.

The furniture was different; in place of the large comfortable sofas and arm-chairs which had crowded up even that big room in Miss Meldrum's time, there was a sense of space and freedom. The carpet, of which one saw a good deal, was a soft grey; there was a tall oak settle beside the fireplace, and two or three comfortable chairs pulled close as well, but no furniture that one had to thread one's way between. The firelight gleamed upon old glass and lustre in a cabinet, and upon the burnished copper of an ancient warming-pan hung on the wall; and everywhere around those walls were books, books, books.

Miss Harrington was reading by the firelight, crouched all in a heap upon a black satin "mora"; and an upright angular lady, looking at least a dozen years older, sat upon the settle, knitting vigorously.

"Georgia—the girls!" she said reprovingly, as the door opened.

Miss Harrington did not get up, but she sat more upright, and shut her book.

"That's right!" she said. "Come and get warm; these evenings are cold. This is Vivian, of course; my dear, what a cold hand! How are you, Petronella?"

It was the clasp of a comrade that she gave Peter. Then she turned to the angular lady on the settle.

“You will have to know the names of all the girls by the end of the week. No excuses accepted by Sunday. So you can begin at once. This is Vivian Massingbird, a new girl; and this is Petronella Carey, our Senior Prefect. Girls, Miss Jane Brooker, who has come to help me with the school, as she has helped me with most things in life so far.”

Miss Jane Brooker laid down her knitting and extended a hand. “Glad to meet you,” she said gruffly. “So you’re the Senior Prefect? You’re rather small.”

“Jane, you are not being tactful!” exclaimed Miss Harrington. “Pull up chairs, girls, or do you like the rug? I always did, before I was lame. Now, can I ask questions?”

“Please do, Miss Harrington,” Peter said very properly, settling down comfortably in front of the blazing fire.

“Would you two girls like to sleep together, or not? I know you are relations, and relations are like our climate, variable. We are just talking now, so you can say exactly what you really feel. Petronella, the Senior Prefect is entitled to a single room if she prefers it. Vivian, you don’t know anyone yet, except your—are they cousins?—but you will have hosts of acquaintances in a day or two, and friends soon after.”

Peter looked at Vivian and Vivian looked back at Peter. It was the first time it had dawned on Peter that her new post carried other advantages than the monetary one. It also seemed to her that it would be rather pleasant to have someone of one’s own age to sleep with, and consult over bothers and so on. Hitherto, since her advancement to the Upper Sixth, she had been Senior in a dormitory full of little ones, who were dears, but a terrible handful to get ready in the morning.

“If Vivian likes, I’d like to share a room with her, thank you very much, Miss Harrington,” she said.

“Thank you so much,” Vivian added, with evident approval, and so it was settled.

Miss Harrington talked more to Vivian after that, asking her what she had read and done. Vivian had never been to school, it appeared; her people lived in the country, and she had been at home with a resident governess.

“Then you are probably well up in a good many subjects, but no good at the Grab game,” Miss Harrington said cheerfully. “School work seems a grab game, after the quiet of home work, you know; but though it’s bewildering at first, it’s such fun trying new ways of getting there. And you

are so lucky to have three nice cousins ready to be Guide, Philosopher and Friend."

"Which is which, Miss Harrington?" Peter asked, with a grin.

"I'll leave Vivian to find out," Miss Harrington told her. "Now Petronella—I am afraid it must be Peter when we are being informal—do you mind?—will you take Vivian back to the Gym or wherever you have fires to-night, and introduce her to someone who will show her round and take care of her."

"Oh, can't I, Miss Harrington?" asked Peter.

"I'm afraid you can't," Miss Harrington said. "I happen to want my Senior Prefect."

CHAPTER VI

THE BOMBSHELL

Peter sat staring at Miss Harrington in dead silence. She was trying to take in the altogether astounding things that the new Head had been saying to her.

There was an interval of quite a moment when nobody said anything at all in the big room. Then Miss Brooker broke the silence with a snapped "Well?"

"Give her time," said Miss Harrington gently.

Peter stammered herself into speech. "But, Miss Harrington, you don't mean that I'm to be a sort of Head Girl. I c—couldn't truly. Carol Stewart's Head Girl, you know; I couldn't take her place away, really I couldn't."

"I'm not asking you to take her place away," Miss Harrington said quietly. "Carol Stewart will be Head Girl still, as far as that goes. I want something that goes a great deal farther, from my Senior Prefect."

Peter took another look at the new Head's face, set in its wonderful auburn hair. Yes, the large well-opened eyes of greenish hazel were quite serious; Miss Harrington did mean what she was saying.

"The girls wouldn't like it," she faltered miserably.

Silence from Miss Harrington.

"We never have done that sort of thing," Peter went on, in a sort of gulp.

Still silence. Rather unnerving that silence.

"I know about the scholarship, and it is most frightfully good of you, and, of course, if I have it I'll play the game about it; but I didn't know you were going to ask me to do things I simply can't," finished poor Peter.

"Who told you that you can't?" inquired the Head very calmly.

"Miss Harrington, I'm not brainy."

"You haven't chosen yourself."

"Nor anything in the school. Couldn't Carol . . ."

"No, she couldn't," said Miss Harrington.

There was a little silence. “I don’t want to let you down, you know,” Peter got out at last.

“Of course not. And people needn’t do what they don’t intend,” the Head assured her.

“I think—it’s just as good of you—and, of course, I must write to mother; but I think I would rather not have the scholarship,” Peter said.

Miss Jane Brooker gave a sound that was rather like a snort, rammed her needles deliberately into a black satin knitting-bag, and rose to her feet.

“Told you that you were mistaken, Georgia; told you so all along,” she said.

“I don’t think so, dearest,” Miss Harrington assured her with perfect calm. “But don’t bother to stay if this discussion bores you. Peter and I will meet you and everybody in the Great Hall in half an hour’s time.”

The door shut behind Miss Brooker; it shut very firmly. In a schoolgirl one would almost have called it a slam, only naturally Miss Jane Brooker was above such weaknesses.

Miss Harrington smiled indulgently. “Dear Miss Brooker, I never am properly grown up to her. She was my governess once, you know, Petronella, and when you have failed to make a person see the use of Algebra after many years of effort . . .”

Peter laughed, but she returned to the charge.

“Miss Harrington, it’s awfully wonderful and nice of you to think I could do that sort of thing—but you don’t know me really, you know—I mean, of course, you know all about girls, but you can’t guess about me quite. I just couldn’t—everyone would laugh, and I should make a muddle of it all.”

“Any sort of pioneering wants pluck,” Miss Harrington remarked, so casually that Peter was almost deceived into the idea that she was agreeing with her. “You did show a good deal when you stopped the Express, but it’s a nuisance stretching up all the time, I know.”

“It isn’t that exactly . . .” began Peter. “At least, I suppose it may be just a bit,” she continued lamely.

“I think so too,” agreed Miss Harrington, and then she laid her hand on Peter’s shoulder, as the girl sat there on the black bearskin rug.

“Peter,” she said, “we’ve got a rather stiff run across country before us this term; but no one who can ride may shirk; you don’t want to shirk, do

you?"

Peter stared up at Miss Harrington. She had looked like that in the train, when she was expecting a collision and trying to get the children into safety first. Quite suddenly she felt that she would have to say yes to all the dreadful new responsibilities which were being pressed upon her.

"Is it to be the school first?" asked Miss Harrington; and Peter muttered, "I'll try, anyhow," which seemed to satisfy the Head.

She took up her stick and limped across to her desk, returning with a paper.

"After consultation with the staff, these are the names of the girls I propose asking to take office as Prefects," she said. "Twelve of them you see—you are the thirteenth."

"Unlucky number," Peter blurted out, feeling the need of saying something.

"Not in this case, I think," the Head told her. "Among our changes here I have turned a big army hut into a Gymnasium—and a beauty it makes—the old one, which was quite too small for the purpose, has been turned into the Lower School Recreation Room; and that long room at the top of the house where they used to play, to the utter distraction of everyone below, I am told, has been partitioned out into six studies, one for every two Prefects. The seventh study is that little turret room at the angle of the old playroom—and that is for you, Peter."

"For me—that jolly little place with the cornery windows; how absolutely *it*!" Peter cried in a tone of such fervour that Miss Harrington laughed.

"Glad you approve. A study is a rather fascinating possession. I have furnished each to some extent, but the owners will supplement to taste, no doubt."

"Please, when shall we be allowed to be in them?" Peter inquired, with shining eyes.

"Whenever out of actual class-hours your consciences allow you."

"They're upstairs."

"That won't matter. There will be hardly any rules for Prefects. They are expected to keep the spirit more than the letter."

"And may we——"

Miss Harrington held up her hand.

"I'LL TRY, ANYHOW."

"To a large extent you will have the ruling of yourself and others. Keep as your absolute creed 'The School first,' and then think for yourself. And now to break our plans to the rest."

Leaning on Petronella's arm, Miss Harrington made her slow way to the Great Hall, opening the door exactly on the stroke of the half-hour.

The hall presented a rather disorderly appearance. Girls were strolling about it; some rather languidly placing chairs; Miss Rowley and another very junior mistress were trying, in a rather fussed and flurried way, to get things straight.

Miss Harrington paused at the door and held up her hand.

There was not an instant silence, it is true, but the noise began to die away uncomfortably. When the dropping shots of coughing and feet shifting had followed the voices, Miss Harrington spoke, and her voice sounded like little dropping pellets of ice, not kind and comrady as it had been to Peter in the study.

"I said I should be ready for you at half-past seven, girls."

Miss Rowley murmured something about not having known how late it was, and it being difficult to collect the girls from their unpacking.

Miss Harrington mounted the platform, still leaning on Peter's arm, and stood looking down upon the girls, who had by now been got into some sort of order.

"About fifty girls are not here," she announced after a moment's pause. "Would you mind, Miss Rowley . . ."

"I am so sorry, but the unpacking is rather a difficulty . . . and Senior girls . . . besides the custom. . . ."

"Would you tell them to come at once, please, Miss Rowley," the Head requested very quietly. "I should like you to see that every girl is in her place within two minutes."

Miss Rowley hurried away. Miss Harrington, still leaning upon Peter, surveyed her subjects with much interest. It was an interest with which some of them, very conscious of untidy hair, and clothes rumpled by the unpacking and the ragging in the corridors that generally went with it on the first evening of the term, would gladly have dispensed.

Well within the appointed time there was a stampede on the stairs and across the hall, and the greater number of the missing girls burst into the room. The rest followed three seconds later. Miss Harrington looked round.

"There are two or three little points to which I should like to draw your attention, girls," she said, her voice reaching without effort to the farthest end of the Great Hall. "I dislike unpunctuality, noise and untidiness. I have met all three at Windicotes to-night. Don't let it happen again, please. Will the girls who had to be sent for go quietly to their places behind the others?"

The girls went, and very quietly. Whatever they felt, there was not the ghost of a murmur to be heard. There was a pin-drop silence when Miss Harrington began to speak again.

She started by a charming tribute to Miss Meldrum; her untiring work for Windicotes, the vivid interest she felt in its welfare, the obligation on the school to live up to its past reputation. The school clapped as in duty bound, but the enthusiasm would have been more if Miss Harrington had reserved her remarks for what was felt to be the proper time—after prayers next morning, when the business of life had begun.

Then in a brief and business-like manner the new Head outlined the plan of work for the coming term; that was more or less expected and aroused no special excitement, though Meriel Roper looked gloomy and Cara Stornaway frankly sceptical when they heard of lectures on special subjects added to the ordinary school curriculum, and that in spite of the Public Schools Exam to be taken again at Christmas. But aggressive energy was perhaps to be expected from a new Head, and the school in general listened with only moderate disapproval.

Miss Harrington made a slight pause before going on to the burning question of the changes in Windicotes constitution.

“The Governors of the school and I have talked a good deal over the past, present and future of the school,” she said, “and have come to the decision that certain alterations are advisable. Alterations tend to be disagreeable things, both to make and to bear, but you and I have both to consider one thing before any private feelings whatsoever—the good of the School. Government by Prefects always seems to me an essential of any school; for that reason I am placing much of the dealing with school affairs in the hands of Prefects chosen from among yourselves. There will be twelve Prefects at Windicotes, to whom I will talk presently about their duties, responsibilities and privileges. There will be a Senior Prefect, to whom will belong, of course, the casting vote in Prefects’ meetings, and to whom the other twelve will be directly answerable. She is already chosen—Petronella Carey. The twelve Prefects to work with her have still to accept office. I am about to read their names.”

Freda Compton of the Sixth, looking hot and uncomfortable, stood up, in response to an agitated whisper and then a push from her neighbour.

“May I say something, Miss Harrington?”

There was tension in the air; the school felt it. Even Miss Brooker had laid down her knitting, Peter noticed that.

"Have you quite decided to alter ways which have always belonged to Windicotes, Miss Harrington? We are very conservative here—and Carol Stewart is Head Girl."

Miss Harrington looked full at Freda. "Thank you for mentioning it. I know that Carol has been Head Girl—is still for that matter. Carol and I will talk that matter over later on. But there will be twelve Prefects and one Senior all the same."

Freda stood up for a second or two longer, as though she wanted to say something else, but she didn't. She sat down rather suddenly, turning plum colour.

Miss Harrington took up her list as though nothing had happened.

"The names of the girls whom I ask if they are willing to take office for the school are these:

"Cara Stornaway.

"Christine Kington.

"Meriel Roper.

"Sylvia Stockton.

"Jean Adams.

"Nancy Willingdon.

"Doris Carpenter.

"Phyllis Armstrong.

"Margery Cottrill.

"Iris Pemberton.

"Joan Grey."

A breathless silence, and then a torrent of agitated whispers. Miss Harrington allowed a full minute for those, before she held her hand up.

"To begin from the bottom of the list and go upward—Joan Grey, will you take office as Prefect?"

Joan seemed to find some difficulty in replying, though in general she had plenty to say. She turned very red and stammered a little, was nudged by

a neighbour, another Lower Sixth girl, and finally stood up.

"Thank you very much, Miss Harrington, but I think I had rather not accept," she said.

The school held its breath again as Joan sat down with an embarrassed plop. What would the new Head say?

What she said was "Iris Pemberton?"

"Thank you, Miss Harrington, but I don't feel fitted for a Prefect."

"Margery Cottrill?"

Margery was blunter still. "No thank you, Miss Harrington."

Miss Harrington showed neither annoyance nor surprise. She ran through the list in a perfectly toneless voice, only allowing time for each refusal. Eleven girls declined the honour offered to them; the twelfth, Cara Stornaway, accepted it in a tone that was truculent from sheer embarrassment.

Miss Harrington noted the name down in a little book that she carried with her; the school watched the proceeding with a sense that her bluff was rather good, for she must have known that two Prefects could not rule four houses.

Miss Harrington faced the school again, another paper in her hand.

"I will now read the names of eleven other girls, who are asked if they will take office for the school."

She began to read at once; it wasn't bluff, she *had* another list.

"Patricia Heron.

"Peggy Wren.

"Mary Morton.

"Joan Lindsay.

"Jacynth Caine.

"Helen Wright.

"Catherine King.

"Barbara Slade.

"Barbara Grinstead.

“Martina May.

“Veronica Wynne-Hardinge.”

To say that the school were taken aback would be to express the matter mildly. The move was so entirely unexpected. Veronica Wynne-Hardinge said “Yes” because she could not think of anything else to say, as she afterwards explained, and the rest followed like sheep. The twelve Prefects and one Senior Prefect were duly cheered by a bewildered school, and requested to come to Miss Harrington’s room after supper to be notified of their duties.

Miss Harrington dismissed the school to dress for supper, as calmly as though nothing had happened.

When Peter flew upstairs, after giving the new Head an arm back to her study, she found angry groups standing about in the corridors discussing a situation which it appeared that nobody intended to tolerate for a moment. Unluckily they had borne it for the moment that mattered, the moment when the Prefects were accepting office.

CHAPTER VII

REBELLION

Peter took "Lights Out" according to instruction. When she had done the round she went to her new room, to find Vivian most properly in bed, and Aleth sitting upon hers clad in a blue dressing-gown.

"Hullo?" Peter said inquiringly. There always had been licence on the first night, and Aleth and Angela were in the Sixth, if it was only Lower Sixth. Still, "Lights Out" had been taken; Peter wished very heartily that Aleth was not her elder sister.

"I say, do you mind?" she asked, facing her squarely. "It's half-past nine."

"I know. I'm not staying—I've only just come to tell you something," Aleth said. She looked round at Vivian, and Vivian discreetly withdrew under the bedclothes, murmuring something about going to sleep.

"We've been talking it over, and someone will have to tackle Miss Harrington. This sort of thing won't do at Windicotes, making Juniors into Prefects, and so on."

"The Seniors declined," Peter interrupted.

"Miss Harrington is new, of course, and she can't understand about Windicotes," Aleth went on.

"There is to be a Seniors' meeting to-morrow, and you must . . ."

Peter stiffened her courage. "Look here, Aleth, I'm sorry, but you must go or be reported. You're breaking rules."

Aleth rose in outraged majesty. "My dear kid . . ."

"Sorry, but I did take on the Prefect job," Peter said stubbornly. "Good-night, Aleth."

Aleth went out. She looked very tall, and though she returned the good-night, it was from an altitude. Peter foresaw a difficult explanation in the morning. Life presented complications. She began to unhook her evening frock.

"Let me do that, Peter," Vivian said, sitting up.

Peter sat down on the bed. “Thanks no end.”

“I say, Peter.”

“Um.”

“I’m awfully sorry.”

The sympathy was unexpected. It was also rather nice. “Oh, it’s all in the day’s march,” said Peter. “Come all right in time, I expect.”

She hurried with her undressing and got quickly into bed. “Good-night, Vivian—and thanks.”

Peter stayed awake longer than usual, thinking of the Seniors’ meeting and other rocks ahead. But she also thought that it was rather comforting to have someone in your room who cared how things went with you. She went to sleep at last, feeling comparatively cheerful.

Morning came, bright and sunny, with an exhilarating touch of frost. Peter and Vivian dressed by the open window, Peter busy pointing out historic spots where incidents of note had happened in the Windicotes career. Vivian showed a very proper appreciation of their importance; Peter thought she would be a decided success at school. There seemed a lot to talk about, and the breakfast-bell nearly caught them unready. Only just in time they joined the flying crowd of girls rushing along the corridors and galleries to meet on the great staircase. More girls were in the hall, or streaming up from the dressing-rooms where girls from other houses shed coats and outdoor shoes, and then an army pouring into the enormous refectory.

There was a rule against talking on the stairs, or in the hall; but during the last year of Miss Meldrum’s life, when her health had necessitated her being a good deal away, the rule had become rather slack. Certainly there was a very distinct buzz as the girls crossed the hall in rather disorderly procession and entered the refectory. Peter and Cara Stornaway looked at one another; then Peter nerved herself for a tremendous effort.

“No talking, please.”

The buzz ceased from sheer surprise. Peter, scarlet in the face, stood waiting until the last of the crowd had passed through; then she shut the door and walked to her place. A table marked “Prefects” stood in solitary grandeur in the great bay window. The other Prefects stood near it, looking embarrassed. Peter walked to the head, and glanced at Cara Stornaway. “Let’s sit down.”

The Prefects did not talk much; their position was too new and too conspicuous for ease, and Catherine King, Martina May and Veronica Wynne-Hardinge were only Fifth Form and very conscious of it. But they made a good breakfast; the commissariat was notably improved under the new régime. Just at the end of breakfast, Catherine King remarked nervously:

"I say, Peter, do you know there's going to be an indignation meeting or something—and it's Upper School."

Peter went on eating bread and marmalade.

"So I heard," she said.

"What shall we do?" asked Patricia Heron.

"See when the time comes," said Peter.

Miss Brooker was to teach Domestic Science; that had been announced last night, and was a fresh shock to the school. Miss Meldrum had taught nothing personally for years, except Divinity. Windicotes felt that subject belonged to the Head, and that only. Besides, what *was* Domestic Science?

"Suppose we shall find out," remarked Peter, to whom the last objection had been addressed, during the interval after breakfast.

"Are you going in for it?"

"Yes, I'll have to do lots of things in the house, I expect, by and by. We're not rolling."

"What's Miss Brooker like?" asked Phyllida Fayre, a name made for puns, as poor Phyllida knew to her cost.

"You saw her last night, didn't you?"

"Yes, you silly, but not to talk to."

"She doesn't talk very much," Peter said cautiously.

"Um. How cheery! She'll expect us to do it all in class, I suppose," groaned Mary Morton, who had put her name down to take the class last night.

But history was the first lesson that morning. A visiting Professor had taken it last term for all the Forms of the Upper School. He was tremendously learned and rather dull—great on Reform Bills and Constitution and Tonnage and Poundage and so forth. History aroused no

enthusiasm at Windicotes; still, a distinction was felt about the Professor's visits. He hardly ever condescended to a school.

This morning in the big airy Sixth Form room there was no sign of the Professor's narrow parchmenty face, peering at his class as he edged himself and his voluminous notes in his neat minute handwriting, through the door. Instead, the form had barely seated itself before the tap of a stick outside announced Miss Harrington, and the new Head walked in with a cheery "good morning" to her class. She seemed to feel no doubt that they were pleased to see her. The class stood and responded properly, but a little suspiciously. Another innovation, was the general thought.

Miss Harrington brought no notes or books, she just inquired what the Sixth had been taking in history during the past term. The Sixth were not too definite, suspecting a trap. "The Stuart Period," was Carol's description.

"Oh," said Miss Harrington, and began by a few casual questions. What the Sixth disliked about those questions was their unexpectedness. They had all heard of the Treaty of Dover, though Meriel Roper and Cara Stornaway would have been hard put to it to explain clearly what it was about; but who could be expected to know what else Louis XIV. of France was doing just then, what was the state of Russia, and what were the conditions in Austria which were eventually to lead to the Seven Years' War?

The catechism didn't take long—and everyone, including Peter, was glad when it came to an end—and then Miss Harrington began to talk. She didn't seem to the Sixth to take any particular trouble over it, but facts, and reigns, and people and countries all seemed to come together and to account for one another, instead of remaining in dismal isolation.

When she stopped at last, it was borne in upon the Sixth that there was quite a lot they didn't know in history!

"Compositions to be handed in on Saturday dealing with the experiences of a girl visiting the English Ambassador's wife in France, Russia, or Sweden," Miss Harrington announced cheerfully. "Please take note of the people she would meet. I shall expect most interesting essays"; she smiled her elusive smile. "And, of course, I shall get them."

Rather against its will, the Sixth smiled back. It had no such flattering hope; but it was difficult not to smile back at Miss Harrington. "But how in the world anyone of us are going to take a subject like that!" groaned Carol Stewart. And Carol liked history, and had always been considered a shining light at it.

Miss Harrington had chosen the break for introducing the Prefects and their studies to each other; Peter wondered a little whether she had realised that the removal of the Prefects gave the opposition in the school a grand opportunity for its indignation meeting. However that might be, it was, of course, impossible to tell her that an indignation meeting was impending. So she followed the new Head upstairs without speaking, only hoping that Carol's influence would be strong enough to keep down any open expression of defiance.

The studies gave unmixed satisfaction; they really were quite charming. The wooden partitions between them were painted a soft green colour, an admirable background for pictures. There was a little table in each; two or three basket chairs, a small cupboard and bookshelf. As Miss Harrington had said, the rest of the furnishing was to be left to the owner's individual taste. The Prefects had already arranged themselves in pairs, and took possession with much delight. Patricia paired with Barbara Slade; Jacynth with Catherine King; Peggy Wren and Mary Morton had always been inseparable, and Helen Wright and Joan Lindsay asked permission to share. Barbara Grinstead and Cara Stornaway were obviously intended to pair, and so were Martina May and Veronica Wynne-Hardinge, being so much younger and Lower Fifth only. The Prefects gave Miss Harrington three cheers when she announced that, except for a Prefect on duty for each house, the Prefects could consider themselves free for tea and prep, and could arrange to have tea brought them to their studies if they wished. Windicotes was warmed all over by radiators, but there was still a fireplace at the end of each corridor on which the studies opened, and Miss Harrington said that there would always be a fire there for boiling kettles, and that the cupboards might contain stores of eatables, since Prefects could naturally be trusted not to indulge in midnight suppers and so forth. Then Miss Harrington led the way to the turret-room. "And this is for the Senior Prefect."

Peter gave a cry of joy as Miss Harrington opened the door. The turret-room was very small, but it seemed to gather into it as much sunshine as the biggest room could hold. There were casement windows, opened wide just now to let in the flooding of that glorious vivid sunshine of late September; there were, as Peter had remembered, many enchanting corners; there was a delicious deep old window-seat, where it would be glorious to sit and do one's prep.

Miss Harrington had been even more generous with the furniture in this room, just as though she had guessed that the funds at home didn't run to much not strictly necessary. She had not needed to put in a cupboard,

because a long low one was sunk into the least cornery wall. But the bookcase stood on the floor, and was long and white-painted; there was a charming little table of old oak, with queer carved feet; there was a little square of old rose carpet on the floor, and the cushion in the window was the same shade, only rather deeper. Two little white-painted arm-chairs with rose cushions were drawn up suggestively to the fireplace, where a tiny three-cornered grate held a wood fire.

"You Prefects mostly look after your studies yourselves, of course; but coal and wood will be put all ready for you in the little cupboard at the end of the corridor, and I don't think you will find it difficult."

"Rather not, Miss Harrington!" That was Cara, a Cara who had quite forgotten to be gloomy.

"You can have the rest of the morning free to arrange your studies," the Head told the Prefects pleasantly, and they thanked her almost with enthusiasm.

The Head turned to go; Peter ran after her. "Miss Harrington, mayn't I give you an arm downstairs? Then I can come back with some of my books and things."

"Well, thank you, Petronella," Miss Harrington agreed.

On the stairs she said, with that odd smile of hers, "I wonder if the rest of the school has employed break as profitably?" Peter preserved a discreet silence.

The bell for the first lesson after break was beginning to ring as Miss Harrington and Peter crossed the hall. The door of the Sixth Form room stood ajar, and a voice, raised so as to be heard above the clanging of that aggressive bell, was plainly audible.

"That's settled then. We'll stand by Windicotes, and have our old ways back, and no Prefects. Carried *nem. con.*"

CHAPTER VIII

THE SING-SONG

For quite half a minute Peter did not dare look at the Head. When she screwed up her courage and did so, she was astounded to find that Miss Harrington was laughing a little to herself. And the worst of it, she had made no attempt to explain the joke.

"We have never had a debating society here, I think," she said pleasantly. "Don't you think that the Seniors should start it?"

"I don't think many of us are much good at talking," Peter said doubtfully.

"Oh, a good many, I gather. Don't be too modest," Miss Harrington told her, and that was the only allusion she made to the speech she had overheard.

Peter did not think much about debating societies and their advantages as she sped up the stairs again, with her arms full of books. Miss Harrington might or might not have been serious in her suggestion, and Peter had too many serious problems of her own to tackle just at present. For one thing, she was almost certain that Aleth, if not Angela, had been among the rebels at the meeting. She did wonder a little what was going to happen.

But in the meantime there was her study to arrange, and that made up for a great deal. The view from the turret-window was the best in the house; and the room being built out in the way it was, you seemed to hang rather over into space, as though it were bowing to the turret in Knave's House just opposite. The four "houses" at Windicotes were christened respectively School House, King's, Queen's, and Grey House. But the school called them King's, Queen's, and Knave's. There was a tradition as to the Grey House's reputation; ever since the historical term, five and twenty years ago, when Roberta St. Helier, known to her world as Bobby, had beaten all records for sheer ingenious wickedness, and among other crimes had run a ladder bridgeways from her own turret-window in Grey House to the turret of the School House, and crawled along it to convey half a pork pie and six strawberry tartlets to the inhabitants of the long room, now turned to Prefects' studies, then a dormitory.

Luckily it was only the pork pie that fell noisily from the height of three stories, not Bobby herself; but Miss Meldrum heard the bump, and looked out to see the ladder bridge, and the crouching figure on it clearly in the moonlight. After that, Grey House acquired, perhaps deservedly, its other name—and did its best to live up to its reputation.

Peter looked from her sunny windows across at the turret in the other house, and shivered a little. The girl must have had an extraordinarily steady head, an article with which Peter wasn't blessed. She hated heights, though she did her best to conceal the fact.

By dinner-time Peter was proud of her room, though, of course, it would be much nicer when certain treasured books and pictures, for which she had had no private place up to date, could be sent for from home. She and the other Prefects went down to dinner very cheerfully.

The afternoon was taken up with what was known as the Test Match, when new girls played hockey against a scratch team, and the Games Captain and the great lights of the athletic world stood and watched their play. Phyllis Armstrong, one of the Seniors who had declined Prefect's office, was Games Captain; Sylvia Stockton and Jean Adams were also very exalted, though the Games Mistress thought more of Cara Stornaway's "form," for all her general ungainliness. Peter, coming down to the field with Vivian, who was, of course, playing with the other new girls, noticed that Jean, Sylvia and Phyllis Armstrong were strolling down together, their hands in the pockets of their blazers (only the great lights in the school might do that, however cold the day might be), and Cara Stornaway, who would naturally be with them, walking by herself.

She hurried, and she and Vivian caught Cara up, Peter a little nervous lest she was outraging all school etiquette by so doing. Peter was a steady, not a brilliant hockey-player, and had never come to the fore specially in any game, though she was as keen as mustard. Cara was in Windicotes parlance "a knut."

"I say, Cara, I wonder if you would be awfully good, and give Vivian Massingbird here a few tips. She hasn't played much," Peter began diplomatically. "That is, if you can spare the time to walk down with us?"

Cara cocked an inquiring eye.

"Our new Head thinks you have a brain, Peter. I begin to think it vaguely possible myself. The society of Prefects isn't exactly at a premium."

She expounded hockey to Vivian all the way down the field, growing earnest and impressive over the supreme sin of failing to "pass" at the right moment, and so letting down your side for the sake of your individual play. Peter wondered whether Cara had been thinking of that duty when she accepted the post she did not covet in the face of her world's disapproval last night.

The Test Match was marked by few incidents of outstanding interest. Vivian played a good though rather nervous game, and a monkey-faced child of thirteen or so, called Gypsy Carstairs, had considerable flair and was an amazingly good runner. Peter watched Gypsy with rather particular interest; Miss Harrington had mentioned her last night during the study talk, as a child who would call for tactful dealing. She had been the inseparable companion of a brilliant and erratic artist father, it appeared. No one else showed very particular promise.

That was Cara's opinion, given in undertones to Peter, who stood beside her. Phyllis Armstrong and the others stood very definitely apart.

After the Test Match came an hour's work, then tea and prep, dressing for supper, supper itself, and then the unvarying institution of the first term day at Windicotes—a Sing-song—supposed, like the Test Match, to give new girls a chance of showing what they could do.

Peter did her best to prepare Vivian for this ordeal whilst they were changing their gym frocks for white ones.

"You needn't do much, but you must do something. Everyone is very decent, if you get up when you're asked and don't make a fuss. What will you do? Play the violin?"

"I think so," Vivian said, rather doubtfully.

"I know they're hateful things to keep in tune," Peter remarked. "There's a kid in the Fourth who always gets her strings either sharp or flat when she plays to parents on Breaking-up Day. But I'll stand by and bang the note on the piano for you, if you like."

There was a gleam of something that looked like amusement in Vivian's beautiful brown eyes. "Thanks awfully, Peter, it's ever so good of you, but I don't think I shall need that." Peter thought that Vivian was a less nervous sort of girl than one would expect from looking at her.

The Sing-song was held in the great hall of the School House, and practically the whole school assembled for it. It was considered only fair to

the new girls that they should do so, though it is doubtful whether the new girls altogether appreciated their blessings.

Vivian fetched her violin-case directly supper was over, and came and sat down quietly by Peter.

They never put the new girls on at the very beginning of the programme; that was considered unfair. Jacynth Caine sang "Down Vauxhall Way" in a reedy but correct voice, and was vociferously clapped. Jean Adams recited "A Revolutionary Relic." Meriel Roper played something with an unpronounceable name, that shook fireworks out of the piano, and would have been more enjoyed if the school had not heard enough and more than enough of it when Meriel was practising for the breaking-up last term.

Then Carol Stewart, who was in the chair in right of her Head Girlship, cast a leisurely glance round, and spoke kindly, but from an immense distance.

"Now, new girls, don't be shy. Which of you will be first in showing us what you can do?"

There was the usual awkward pause, when feet shuffled, and new girls looked agonised and were advised in breathy whispers. Then Vivian stood up, holding her violin-case.

"I will play something, if you wish."

"That's right. What's your stunt? Fiddle?" Carol encouraged, with easy condescension. "Come up here to the platform—what's your name?"

"Vivian Massingbird."

"Oh yes, of course, you're something to the Careys, aren't you? Want an accompanist?"

"I don't think so, thank you," Vivian said, taking out her violin and tuning quickly and certainly. Peter noticed with interest that she never struck a note on the piano; it seemed she did not need that help to tuning. Then she tucked a silk handkerchief under her chin and began to play, without music and without accompaniment. The school held its breath; such playing had never been heard since the school began.

"And I told her not to be nervous," said Peter to herself.

Windicotes treated the new girl to a spontaneous burst of applause, and, as she laid her bow down, to an even more vociferous encore. Vivian gave it with a smile—something in complete contrast to the singing of innumerable

angel voices which she had given first; now her violin laughed and tripped a mad, merry measure that set scores of feet tapping in sympathy.

"You wonder—where do you get it?" Peter whispered, when Vivian had been congratulated by Carol, with a warmth that had in it a distant note of respect, and had returned to her place.

"Did you like it? I'm so glad," Vivian whispered back. "Oh, I don't know about it—it just comes when I start playing."

"Do you mean that no one taught you those things you played—you composed them?" Peter demanded in blank amazement.

"Oh, they just sing themselves in my head, I think," Vivian said. Peter gasped. "Well—you *are*!"

The other girls performed with more or less skill, but naturally fell rather flat after Vivian and her violin. The last to get up was Gypsy, who, instead of looking scared like most of the girls while waiting for her turn, had been staring about her, Peter noticed, with bright, critical eyes. She stood on the platform facing the school, a small quaint-looking child, with straight dark bobbed hair tumbling into her eyes, and an impish smile.

"I was going to play my fiddle to you, but under the circs I won't. If anyone will oblige me with a bit of chalk . . ."

Several girls "obliged" promptly; odd bits of chalk are plentiful at school.

"Thanks," Gypsy said imperturbably, reaching down to grab at the nearest of the hands held out to her.

"Miss Gypsy Carstairs will now proceed to her famous (they will be) lightning portraits of School Celebrities."

There was a murmur of "Cheek" that rose above the laughter greeting this announcement, but Gypsy did not seem to mind. A blackboard on its easel was always on the platform, except for the special school concerts or theatricals. Gypsy strolled up to it, turned it round so that the audience should not see what she was doing. A line here—a dash there—a wild scriggle of handwriting—and Gypsy turned the board so that it could be seen.

Phyllis Armstrong stood portrayed to the life, hands in blazer pockets, chin uplifted, back to a vaguely indicated mob of schoolgirls. Below simply "The Knut."

Everybody shouted applause, particularly the Lower School; perhaps the Seniors recognised the touch of malice that lay under the cleverness of the sketch. Gypsy rubbed rapidly with the duster that hung over the easel and got on to her next. This time it was Vivian (no under-current of malice in her portrait), a far-away look in her eyes, and her delicate fingers on the strings. Below, "Don't be shy."

Carol turned rather red, but the unwritten law of Windicotes insisted that every new girl might give what performance she chose at this special Sing-song. Gypsy wiped out the sketch and got to work again. This time the sketch, which had taken longer, in spite of the amazing speed with which she worked, was not received with much applause. It represented a row of faces—the faces of the twelve whom Miss Harrington had first asked to take the office of Prefect. The scored-off expression on their faces was rendered with cruel cleverness. At the top of the blackboard a hand held a list—the names upon it just indicated.

Below was written, *Vendu*.

Carol stood up, her face crimsoning. This was really going beyond everything. Carol had also received a little information about Gypsy Carstairs, but she could hardly be expected to tolerate this.

"That's enough, Gypsy—very clever, but we'll have someone else, please."

"Just one more," suggested Gypsy easily. "I'm sure the school would like to see one more. You don't get an artist free of all charge every day."

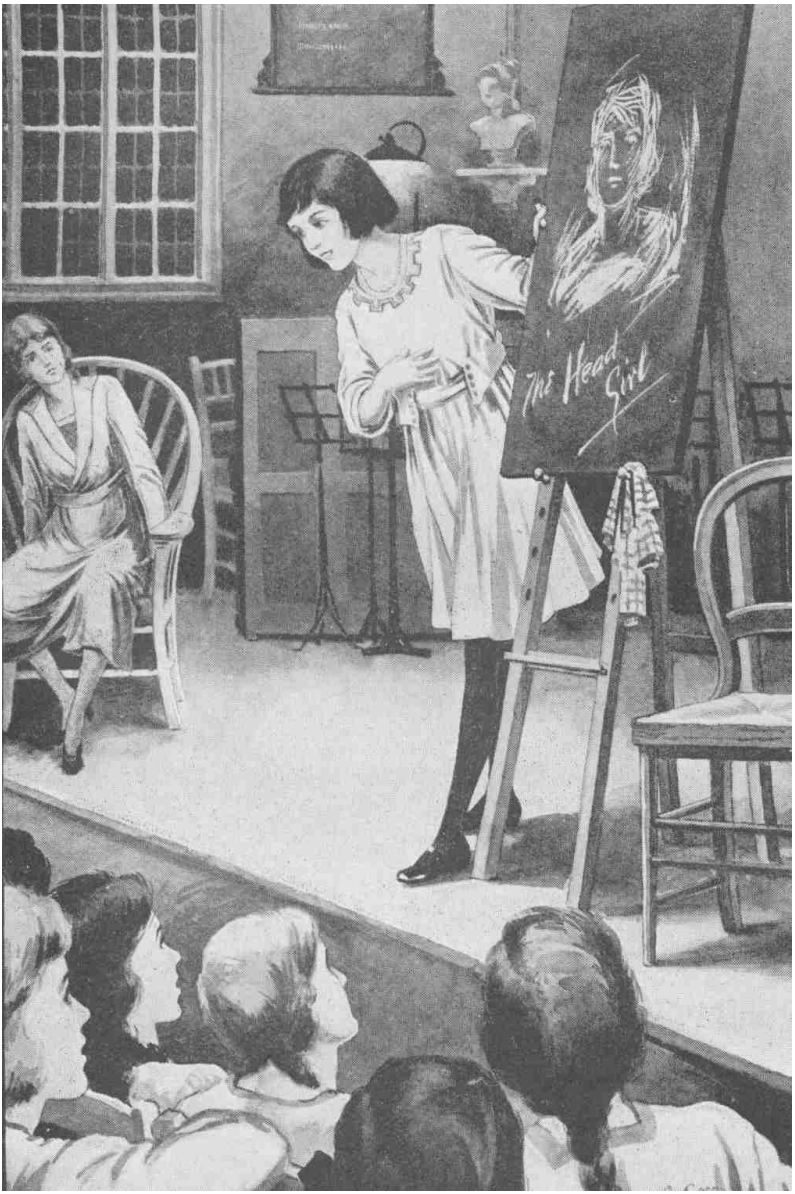
She wiped out the offending sketch with lightning speed and turned the easel back. The Lower School and a good many of the Upper too, to judge by the noise, yelled "Encore! Encore!" Carol made a virtue of necessity. "Well, one more then," she said.

Gypsy took a little longer over this one, and once she took a rapid glance at Carol. But her impish smile remained unchanged, in fact it grew a shade more impish as the breathless seconds passed. It occurred to Peter that the Prefects were likely to find a handful in Gypsy Carstairs, but she didn't guess to what extent.

Gypsy turned the easel. "My last," she said blandly. "Miss Gypsy Carstairs retires from the scene of action."

She jumped off the platform as a murmur, swelling rapidly, rose from the audience. No one could doubt what the murmur meant. It was indignation, and Peter for one could not wonder at it.

The legend written below Gypsy's sketch was "The Head Girl," and the face was Carol's growing into Peter's. The thing was wonderfully done, and quite unmistakable. If the girls had been looking at a sketch made by an outsider, they would have realised that it was a brilliant piece of work. But the fact that it was a skit on such a burning school question, and a skit perpetrated by a new girl and a Junior, made it a crime of the deepest dye. Above all other sounds arose the angry hisses; Peter stood up.



“MY LAST,” SHE SAID BLANDLY.

“I should like to say something, Carol, if I may.”

That was what she tried to get out, but her voice was drowned. The school literally howled her down, and even Carol, struggling for order, could obtain no hearing. Gypsy had laid the match to a train of gunpowder, and it burst with a terrific explosion.

“Down with the Prefects! the Prefects! Three cheers for the Head Girl! No Prefects! Down with them!”

The noise was frightful; nothing of the kind had ever been heard before at Windicotes.

Peter fought her way through the hostile throng and got on to the platform, but even standing beside her she could not make Carol hear what she said.

The quieter girls had been shouted down by the rest, and were leaving the hall, by now a veritable pandemonium.

“No Prefects! No Prefects!” yelled the school.

The sound of a bell cut sharply into the appalling din. Carol heaved a sigh of relief, and took instant advantage of the momentary lull.

“The bell!” she shouted. “Cut along.”

Habit goes a long way, and the time allowed before “Lights Out” was rather short, especially for the girls who had to run across to the other houses. The school stopped shouting and hurried. In a few minutes only Peter and Carol were left fronting each other.

Carol spoke. “Petronella, I’m sorry, I wouldn’t have had this happen for a good deal.”

“You couldn’t help it,” Peter acknowledged squarely.

“It’s beastly, though. ’Fraid Miss Harrington will have to give up the Prefect idea.”

“Think so?” inquired Peter, and passed on.

That was the end of the noisiest Sing-song ever known at Windicotes.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE NIGHT

Peter did not go to bed that evening after "Lights Out." She went up to her study to think. There was a good deal to think about.

Of course it had been hopeless to suppose that the noise at the break up of the Sing-song had not been heard. Carol and Peter met on Miss Harrington's doormat, each aware that something must be said.

"Oh, you go first," Peter suggested politely. Carol considered. "I should think we had better go together."

They went. Miss Harrington received them politely, and made no allusion to the noise. But it had been heard in the staff-room, farther away by the length of a corridor from the school hall. Carol looked at Peter, and then remarked nervously:

"We had a Sing-song to-night, Miss Harrington."

"Ah, so I heard," said the Head. It was coming; no, it wasn't. "What talent among the new girls?" came instead.

"Vivian Massingbird plays gorgeously," Carol explained, putting off the evil day of confession.

"And Gypsy Carstairs, the Junior you were talking to me about last night, does frightfully clever sketches," Peter put in.

"Ah, she does? Did I tell you her father's name—Nick Carstairs, the Lightning Cartoonist?" Miss Harrington said pleasantly.

"Is she his daughter? Oh, that accounts for it, I suppose; the things were good," Carol agreed, without enthusiasm.

"But you don't care for that sort of thing?" Miss Harrington was sympathetic.

"Oh, I didn't mind—but the school did. There was rather a row. . . ."

"I gathered that," smiled the Head.

"And I couldn't make them stop it."

Miss Harrington smiled still. "Ah, if you sow nasturtium seeds, you seldom reap broad beans up. So you couldn't stop them? Did anybody?"

“I didn’t,” Peter confessed. “I tried, Miss Harrington, but it was no good. They wouldn’t hear me.”

“They wouldn’t? And one Head Girl and one Senior Prefect. And you were both quite content with that ‘wouldn’t’?”

The last was in a tone of polite inquiry.

“Miss Harrington, I don’t really see what one could have done.” Carol was on the defensive. “The school is a good deal upset by the changes, and . . .”

“Yes?” said Miss Harrington deferentially.

Carol seemed to find some difficulty in going on. Miss Harrington was leaning a little forward, her wonderful eyes fixed upon Carol’s face. Carol looked at Peter, and Peter rushed into the breach.

“We made a mess of it, Miss Harrington, that’s the long and the short of it.”

“Yes, I did just guess that. And now what about the hockey teams?”

“Phyllis Armstrong is Games Captain—at least, if she is re-elected,” Carol explained. “But, Miss Harrington, the School is up in arms.”

“The Games Captain is elected by vote, the voters being one girl chosen by each Form, I think?” Miss Harrington said.

If she didn’t know what the School wanted, at least she knew what the School had done, Peter thought.

“Yes, but . . .”

“That little matter, and the election of all school officers had better go forward at once,” Miss Harrington announced briskly. “The Senior Prefect will call the meetings, the notices to be posted on the new notice board in the hall. And now, good-night, girls—you must have some prep to do, I am sure.”

When they were outside it occurred to both of them that Miss Harrington had given no instructions as to how they were to deal with the rebellion Gypsy had excited. Carol thought she had forgotten, and suggested going back; Peter thought not. She was smarting under the Head’s attitude towards the trouble, but that wasn’t the reason that she refused to face her again. “I believe she meant we ought to have found a way for ourselves,” she said gloomily. “We’d better go along and find it, I suppose.”

"Going to stick to the Prefect business?" asked Carol off-handedly.

"Rather!"

With which they parted, and Peter took "Lights Out," and then collected her books and went to her study for some work and a quiet think.

The thinking took a long time; Peter had no idea how the quarter-hours slid by, while she sat with her chin in her hands, and her blue eyes, which were so like her father's, staring out unseeingly through the open window at the Knave's House opposite. And then quite suddenly she came back to a rather belated consciousness of the present—eleven striking, no preparation done, and the world in bed.

Peter got up and stretched herself. She wasn't afraid of getting into trouble for breaking rules; Miss Harrington had certainly implied that the Prefects were to make their own to a large extent; and she had been trying to see her way through the difficulties that beset the school. But she must go to bed now, that was certain; everybody else would be asleep. But were they? As Peter leaned out of her turret-window to catch the hasp and close the old-fashioned casement that she loved, her eyes were caught by a curious fitful red glow that seemed to come from between the curtains of the windows of a big dormitory on the second story of the Knave's House.

Peter leaned a little farther over; and yes, there was no doubt of it, there were lights up in a dormitory on the second floor of the house opposite; and, as she listened she fancied a sound of hushed giggling. There was no doubt about it, some sort of excitement was going on in one of the dormitories of Knave's House.

"A midnight supper!" Peter thought. Of course it must be stopped; the Windicotes rules had always been most strict on that point since a girl had been taken very ill indeed after eating two sausages, two dough-nuts, seven sardines, and a whole tin of pineapple, at one o'clock in the morning.

That floor was given over to Lower Fourth and Upper Third children; they were probably celebrating Gypsy's outrageous conduct, Peter thought. She considered for a moment, and then went quietly to the door. All outer doors would be shut and bolted, but there was a window in one of the cloak-rooms that was quite easy to open from the outside, she knew. Once outside and under the windows of the Knave's House, it ought to be quite easy to attract their attention, without attracting the undesired attention of a mistress as well. Peter didn't intend to do that; Miss Harrington's tone about the inability of her Senior Prefect and Head Girl to deal with the earlier trouble

was quite fresh in her memory. Besides, there would be the most terrific row if any mistress caught girls red-handed in the orgy of a midnight supper.

Peter turned the door-handle very quietly. She must be quiet now, she knew; it would have been quite possible to explain her own reasons for being up and in her study at this hour, but not her reasons for getting out of a cloak-room window at eleven at night.

Just because she was so anxious to make no noise, the door was unaccountably difficult to open. Peter turned and twisted the handle, but still it stuck; Peter couldn't understand it. It was particularly tiresome, though; luckily no one slept this side of the School House on the top floor; there were music-rooms and box-rooms beyond the Prefects' studies, the maids all slept on the other side. But any wakeful person might hear from below; there was always that risk. Peter wrapped the handkerchief round the handle and tried again, giving a sharp twist instead of shaking the door.

The result was just the same. Quite suddenly it came to her what had happened. She had fancied a sound of tiptoed footsteps outside the door, and something that might have been a smothered giggle, but that was a long time ago, when her thoughts had been far away, and she had taken no real notice of it. Now it came back to her, and with it the certainty of what had happened. Someone had locked her in. Peter desisted from her efforts and sat down to think.

There were two things that she could do; one was to wait quietly here till morning and be let out when the maids came upstairs; the other, to open her window as wide as it would go, and to lean out, calling, till she wakened somebody and was rescued forthwith.

But neither plan appealed to Peter; the first meant such a score for whoever had shut her in and for the midnight feasters next door; the other meant getting the rebels next door into the most fearful row to start with, and—showing Miss Harrington for the second time this evening that the Senior Prefect she had trusted was quite unable to deal with any trouble in the school. Peter set her teeth; she would deal with it somehow.

She got up and walked across to the window, the red light from the revellers' window lay in a curious vivid bar on the whiteness of the moonlight, as reflected on the grey wall below her. They thought they could carry on their midnight supper with impunity, for the turret-room above the dormitory was empty and the Senior Prefect was locked into the other across the way.

Peter stared from the open window of her turret into the open window of the turret opposite, and then all at once, the thought of Bobby St. Helier flashed across her mind. Bobby had bridged the gulf for no bigger reason than to bring a pork pie to the third floor dormitory at the School House; Peter looked round her prison with a little fighting smile upon her face.

A ladder? Yes, she had in the room with her the ladder from the box-room, so that she might hang the pictures she had brought from home. It was a good long ladder too, longer than she had really needed for the pictures. She had been obliged to get Cara Stornaway's help in moving it, for fear she should break something, and it was because Cara Stornaway had gone down before she, Peter, had finished her study, that the ladder had remained in the turret-room instead of going back to its proper place.

Peter was thankful now that Cara had gone down, so that she had not put that ladder back. She moved it very cautiously towards the window. It was rather heavy, but then it would be quite strong. There was no fear that it would break.

Moving gingerly, and skirting chairs and other articles of furniture, she got the end of the ladder through the window, without further misadventure than breaking a little old nursery cup holding a couple of late roses.

Peter began to push the ladder very carefully through—she must get it quite straight, or she might shatter glass across the way. It was heavy and a slow business, but there was a certain dogged element about Peter that made for patience. She got the ladder planted safely, tested it, and then, very carefully, on hands and knees, began to crawl out upon it. It wasn't dignified, but it seemed the better way for someone whose head was unsteady. Even as it was, Peter didn't particularly like it. But she went on steadily, without looking down at the yawning gulf and the gravelled square three stories below. She meant to stop that midnight feasting somehow, and this appeared to her just then to be the only way.

She got across and crawled in at the window of the turret opposite. Peter heaved a sigh of thankfulness; now it was over, she discovered that her mouth was almost as dry as when she had stopped the Express with the Greenacre train coming round the corner behind her. "I must get my head steadier for heights," Peter told herself, and went quietly downstairs to the dormitory below.

She opened the door. About twenty girls—all Third or Lower Fourth, were sitting round a table made of two beds pushed close together, and covered, humpily, with the sheets belonging to a third.

This table was spread with a truly magnificent feast—sausage rolls, meringues, cheese-cakes, dough-nuts, Swiss buns, chocolate and jam roll and shortbread. There were bottles of fizzy lemonade, and two or three tooth tumblers going the round of the party when drink was required.

At the head, or rather the foot of the table (the head was rather a difficult position), sat Gypsy, her impish face all one grin. The feasters had lit the gas, and had taken the precaution to draw the curtains, only unluckily, or luckily, they had not drawn them quite carefully enough; hence the bar of light upon the house opposite.

Peter stood in the doorway and surveyed the crowd of girls in dressing-gowns.

"Who got up this festive show?" she inquired in uncompromising accents.

Everybody stared at her instead of answering, for quite half a minute; then Eileen Tremain asked falteringly, "How did you get out?"

"Oh, it was you locked me in, was it?" Peter said.

"I told her to," Gypsy explained.

"You did? And is it your feast?"

"I thought of it," Gypsy owned.

"You're new, of course. But I suppose you have been told about the rules?"

"Yes, but there's no fun unless you break them," Gypsy said airily.

"Quite so, and it's so safe to do it the first week, when you know you won't be punished," Peter told her.

Gypsy went scarlet.

"I didn't . . . I didn't do it for that."

Peter took no notice of her. "Any other ringleaders?" she inquired, with an air of being quite sure the ringleaders would wish to mention their names at once.

Eileen Tremain stood up. "I was one."

"I was another," said Cynthia Langdale.

"And I gave half a crown, and helped to do the shopping," that was Viola St. George.

“Right,” said Peter calmly. “You, Eileen, Cynthia and Viola will come to me to-morrow afternoon, and . . .”

“We shan’t,” snapped Eileen.

“Don’t, then,” said Peter coolly. “Nothing to me, but don’t blame me if you don’t like the alternative.”

“What is it?” Viola asked, with an attempt at cheerfulness that wasn’t quite successful.

“You’ll know to-morrow—if you’re not in my study by two sharp,” Peter mentioned, without excitement. “The remainder of you kids clear up this mess as fast as possible, and write out *Breaking rules is a silly game*, ten times over to-morrow. Gypsy Carstairs gets off, of course . . .”

“I don’t want to,” Gypsy burst out hotly. “I don’t think you’ve any right to interfere, Petronella; they all say you’re not Head Girl, and they don’t care about Miss Harrington’s old Prefects—that’s why I did the sketch, to make them mad; but if you’re going to row the others, I’ll . . .”

“Clear up and get back to bed,” Peter interrupted. “This isn’t a debating society; it’s a supper that isn’t allowed in the middle of the night. You’ve got a box or something, I suppose? If everything isn’t packed up, and the lot of you in bed within five minutes, I’ll double your lines all round.”

The children hurried. Gypsy had voiced what they all felt, but it was a curious fact that no one felt inclined to absolutely defy Peter’s authority just then. The remains of the food were hastily packed into a large cardboard box, taken from underneath one of the beds; the sheet that was a tablecloth was shaken clear of crumbs and put to its proper use again, and ten dejected Juniors from the next dormitory filed towards the door.

“Good-night,” said Peter.

“Good-night,” murmured the dressing-gowned procession.

Peter picked up the box of eatables. “Good-night, you kids here.”

“Petronella,” came from Gypsy’s bed.

“Well?”

“I’m coming with the other three to your study.”

“I shouldn’t. You won’t come in; it’s dull outside,” Peter advised.

“You’re a beast!” flamed Gypsy, and turned over.

“Quite so,” Peter agreed, putting out the light and moving cautiously towards the window to draw back the curtains.

“One thing,” came from the bed in the far corner—Gypsy’s bed.

“A civil thing?” asked Peter.

“Yes; how in the world did you get out of your study with the door locked?”

“I’ll leave you to think it out,” Peter said pleasantly. “Good-night, Gypsy.”

Peter went out and softly closed the door.

CHAPTER X

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

The first thing she did was to go back to the turret-room and draw the ladder over. It had occurred to her that it wasn't a very safe plan to leave it bridging the gulf between the houses for everyone to see. It might strike the Juniors as a good way of getting from house to house, and Peter did not think it was a way that would appeal to Miss Harrington at all. Of course, she might have to account for the ladder being in the wrong house, but the ladders were moved about so often; and no one, except Cara Stornaway, was likely to remember that the ladder had been on the top floor of the School House last night.

Then she began to go downstairs very quietly, with the box. Her idea was to let herself out of the Knave's House and in at the little cloak-room window. She believed that one could lift the hasp of the window with the blade of a knife, and Peter always carried a knife about with her, when she could. She had on the dark-green flannel blazer worn by Windicotes over her evening frock to keep her warm, and there was a knife in her right-hand pocket.

Peter let herself out of the Knave's House by a passage window, closed it carefully behind her, and dropped into a wonderful moonlit world, with everything as bright as day, and far more beautiful.

As she crossed the square of brilliant moonshine, a window was thrown up, and a voice asked very quietly.

"Who is that outside?"

Peter had to repress a certain inward giggle at the thought of dear Miss Meldrum's face if she had seen what Miss Harrington saw now.

"It's I, Miss Harrington—Petronella Carey."

"Can you get in through this window?" Miss Harrington asked, with a calm that was really rather astonishing under the circumstances.

The study window was not high, but Peter was a good deal encumbered by the box.

"Give that to me," Miss Harrington suggested. "That's right. Now then, scramble up; our front door has so many bolts and bars."

Peter climbed up and through; it wasn't difficult, not half so difficult as it would be to explain what she was doing outside in the moonlight at something past eleven at night. And the box too; Miss Harrington would make inquiries on that subject, she might be certain.

But this astonishing Head did not seem in any hurry to do so. She laid the large flat cardboard box down on one chair and waved Peter towards another.

"I am making coffee; won't you have some?"

"Thanks awfully," said Peter.

Miss Harrington brought her a cup—fragrant and delicious; Peter drank mechanically, wondering how to begin. There was a little silence; it felt very long to Peter.

Miss Harrington was looking into the fire; she didn't seem at all anxious to ask questions or to do any of the sort of things you would expect from a Head Mistress who had discovered one of her girls out of doors at eleven at night.

Peter plunged: "I know it looked fishy my being out."

"Yes?" said Miss Harrington interrogatively.

"I couldn't help it—at least I think I couldn't; it seemed the rightest way when I did it anyway," said Peter.

Miss Harrington looked at her.

"I supposed that. I trust you to play the game by our school, Peter. But I want you to remember that while the underneath and not the look of things is what counts, we owe it to the school to give all possible care we can to its credit in the world's eyes too."

"I know—I only just went to another house and back," Peter blurted out, turning fiery red.

"Very well, good-night," said the new Head. "Oh, take your box."

She never asked what was in that suspicious looking box. Peter took it and returned the good-night. The food she carried to her bedroom because she couldn't at the moment think what else to do with it. Miss Harrington's attitude was so extraordinary that it seemed to deprive her of all power of thought.

Vivian was awake. Peter saw her eyes open, as she turned the light up. “Did I wake you?” she asked.

“No, I wasn’t asleep. I was so worried about you, Petronella. Where have you been?”

“If you want to know you must keep it quiet,” Peter said, sitting on Vivian’s bed and beginning to unfasten her evening frock. “There was a festive supper-party across the way, and I was locked into my study.”

“Locked into your study?”

“For fear I should attend it, I suppose,” Peter concluded. “Anyhow, I did attend it—and that’s the remains in the box you may observe sitting upon the floor, and I have the pleasing job of interviewing three of the little blighters who were responsible, to-morrow after lunch.”

Vivian sat up. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“Who?”

“Aleth and Angela.”

“Haven’t seen them since the Sing-song.”

“They’ve settled not to have you as Senior Prefect.”

“Who have?” asked Peter.

“Lots of them—a paper went round and the girls signed.”

“Did you?”

“Peter! Of course not.”

“Thanks,” said Peter, and went on undressing.

“What are you going to do?” asked Vivian anxiously.

“Go on Senior Prefecting, of course. Don’t worry, Vivian; it will come all right, you’ll see. But it’s topping of you to stand by me.”

“You know I’d do that always; at least you ought to know,” Vivian flung out, and then they both went to sleep.

Peter woke early, in spite of her late night. She had her Swan pen upstairs, and put in the extra time quite profitably. When the school assembled in the hall before going into breakfast, they found the notice-board adorned with a sheet of paper, covered with Peter’s writing, which was particularly large and clear.

"*A meeting will be held in the School Hall at 8.15 this evening for the election of School Officers.*

"*The voting will be by ballot, and will take place in silence. Anyone violating this rule loses her vote.*

"(Signed) P. CAREY, *Senior Prefect*."

Peter heard ominous murmurs from the everchanging crowd before the notice-board during the two or three minutes before breakfast-time, and the Prefect's table was gloomy when she joined it.

"It's an innovation, you know, Peter," Cara remarked.

"Well, the row last night was that, I suppose," Peter said.

"It was; but times are ticklish. We mustn't press things too hard."

"We're Prefects; we can't let other people rule the roost," Peter said stubbornly. "The election of officers has to come off, and it's going to come off quietly and decently. Don't you all agree?"

"Oh, we agree all right," Cara acknowledged lazily. "It's the rest that won't."

The Prefects filed out last from the refectory. When they arrived in the hall, Carol was standing by the notice-board, with Aleth and Angela.

"I want you Prefects half a minute," she said in her pleasant, easy voice. "Peter, and all of you, it won't do. We don't want a repetition of last night's disgraceful scene . . ."

"Agreed," said Peter.

"If you have no objection we'll amend this notice. The election of officers has always been by show of hands; and—I don't want to be personal, but you, Peter, aren't very popular just now at Windicotes, and we don't want trouble. I think I'd better be in the chair. Do you all agree?"

Catherine King looked at Peter inquiringly. Cara didn't look, she merely grinned.

"It's ever so decent of you, Carol, and I hope we'll manage to pull together; but I am afraid the arrangements for the meeting must stand as I said," Peter told her. "You would naturally be the right person to be in the chair, though, and, of course, I should like you to be."

Carol flushed up. "The school won't stand what you're doing."

“Strikes me the school will have to try,” drawled Cara.

Carol turned on her heel and walked away.

“First time I have ever seen our respected Head Girl *avec son singe en haut*,” paraphrased Cara, for slang had been a punishable luxury at Windicotes in the reign of Miss Meldrum.

“Same here,” said Peter.

Aleth and Angela waited till Cara had gone on; the Careys had always stood by one another, at least in public. Then Angela spoke, with the decision of a Senior.

“Peter, we couldn’t find you last night, or we should have told you this would have to stop. The school doesn’t mean to have things changed; a paper went round last night to find out which girls were for the old ways, and any amount signed it.”

“Has it gone to Miss Harrington?” asked Peter.

“That won’t be necessary. You see she is Head . . .”

“Glad that fact is conceded,” interpolated Peter.

“And we Seniors anyhow would hate to give the idea that we were going against her in any way . . .”

“It would be an unreasonable idea for her to get hold of,” Peter said blandly.

“All that is wanted is for the Prefects, and you especially, to keep quiet and leave well alone; and I don’t suppose the school will object particularly to the name itself.”

“That’s comforting to know,” Peter said. “Look here, Angela, honest Injun, I don’t want to be a nuisance, and I don’t want to interfere with old ways; but I have taken on certain responsibilities with the scholarship, and those I’m going to stick to. Of course, I shall try and do that sticking in as little objectionable a way as possible, and I’ll be ever so grateful for advice; but I’m just going to stick to the job, whatever anybody says.”

“Aleth and I won’t be able to stand by you, then. Peter, don’t be an idiot!”

“Sorry, Angela, but there’s no help for it.”

Peter walked off to her Domestic Science class. Her head was well up, but her feelings didn’t reach the independence of her attitude. It was horrid

to go against her elder sisters—such bricks, too, as they had always been to her.

By dinner-time there was a further development, a fresh notice adorned the notice-board—a notice in Carol's handwriting.

> "*There will be a meeting held in the Gym at 8.10 p.m. this evening to deal with the election of School Officers, the election to be carried through in accordance with the established customs of Windicotes.*
>
> "(Signed) Carol Stewart, *Head Girl*."

Peter read the notice without remark. "What are you going to do?" asked Catherine King, who was reading it over her shoulder.

"Nothing—yet," said Peter.

At two minutes to the quarter, twelve Prefects and one Senior Prefect filed solemnly into the Great Hall to take their seats on the platform.

In the exact centre of the hall, facing them, was an audience consisting of one girl, Vivian Massingbird. At eight-fifteen precisely, the audience still consisted of that one girl only. The Senior Prefect stood up and addressed the meeting.

At nine, the school coming to bed, read something pinned, large and determined, on the notice-board.

> "*Result of the meeting for the Election of School Officers.*
>
> *Captain of the First Hockey Eleven—Phyllis Armstrong. Captain of the Second Eleven—Cara Stornaway. Proposed by Veronica Wynne-Hardinge; seconded by Jacynth Caine.*
>
> *Captain of the First Net-Ball Team—Meriel Roper. Captain of the Second—Betty Fraser. Proposed by Barbara Grinstead; seconded by Helen Wright.*
>
> *President of the Windicotes Dramatic Society—Christine Kington. Proposed by Barbara Slade; seconded by Mary Morton.*
>
> *President of the Debating Society—Winifred Farrell. Proposed by Martina May; seconded by Jean Lindsay.*
>
> *President of the Nature Club—Viola Markham.*

Librarian—Iris Pemberton. Proposed by Cara Stornaway; seconded by Helen Wright.

None of the above officers making any demur at accepting office, their names have been duly registered.

Petronella Carey, *Senior Prefect*."

CHAPTER XI

ON MERTHYR MOOR

Peter spent the first quarter of an hour of her Wednesday half-holiday making the three ringleaders of the supper-party feel small. Gypsy was seen to be wandering disconsolately about the quadrangle during the process. When the three victims had departed in tears, she went to her room, feeling rather a brute, and distinctly exhausted.

Vivian was there, practising her violin; the lovely tremulous notes, vibrant with passion, reached Peter as she turned in the passage, and she stood listening for two or three minutes before opening the door.

Vivian laid her bow down. “No, go on,” Peter begged, dropping on to her bed. “You do play toppingly, Vivian.”

“Aren’t you going out?” Vivian asked. “It’s a gorgeous afternoon.”

“Presently, I suppose.”

Peter couldn’t tell Vivian that no one had suggested going out with her, or doing anything special in her company to-day. Her friends of last term had been among those members of the Sixth who had been offered office as Prefects and refused it. Naturally that made a bar. Aleth and Angela had ignored their junior altogether since last night, and had gone off this afternoon for a tramp across the moors to Petersham with Carol Stewart.

The Wednesday half-holiday was generally devoted to walks and expeditions; any member of the Sixth who had not forfeited the privilege by a “conduct mark” might take a companion from any form and go out as she pleased, provided that the companion and destination were first given in to the mistress in charge, and entered by her in a book kept for that purpose. Last term those expeditions had been very jolly; Windicotes lay in the midst of lovely moorland scenery, only slightly spoiled on one side by the encroaching coal-mines. But, after all, the moors remained, if one did sight a windlass or so and sundry queer low erections against the sky line, and Windicotes would never hear a word against its situation. Peter gave a small strangled sigh—to the memory of certain very jolly expeditions last term with Christine Kington and Margery Cottrill. Phyllis Armstrong had been too great to condescend to a girl who was only moderate at games, but Jean Adams had been more approachable—altogether at that moment Peter

wished that it had never entered Miss Harrington's head to offer her the scholarship and Senior Prefectship together.

Vivian laid her violin down very carefully beside the bow and came and sat by Peter. "If you're not going out with anyone else, I suppose you wouldn't let me come with you?" she asked.

Peter stared out of the window. "Didn't you want to practise?"

"Not now, thanks."

"But aren't you going out with someone else?"

"No."

"You'd be a whole heap more popular, you know, if you went with the other side." Peter told her rather bitterly.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Peter. I beg your pardon for talking with such unvarnished plainness, but . . ."

"All right, I retract, old sport," Peter said hastily. She had a horror that Vivian was going to be sentimental, or, worse still, that she was. It would never do to acknowledge even to herself how grateful she was for Vivian's friendship and support.

"Well, come along for a tramp," she said. "Do us much more good than fugging. Get thick boots on, the moors may be dampish."

"Where are we going—Petersham?" asked Vivian, rummaging on the shelf for the right boots.

"I think not," Peter said dryly, "that being the destination of my sisters and Carol Stewart. Across Merthyr Moor, I think; and tea at Selby. There's a jolly old-fashioned inn there, where they do you proud—hot buttered cakes of every kind, and ham, and sometimes cold game pasties, absolutely fas. They get ptarmigan, you know, round about Merthyr Mire."

"What's that?"

"Oh, a pretty bad bog. We always give it a wide berth. But it's all right, Vivian; I know my way, and we're bound to be back before dusk; so we must step out."

The two girls hurried, and were downstairs in less than five minutes. Miss March, on duty, was correcting exercises in the staff-room, and readily acceded to Peter's request.

“Yes, you and Vivian Massingbird. Across Merthyr Moor to Selby; you’ll remember Wednesday roll is called at five?”

“Yes, Miss March, we won’t be late,” said Peter. “Thanks so much.”

They left the staff-room while Miss March was still making the entry in her book, and set out at a good swinging pace, their spirits rising with the exercise.

Down the drive, with hardy chrysanthemums blooming on either side—chiefly in purple and brown hues—through the village, with its tiny dark general shop and its little tin-roofed chapel of ease, hideous to behold—the school walked on Sunday to Setterick Church, a good mile away—then a turn to the right, and across an untidy bit of ground—half waste land and half allotments, and then out upon the springy, healthy moor, fresh and open and free.

The two stopped to inhale and to look.

“Some view, isn’t it?” said Peter proudly.

“Isn’t it? But I wish those—what are they, windlasses . . .?”

“They’re not so bad—the mines are a good way off, or I suppose we shouldn’t be allowed to wander about as we are,” Peter said. “The villages round about there are pretty rough at times, especially when there’s a strike on. But we’re all right here.”

She looked at her watch. “If we step out, I think we shall have time to go round by the old church. It’s disused now, but it is so lovely. I always go in if I can. I think you’ll like it.”

Vivian agreed enthusiastically, and the two shaped their course rather more to the right. Peter pointed out landmarks.

“That’s Hascham Height. They put a giant gibbet there in the Wars of the Roses and hung seventy men in one day. It’s supposed to be haunted. Over there is Merthyr Mire—the streams from Hascham Height run into it, and it holds water like a sponge—a beastly place. Chris Catterick, the Turpin of these parts, escaped across it once, when the soldiers following him were drowned. He let his horse loose and jumped from tuft to tuft; he was small and light, you know.”

“Did he really? how thrilling! What sort of a man was he?” Vivian asked.

“Oh, ever so clever, and resourceful and plucky, but not the sort of highwayman you get in books,” laughed Peter. “He wasn’t chivalrous at all, I fancy, and had no use for beauty in distress.”

They talked books after that, and discovered they both had read and loved *Lorna Doone* and *Beau Brocade*, and liked historical stories more than modern ones, and couldn’t stand a good many school stories because the heroine was always being unjustly suspected of something and the Head Mistress was usually crassly idiotic. They talked a little of Cousin Alan and Elena too—the wedding was to be at Christmas, and Vivian was to be chief bridesmaid. “And I know Elena wants you all three,” Vivian said warmly.

“It will be Aleth and Angela, they always do the show part,” Peter mentioned placidly.

“Shan’t you too, Petronella? Do, Peter please.”

Peter said, “No, I shan’t, I’m sure.”

“Why?”

“Too short to start with. I shouldn’t pair a bit with you; you’re nearly a head taller though you are younger.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. Besides there’s the frock. We have to think twice about frocks in the family.”

Vivian subsided so suddenly that Peter was afraid she was hurt. “I’m awfully sorry about it,” she said hastily, “but you know one of us would have to stay at home to see after Robin.”

“That your baby brother? Elena told me about him; she said he was a perfect little duck. She wants him for a page to hold her train.”

“She’d better not,” grinned Peter. “She doesn’t know Robin. He was a page at Aunt Sylvia’s wedding; she *would* have him, though warned. And in the middle of the address he plumped down facing the congregation in the middle of the bride’s train, and said very clearly and distinctly, ‘I don’t like weddings at all!’ ”

“I believe Elena would risk it for the sake of having him,” Vivian said, when she had finished laughing. “She came back with a crush on you all, but most especially Robin.”

They talked a good deal of Robin, and somehow Peter found herself unfolding to this new friend, what she had never dreamed of telling anyone

before, some of her dreams for helping Robin's future.

"He must go to Daddy's old Preparatory and then to Dartmouth," she said. "We couldn't have him anything but a sailor, you see. But it'll cost heaps, and the poor kid must have decent clothes at Christopher's, and enough pocket money, and all the things the others have. He's only four and a half now; but he ought to go when he's eight, if he's to pass well into Dartmouth—there's no one to teach him anything at Helver except Mummy—she's jolly good, but she doesn't know Latin. Of course, Aleth will be painting by then, and Angela writing, but it always takes a bit of time making money enough to help, I know, and I'm wildly keen to do a bit."

"I thought Elena said . . ."

"I'd got a scholarship. Yes. I know. But that's just saving, not making. Of course, it's better than nothing, I know, but probably I shall make such a rotten Prefect that Miss Harrington won't keep me on."

"I'm sure she will. Look at the way you're sticking to it through all the bother. But will you . . .?"

"I think so. It makes it easier, you know, your standing by me," acknowledged Peter.

"I'm awfully glad."

"Well, if I keep the scholarship, so that I don't cost anything except my clothes and my books, and could earn a little bit too . . ."

"How, by writing?"

"Angela does that."

"But can't you too?"

"I do a little. But I don't suppose it's any good."

"You might show me."

"Oh, what I've done isn't worth seeing—perhaps some time? This is the church, Vivian."

Vivian drew a deep breath.

"How absolutely perfect!"

For some time past their feet had been treading what had been once a path trodden by many worshippers. Now the heather and the moss and the soft elastic turf had obliterated every trace of it. The lych-gate had fallen,

and the wood had been carried away, but the stone supports still remained, though clustering ivy had done its best to loosen them, and had succeeded in some cases, for loose mossed stones were on the ground below. The old seats, where the coffins used to rest, were intact, though tiny ferns and saxifrages had forced their way between the big grey slabs as though to point the way to that sure and certain resurrection. A low wall, with many gaps through which the sheep could stray, and did, had once fenced in the churchyard, when crumbling headstones marked graves where the grassy mounds had long since levelled. Moss and green lichen had in almost every case obscured the lettering, telling of the dead who lay below. Vivian made out the date 1588—Armada year. And she and Peter invented a story about the "Cecily Dacre, aged seventeen years, whom God had taken to Himself on the Eve of her wedding," and decided that the bridegroom to be was a villain and a traitor, and Cecily was broken-hearted at the thought of marrying him.

They even provided her with another lover, a charming brown-faced adventurer who sailed with Drake, but owned no property except his good sword, and so was scorned by Cecily's haughty parents. They sent this lover to a hero's death in the sinking of a great Spanish galleon, and the villain and traitor of a bridegroom to a dreadful but suitable end in Merthyr Mire. And then, in a proper state of nearness to the past, they made their way into the old church.

It would have been very dark, coming from the blaze of daylight, for the arches were low, and such of the old glass as remained was dim with dirt and obscured with the ivy that had climbed everywhere it could outside, and was now pushing its way in—but that a part of the roof was gone, showing a square of glorious blue sky. The door had fallen too, but a rough fencing had been placed across the doorway to keep the sheep from desecrating the church. But nothing could keep out the birds, "that feathered flock" to which St. Francis preached. Jackdaws were chattering in the old square tower; a couple of robins eyed each other pugnaciously from either side of what once had been a fat red pulpit cushion; old deserted nests showed under the corbels.

"You should see the church in spring," Peter whispered. "They nest here in crowds, and one day when I was watching, a lark soared right up from above the altar, out and out through the roof into the blue."

Vivian was even more delighted with the church than Peter had expected her to be. She turned out to be an expert on brasses, and the two spent more time than they could afford in kneeling on the dirty floor, deciphering and

planning a visit with materials for rubbing. When at last they tore themselves away and came out again into the sunlight, Peter was horrified to see the time.

"I say, I'm frightfully sorry, I'm afraid we shall never do Selby," she said. "I oughtn't to have suggested coming round by the church, as we were latish already."

"Oh, but it was much nicer than Selby could be," Vivian declared, with conviction. "I wouldn't have missed coming here for anything."

"Where shall we go now, as Selby is out of the question?" Peter asked. "We may as well see something more, as we don't want to be back at Windicotes before five."

"I suppose we couldn't get to that gibbet place?"

"Too far, I'm afraid; it means doing a wide skirt round Merthyr Mire," Peter explained. "But I'll tell you what; we might go as far as we dare in that direction; I think we might get to the old cottage by the Mire where Catterick painted his white mare dun."

"No, did he? How priceless!"

"Yes—he had friends there—an old woman and her granddaughter. Once when he was nearly run down by the redcoats, the old lady dressed him up in her things, and said he was a neighbour come to help her with her washing."

Vivian giggled. "Could he wash?"

"I don't know. But they were men looking for him," Peter said.

"Do let's go to the cottage—I'd really sooner do that than Selby," Vivian begged.

"They've spoilt the old cottage, I believe; but anyhow, you'll get a near view of Merthyr Mire," Peter promised, as the pair of them turned their backs on the old church and set out at a good round pace in the direction of the bog.

CHAPTER XII

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

Peter found herself forgetting her school troubles to a large extent as she and Vivian tramped across the moor on that glorious afternoon of early autumn, their faces turned steadily towards Hascham Height, of grim and unpleasing fame. It was certainly a relief to get away from it all, if it was only for an afternoon, and the hard exercise, combined with the sunshine and the fresh, sweet, wholesome air, proved as good at driving away depression as Kipling's "Camelious Hump." Peter began to feel distinctly hopeful that it would all come right in the end, as she and Vivian swung across the moor at a good four miles an hour, perfectly in step for all the three inches difference in their height, and perfectly in sympathy as well.

Hascham Height came nearer, and then before them the purple of the distant moor began to give place to a rich shimmery green.

"That's Merthyr Mire over there," Peter pointed out.

"But surely people can see the difference in colour for themselves?" Vivian asked.

"Yes, now; a good way off still, and with the sun shining on it. When you're close, and if it's dullish or getting dark, you can't see it's any different, for the bents stand up as they do on the moor."

Vivian shivered. "How absolutely frightful to blunder in without noticing, and feel yourself sinking deeper and deeper. Is it mud, Peter?"

"A sort of black ooze underneath, with a frightful smell, I believe," Peter said. "But you needn't worry; we're not going within several yards of it."

"I wonder that highwayman—what did you call him? . . . Chris Catterick—had the nerve to get across."

"Oh, he was pretty desperate, and I suppose thought it no worse a death than hanging. Besides, it isn't as bad all over—part of it is fordable if you know your way exactly."

"Shouldn't like to try," Vivian said, and Peter most decidedly agreed.

They tramped on for a few minutes in silence.

"Do you have wild fowl, here?" Vivian asked suddenly.

"A few; there's a mere fed by some of the Hascham Height streams, and you see ptarmigan, and wild duck, and moor hens. They come over the Mire sometimes—Lord Rustthorpe got bogged once, wild-duck shooting, and they only just got him out in time. It was in all the papers. . . ."

Vivian caught at her arm. "Peter, there it is again; it isn't . . ."

They stood stock still for a moment, listening intently. "It's . . . I do believe it's someone screaming," Peter jerked out. "It . . . it *is*! Come on, *Run*!"

They ran, keeping knee to knee for all Peter was the shorter, and they came close to the dreaded expanse of Merthyr Mire, always with that thin whistling scream growing plainer and plainer. And there in the Mire was an old man, with a shock of white hair and a thin wizened face and sightless eyes turned up to the blue heaven that did not help him. And the foul ooze was nearly at the level of the unshaven chin.

Vivian turned a white face and agonised brown eyes on Peter. "He's drowning; can't we do something?"

"We've got to," Peter snapped out grimly, and then she raised her voice in a shout of encouragement.

"Steady on—help's coming."

She surveyed the situation rapidly; there was no time to weigh things and think what was best to do; it was just a case of doing something that had the remotest chance of succeeding. Peter felt dazed and muddled and rather sick, and very like somebody in a bad dream. But there was no time for giving way.

There wasn't a house of any sort in sight—no help, therefore, to be got from anyone. She and Vivian between them must do all. What was more, they must do it within the next three or four minutes, or it would be too late to save the poor old man.

He had kept his arms above his head, true to the instinct bred in all who live where bogs are found; but the girls had no rope, nor anything that could be made into a rope, to throw in. Gym frocks were only worn indoors at Windicotes; and both girls had heavy serge coats and skirts on. Peter saw with a sinking heart the only thing that gave the faintest chance of saving the old man from a frightful death. Close to the spot where she and Vivian were standing there was a slightly firmer piece of bog; she knew it by the clumps of coarse grass and heather. If she could get across to that bit in safety, she

might just be able to reach the old man from that side. Might—it was horribly doubtful, she knew, but there was the chance.

She began pulling off her coat.

"Listen, Vivian, and don't waste any time saying things, because I know how they rescued Lord Rustthorpe, and you don't. I've got to get over there, and you're to follow me only as far as that black stump—see! You must keep on that; it'll be fairly firm and . . ."

"Peter, let me be the one in front?" Vivian said, going white.

"No, I'm much stronger—he's got to get hold of my feet," Peter said. "Don't argue, Vivian; come on!"

Vivian came. Peter, holding her coat, hopped rapidly but carefully from tuft to tuft, never staying long enough on one to sink above her insteps. Vivian followed her closely, and being light and active, managed very well. Peter alighted on the black slimy tree-stump, and it stood firm. But the distance between the two girls and the drowning man seemed terribly big still, and the black ooze had reached his chin. How long would it be before it was at the level of the blue, trembling lips?

Peter grabbed Vivian's hand and dragged her on the tree-stump. It did not give way, but it rocked a little, and firm, dry land seemed a good way off. It just held the pair. Peter held on to Vivian rather tightly to emphasise her words.

"Look here, whatever happens—*Whatever*—mind you've got to stay on this stump. I'm going to get that poor old man up, if I can—the same way as they did Lord Rustthorpe—Cousin Alan told me—and you've got to give yourself the chance of helping me. When you see him beginning to lift, get down flat on the stump, grip it with your knees, and hold your hands out to me. Cheerio! We'll do it."

"All right," Vivian said in a low voice.

Peter came cautiously off the stump. The bog was much more oozy on its other side; she had no hope of a foothold. Spreading her coat out on the bog to make a sort of island of support, she wriggled herself out flat over the bog's surface, always keeping her face towards the stump and her feet reaching out towards the old man. She turned at intervals to see that she was going straight, and twice she called encouragement.

A channel of black ill-smelling mud from which she and her spread-out coat between them had dragged a path through moss and scum lay between

herself and the stump; it looked horribly wide. Her coat felt a dreadfully frail support to keep her face from being sucked down into that horrible foul slime, the varied odours from which were beginning to make her absolutely sick. Her heart thudded, and her mouth was dry; she hoped against hope that she would wake up presently and find it was all a nightmare dream.

"Only dreams don't smell," she heard someone saying loudly in her mind. And then with a long wrenching stretch, one of her feet managed to touch the old man's hand.

He grabbed; she got the other to him; he held both her ankles. Peter braced herself, her eyes on Vivian. Vivian was down on the stump, as directed; her knees gripping frantically, her hands outstretched.

"Steady! Don't topple in," Peter shouted. "Just be ready to get hold when we come near."

Pushing the coat before her, so as to keep it underneath her face, Peter began to wriggle, serpentine-ways towards the stump.

Of course she was dragged back by the despairing pull upon her feet, but she fought on—clawing at tufts of grass—at anything which gave a little something to pull on, and always fighting furiously towards Vivian, straining towards her from the stump.

There was a frightful wrench upon her ankles, and she sobbed aloud with the pain of it. The bog felt cold about her—she was sinking. The fœtid reek surged up around her, and the pain in her ankles was almost unendurable, and she was horribly afraid. And then, her groping hand caught Vivian's; next moment both were seized.

Peter tried to warn her friend to grip tight with her knees, but no voice would come. She only clung desperately, and braced herself to bear the frightful tug that lay before her.

Vivian spoke. "I'm going to count three, then . . . One! Two! Three!"

Peter felt the agonised wrenching of her hands and feet, and wondered vaguely whether being racked was at all like that. If so, she was afraid she would have given up any information she possessed sooner than bear it.

But this strain must be borne if the old man's life was to be saved. Clinging tightly to Vivian's outstretched hands, she dug her knees into the cold clamminess and fought her way on. She was sinking—she knew she ought to spread her weight, but the old man had both ankles fast.

The serge coat made a frail little island to uphold her, but she felt her knees sink. Wrench—wrench; a gurgling groan or two—and Peter had always prided herself that she could bear pain without fuss—then a sense that both her feet were coming off.

Above the scream she couldn't bite back, she heard Vivian say.

"Oh, Peter, you've done it!" and with those words the strain slackened. Peter was only half-conscious of crawling up on to the tree-stump and of someone following her. She felt very sick and cold, and thought both her ankles were dislocated. But, of course, there could be no giving way when the old man she had risked her life for was in hearing.

He was a pitiable object—covered in foul black mud, stiff and frozen.

Peter looked at him anxiously, trying to swallow down the uncomfortable lump in her throat.

"I say, I believe you ought to have brandy or something, and I'm afraid we haven't got any. But we can see you home," she said, "only we must hurry up and get clear of this beastly bog first."

"Can you stand, Peter?" Vivian whispered.

Peter grinned ruefully. "I suppose so, we can't stay on this stump all night. Come on, give me a hand."

She stood up cautiously; it appeared that her ankles were not dislocated, but using them appeared likely to be a horribly painful business.

Clutching to Vivian, she addressed the old man, who was still coughing and spluttering and shivering in his loathsome coating. The smell was enough to turn anybody sick.

"You can't see, can you?" she said gently. "But we're all right, if we get back to firm ground at once. There are tussocks of grass; I think you must give my friend one hand and me the other, and step just where we tell you. Then we'll be all right."

"Thank you, miss," said the old man in a queer cracked voice.

They got across; afterwards, when she came to think about it, Peter wondered just how they did it.

The sunshine had faded while they were at their work of rescue, and the daylight seemed to be flying extraordinarily fast, and it was so difficult to see what was firm ground and what wasn't, that twice Peter was nearly sucked into a soft spot. And to guide the old man's footsteps was terribly

difficult, and all around the bog sucked and smelt, and the reek of the mud upon herself was horrible beyond words. But they touched firm ground at last, and dropped down for a minute's rest.

At least the girls did: the old man, black from head to foot, stood up and looked to the sky he could not see.

"I haven't said my prayers for thirty years," he announced in a loud, defiant voice; "but I'll thank You above for having sent these well-plucked young ladies to save the life my Ruthie wants. Amen."

CHAPTER XIII

AND AFTERWARDS

The two girls looked at one another, feeling suddenly ridiculously shy. Neither liked to say anything. Luckily the old man spoke.

"Did you say as how you would be kind enough to take me to my home, young ladies? Then would you make it to some place where I can find a doctor instead? Ruthie's cruel bad."

Peter and Vivian broke out simultaneously. He couldn't possibly think of going to find a doctor in that condition; if they might guide him home now they would ask Miss Harrington to telephone for Ruthie's doctor the very moment they got back to Windicotes.

He was hard to persuade at first, but the girls were insistent, and it appeared he lived above half a mile from Merthyr Mire, his being the actual old cottage where the highwayman had found a refuge, now patched together against wind and weather. "I used to live in these parts once when I was a lad," he gasped out, as the two girls hurried him along in the direction of the once famous cottage. "I was minded to come back—where there was none to see Ruthie and make mock at her, poor little lass."

"Is she very delicate?" Vivian asked pitifully.

"She's that; she's all crooked like—and motherless and worse than fatherless, poor little dear. So when I got my bit of money I bought the little lass away from Perce, my daughter's husband, for five pounds down. And I took and brought Ruthie to the parts I knew long ago. She can't walk a step, but she's my eyes, and bright ones too. But she's crying out with the pain, poor lassie, and I must get the doctor to her so soon as may be. I made sure I could find my way, without waiting till the lad that serves my guide came back from work."

"It will be much quicker if we telephone," Peter said encouragingly. "And then you won't have to leave Ruthie. But you'll have something hot to drink directly you get in, won't you?"

The cottage was in sight by now, no longer the picturesque ruin of Peter's recollection, but a cottage with some new red bricks making splashes of ugly colour, and a patched roof, and fresh glass in the old broken

casements at which Chris Catterick had tapped, and creepers and lichen torn away to make space for those aggressions.

Peter privately thought the place spoiled, but acknowledged that no man, let alone a child, could have lived in it as it was. It wasn't likely to be extra comfortable now.

A child's wailing cry broke the stillness, as Peter lifted the latch on the cheap deal door, which replaced the old one that had swung loose for many a long day, and finally fallen to the ground to rot among the rose-bushes and other flowers all asprawl together.

"Grandy! Grandy! is that you back? The pain's so bad."

"I'm here! my little maid, but I can't come near you—I'm all of a muck with the bog," the old man told her gently. "But here be kind young ladies as'll get the doctor to take your pain away. You show 'em where to get the kettle of hot water, for they be mucked with saving I; and then I'll bide with ye while they sends doctor."

Peter and Vivian went out into what had been the kitchen, in the old days when Chris Catterick's friends lived here. Even now the big low-pitched room had an old-world, storybook appearance, with its low rafters and wide fireplace, where smoked hams must once have hung; its deep window-seat and its uneven brick floor.

Upon a bed in the corner nearest the fireplace, there lay a little girl with a thin, pinched face and a pitifully one-sided look about her, and big, wistful eyes which stared in a frightened sort of way at her visitors.

"You're Ruthie, aren't you?" Peter said kindly. "We're ever so sorry you're feeling so seedy, but if we can just wash off some of this mud, we'll be after the doctor for you in two secs."

"Grandy?" asked the child in a frightened whisper.

"He's all right, he's just muddy," Peter told her reassuringly. "Stick the kettle on the fire, Vivian—I say, I shall have to leave my coat; it's done for keeps, I'm afraid. So's my skirt, I'm afraid, but I can't go without that, I must take it off and sponge. Ugh, this mud *has* a loathly smell."

Vivian took the skirt away from her with a firm hand.

"I'm going to do that—wrap that checked tablecloth round you and sit down and talk to the kid. You've had enough."

“I’m all right, but I should like something to drink,” Peter said. “I feel as though I’d been swallowing bog for hours; I didn’t, of course, but the smell was solid.”

“Wasn’t it?” Vivian agreed, sponging diligently. “ ’Fraid you won’t get much more out of this skirt, Peter.”

“Poor Mummy!” Peter was sober. “What a shame. Lucky it wasn’t Aleth or Angela—theirs are new.”

“I should think your mother will be proud of the way you spoilt it,” Vivian flung out, a shade indignantly.

Peter, wrapped in the chequered tablecloth she had taken from the round table, grinned cheerfully.

“Oh, Mummy will be pleased all right about that, but she’ll wish I’d been in a bathing dress.”

Then she went and sat down by the sick child; Peter wouldn’t have owned it to anyone, but she was uncommonly glad to sit down. She felt more shaky than she had ever felt in her life before. It was probably a good thing for her and for Vivian both that the need of haste and the presence of a small scared child combined to make it impossible for either to break down. Peter put her hand over Ruthie’s little feverish claw. (She and Vivian had washed the mud off their hands in the sink.)

“Poor kiddy, I expect the pain is rotten, but it will soon get better. We’ll hurry like anything going home.”

“Did you get drownded in the bog,” Ruthie asked, in a weak little whisper.

“Nearly, not quite,” Peter told her. “Never mind about that, kiddy; where’s the pain? When my little brother had one in the holidays we put hot things on, and it did heaps of good. Do you think you would like me to put something hot on the bad place now, while my friend cleans my skirt up?”

“Please, Miss,” Ruthie whispered trustfully, and directed Peter to a drawer where coarse clean handkerchiefs were to be found. Peter poured boiling water into a pudding basin and wrung out her compress in fine style. From the child’s description and the position of the pain she thought it might be appendicitis. Ruthie winced a little as the hot handkerchiefs touched her, but she was very good, and seemed to feel the ease of it almost at once.

But her skin was burning to the touch. “We won’t fag much over the skirt, Vivian,” Peter said anxiously. “We shan’t notice the smell so much in

the open air."

Ruthie clutched her hand with weak little fingers. "Don't you go—you stay till Grandy comes back."

Peter shook her head. Inexperienced as she was, she had Robin's illness to guide her, and she was sure the child's temperature was very high.

"Grandy is quite close, and he will come directly. Look here, we'll fill the kettle up and put it on the fire, and you must make him have some hot tea or cocoa, or something, the minute he comes in. Shall we put some tea in the teapot already?"

"Please, Miss," Ruthie breathed; and then Peter put her damp skirt on again, and they left her. Poor little girl, they felt themselves brutes; but her grandfather was moving about in a room close, they could hear him—and there was certainly no time to lose in getting the doctor.

"Hospital, I expect," Peter said laconically as they left the overgrown garden behind them and limped out on to the open moor.

"Poor little dear," Vivian said.

"Yes, but it's the old chap I'm sorriest for," said Peter. "He's wrapped up in her, that's plain, and it would be awful to be alone in that lonely cottage—blind."

"Perhaps it's only a feverish cold," suggested Vivian.

"The pain looks suspicious. Wonder if we shall be allowed to go and see her again?"

"I do hope we shall. Wonder if the old man will be any the worse? He looked very blue and queer."

"Didn't he, but he was rather a sport. I should like to have known how he was, but, of course, we couldn't wait, and he might have got on to thanking us, or something awful."

"Thanking you, you mean, Peter. You did it all."

"Stuff! you did just as much, and we couldn't have got out without you. Weren't your arms about wrenched out of their sockets?"

"They're beginning to feel stiff," laughed Vivian. "But I didn't care. Peter, I *shall* enjoy seeing the faces of the girls when I tell them about you—the girl they wouldn't——"

Peter stopped dead in her limping progress. “Vivian, do you think you’re going to say anything about this afternoon. You jolly well give your word you don’t breathe anything about it.”

“Peter!”

“Yes, I mean it. I won’t have it.” Peter stuck out doggedly.

“But Miss Harrington will have to know. Our lateness and your limping, and the mud on our clothes and everything.”

“Yes, of course, she’ll have to know,” Peter agreed, after a minute’s thought. “But I’ll ask her to promise to say nothing. And I’m sure she will see.”

“Peter, is it because of all this Prefect row you won’t let the school know about the bog?” Vivian asked in a low voice.

Peter considered. “I suppose it is, partly. I don’t see why they should know anyway; but—I’m not going to have them settling to put up with me—because we happened to be out by Merthyr Mire this afternoon. See? They’re going to put up with me, because it is the best thing for the school, and they know it—nothing else.”

“You’re rather a sportsman, Peter,” Vivian said.

“Oh, chuck it!” Peter said, and limped on. She did not ask for Vivian’s promise, she knew that she was safe with her.

The way home seemed very long indeed. It was incredible to believe that it had seemed so short when they tramped gaily across Merthyr Moor in the sunshine. The beauty of the day had gone—a cold whistling wind blew across the moor, making Peter realise that even a delaine shirt doesn’t make up for the absence of a coat. She absolutely refused to take Vivian’s, however, declaring with truth that she never caught cold. But she couldn’t keep from shivering.

Both girls were worn out by the mental and physical strain that they had gone through. Peter’s damp skirt flapped about her muddy stockings, from which they had only managed to scrape off an outer coating of mud. The foul stuff seemed sticking to them everywhere for all their efforts, and the smell was nauseating. Added to that, Peter’s wrenched ankles made walking very difficult; she hardly could have got home if it had not been for Vivian’s arm. But at last the great block of Windicotes loomed through the gathering darkness. All the lights were up.

“My word! we *are* late,” Peter exclaimed ruefully. “We must get hold of Miss Harrington at once, and tell her about the kid.”

“Go to the Head’s study like this?” Vivian asked doubtfully.

“We’ll interview a bathroom first, but I must send an S.O.S. for Aleth; she’ll see the Head for us, and explain about Ruthie.”

They met a horrified housemaid in the back passage, and she not only volunteered to take their muddy clothes if they would put them outside the bathroom door, but undertook to carry an urgent summons to Aleth—always the more approachable of Peter’s sisters.

Aleth came before either girl had succeeded in pulling off the wet, muddy stockings. Her nose was in the air; it was abundantly clear that she was disgusted, in more senses than one.

“Phew!” she began explosively—and it was the rarest thing for Aleth to lose her temper. “Peter, you are the limit! Sixteen, and with a scholarship—couldn’t you look out for the time? Where *have* you been?”

“Merthyr Mire,” Peter answered briefly. “Now Aleth, don’t jaw, there’s a good soul! We couldn’t help it, really. Just go along to the Head and say I’m coming to apologise and explain, when I’m clean; but in the meantime there’s a poor kid at the highwayman’s cottage, in a lot of pain and pretty bad, and I promised to ’phone for Dr. Macintyre directly I got back. She’ll know—Dr. Macintyre, at the Red House. Do hurry, Aleth, like a brick, for there’s only a blind old man with the kid, and it might be appendicitis, or something awful, she’s got.”

Aleth spoke in a much softer voice, “Righto! you have your baths, and I’ll see Miss Harrington and then get you some clothes.”

She departed in a most unusual hurry, and Peter and Vivian departed each into one of the twin bathrooms, and washed hair and all. Feeling distinctly better for her ablutions, Peter, girt with a towel, put her head through the door to find Aleth waiting with a pile of garments.

“Miss Harrington has ’phoned, and she caught Dr. Macintyre in and he’s going at once,” she said. “And Miss Harrington wants to see you in the study as soon as you are dressed.”

“Aleth, you are a good sort!” Peter said. “Is she—Miss Harrington—very mad?”

Aleth considered. “I don’t know, I don’t think so, but it’s so extraordinary hard to tell with her. What *did* happen to you, by the way?”

“Do you mind if I don’t tell you now because of dressing?” Peter asked politely. She felt rather mean, because that wasn’t quite the reason, but she had to gain time to settle what she could say. She hadn’t really settled anything as yet; she only knew that she was not going to tell Aleth, or the rest of an antagonistic school, about the experience of the afternoon. She seized her clothes and ventured back into the bathroom. About a quarter of an hour later, damp about the hair and a little shaky about the knees, partly from want of tea and partly from nervousness, she presented herself at the door of Miss Harrington’s study.

There was a tea-table in front of a glowing fire; it looked exceedingly inviting. Peter stood just inside the door.

“Miss Harrington, I am sorry that Vivian and I were late.”

“Have you had tea?” asked Miss Harrington.

“No, Miss Harrington, not yet.”

“Where is Vivian?”

“She’s gone to the Lower Fifth for prep.”

“Ah, we will send for her; you must both have tea,” this surprising Head told Peter quietly. “Come here to the fire and tell me what you have been doing? Aleth tells me that you have been bogged.”

Peter came across. “We weren’t fooling round really,” she told Miss Harrington. “I don’t think anyone could have helped doing what we did—and it sounds disrespectful, but if you don’t mind, I don’t want anyone in the school to know what happened.”

“I think you can trust me to hold my tongue,” Miss Harrington said gravely. “I want you to tell me exactly what did happen, Petronella, and I promise you that it shall not go farther, as far as I am concerned.”

Peter told her, rather gruffly, and not at all picturesquely. Taken as a narrative it was distinctly disappointing. But Miss Harrington appeared to find it interesting.

“Thank you, Peter,” she said, when Peter had finished. She just put out her hand and grasped Peter’s. “You’re lucky, you and Vivian. It was—well, something to have done. And you don’t want anybody in the school to know?”

“Please not.”

“And Vivian feels that too?”

“Please, Miss Harrington.”

“Very well, you have my promise,” Miss Harrington told her. “I appreciate the desire for battle without favour. Here is Vivian. You needn’t apologise, Vivian, all that has been done for you. Come and have tea.”

Miss Harrington said no more just then about the Merthyr Mire adventure, not even when she returned from an interview with Dr. Macintyre, to tell the girls that Ruthie had appendicitis and was being moved by an ambulance into hospital that very evening. But she sent them away to their belated prep feeling extraordinarily happy, even though they had no idea of the far-reaching consequences which were to be the result of the adventure in Merthyr Mire.

CHAPTER XIV

PETER TAKES PREP

The dead-lock that might have been anticipated over the election of the school officers did not come about, chiefly owing to the fact that Carol Stewart and the other Seniors in the opposition had too much regard for the school to insist on choosing the wrong officers because the right ones had been elected by the other side.

A meeting was hastily called, Carol Stewart in the chair, and the identical officers were chosen to fill the identical posts to which they had been elected by a meeting of thirteen unacknowledged Prefects on the platform and an audience of one below. Carol Stewart posted the result of the second meeting on the notice-board. Peter grinned and made no sign—though she had something of a business inducing her twelve colleagues to bide their time. Anyhow, the officers were elected without open warfare, and the affairs of Windicotes went on to all appearance much as usual. Peter and Cara Stornaway were quite aware, however, that this was only the lull before the storm. Pretty nearly the whole school had signed the paper refusing to acknowledge the authority of the Prefects, and an explosion was bound to come.

It was about a week after the adventure in Merthyr Mire that it came, and it came from the simple fact that Peter was asked by Miss Harrington to take Prep for Lower Fourth, *vice* Miss Orchard, gone to bed with a bad neuralgic headache.

Peter did not anticipate an easy time, seeing that Gypsy Carstairs was a leading light of that always difficult form, and Gypsy had devoted a good part of her really acute brains to making things difficult for the Prefects ever since the beginning of term. But Peter wasn't going to shirk; she took her own prep books and marched off to the Fourth Form at five o'clock precisely.

A longish passage led to the Fourth; a good deal of stifled giggling seemed coming out of it, which hushed into an unnatural stillness as her footfall was heard.

Peter rather suspected that unnatural stillness; she did not stop, nor alter her pace, but the sound had put her on her guard. The Lower Fourth was not

only preparing to enjoy some priceless jest, but preparing to do so at her expense. Peter went warily; her quick, bright eyes keenly on the look-out.

The door of Lower Fourth stood just ajar, and Peter looked up to the top of it, expecting a booby-trap, and quickly down again. There was nothing above; but there was something below—a piece of stout string stretched tightly about three inches from the floor.

Peter jumped to it, of course. Anyone marching in quickly and unexpectedly, would come a header over that string, and make an entrance that was decidedly undignified.

Peter opened the door quickly, measuring her distance, stepped over the cord and walked to her desk, remarking, "Name of the girl who left that bit of string about on the floor, please?"

There was a little silence, followed by an uneasy titter.

Peter raised her eyebrows. "I said the name."

Gypsy Carstairs spoke, accompanying the remark with an impish grin that was peculiarly exasperating.

"We can't tell you that if you wish for the exact truth, Petronella."

There was a fresh access of stifled giggling, as the Lower Fourth waited for Peter to ask why.

She didn't; she appeared to be quite absorbed in arranging her books and papers. The Form waited in vain.

When she had finished, she looked in a leisurely way across at the room of grinning faces.

"From five to six-thirty the Lower Fourth will do their ordinary prep; from six-thirty to seven a 'Fatigue' of French Dictation," she remarked, as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world. "Any dictation containing more than six mistakes will be repeated at the same time to-morrow evening."

Peter unscrewed her Swan pen and sat down. "Begin your work."

The Form looked blankly at one another. That half-hour of freedom before supper was tremendously appreciated, and the Lower Fourth was the highest form at Windicotes to taste its delights. From Upper Fourth and onwards that half-hour of freedom was added to your prep; and now this precious half-hour was to be taken away—perhaps for several evenings in succession—the French of the Form was remarkably weak—all because one

girl had been seized with an idea, the brilliance of which had been overrated, as it happened. Gypsy Carstairs stood up sulkily.

"I did the cord business, Petronella."

"Why didn't you say so at once when I asked?"

"Well, I didn't leave it lying about, I put it there on purpose." Gypsy was beginning to perk up again; so was the Lower Fourth in its entirety. They had hoped that Peter would ask that question. Up to date she had been distinctly disappointing, but here at last she was beginning to come up to expectations.

Peter raised her eyebrows a little; her blue eyes looked puzzled. "What on earth did you do it for?"

The Form giggled audibly; here was richness; Peter Carey had delivered herself into their hands indeed.

Gypsy grinned delightedly. "Really wish to know, Petronella?"

"I said so," Peter told her briefly.

"Well, Petronella, as a matter of fact it was intended for you," Gypsy told her blandly.

"For me?" Peter still failed to see daylight.

"You won't mind—for you to tumble over," Gypsy said delicately.

Peter looked her over. "Oh, was that the idea? It had occurred to me, but really I had given the Lower Fourth credit for something more original—not brainy, you know—I didn't expect much, but not just a Primary-school kid's game. However"—she shrugged her shoulders—"Gypsy, you silly little ass, you can stay behind when the Form has finished and see whether half an hour of hard thinking will give you a chance of planning a rag with a little humour in it."

Gypsy sat down, scarlet to the ears. The Form got to its prep in silence, and worked in silence for a good ten minutes. Then a part of the previously arranged programme began to filter back into the minds of the more enterprising spirits.

Peter from under her eyelashes saw Eileen Tremain nudge Chrissie Barrett, and both look appealingly at Gypsy, who was obviously the leader. Somebody whispered, but Peter made no sign; she was awaiting developments.

Then the Form began to cough, not all together as though it were concerted, but irritating attacks from first one and then another. If it hadn't been for the nudges and the whispers, Peter might almost have been deceived into thinking that at least some of the coughing was genuine, for it was done very well, and a sudden change to cold, damp weather had produced the usual crops of colds in the school. But she was beginning to know Gypsy, and she had used her eyes and ears.

"Have you all got such bad coughs?" she inquired sympathetically. "Wait a minute, I'll get you something to stop them."

She walked into the Lower Fifth, hearing Chrissie Barrett say in rather a scared voice: "She's gone to report us," and Gypsy answering crossly and unwillingly, "No, she's not that sort." Then she was in Lower Fifth. She spoke to Miss Fenchurch.

"Would you allow me to ask Vivian Massingbird to fetch something from our room? I'm taking Lower Fourth, so I can't go myself."

Miss Fenchurch looked a little surprised, but said "Yes." Peter spoke to Vivian very quickly.

"You know, Vivian, those frightful liquorice lozenges that Ruthie pressed upon us in hospital yesterday. There's a whole bag of them on my washstand. I meant to give them to the kids at the Lodge, but I think they'll do the trick here."

Vivian fled, looking rather mystified. She was too new to Windicotes to know that Miss Meldrum had kept a medicine cupboard, and a certain frightful compound called liquorice powder had been freely administered in the school. Not a girl who had been under Miss Meldrum's rule would ever touch liquorice for pleasure. Peter returned to Lower Fourth with her face serious, but a smile in her eyes.

Vivian was soon back, a bursting bag of sticky liquorice lozenges, held delicately at arm's length. The very smell was potent. Ruthie's grandfather had brought them to her in the hospital, and sweets were not permitted so soon after her operation. Peter had found it impossible to hurt the poor mite's feelings by refusing, and had heroically sucked one jujube under Ruthie's eye; she therefore knew exactly how horrible they were.

She took the bag from Vivian and walked across to the front row of desks. "I expect one all round will cure those coughs," she remarked blandly.

The Fourth Form stopped coughing in sheer surprise. “That’s right, even the thought of them does you good,” Peter said brutally. “Come on, Gypsy, I hope you won’t need two; your cough was the most aggressive.” Gypsy’s impish eyes met Peter’s; Peter looked squarely at her. She knew quite well that Gypsy was upon the horns of a dilemma: either she must acknowledge that the coughs were put on, in which case Peter would be justified in reporting the whole Form, or she must accept the hated liquorice lozenge and with it Petronella’s authority. There was a little pause. Peter advanced the bag. “Those coughs are to stop,” she said quietly.

Gypsy took the jujube; the Form took them one after another in gloomy silence. No one said “Thank you”; perhaps it was hardly to be expected. Eileen Tremain and Chrissie Barrett did mutter something about their coughs being better. “Glad to hear that, but they’re going to be quite well,” Peter told them pleasantly. In the space of a very few minutes the entire Lower Fourth classroom reeked of liquorice, as the Form slowly and miserably sucked the revolting sweetmeat.

“I HOPE YOU WON’T NEED TWO, YOUR COUGH WAS THE MOST AGGRESSIVE.”

Peter went on writing.

As might have been expected, Gypsy Carstairs was the first to try and find a way out. She held up her hand. “Well, Gypsy?” Peter asked.

“Can I go and get a handkerchief, Petronella.”

“Come here,” said Peter.

Gypsy came rather unwillingly. “Just make quite certain you haven’t got one on you,” Peter said. “Look, please.”

Gypsy looked. She probably knew that otherwise there would be the ignominy of being searched. A handkerchief of brilliant hue was tucked into her elastic at the knee, as might have been expected.

“Keep it up your sleeve, then perhaps you will remember it.” Peter suggested. “And, while we’re on the subject, I should like to point out to the Form that if anybody else wastes time, by forgetting where they keep their handkerchief, you will *all* do prep till seven.”

“I don’t see that you’ve any right to rag us like this,” flared the disgusted Gypsy, her cheek still distended by the hateful jujube. “The school have hoofed you out from being Senior Prefect.”

“I know,” said Peter placidly. “Get back to your desk.”

It was after that that Chrissie Barrett’s nose bled, but with no result; nor was Eileen’s threat of being sick received any better. “If you’re going to be sick you’ll have to be sick here,” Peter stated most unsympathetically.

After that the Lower Fourth got on with their work for quite a long time in an outraged silence; and Peter did some of her own prep while keeping a wary eye upon her furious Juniors, particularly Gypsy.

The Lower Fourth had to write its weekly essay during the last forty minutes of prep time. Peter gave out the paper at the appointed hour and wrote the subject of their essay on the blackboard.

Pens began to scratch, and presently crushed spirits to rise. The lozenges had been disposed of, and the classroom no longer reeked of liquorice. Chrissie Barrett’s hand went up.

“Please, Petronella.”

“Well?”

“How do you spell ‘tyrannical’?”

Peter told her gravely. Somebody gave vent to a queer little stifled noise somewhere at the back.

Joan Wrotham’s hand went up almost instanter.

“Please, how do you spell ‘abominable’?”

Peter gave the desired information.

The next demand was from Eileen for "sycophantic." Peter noted the sidelong glance at Gypsy as she asked, and the stifled giggle. She decided to take action.

"Gypsy, come over here—you write a good bit better than you plan booby-traps. Just take down these words on the blackboard; we'll save the Form the trouble of asking any more questions."

Gypsy's sulky expression suddenly gave place to a grin of understanding, as Peter solemnly dictated almost every opprobrious term supplied by the English language. They made three columns on the blackboard.

"There!" Peter said agreeably, smiling down at a gaping Form. "Quite a hefty lot to choose from, aren't they? But I've taken so much time supplying them that I'm afraid you'll have to work till nearly seven this evening."

"We won't! you've no right to make us. We'll go at half-past, whatever you say. You're not Head Girl!" came a sudden excited clamour.

Peter smiled. "I don't think you will go. For one thing, as it happens, I locked the door when Vivian brought me that bag of liquorice. For the second, I'm not Head Girl, but I'm Senior Prefect as long as Miss Harrington chooses, and I mean to be obeyed."

Peter pulled out her French Composition book; not that she expected to get much chance of doing her own work, but it was well to have the semblance of occupation. Through her eyelashes she observed that the junior members of the Form were engaged in making faces at her, faces which every moment became more appalling. But she went on writing without looking up, and was three-quarters down the first page when the giggling became aggressive.

"Less noise!" she said sharply, still without looking up, and went on writing. The first page was turned; the Form began to feel the strain of keeping their contortions up. Instructed by Chrissie and Eileen in dumb show, and one small whisper, Phœbe Ffoulkes, the junior of the Form, advanced a rather nervous—"Please, Petronella . . ."

"Um!" was Petronella's answer; then sharply, "Yes, what is it?"

Phœbe took on a tone of shocked surprise. "Please, Petronella, they're making faces at you."

"Oh, are they?" Peter inquired absently. "Oh, making faces at me, was that what you said?"

She looked up suddenly to meet a variety of ingeniously unpleasant expressions.

"Well, Phœbe, I don't know what you mean by making faces; they are a pretty plain lot in this Form, of course, but I don't see that the faces are any different from the ordinary, do you? Sure you weren't dreaming?"

Every face straightened as though by magic. Peter's remarks were extraordinarily humiliating, and what was the use of taking all the trouble to make faces, if this objectionable Senior Prefect was under the impression that the Fourth were just looking natural, though plain.

The Lower Fourth worked till ten minutes to seven in a gloomy silence, but without any active demonstration of warfare. At ten minutes to seven Peter put her books and papers together and walked in a leisurely manner across to the door.

"I'm going to unlock it; you can stay if you like, or go if you like. If you stay, I've something to tell you."

She opened the door. Several girls looked at Gypsy and Eileen. Gypsy grunted out, "I'll stay."

The Lower Fourth stayed in its entirety. Peter faced it.

"I'm going to tell you something about the kid who supplied me with those filthy liquorice sweets," she began. "Don't be alarmed; she'll be well enough to eat them herself the next time she gets them, I imagine. She's only nine, and all on one side, with a twisted leg, and she's never out of pain, and she lives with an old blind grandfather, Faraday, at the highwayman's cottage, and the other day she had to have an operation for appendicitis, in the hospital—and she's a bit more of a sportsman than anyone here. She said to the nurse who told her she was brave, 'I'm just thinking all the time what a lot there'll be to tell Grandy. He likes so to hear about things, because he can't see.' Just that; some sport for nine, wasn't she? And when Vivian and I went to see her yesterday, she smiled up at us and said—'Doctor's made a little hole in me, but it don't hurt, and my bad leg *is* comfortable since I came to this hospital.' "

"Poor little kid! is her leg awfully bad?" Gypsy asked, her impish face wearing quite an unusual expression.

"Pretty bad. They say at the hospital that she ought to go to the Orthopædic Hospital . . ."

"The how-much?" Eileen asked.

"Orthopædic—it's where they get bone deformities right," Peter explained. "But her grandfather is deadly poor . . ."

"Couldn't we all subscribe something?" Gypsy broke in.

"I wondered if we couldn't get up some sort of show, and make a bit of money," Peter said.

"I could do the programmes, couldn't I? Do say I could," Gypsy broke out.

"I should about think you could; your drawing is just topping, and people will always pay up for well-illustrated programmes," Peter said warmly. "Thanks, Gypsy. My idea was a mixed show, or perhaps a play. If we got a fair amount she might go to London and then a Convalescent Home by the sea afterwards to get strong."

"Do let it be a play—and just this Form do it," begged an excited chorus. "You might let us, Petronella!"

"I'll think, but I don't see why not," Peter cautiously agreed. "Only getting up a play means a good bit of work at your parts, you know."

"Oh, but you'd coach, wouldn't you?" said Chrissie Barrett, and several others chimed in. "We don't mind work."

"Couldn't you write us a play?" suggested Gypsy, and the idea was received with such acclamation that the striking of seven o'clock passed unnoticed, and Peter herself had to call attention to the hour.

"Here, I say, you ought to be off; cut along."

Gypsy lingered behind the rest. "Oh yes, I told you to, didn't I?" Peter remarked. "But it's dressing time now, you can go."

"I say, I'm sorry I ragged you," Gypsy mumbled. "It was decent of you about the programmes."

"That's all right," Peter said. "But, Gypsy, I do think a kid as brainy as you ought to be up to something better than silly ragging. You've got a lot of influence on the Form already; can't you use it to induce them not to play the goat? It's rough on Miss Orchard."

"She does get a bit fed up with us," acknowledged Gypsy, with a twinkle, "and *she* doesn't keep liquorice lozenges on the spot. I say, did you know how utterly unspeakable they were?"

Peter grinned. “Didn’t I? I ate one in hospital under the poor kid’s own eye, and it took nearly all the time I was there to dissolve.”

“Then if you knew, I think you were an unmitigated brute,” Gypsy said solemnly, and ran off to get ready for supper.

That evening a deputation from Lower Fourth, consisting of Gypsy, Eileen and Chrissie, waited upon Carol Stewart and requested that the signature of Lower Fourth *en masse* should be deleted from the paper that demanded the removal of the Prefects.

CHAPTER XV

THE PRINCESS WHO LOST HER CHILDHOOD

Peter and Vivian put their heads together over the play to be acted by Lower Fourth for the benefit of little Ruthie.

Peter was in favour of using a play already acted, but the numbers were awkward—twenty-seven in form, and scenery and dresses had to be considered as well. Then she remembered a fairy story she had told to Robin about a princess who lost her childhood and went out into the world to look for it. She told the story to Vivian, and Vivian saw Pantomime possibilities, and offered help with the music. Peter wrote the words of a little lullaby for the nurse to sing over the baby's cradle, and Vivian played a fascinating sleepy air for it on that wonderful violin of hers, and afterwards wrote it down in full score. Then it was that the Pantomime began to take definite shape in both their minds, and they went to Miss Harrington about it.

Miss Harrington was sympathetic. She had been to see little Ruthie herself, and was much interested in the poor little thing. She thought Peter's plan for helping her a capital one, and was pleased that the Lower Fourth should be interested too. (Perhaps she also thought it an excellent plan that the most troublesome Form in the school should be occupied.) Peter might look over the contents of the theatrical chest and see what she could find, and she could have wet half-holidays, and any odd scraps of time that she could find for rehearsing.

Miss Jane Brooker was heard to murmur resignedly that she supposed it would spoil the children for any sense all the rest of the term; but Peter was growing used to Miss Brooker and her ways. Her damping comments never made her one whit less kind when anything needed doing, or anybody needed helping.

She and Vivian went away cheered, and started seriously on the writing of their Pantomime next morning. The characters were first discussed. There was to be a careless and comic nurse, who had been a cook, who caused all the trouble by forgetting to post the christening invitation to the wicked fairy; there was the Princess, who by a spell was made to grow up at six weeks old; there was the wicked fairy herself—Racha—who revengefully worked the spell; there was the Princess's poor distracted father, the King; there was a Toy Rat, who played a most important part in the original story,

and who could be played, the collaborators considered, by little Phœbe Ffoulkes. There was Father Christmas and a Prince who couldn't grow up, and all the inhabitants of the Land of Childhood, to which the poor Princess's search finally led her, and a Spirit of Childhood who put everything right.

The mornings were rather chilly, but the pair enjoyed them, particularly after Peter had bethought herself of bringing her "Tommy's Cooker," and a tin of biscuits from her study, and making early tea. Vivian used to rush for her violin when she was particularly fascinated by any of Peter's rhymes, and their next-door neighbours, who were not musical, complained bitterly.

But by the end of a rushed and frantic week the Pantomime, libretto and music both, was finished, and Peter, with permission from Miss Harrington, had a tea-party in her study, after which the play was to be read and the parts cast.

The study distinctly resembled the black hole of Calcutta, even with all the windows wide open and the doors ditto; but the Lower Fourth seemed quite content, even though some ten or twelve were picnicking in the passage.

Miss Harrington had sent what she called "a little contribution" to the tea, and with the big cake Mrs. Carey had dispatched to Peter from home, and the ordinary school supply of bread and butter sweetened by Elena's endowment of three pots of strawberry, apricot, and quince jam, a truly magnificent spread was provided.

Vivian poured out on the landing, and Peter cut cakes on the window-sill, and presently the Lower Fourth, comfortably replete, settled down to the reading of the Pantomime. Peter was in the chair, the one arm-chair the room afforded, and Vivian sat beside her with her violin across her knees ready to play the songs when the music was wanted.

It was a most appreciative audience. The wicked fairy's spell:

> "Blear-eyed bats from the old church tower,
> Caught by me at the midnight hour;
> Nightshade deadly, and hemlock rank,
> Growing coarse on the weedy bank;
> Mist from the fevered aguish fen,
> Hair from the head of murdered men,"

was rapturously received, when read by Peter in a horrible toneless voice of utter malignity, and accompanied by Vivian with an uncanny current of

weird sounds from the violin that could sing so angelically at its owner's will.

The poor King's harassed endeavours to keep the thought of her lost childhood from his daughter's mind, by banishing toyshops, abolishing Christmas trees, removing the word childhood from the dictionary, and punishing with penalties, of which hanging was the mildest, any mention of children in the hearing of the Princess, was received with shouts of laughter; and so was his hopeful announcement that she had really "scored" by growing up at six weeks old, in that she had missed most of the troubles of her childhood.

"Just think of all the teething,
I remember it of old;
Why, the tortures I experienced
Would make your blood run cold."

Vivian had written a charming little air to the duet between Father and Daughter, entitled "Missed." Peter privately considered it one of the best things in the play. The Princess's reply had a sound of tears in it—the sound that a violin can get—over the second verse:

"But think of Mother's cuddling,
To balance any woes,
And the joy of 'pigs to market'
With the baby's bare pink toes."

The play went on to show how the Princess, advised by the Toy Rat, went to the North Pole in search of Santa Claus, and was by him conducted to the Land of Childhood, where, among the rightful inhabitants of the country, there lived the Prince who couldn't grow up until he met a girl who couldn't nurse a Teddy Bear. The Princess naturally fulfilled this difficult requirement, and amid flames of green fire and hangings of tea-trays, the spell that bound the grown-up Prince to boyhood was broken, and the Princess found that, it having served a purpose that she had never been a child, she could now be content without her childhood, as his bride.

The comments came thick and fast the minute Peter had finished reading.

"Simply topping."

"Absolutely 'fas.' "

"Who'll be the Princess?"

"Who'll be the nurse?"

“Who’ll be Racha?”

“How will you do the spell?”

“Did Vivian make up the tunes?”

“Where shall we act it?”

“When shall we act it?” . . .

Peter held up her hand.

“We have just five minutes before prep time—don’t interrupt and I’ll tell you all I can in the time.”

“Vivian *did* compose all the music—she’s going to bring fame to Windicotes, that’s certain. We’ll act it in the new gymnasium, and we’ll charge for admission, and we’ll beg, borrow, steal or make all possible clothes and stage properties, so that we can give almost all the money we get to Ruthie’s Convalescent Home. And we’ll do it as soon as we can, because the sooner she goes, the better for her and for that old chap, her grandfather. And so nobody in the cast must have any impots or get the Form detention, because we’ve got to get a move on with the show. See?”

The Form saw. Rehearsals set in with vigour, and with them a period of unexampled saintliness in the Lower Fourth.

Gypsy illustrated programmes with uncanny skill in all her leisure moments, and Miss Orchard quite ceased to look harassed.

CHAPTER XVI

IN LOWER SIXTH

A selection of the Sixth were sitting round the fire one cold, blustering evening when October was well on its way. They were supposed to be doing their preparation, but the preparation of the Sixth was left very much to their own arranging, as it had been in the days of Miss Meldrum. They had a room to themselves, and no mistress sat with them; this arrangement also dating from the days of Miss Meldrum, only Miss Meldrum had never made such caustic comments next morning as Miss Harrington could do when the preparation was inadequately done. The Sixth Form at Windicotes were beginning most unwillingly to realise that nowadays you must be something more than just be Sixth; you must work.

The Sixth referred to was, as it happened, Lower Sixth, only it was seldom known by that slightly invidious title. The few who had soared above it—Peter among the number—were known as Upper Sixth; the rest were just the Sixth.

The Lower Sixth had a large and comfortable room of their own, and it looked particularly cosy on this rough, dark evening. A roaring wood and coal fire was in the large grate; the carpet of crimson felt, the red distempered walls, the big dark oaken bookcases, the solid comfortable furniture, with the sprinkling of lighter basket chairs, made it look extraordinarily cosy and home-like. But the girls' faces wore by no means the contented expressions that they should have done; they all of them, from Carol Stewart downwards, were looking annoyed and out of temper.

"You know we can't get over it; the thing is spreading," Iris Pemberton said. "If we don't put a stop to it soon, the whole of the Lower School is going to acknowledge Petronella."

"Rubbish, it's only the Fourth; they're crazed about this silly play. When it's over . . ." Christine Kington remarked, leaving a gap to be filled in by imagination.

"I don't know about that." Doris Carpenter was rather gloomy. "Peter has got a hold over them, and the Lower Fourth lead the Lower School."

"Well, they were a set of arrant little ruffians as ever breathed before Peter took them in hand," Carol observed pacifically. "I really don't think

she's done so badly by them."

"Oh, she's all right as far as discipline goes." Iris took up the parable. "It's the principle of the thing. Windicotes has got its own constitution, and no one has a right to alter it arbitrarily. Miss Harrington didn't consult us about the new arrangements."

"She asked some of you to be Prefects," Carol owned rather unwillingly.

"Carol, we couldn't in loyalty to you," Margery Cottrill reminded her.

"I know, and it was very decent of you," Carol said hastily. "But still, what I mean is, we ought to be fair to Miss Harrington."

"We're going to be; but we can be that without upsetting all the Windicotes arrangements. Of course, that petition ought to have gone in ages ago," Christine Kington said.

"Yes, but what's the use of sending it in, unless the greater part of the school sign," Iris said crossly; "don't talk idiotically, Christine."

Christine and Iris were sworn allies in general, but that did not prevent them from quarrelling a little at times, especially now when the nerves and temper of the Lower Sixth were wearing rather thin.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" demanded Doris Carpenter. "If we let things go on as they're going, there'll be less to sign than ever. Heard the latest?"

"No, what is it?" Carol asked.

"The Prefects have all got fags," declaimed Doris. There was a pause; the fagging question was an old outstanding grievance in the Sixth at Windicotes. Carol had always enjoyed a superfluity of fags in right of her position and popularity, though her easy good nature made her most indifferently served. But the school in general rebelled at the demand of the Sixth, that each member of that august body, whether Upper or Lower, should also possess fagging rights, and the Sixth had been obliged to rely on personal popularity or enforced unwilling service, wriggled out of as soon as possible. A fixed fag had been impossible to obtain for any bullying or cajoling, and the Sixth had given up this altogether as a bad job. And now, apparently, these Prefects, unacknowledged by the magnates of the school, had succeeded when they had failed.

"They haven't? What appalling cheek!" Carol cried, an angry flush upon her usual sweet-tempered face.

“Well, I do call that the limit. What are we going to do?” demanded Doris.

Carol got up. “Who is Peter’s fag?”

“The frantic new kid who can draw,” Iris contributed.

“Send for her, somebody,” Carol directed briefly. The Lower Sixth looked at each other with startled approval. For once in a way, it was clear, the impossible had happened, and Carol Stewart was roused.

Christine Kington went out in a hurry; no one spoke during her absence. It was felt that the occasion was too serious.

She came back in about three minutes, bringing Gypsy with her—a Gypsy who, far from being properly impressed and awed by this summons to the Sixth, had impertinently twinkling eyes under her thatch of straight bobbed hair.

Carol spoke. “You are Gypsy Carstairs, aren’t you? I want to change fags, my present one is such a silly young idiot, and breaks all my cups. I hear good accounts of you, so I’ll have you instead.”

Gypsy answered with exemplary politeness. “Thank you, Carol; it’s very kind of you, and, of course, I should have been most pleased, but I am fagging for the Senior Prefect, as it happens.”

“The who?” snapped Carol, forgetting grammar and dignity in the shock of Gypsy’s answer.

“The Senior Prefect,” repeated Gypsy demurely, but with badly twinkling eyes.

“She means Petronella Carey,” Christine translated.

“There’s only one Senior Prefect, is there?” said Gypsy.

“There isn’t any Senior Prefect,” snapped Doris, and then looked a little uneasily at Carol. She felt she had gone rather too far. However, the Sixth supported her as in honour bound, and the more easily perhaps that it was felt that Carol really felt what Doris had voiced.

“The opinion of the school is all against change, the Head Girl is the person you Juniors have to attend to; you needn’t worry your heads over anybody else,” Christine told Gypsy, and Carol added conclusively:

“So that’s settled; you are my fag, Gypsy. You can go and make me some tea now, and mind you see that the milk jug’s clean.”

“I’ll make you some tea with pleasure, as soon as I’ve got the Senior Prefect hers; but, as to being your fag, I’m afraid it’s impossible,” Gypsy answered.

“I won’t have any nonsense; you will be my fag. Petronella must choose someone else,” said Carol, her anger rising.

“She has chosen me, as it happens,” Gypsy informed the Head Girl, her most impish expression to the fore.

Carol got up and came to her. Standing like that, she towered over thirteen-year-old Gypsy.

“*Will* you do what you’re told?” she demanded. Gypsy saw her chance and took it like a flash.

“When I am told to do things by the proper people,” she flung out. “In the Lower School we take our orders from the Prefects.”

It was Doris Carpenter, not Carol, who boxed the rebel’s ears; but Carol certainly did not interfere, and Peter, hurrying in a moment later to find Gypsy with her eyes full of tears and the print of five fingers scarlet on her face, made small distinction of persons.

“What are you doing to the kid?” she flared, coming, a short, square, determined figure, into the midst of the angry group of tall Sixth Formers threateningly surrounding Gypsy.

“She was most impertinent,” said Carol stiffly.

“And somebody seems to have jolly well smacked her for it,” said Peter. “What did you say, Gypsy?”

“We should prefer that you left the matter in our hands, Petronella,” Carol said, with cold dignity.

“Sorry, but ’fraid I must deal with it,” said Peter. “What was it, Gypsy?”

“Carol Stewart ordered me to give up fagging for you,” Gypsy explained.

“Correct, Carol?” Peter demanded, in business-like accents.

“Yes, I have decided to have her for my fag,” announced the Head Girl, with an air of finality.

Peter made no comment on that. “Did you refuse rudely, Gypsy?” she asked.

“Not very, Petronella; I might have said ‘Go to blazes’; Daddy would,” the culprit answered.

“If you had, you would have found yourself doing two hours’ detention next half-holiday,” Peter told her, most unsympathetically. “As it is, tell Carol you are sorry you weren’t as polite as you should have been.”

The rest of Gypsy’s face began to match the finger-prints upon it, but to the unmixed amazement of the Lower Sixth she obeyed.

“I’m sorry if I wasn’t polite, Carol,” she mumbled.

“That’s all right, if you’re sorry. Cut along and get my tea then, as I told you, and I’ll put you in the way of the rest of the things to-morrow,” Carol directed.

Gypsy looked at Peter in mute appeal. “Cut,” said Peter laconically, “and you can bring Carol Stewart a cup from my tea. Come back with the cup to tell me that it’s made.”

The door shut behind Gypsy before the Sixth had quite taken in the purport of Peter’s last remark. She thoughtfully enlightened them.

“I see we’ve got to have it out! Look here, Carol, I’d much rather pull with you—and it would be so much better for the school. Won’t you?”

Carol drew back. “I don’t know what you mean, Petronella. Of course, I have no personal feeling against you, but I can’t acknowledge your right to boss people just because Miss Harrington chooses to call you by a silly title not acknowledged by the school.”

“By the Upper School,” corrected Peter.

“What are the Juniors?”

“More than half Windicotes numerically,” Peter stated blandly, and the Sixth looked at one another in dismay. What she said was most unfortunately true: the attitude of the Lower School knocked out the petition (unless it was decided that Juniors were too young to sign), and even more the idea of voting on the Prefect question. And Peter knew that.

“Well, if you won’t let us work together for the good of Windicotes, you won’t,” Peter said philosophically. “It’s a mistake, and by and by you’ll see that for yourself. But, in the meantime you can go your way, and I mine, as long as we don’t clash.”

“What’s going to happen then?” asked Carol uneasily.

“Oh, you’ll find your way guided firmly in other directions,” said Peter. “And while we’re on the subject, one of the ways which I won’t have is bullying. That child Gypsy was absolutely within her rights to refuse your unfair order. I ragged her for rudeness because she oughtn’t to be rude; but if she was a bit impolite, you were thoroughly unsportsmanlike, and I think you ought to be ashamed. The child goes on being my fag, and if you interfere with her again, I shall take steps. Is that clear?”

“Petronella, how dare you!” began Carol furiously, but Peter did not wait to hear her out. “Here comes Gypsy with the tea. Good-night, everybody. Come on, Gypsy,” she said, and marched off with her fag, and the honours of war.

The Lower Sixth looked at Carol, and she back at the Lower Sixth.

“I’m not going to stand it,” she said viciously.

“Of course not; but how are we going to avoid standing it?” asked Christine Kington.

Nobody answered that question.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR RUTHIE

Two days before the production of the play, Peter received a letter from Elena, a letter which was so exciting as almost to put dramatic interests in the shade.

The letter began with the bridesmaid invitation at which Vivian had hinted, and went on to announce that Lord and Lady Rustthorpe had asked Alan to bring Elena up to Rustthorpe Castle to stay, and had further invited Vivian and Peter to spend a day at the Castle in the course of the visit. It appeared that Alan had told Lady Rustthorpe that Elena's sister was at Windicotes, and that Peter was her especial friend, hence this delightful invitation. The visit was to come off next week, and Lady Rustthorpe would write to Miss Harrington and arrange the day.

To say that Peter was thrilled by the invitation was to put it mildly. Cousin Alan being Lord Rustthorpe's agent, she had heard some interesting facts about him, notably the story she had told to Vivian about his rescue from the bog. She had heard more about his wonderful old castle, where all manner of grim things had happened in times past, when the moors spread in lonely grandeur with never a mine in sight; and she had always longed to see it. But Cousin Alan had never come over to Windicotes when his employer was in the north; it probably had not occurred to him to do so—and neither Lord nor Lady Rustthorpe were likely to find out that their agent had young cousins handy, who were longing to see over their historic place. Elena made the difference there, and Elena knew, it appeared, from Vivian's letters, what friends she and Peter had become.

"Won't it be absolutely fas?" Peter cried, when she had read this delightful letter to Vivian, by way of giving her the messages coming on the last page. "Elena's a dear; I *am* glad she's going to marry Alan. Just fancy, if they were to take us down a coal-mine; Alan's been down heaps of times, I know. And there were lots of murders and escapes and jolly things like that at Rustthorpe Castle—it was going in the Wars of the Roses."

Peter wrote to Elena for Vivian and herself, mentioning the school half-holidays, and their pleasure at the promised invitation; and both found it very hard to settle down to the final preparations for the play. Luckily there

was so much to do that they were obliged to concentrate, and put unsettling possibilities like coal-mines out of their minds for the moment.

Miss Harrington had allowed posters to be put up in the window of the village shop and outside the school gates. Bessie, Peter's most especial ally among the housemaids, told her encouragingly that nearly all the village were coming, and that the blacksmith and family, and Miss Cowley at the shop, not to mention Dr. and Mrs. Macintyre, whose two girls were at Windicotes, and Mr. Graves the Vicar, had all gone to the splendid extravagance of reserved seats at two shillings and sixpence.

The front row only was reserved. Miss Harrington and Miss Brooker both booked places there, in spite of Peter's polite request that they would let her send them "complimentary tickets." That meant that quite half the row was booked, and Peter hoped for a few unexpectedly generous patrons at the last moment. The other seats ran from one shilling to threepence.

The night came at last, as the greatest nights do. Through a chink in the curtains Gypsy reported on the audience, while Peter finished the setting of her stage and the dressing of her company.

"Shilling seats nearly full; all the staff are there—decent of them, isn't it? The Prefects are all shilling too—my word, Peter, I never thought they'd play up to us to that extent, did you?"

"Don't be a young silly; of course anyone would know they would play up," Peter said indistinctly, because she had pins in her mouth. "But it is topping of them to have taken expensive seats. How are the half-crown reserved?"

"Not very full yet."

"More than five minutes yet for them to come in," Peter said philosophically. "What about the back?"

"Threepenny places packed by the look of it; the school's there," Gypsy said. "I should think most of them have turned up."

"Winnie and Kathleen are selling piles of programmes," squeaked Phœbe excitedly.

"And bang goes saxpence at each of Gypsy's illustrated ones," Peter said cheerfully. "You did six dozen, didn't you, Gypsy?"

"Yes, not counting the grand presentation one for Miss Harrington," Gypsy answered, looking pleased. "But they won't all sell, Petronella."

"I bet they will," Peter told her. "They deserve to. That will be thirty-six shillings you'll have given to Ruthie, Gypsy."

"Oh, stuff—just I happen to like drawing things," Gypsy broke in, in a hurry, but anyone could see she was pleased.

"I say, there are some new people come into the front row—four at once, my word! She is frightfully pretty—they're shaking hands with Miss Harrington . . ."

"How many?" Peter demanded anxiously.

"Four. Two ladies and two men."

"Ten shillings more," shrieked Ena Hayes, with a joyful wriggle that nearly undid the effect of Peter's work during the last five minutes.

"They're buying programmes," Gypsy sent back to the rest of the company in a thrilling whisper. "O—oh! they're buying one each, the *dears*! That's twelve more shillings for Ruthie."

Peter would have loved to take a peep at these magnificent newcomers, but she did not dare. When Stage-Manager, Author, Producer and Actor—for Peter had taken the part of the cook-nurse for herself—are all combined in one, there isn't time to spare within three minutes of the moment when the curtain should rise. She jerked the Toy Rat's mask into position, spread Vivian's lovely opera cloak of white velvet and swansdown over the cradle in the royal nursery, and commanded the "orchestra"—piano and two violins—to "get going."

They obliged, after some preliminary tuning and one false start from sheer nervousness, and Peter cleared the stage, gave a final twitch to the gorgeous covering of the "baby's" cradle, and the signal to "ring up." The curtains parted jerkily, and the nurse began to sing the lullaby to the sleeping infant, tremulously, but in tune. The play had begun.

It was not until the Pantomime was well upon its way that Peter dared distract her mind sufficiently to look at the audience, and then it was not so much from curiosity as to the identity of the strangers described by Phœbe, as because a burst of whole-hearted masculine amusement had greeted her description, in patter song, of her various "places." She went on to verse two in good spirits, wondering who these cheery, appreciative strangers could be:

"I was a cook, expensive, classy,
All my ways up to date, not *passé*,
Three kitchen-maids kept my saucepans clean,
And washed all my clothes in the soup-tureen."

This time the laughter-shout was so decided that Peter had to look—and that look gave her the surprise of her life. For there were two quite familiar though most unexpected faces in that front row—Elena's lovely one, so like Vivian's, and Alan's brown, laughing, square-chinned face, with the vivid blue eyes. And between them, two other faces, less familiar and even less expected—the faces of Lord and Lady Rustthorpe, only viewed before by the Windicotes girls upon the platform in Great Hall when her ladyship was giving away beautifully bound prizes, and making felicitous little speeches to the lucky people who had won them.

Peter nearly forgot her next "cue" in astonishment; Lord and Lady Rustthorpe—what could they be doing at a Fourth Form Pantomime?

They were certainly appreciating it, there was no doubt of that. The heartiest laughter came from that first row, the most vigorous clapping. Even Miss Jane Brooker was observed to look as though she had never disapproved of anything in her life.

The Princess reached the Land of Childhood with all the Company in good spirits and playing to the top notch.

The curtain went down for the last time; Miss Harrington's clear voice called for "Author and Composer." The audience, especially the front row, took the cry up with a will, "Author and Composer! Author and Composer!"

"Go on—you two," urged Gypsy, catching Peter and Vivian each by an arm. "Go *on*! Can't you hear them yelling for you—and you jolly well deserve it."

Gypsy was devoid of veneration for her elders, but there was no mistaking the note of whole-hearted admiring pleasure in her voice. Somehow that warmed Peter even more than the public tribute to her writing. She clutched Vivian's hand, and together the two took their call.

It was a wonderfully enthusiastic reception that they got, when the pair of them stood in the glare of the footlights, Peter looking short and square in the full-flowered print dress, voluminous apron and enormous "granny" cap of the careless nurse, and Vivian, slim and graceful, in velvet tunic and feathered cap, as the Prince who had no power to grow up until he met a girl who could not nurse a Teddy Bear.

The audience clapped, they stamped, they shouted, till Peter was hot and Vivian "lump-in-the-throaty," as she afterwards described it, with gratified embarrassment.

And then all the actors were called, singly and collectively, and clapped violently before going down into the audience for congratulation and comments.

Peter found herself dragged up to Miss Harrington by Cara Stornaway before she had time to protest. The Head received her with a twinkle in those wonderful eyes.

"So you can write, Petronella? I understood from you that the literary talent of the family resided exclusively in Angela."

"Oh, the play would have been nothing without the music, Miss Harrington," protested Peter, inwardly thrilled, however, by the quiet certainty of that "You can write."

"The music for the songs was charming, quite charming—I congratulate you both," Miss Harrington said quite emphatically. "And if you and Vivian like to make a little money on your joint production I am tolerably sure that I can place your little play, music and all, with the editor of a girls' paper for which I sometimes write. It would bring you in not less than fifteen pounds, probably nearer twenty."

"Oh, Miss Harrington!" gasped Peter, and nearly fell backwards in delighted wonder.

"You are probably quite wrong about the editor, my dear Georgia," said Miss Brooker severely; but not even that could damp Peter then, because though Miss Brooker knew everything there was to be known about domestic service, and did the housekeeping at Windicotes so wonderfully that the school had hardly seen the same pudding twice in the term up to date, she did *not* know publishers and editors, except in so far as those august people had more than once come down to lunch with Miss Harrington, and sat at the High Table, looking like ordinary people and eating ordinary food.

Peter felt as though she would like to get away into a corner with Vivian to discuss this amazing suggestion in all its wonder; but Cousin Alan and Elena were greeting her and asking for Vivian, and Lord and Lady Rustthorpe were asking to have author and composer introduced; and somehow through the babel of eager talk an invitation was being given to

both girls for the very next day but one, and Miss Harrington was accepting it, for all it wasn't a half-holiday.

Lord Rustthorpe even said something about a descent to the nearest coal-mine; Elena, it appeared, like the girls, was dying for the experience. Altogether life was too thrilling for words that night. The money for Ruthie was absolutely safe—six weeks at the Convalescent Home at least could be counted on, even if the surgical appliances for helping her lameness cost more than Miss Harrington's experience had allowed for. Not only was there the giddy prospect of selling the play to an editor for an unbelievable sum, but the proceeds of the actual performance had been ever so much bigger than Peter had dared to expect in her most hopeful moments. The huge hall had been full, Lord Rustthorpe had proffered a pound note for the four tickets of his party and refused to accept any change, and furthermore had insisted on giving half a crown for every programme, declaring Gypsy's drawings were well worth it, a statement not as inaccurate as it was kind.

Altogether, Author, Composer, Illustrator, and Lower Fourth collectively were in a state of unexampled happiness and triumph, and Peter went to bed feeling as though nothing could ever be seriously wrong again.

And there upon her dressing-table lay the letter. Peter took it up and read it through. It was not very long, but most conclusive.

> "Dear Petronella,—*We, the undersigned, have decided that unless you place your resignation in Miss Harrington's hands within the next forty-eight hours, giving back to Carol Stewart the place you have usurped, we shall all write to our people demanding to be taken away from Windicotes at the end of the present term, giving as our reason, that the school is being ruined by the changes. We make this decision reluctantly, knowing the harm it must do to the prestige of Windicotes if the Sixth leave in a body, with only one or two negligible exceptions; but we shall be forced to act unless you yourself prefer to do so for the credit of the school.*
>
> "The Lower Sixth."

Peter read the letter through twice to herself, and then put it in her pocket. The magic had gone out of this wonderful day all at once.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE START OF THE FORTY-EIGHT HOURS

When she was in bed Peter started to think seriously. The situation needed serious thought; Peter knew enough of the Sixth to realise that theirs was no idle threat. When a girl of seventeen or eighteen tells her people that she cannot stand her school any longer, the present-day parent listens with respect. Fifty years ago she would have been snubbed, or ignored; but the modern schoolgirl has come into her own, and perhaps a bit over. And it was unfortunately quite true that a big exodus is bad for the reputation of a school. Peter tossed and turned in bed, and could not see any way out of the impasse, except the way she loathed, that of retreat.

Vivian's sympathy would have been comforting, but Vivian was so happy over the play's success that Peter had not the heart to tell her. If anybody knew, it must be the other Prefects; she had no right to lay the burden on a girl in Lower Fifth because she was her friend, was Peter's feeling. So Vivian went off to sleep and rosy dreams, and Peter tossed and fidgeted and went over and over that uncompromising letter in her own mind.

What ought she to do? What could she do? What she did do at last was to get up, against all known rules, put on her dressing-gown, and go along to Carol Stewart's room, where she waked the Head Girl from a particularly sound sleep. Carol sat up looking frightened.

"What on earth's wrong? Is the house on fire?"

"No, a bit worse, I think," said Peter. "I've come about that letter, Carol."

"What letter?"

"You know—the one I had from the Sixth."

Carol lay down again. "There wasn't any such desperate hurry; you could have waited till to-morrow morning. They gave you forty-eight hours, didn't they?"

"I suppose you saw the letter?" Peter suggested.

"Well, yes; but I don't see why you should come here and catechise me in the middle of the night. It isn't allowed, and it's a nuisance. Do go back to

bed."

"In about five minutes," Peter answered coolly. Now it came to the point she felt quite calm and collected. "It's no good being detached, Carol; you know all about the letter."

"The Lower Sixth did it on their own," Carol interrupted. "I don't say they're wrong, and I don't say they're right . . ."

"But they have your tacit support in doing what you know will damage the school," Peter told her grimly. "You know as well as I do that it's not playing the game by Windicotes or the Head, and you let them do it."

"The remedy is in your hands, not mine," said Carol. "If you are as keen on the good of the school as you make out, you had better give in about the Senior Prefect business, Peter. I can't press you, because I stand to profit by your resignation . . ."

"I wonder what you would describe as pressure," thought Peter, but she didn't say it. What was the use?

—"Since we are on the subject, I don't mind telling you that I am sorry the Sixth have gone so far; but since they have, there is obviously no drawing back——"

"Meaning in plain English that you'll stand by, smiling placidly, while Windicotes Seniors do their worst for Windicotes?" Peter inquired.

Carol flushed up. "If you are going to be rude——"

"Sorry, unintentional. I was asking for information, that was all. I've got it now, so good-night," Peter said.

"What are you going to do?" Carol asked, a shade uneasily.

"Wait till the end of the forty-eight hours and you'll see," Peter informed her from the door, and went back to bed.

But not to sleep; that did not come for a long time. Peter was thinking out a plan of action. She had only gained one advantage from her midnight prowl, and that was the wholesome certainty that she had only herself to rely upon. She would have no support from Carol. Oddly enough, the certainty proved stimulating. Finally, she decided to call a Prefects' meeting for the half-hour before breakfast next morning, and went to sleep at last. She had a plan; it only remained to be seen if the other Prefects agreed to it. The money needed could be borrowed from the "Ruthie" fund, already in her

possession, and paid back eventually from that wonderful fifteen pounds of which Miss Harrington had been so certain.

Vivian found Peter quite cheerful next morning, and with a light in her blue eyes which Vivian connected with some sort of fighting business to the fore. But since Peter volunteered no information she loyally asked no questions, but talked about little Ruthie, and the brilliant prospects opening before her. Miss Harrington had promised that she and Peter should go to the hospital that afternoon to see Ruthie and tell her the great news; and the day after there was the splendid excitement of the visit to Rustthorpe Castle and the possible descent of a coal-mine. Vivian thought it tremendous luck that a threatened coal-strike should have brought Lord Rustthorpe to his northern home a good week earlier than had been expected. They had made so much difference to the front row—"the stalls" of last night—and it would have been rather flat, after all the excitement of preparing for the play, if there hadn't been the great day to look forward to. "A thrilling forty-eight hours we are going to have," Vivian concluded.

Peter agreed, rather absently; odd that Vivian should make use of the very expression adopted by the Sixth in their ultimatum. She was wondering what the other end of these forty-eight hours would bring forth!

She was ready dressed a good half-hour before breakfast, having previously gone round in a dressing-gown to wake all the Prefects sleeping in the School House. Realising from her tone that serious business was toward, they made no murmur over the horrid necessity of getting up half an hour too soon. Peter found most of them ready and waiting on the tiptoe of expectation when she reached her study—the appointed meeting-place—next morning.

"What is it, Peter?" Cara Stornaway demanded. "Something badly wrong, of course? Oh, my lost peace and quiet and getting up five minutes before prayer-time! Go on—break it to us—we can bear it."

For all answer Peter produced the fateful letter, and read it aloud from first to last in a voice which she purposely kept at a dead level.

"And that's that," she concluded.

There was a momentary silence, then:

"Well, they are the absolute limit!" Cara said.

"Rank outsiders, I call them," proclaimed Veronica heatedly.

"Rotters," chimed in Catherine. "What are you going to do about it, Peter?"

"Ask your opinion on a plan," Peter answered briskly.

"The advisability of giving in," inquired Cara, a twinkle in her eye.

"Naturally not. A plan for turning tables—always a satisfactory game."

"Rather!" came in a most united chorus, and Veronica jerked Peter's arm and said, "Oh, get *on*; tell us!"

"If there are twenty girls ready and waiting to take the place of the twenty departures it ceases to be a nuisance that twenty depart *en masse* and becomes a convenience," said Peter slowly. "If twenty telegrams arrive from prospective Windicotians—real or imaginary while Miss Harrington is giving Literature to the Sixth in First Hour—well, some of the contents are bound to leak out, and the Sixth will feel as the French don't have it, *vendu*."

Cara Stornaway sat down rather suddenly. "You've a nerve, Petronella! Do you mean to suggest in cold blood and before breakfast that we should have Miss Harrington on by bogus telegrams? I should imagine the desired vacancy in the Senior Prefect line would be very much there, when the Head finds out."

Peter grinned. "I'll undertake to square Miss Harrington."

"Expect us to stand round and pick up the pieces afterwards?" Cara asked resignedly. "Propound the rest of your plan, please, before we get brain fever with suspense."

"This is it," Peter told her promptly. "You, and Barbara Grinstead, and Martina all have young sisters coming as soon as there are vacancies, I know. The wires can come from your various mothers, asking whether Miss Harrington can possibly take the kids in next term instead of waiting?"

Barbara Grinstead laughed. "Mother is desperately keen—I might send her a prepaid wire."

"That's an idea," Cara agreed. "It's going to cost us all rather a lot, but I agree it's worth it."

"I've got some unexpected money coming in," Peter interrupted. She was shy of mentioning her literary success. "Ruthie, the kid we acted for, won't want her money for another week or so at earliest, so we could borrow from the takings at the door . . ."

“That’s the way the thoroughly bad lots begin in books,” Cara said resignedly; “but go on, Peter. Let’s hear the rest of your nefarious schemes, for breakfast comes apace, and I, for one, prefer it hot. We’ve grasped the idea of the genuine wires; where are the bogus ones to come from?”

“Leave that to me,” said Peter blandly; “just take these forms and help me write them.”

CHAPTER XIX

TWENTY TELEGRAMS

"*Can you take delicate girl fourteen next term. Reply, Lady Earlscourt, Marlhouse, County Kerry, Ireland*," read Jacynth, with literary pride.

"Why a title?" asked Cara.

"Oh, it sounds better."

"They'll look in Burke."

"Why should they? Besides, she's probably a very new creation."

"You'd be safer with plain Mrs. Smith."

"I think it's topping, Jacynth, your wire," Peter said, looking up from her own. "That touch about the girl being delicate is so realistic. Think these two of mine will do?—

> " '*Please write if possible vacancy for two sisters next term. Parents returning India. Onslow, 3 Park Lane, W.*';

"and this,

> " '*Anxiously awaiting reply to letter asking if you could take my three nieces next term.*
>
> " 'MATTHEW MOLSON.' "

Everybody shouted. "Peter, you're a genius!" Cara declared. "That's five done."

"What do you mean about the letter?" Catherine King asked anxiously.

"Nothing—of course there hasn't been a letter, considering there is no Matthew Molson there are no nieces," laughed Peter. "But it sounds well."

"And 'returning to India' is so gorgeously hurried," Patricia Heron remarked admiringly. "I say, whether we carry it through or not, this is a rag."

"We are going to carry it through," Peter said firmly. "Get on to it, somebody else. Twenty telegrams to do, remember."

"Not twenty—you got two sisters on one, and three nieces on the other," Cara suggested.

"I know, but we want some over—twenty telegrams in all," Peter said decidedly.

"I shall send four sisters—not possessing one," Veronica stated in a hardened manner.

"Too many," Cara told her. "No one *could* have four sisters—at least, I suppose they could, but they don't."

"No, be moderate; I sailed rather near the wind in sending three nieces," Peter remarked, "but Matthew was an uncle, an ill-tempered bachelor uncle, and he couldn't stand girls about the place at any price. Rosemary, the youngest, was only seven, much too young for school really, but he was that kind. Only he must be unique—too many of them might arouse suspicion. . . ."

They got to work seriously upon the twenty telegrams; and twenty-three girls were pressed upon Miss Harrington for next term before the breakfast-bell clanged. Peter gathered up a sheaf of forms. "Thanks frightfully; we've done a good morning's work."

There was always half an hour to spare after breakfast; you practised in it, or looked up shaky dates, etc., for First Hour if you were industriously minded and cared about your place in form; you strolled about the grounds in summer, or sat upon hot-water pipes in winter with your special friend, if you were not.

Peter was in neither class this morning; the moment breakfast was over she disappeared unostentatiously and, mounting upon a bicycle borrowed from Bessie, pedalled furiously down the drive and in the direction of Raynham, the nearest town, Ruthie's money and a sheaf of telegraph forms in her pocket.

There were three villages possessing post offices to be passed upon the way; Peter dismounted at each and dispatched telegrams, the prepaid one to Mrs. Stornaway—it expressed the situation in a nutshell and invited her co-operation; Cara had vouched for it that her mother would rise to the occasion—and two others, one from the inhospitable uncle, and the other from the equally mythical Lady Earlscourt of County Kerry. It would never do to have all the wires arriving at exactly the same moment. Two more were sent off from the small combined post office and grocer's at the entrance to the town, four from the big Central Post Office, two of them the

prepaid ones, which would be answered promptly or not according to the time they reached the mothers, and anyhow would be most unlikely to arrive suspiciously close to the other two, or to each other. Peter found another small post office in a back street, which disposed of another two, and put in three more at the "General" after giving them this short rest. She gave them in to another fatigued young man this time, but thought he eyed her suspiciously. Then she rode home at a dangerous pace by another route, disposing of all her remaining telegrams by the way. There was just time to drop the bicycle at the back door and change her muddy shoes before going in to First Lesson with Miss Harrington. It so happened that in Literature and History the Head was taking the Upper and Lower Sixth together.

The Form took their places—Peter feeling a little out of breath and with her mind an entire blank on the subject of *Hamlet*. To them entered Miss Harrington, a small Temple edition of the play in her hand, and, as usual, no notes at all.

"You have your places?" she began before she was well inside the door. That was one of Miss Harrington's ways—she always expected you to be so tremendously ahead with everything. "Act I. Platform before the Castle—Christine, you will read Horatio; Cara, Bernardo; Petronella, Francisco. Try to envisage the scene, girls—the faintly moonlit ramparts, the sentinel trying to hide his overhanging sense of fear, the fear which has had its root, less in that shadowy mysterious figure seen last night, than in the general haunting sense of something wrong. Realise the cause those Danish soldiers had for sheer inexplicable dread, and get the feel of hidden fear into that first sharp challenge. Now, Cara, you—feel it—fear at your elbow, and a step in front —'*Who's there?*' "

The knock at the door seemed a part of Miss Harrington's directions; the answer came in the shape of Bessie with a silver salver and two orange telegrams upon it.

"The boy is waiting to see if there is any reply, Miss," Bessie mentioned, presenting them.

Miss Harrington looked slightly annoyed: she hated interruptions, especially in Literature-lessons, when an atmosphere was essential. She felt for the glasses which should have been hung by a slender gold chain round her neck, and generally weren't. Then she opened the envelopes.

"Nothing wrong—something about a vacancy next term," she said, half aloud, with puckered brows. "Read them to me, will you? I'm no good, without my glasses."

Christine Kington, whom she happened to address, read the two wires aloud as desired. One was from "Lady Earlscourt," the other from "Matthew Molson." Peter saw Carol Stewart and Doris exchange a quick glance. Miss Harrington clasped her head.

"I hate wires, especially in the midst of First Lesson—why couldn't they have written? We haven't reached Mid-term yet. No, Bessie, there is no answer; I must find later if there will be any vacancies. Go on, girls.

" '*Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.*' Don't go to sleep, Petronella!"

Peter, thus adjured, found herself equal to remarking, "*You come most carefully upon your hour*," and, as she said it, telegram No. 3 arrived with uncanny appropriateness. She restrained an hysterical desire to laugh, however, and waited, book in hand, while Miss Harrington asked Carol Stewart to dispose of this fresh interruption as fast as possible.

"*No answer*," said Miss Harrington, and addressed Christine rather caustically on the subject of Horatio. A bewildered Sixth pulled itself together, but Carol had not had time to realise what Miss Harrington expected from a ghost, when Bessie arrived in the Sixth Form room again this time with no less than four orange-coloured envelopes, and a distinctly scared expression upon her pretty face.

This time Miss Harrington sent for her glasses, which was perhaps fortunate, as two more wires arrived while they were being fetched. She read the six telegrams with meticulous attention; then she had a careful look at the earlier ones read to her by Christine and Carol. It was then that Peter began to shake a little in her shoes, but she didn't regret what she had done, not for a moment.

Miss Harrington looked up, and her beautiful eyes, behind their gold-rimmed eyeglasses, swept the rows of girls. Peter held on to her courage, metaphorically speaking; what terrible question was coming? No question came. Miss Harrington just spoke:

"To judge by the telegrams I am receiving all asking if I have vacancies for next term, I am disposed to think that an idea must have somehow got about that several girls are leaving at Christmas, without giving me the usual notice courtesy demands. Carol, have you heard of any girls who are expecting to do this?"

"Oh no, Miss Harrington," Carol said eagerly. Asked afterwards by slightly indignant friends what made her say it, she pointed out that,

considering the way Miss Harrington put the question, she could say nothing else.

"Thanks, it must have been some silly rumour," Miss Harrington said placidly. "Get on, girls. A little more bite from you, Petronella. Cara, very good."

Was it fancy upon Peter's part that Miss Harrington twinkled as she asked for more "bite" from her Senior Prefect? And she bore the next batch of telegrams, three at one go, with exemplary patience, asking Carol to read them to her, so that she need not lose her place in the Temple Shakespeare.

But there was considerably more reading of telegrams than there was of *Hamlet* in First Hour on that historic morning. It was greatly to the credit of the Prefects that they maintained that mildly puzzled expression throughout.

Peter, as usual, offered her arm to the Head, as she limped from Sixth Form to the Upper Fifth, her next class. Half-way across the hall the Head made a remark. Peter, quaking inwardly, listened with bated breath.

"Unexampled impertinence which must not occur again; but, I gather, a signal victory, Peter. And victories being as a rule expensive, I should wish to bear the out-of-pocket expenses of this one."

"Oh, *thank* you, Miss Harrington," said Peter from her heart.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE CASTLE

At break Carol Stewart sought out Peter. "You think you've scored, I suppose?" she asked bitterly.

"Perhaps that was the idea," agreed Peter.

"I suppose even *you* didn't tell Miss Harrington—about the Sixth?"

"No; what do you take me for?"

"Well, I'll tell you this," Carol said indignantly, "you've been very clever, I acknowledge, Petronella; but you *won't win*! The school is going to petition against you, and Miss Harrington won't be able to stand against the opinion of the whole school."

"What about the Juniors?" Peter asked.

"They don't count. We didn't propose to let them sign anyway."

"How lucky!" Peter said blandly, and went away to think. Of course she had to keep her end up before Carol, but it was depressing to find how much she was still disliked. Peter would have given a good deal to be able to resign the post which held so many more kicks than halfpence; but two things prevented her, both potent. One was pride, and one was Robin. Of course, disagreeable things could be stuck, and stuck cheerfully if one chose; and the scholarship, if she could keep and earn it honestly, would make the most tremendous difference to Robin and his prospects. With Peter's school bills except travelling saved for two years, all that money could be put by towards the good preparatory school, which Robin must go to if he was to have a fair chance of passing into Dartmouth at the right time. Peter drew a long breath; she would stick it, whatever happened. And then she heard Vivian calling, and bolted out of her study like a rabbit to meet her friend.

"Peter, I couldn't find you," Vivian gasped breathlessly. "We've to change at once, Miss Harrington says, for Lord Rustthorpe has sent a car for us, and wants us to go to the Castle to-day instead of to-morrow, because a strike is declared and the men are coming out at once; and if the railways join in, Elena will have to go home to-morrow. So Lady Rustthorpe sent a note, and we've to be as quick as we can getting ready."

They clattered down to their bedroom; there was certainly no time for thinking out a way of meeting the petition. Peter wisely decided to put school troubles out of her mind as far as possible.

"How decent of Lord and Lady Rustthorpe to think of it in all the bother of a strike," she said, pulling off her gym frock in frantic haste and getting down her Sunday coat and skirt and best silk shirt. "But, Vivian, we shan't be able to see Ruthie and tell her."

"She didn't know we were coming, so she won't be disappointed," Vivian said practically.

"No, that's true. And, Vivian, they're sure to send us back; there's just a chance they might let us go round by Merthyr Mire to tell old Faraday, anyway. It's nothing in a car. Think Elena . . .?"

"We could sound her, couldn't we?" Vivian thought, and then they looked each other over to see if both were tidy, caught up their gloves and hurried downstairs.

"Have a good time," Miss Harrington told them, when they went to say good-bye and thank her. "Lady Rustthorpe says she will send you back when I wish. Peter, don't be later than seven, my dear. Good-bye."

A smart chauffeur held the door open, and tucked them up in a fur rug, and the car purred smoothly away in the direction of the moors. At the bend in the drive they looked back at Windicotes; Peter glanced at her watch. "Seven and a half hours before we look at Windicotes again. I do wonder whether we shall have been down a coal-mine?"

Then the great mass of old red brick was left behind them.

Rustthorpe's Castle stood on rising ground above a little mining village that had once been picturesque and beautiful, and now looked untidy and grimed. There were a great many shale heaps, and there were bored-looking men lounging near them in rather sullen groups, smoking a good deal and talking a very little. The two girls were not sorry when the rather unsavoury main street of the village was left behind them, and the car was climbing to the Castle. She was not exactly surprised that Lord Rustthorpe preferred his south-country home, though she knew from Cousin Alan that he was a very good landlord up here in his northern dominions.

The two girls received the kindest of welcomes from Lady Rustthorpe. Lord Rustthorpe had gone down to the nearest pithead, she told them. Some of the younger and hotter spirits among the miners were wanting to prevent the safety-men from sticking to the pumps. Lord Rustthorpe hoped to make

the men see his point of view by catching them before they left the pithead and got under the influence of extremists.

Lady Rustthorpe was even sweeter than Peter had found her last; Peter knew that she must be anxious and troubled, and yet she had plenty of sympathy to give to the disappointment of Elena and the girls in being stopped from going down a mine.

"Rustthorpe had made all arrangements," she said, smiling; "but the best-laid schemes must give way to strikes, and we shall have to give it up for this time. It wouldn't be safe. I have made Alan promise to bring Miss Massingbird up here again after the wedding, and then we will have a great expedition, all the six of us, and nothing to get in the way."

After all, though there was no coal-mine expedition, Rustthorpe was very much worth seeing, the girls found, especially with such a charming hostess to show them its glories. They explored the gardens first, as the day was cloudy and looked as though it might turn to rain, and saw the wonderful rose-garden, where it was believed that roses of every variety and colour grew and flourished; it was a saying in the countryside, "Blue Roses at Rustthorpe." They saw the Grecian summer-house built by an early-Georgian Rustthorpe, and made interesting by the fact that Horace Walpole was said to have forsaken Strawberry Hill to write a chapter of his famous *Castle of Otranto* there. They saw the wonderful yew hedges, six feet thick, surrounding the ancient bowling-green, which was never desecrated even by the "Royal Game." They saw the orchid house, and the vinery and the orangery from which the orange-blossom had come for all the brides connected with Rustthorpe since Elizabeth was queen.

And by and by there was lunch, laid on a small square table in a corner of the great dining-hall where Prince Rupert had feasted with his Cavaliers before Marston Moor. The table was laid for six, but neither Lord Rustthorpe nor Cousin Alan came back, and Lady Rustthorpe said, with a smile, that probably they had found too much to do for them to get away, and that Alan would never leave Lord Rustthorpe if things were difficult. "Your cousin has been such a friend to my husband always," she said to Peter, and then set herself to be as cheery a hostess as though her thoughts were not at the pithead with her husband, but really on the school adventures about which she was asking with so much animation.

There was a good deal of noise coming up to the Castle from the village, and once, when the very old butler who directed the operations of the two

footmen had been outside for a longer time than usual, Lady Rustthorpe directed a questioning glance at him.

"The men have all come out, my lady," he told her in a low voice, and Peter realised then that Lord Rustthorpe had failed. But the news did not seem to be very serious, for Lady Rustthorpe only smiled and said, "I was afraid they would, Dunster," and then went on asking about little Ruthie.

They went all over the Castle after lunch, and somehow they divided naturally into pairs, for Elena and Vivian had a good deal to say to each other, of course, and Peter and Lady Rustthorpe walked together. And in spite of the thrill of seeing the actual four-post bed in which Prince Rupert had slept, and the tiny secret chamber in the thickness of the wall where a Jacobite ancestor had been hidden for days, while redcoats hunted for him everywhere, and the haunted room, and the ramparts from which a certain "Lady Joan," who held the Castle against great odds for the King while her father was absent, had seen the Royalist horsemen spurring to her rescue just as her garrison had reached its last gasp, Peter found herself wanting to hear about the present-day warfare, and admiring the courage of the hostess who could make so splendid an attempt at keeping her anxieties at bay. For, as Peter saw more of Lady Rustthorpe she began to realise that she was really waiting and listening all the time, and that the interest in historic legend and school adventure was assumed in sheer kindness and good breeding to further the enjoyment of her guests. Peter thought a little and then came to a decision.

"Lady Rustthorpe, it's frightfully kind of you to have had us and given us such a gorgeous time in the midst of all this bother about the mines. But I think we had better go now; thank you ever so much."

Lady Rustthorpe laid a hand on Peter's arm. "My dear, it is sweet of you to think of it, but you mustn't think of going yet. I am, I will confess it, always a little jumpy when anything is wrong at the mine, for, after all, my husband is the owner, and I know he feels responsible; but, Mr. Carey is a tower of strength, and I am *not* anxious, really . . ."

They were on the ramparts from which Lady Joan of long ago had seen help coming. As Lady Rustthorpe stated so firmly that she was not nervous Peter saw her suddenly turn white to the lips, and stare with wide eyes at the road leading from the village.

A little group of blackened-looking men were advancing slowly up it with heads bent.

“There is something wrong,” said Lady Rustthorpe, not loudly, but in a queer high-pitched voice, and she hurried down the narrow twisted staircase leading from the ramparts at a truly breakneck pace. Peter was relieved to see that Elena had not noticed; she and Vivian were on the other side of the ramparts, trying to sight something or another. If something was badly wrong, it might just as well concern Cousin Alan as Lord Rustthorpe himself. Peter followed Lady Rustthorpe closely, though a little doubtful whether she was not being rather pushing, and, incidentally, finding it distinctly difficult to keep up. Fear was behind Lady Rustthorpe, and, steep though the stairs were, she ran. But fast as she went, Dunster was before her. He had the door open, and was speaking to the men as Lady Rustthorpe crossed the hall. She spoke quite quietly. “What is it, Dunster?”

The old man turned, and his face was as white as ashes. “My lady, it’s—it’s bad.”

“Tell me,” she said.

“There’s been a bad explosion from fire-damp, they say,” the old man told her. “There’s been a big fall . . .”

“His lordship?” she hardly put the question above a whisper.

“His lordship—oh, my lady—his lordship is down under.”

Peter saw Lady Rustthorpe sway a little, and ran forward to support her. She took Peter’s arm and held it in a kind of dazed way. So she stood for a second; then she seemed to remember something.

“Mr. Carey, he is safe, I hope?”

“No, my lady,” Dunster told her sadly. “Mr. Carey went down with his lordship.”

CHAPTER XXI

TRAGEDY

Lady Rustthorpe looked piteously at Peter. “That poor girl; how shall I tell her?”

“I’ll do that,” Peter said quickly. To say she was sorry seemed so inadequate just then; besides, she hadn’t much feeling, excepting a queer stunned sensation that couldn’t be described as feeling at all. But to do the telling of Elena was one of the ways in which she could help someone who had probably the greatest of all troubles to meet.

Afterwards Peter heard what had sent Lord Rustthorpe and his faithful agent down into that pit of death. At the pithead, just as he was turning away defeated after an unavailing attempt to get the safety-men at least to remain at their posts and keep the pumps going, there was the muffled sound of a distant explosion far below. Fire-damp and a fall of roof were conjectured, only what had caused it, with all the men up? The question was answered when, a minute later, a little group of wild-eyed women rushed to the pithead, calling despairingly on the names of their men. It seemed that five had been engaged in a distant working, repairing a shaky pit-prop, and had somehow been forgotten when the rest downed tools and went up, in obedience to their leader’s orders. And one of the three was mad Jeff Stanton, who had many times been warned for evading the inspection which ensured that all the safety-lamps were locked at the pit-mouth, and in the unsettled state of things that morning had, as likely as not, done so again. However it had happened, there had clearly been an explosion, bringing a heavy downfall.

Were the men living, or crushed beneath it? That was the question.

The other men had already left the pithead, but Lord Rustthorpe, Alan and the mine-manager sent the women back to ask for volunteer help in the work of rescue if it should be needed, and themselves were cautiously lowered into the mine. Before the men could be back at the pithead there was another explosion; and eight men, the victims and their rescuers, were shut, alive or dead, into a tomb, thirteen hundred feet below ground.

Not, of course, that Peter could tell Elena all that when she climbed tardily to the ramparts, which had been so sunny and charming a spot only a

very few minutes ago. She could only say, when Elena's startled eyes asked a question:

"It's an accident at the mine—Lord Rustthorpe and . . . and Alan."

"Dead? Killed?" asked poor Elena, the colour dying from her lips.

"Oh no—at least no one knows; but people are always being got alive out of the pits, I know," Peter urged, in hasty consolation. "Lady Rustthorpe's going to the pithead."

"Put on your coats and hats, girls; we'll go too," Elena told them in a queer held-in voice, and she almost pushed Vivian away when her young sister put an arm round her and kissed her. "Don't, my dear, there isn't time for breaking down. I can do that—afterwards."

Mechanically and almost in silence all three put on their outdoor things and went out of the old Castle and down the road to the village. Lady Rustthorpe was already at the pithead, Dunster told them; she couldn't wait. "It's a bad business," he kept saying—"a bad business." He looked very pitifully at Elena.

"Mr. Carey was a gentleman whose coat it was a pleasure to take for him. They'll save him and his lordship yet, never fear."

"Thank you, Dunster," said Elena softly.

The three girls, Elena in the midst and the other two each holding an arm, hurried breathlessly down the steep road, leaving old Dunster looking after them, his white hair flying in the breeze.

They said hardly anything on the way down. Once Elena asked, "Am I going too fast?" and Vivian burst out, "*What* makes men do these things?" That was a question no one tried to answer; perhaps it was unanswerable.

The village was distinctly less apathetic than the village through which they had passed four hours ago. Groups of men stood about near the shale heaps, but these groups were smaller; and though pipes were still in the mouths of those remaining, in many cases they had gone out. Consequences are not generally very pleasant things to face; and there wasn't a man in the village but knew that Lord Rustthorpe and his agent—big, cheery, popular Alan Carey—had in all probability sacrificed their lives. And everyone, except the professional agitators, acknowledged Lord Rustthorpe for a good landlord, a good sportsman, and a true friend to the men. The women were nearly all at the pithead, with the five poor pale red-eyed wives, with shawls over their untidy heads, except for one who was wearing a man's cap. They

were not much like dainty, beautiful Lady Rustthorpe in appearance; but they were all fighting the same battle on that grey November afternoon, and she knew it. She was standing among them, very quiet, very brave, holding one poor trembling woman's hand in hers, waiting for the report to come up from the half-dozen experts who had willingly gone down in the cage to investigate. Elena slipped away from the two girls and went and stood by Lady Rustthorpe. Peter and Vivian kept respectfully on the outskirts of the crowd. It wasn't as bad for them, and they knew it. The nearest and dearest were entitled to the front place.

They waited for a long time—hours it seemed to them, though probably the hours were in the singular. The afternoon daylight began to fade perceptibly—a few more men lounged sheepishly to the pithead. People, mainly women, dropped an occasional low-toned sentence into the dreary silence. Peter heard many things that were Greek to her; it seemed there hadn't been time for the air to become very foul yet, because the ventilating machinery had ceased to work for such a short time, but there was great risk from fire-damp and coal dust, even if the victims were not buried beneath the fallen roof, as was only too probable.

Peter looked with pitying eyes towards the two graceful figures, in fur and velvet, at the pithead; would Elena ever see Alan's jolly, laughing face again?

"Oh, God, You let him come through the war," she whispered to herself, in what she meant for a prayer; "and they are to be married at Christmas."

Her vision was growing blurred; somehow it didn't do to think of that marriage at Christmas. Peter wasn't going to show the white feather at the pithead, when women who had lost their all were showing such quiet pluck.

"People do get out alive, after several days sometimes," she whispered to Vivian, who nodded. Peter wished that she could have made her voice sound more hopeful and confident.

There was a curious stir in the crowd, a forward soundless movement like a ripple. Peter didn't know how preternaturally acute is the hearing of people who are used to waiting at the pithead for news. They knew the cage was coming up four seconds at least before she heard anything at all. When she did hear, she and Vivian pressed forward with the rest.

The cage roared to the surface; a man in overalls, a safety-lamp in his hand, sprang out. He mounted on a heap of rubbish, and held up his hand to

hush the tumult of questions flung at him. Only two women, with white faces set in furs, had asked him nothing.

He spoke out, though his voice was hoarse and strained. “The news is bad, but it isn’t altogether hopeless; we have no reason to think that the roof has fallen in as far as the men’s workings, and there is every hope that, considering Lord Rustthorpe and Mr. Carey both were in a hurry, they may have reached them there before the last fall. But there’s a fearful mass to dig through before we can get to them, and they’ll be short of food and drink, and shortest of air, even if the water hasn’t come in by now. I want volunteers, and volunteers, and volunteers, and no rest for anybody who can stand to hold a spade or pickaxe, till we see them out. Are you going to save ’em, men?”

A foxy-faced man somewhere near Peter spoke imperatively. “Make Lord Rustthorpe’s manager promise you the terms you ask first; don’t be fooled. Now’s your chance to stand to your rights.”

Peter turned upon him; afterwards she explained that she couldn’t help it.

“You tell them to bargain when men are dying for want of help,” she said. “All I can say is, I hope—I hope you’re German.”

There was a forward surge about the manager; it seemed that most of the miners were of Peter’s opinion, that now was not the time for bargains. He was choosing the biggest and the strongest for the first shift. Peter spoke rather timidly to an elderly man who had been turned away.

“Can they do it?”

The old man spoke slowly and sorrowfully. “Miss, if what Mr. Grayson says is true about the extent of the fall, nothing can’t probably be done in time. But we’re bound to try and to go on trying, and to go on after that again and again.”

He walked away. Peter and Vivian looked at one another. Lady Rustthorpe and Elena stood hand in hand under the flaring gaslights at the pithead. They had one another and the bond of a common trouble; they did not need the girls.

“It will be dark soon. I’m afraid we ought to go back to Windicotes. Don’t let’s bother anybody; let’s just slip away,” Peter said, and Vivian agreed, with a quick nod of sympathy. They melted away from the outskirts of the throng. Miss Harrington would forgive them for coming back alone when she knew what had happened; Peter was sure of that. The great clock

on the Castle boomed out five strokes as they turned away from the pithead. Neither Lady Rustthorpe nor Elena seemed to hear the sound.

The girls left the little mining village and turned on to the moorland road. “Only six miles,” Peter said, “we can do it easily by seven.”

“Do we come back the way we came, skirting Merthyr Mire?” asked Vivian.

“Yes, but it’s all right; we’ll keep to the road as it’s dark, no short cuts,” said Peter.

“I didn’t mean that—as we’re so near, couldn’t we just tell Ruthie’s grandfather about the money for Ruthie? Oh, Peter, *do*; it would be such a comfort if somebody could be a little happy, wouldn’t it?”

Peter considered. “If we step out, and the moon gets up enough, I don’t see why we shouldn’t. I don’t think Miss Harrington would mind, as we’re so near. But we must have light because of Merthyr Mire, and we’ve got to be back by seven.”

The two stepped out very briskly. As Vivian had said, it was a relief to think of walking even for a minute out of this heavy cloud of tragedy. A faint moon was rising, and there was light enough to see the road by. It was a help to walk fast, and towards a definite goal.

Once Vivian asked, “Peter, do you think there’s a chance?”

“You heard what that old man said,” Peter told her grimly.

“It’s so unfair—because some men are idiots,” Vivian burst out. “Peter, Elena is—*was* . . .”

“Stop that!” snapped Peter. “We don’t know that he’s dead yet.”

“She is so frightfully fond of Alan. You know we’ve always been such pals, though she is five years older, and I always thought I’d hate it when she fell in love and I was left outside. I couldn’t hate it when she did, because everything seemed so transfigured for her. I can’t explain, because it’s just love, I suppose, and you don’t know till you have it. But it made all the everyday things wonderful for her, and she was even more of a darling to me because she was so happy herself. And now it’s come to this.”

“They’re not done in yet,” Peter asseverated stoutly. “But oh, Vivian, if there were only something we could do.”

That was the hardest part; there was nothing.

CHAPTER XXII

"THROUGH"

A light gleamed low down from the window of the old highwayman's-cottage, so the girls knew that Ruthie's grandfather was at home.

Peter knocked at the door, and entered in answer to the feeble "Come in!"

"It's just us—the girls who came before when Ruthie was ill," Peter explained, as the blind old man half rose from his chair. "We've come to tell you about something that several of the girls from our school want to do for Ruthie."

Peter told the story of the play and the money made, and what the Fourth Form did it for. She left herself very much out of it, but old Faraday seemed to guess that his rescuers from Merthyr Mire had done more than they said they had.

"Miss, I can't thank you, but it will make a power of difference to my little Ruthie," he said. "Crutches, dear heart; she won't know herself. They told me at the hospital she 'ud be a different child if she could have a doctor what's special learned in bones gone wrong, and a spell at the sea. It was a good day for I, when I slipped into Merthyr Mire, that's certain."

"I don't know about that," laughed Peter. "I'm afraid it must have been a horrid experience, Mr. Faraday. But when Ruthie comes back to you ever so much better and able to get about on crutches, I expect she will go out with you and act as your eyes, so that nothing of that sort would ever happen to you again."

" 'Tis likely," smiled the old man, "and Ruthie and me, we shan't forget that you young ladies has made it possible. But—you'll pardon me for asking—isn't it late for you to be out on the moor by yourselves?"

"Yes, we must be going; we have to be back by seven," Peter said. "But the being out alone after dark we couldn't help exactly." And in a few words she told of the disaster at Rustthorpe Pit.

An extraordinary change came over old Faraday as she spoke. He seemed to shed at least ten years of his age; his sightless eyes gleamed from

under his shaggy eyebrows. “Trying to dig through where the fall is? They always try that, and it’s wrong,” he said.

“There were heaps of volunteers, when Mr. Grayson, Lord Rustthorpe’s manager, asked for them,” Vivian explained eagerly.

“Very like—very like, Missy; but I know what I’m a-talking of,” repeated the old man stubbornly. “It takes days for the best men to dig through a fall like that, for it’s propping all the way as you go. And they can’t give days, they haven’t got ’em to give—when the explosion has been from fire-damp, and the ventilators has ceased working.”

“That’s about what the old miner said,” Peter told him sadly. “What a lot you know about mines and their awful ways, Mr. Faraday?”

“I was a miner here for over fifty year, boy and man,” he told the girls.

“Oh, do you know the Rustthorpe pits?” asked Peter.

“Not so well, Missy; ’twas at Rimpston I worked.”

“That’s the next pit, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Missy.”

“Is it a long way off?”

“Not all of it—there’s an old seam that they gave up working more than twenty years ago—that run out. . . . Where just did you say the fall was, Missy?”

Peter explained to the best of her powers, what she had gleaned from the talk around as to the position of the fall, and the expected position of the imprisoned men. She was seeing a gleam of hope in old Faraday’s questions.

“Oh, can you do anything?” she asked, when she had answered him.

The old man cogitated. “I might, and again I might not. Look out, Missy; the boy should be coming this way soon. I can’t do nothing without him—he’s my eyes.”

The vision of Alan and Lord Rustthorpe shut up in foul air, while men wasted time trying to fight their way through masses that would take days to penetrate, was vividly with Peter—school and its rules seemed far away. Besides, had not Miss Harrington told her that a Prefect’s duty was more to live up to a standard than to keep set rules and regulations.

“Can’t we be your eyes?” she asked eagerly. “Couldn’t we guide you to where you could tell somebody your plan for getting at them? Oh, do let us!

I'm sure there isn't a moment to waste."

"There isn't that," agreed old Faraday, and he fumbled for coat and stick. "It will be a goodish step," he said doubtfully.

"We don't mind, do we, Vivian?" said Peter; "and I'm sure Miss Harrington won't either, when she knows."

"Of course not," Vivian answered. The answer did for both.

So the three set out together for the famous enterprise which will be talked about in the neighbourhood of Rustthorpe as long as there are mines remaining. Old Faraday was wonderful. His directions were absolutely clear; his twenty years of blindness had in no way impaired his memory. In the interval of directing the girls, he told them stories of the Rimpston pits and his adventures there long ago. The girls would always connect the terms "Workings," "Pit-props," "Davys," "Shaft," "Intake" and "Brattice-cloths" with a husky old man's voice, and feet that ached with much walking, and hearts that were sick with a nameless fear.

The old Rimpston pit, it seemed, had been worked out more than twenty years ago, but some of the workings had run down towards Rustthorpe pit. And it was on these workings, of which he knew the ins and outs as Peter knew the little old house and garden at Helver, that old Faraday fixed his hopes of helping the imprisoned men.

"There might be but a very thin wall between the end of the old working as I have in mind and the spot where they're shut up," he explained; and then the girls began to see.

The old shaft of the Rimpston pit was more than two miles from Rustthorpe.

"Is there a shed over the shaft mouth yet, young ladies?" asked the old man anxiously, as they came near at last in the faint moonlight of the November evening.

"There's something over it!" Vivian said.

"Thank God!" cried the old man. "That means the windlass and bucket is still there most like, and a body can get down."

They came up to the mouth of the old shaft. It looked ineffably dreary, with the rotting shed making a poor pretence of shelter for the hand-turned windlass and rusty bucket, which had served the purpose of a cage when the shaft fell upon evil days and men went down in search of what was little more than rubbish.

The shaft itself had been boarded over this long while, but one of the planks had been removed, and by the opening was standing one of the most enormously stout men that Peter or Vivian had ever seen. He was peering down with an expression of gloom upon his enormous puffy face.

"Someone near, isn't there?" asked old Faraday, with the uncannily quick perception of the blind.

"Such a fat man," whispered Peter.

Old Faraday's face lit up to an amazing extent.

"It's never Tubby—Tubby Stott?" he asked aloud.

The fat man turned right round, all but letting a foot go through the hole, in his amazement.

"It's Faraday! Where have you sprung from, man? You that's been lost to sight these twenty years."

"I'm back to these parts," Faraday said quietly. "I wondered should I find you at the old cottage. What's the news from Rustthorpe, man?"

"There's been another explosion, they tell me," Stott said gloomily. "That means more pit-props down, and more roof with 'em. They're doomed, the lot shut up there, and that's certain."

"Unless they could break out this end," old Faraday said. He repeated what he said to Peter and to Vivian. "Our old workings should pretty nearly run into theirs; if them inside knew that . . ."

"How can they know?" asked Tubby Stott.

"Have you your nephew with you still?"

"No, he left to better himself!"

"I'd go alone if I could see," the old man told him. "The bucket and the windlass is still there, I take it . . ."

Stott showed a little excitement in spite of his gloom. "I'd go with you, if the bucket was made that would bear my weight. As it is, we must send down to Rustthorpe, and get someone who'll risk it."

Peter thought of the men waiting below, the men to whom every minute counted. "Look here, couldn't I go on being your eyes?" she asked. "I'm not big for my age nor heavy—I should think I would do—and it would save time."

The obese Mr. Stott clapped his knee. “You’ve some pluck, Missy; and there isn’t a moment to be spared if so be there’s fire-damp about with them poor fellows. By good luck I’ve a pickaxe here, as Faraday can take down with him; and I’ve let down many a bucket . . .”

“What can I do? Shall I go too?” Vivian asked.

“No, Missy, there ain’t room for more than two, and I can turn the windlass. If you’re not afraid, you be along at your best pace to Rustthorpe, and tell ’em there what Faraday be doing. Get help quick, for the Lord’s sake, for the young lady oughtn’t to stay down, and won’t so long as there’s lads to stop her. Tell ’em up to Rustthorpe that ’tis the old seam, and the props ’ull likely be down, and the air ’ull be foul, but that a blind chap and a young lady has gone down so that eight men may get a chance to live. Tell ’em that, and there’s all the village ’ull be here to volunteer before you can say knife.”

Peter felt Vivian grab her hand for one breathless second; then she ran, a slim figure with flying plait, tearing across the uneven ground at a pace that risked a sprained ankle, if not worse—flying to Rustthorpe.

Tubby Stott had the boards clear of the old shaft by this time; by the desperate speed with which the fat man worked Peter guessed how great was the need for haste; now he was letting down the bucket, unwinding it carefully, testing the chain as he went.

“You’ve brought a lamp, mate?”

“Yes, my old Davy. I knew we’d want it.”

“Look here, Miss, you watch that light,” Stott told Peter impressively. “Light’s the best guide to foul air, mind that, and Faraday, he can’t see.”

“Right,” Peter said. “I’ll take it, and watch out.”

“You’ll neither of you be no good to nobody dead,” was Stott’s final exordium, as he helped first the old man and then Peter into the horribly swaying bucket. “Hold tight, Missy; keep a good heart and sing out, or pull the chain if the light goes blue.”

“All right,” Peter agreed, wondering why her voice sounded so queer.

The bucket swayed down; Peter seemed to herself to be leaving part of herself behind her at the top. The shaft dripped and smelt and was horribly dark. Peter thought she had not guessed one fiftieth part how horrid it would be. Still, horrid or not, there was no other way. She held tight to the side of the bucket with one hand, and clasped the little old safety-lamp with the

other. She wondered, with an odd detached sense, what she would find at the bottom of the shaft; it might be death, she supposed—that great discovery. The fat man, paying out the chain so carefully above, had seemed to think that rather probable. Peter fancied that she ought to be thinking serious thoughts; what she did think about was the fact that she had had no tea, and wanted it badly. Tea was a most insistent thought—hot, sweet tea—Peter liked lots of sugar—and bread and butter, or jam. Well, tea-time at Windicotes seemed a long way off from the queer present; down, down, down into the darkness in a swaying bucket, that felt extraordinarily insecure.

"Watch out for water, Missy—I smell water," said the voice of Faraday in her ear.

"Is the mine drowned, do you think?" Peter asked anxiously.

"We'll hope not, Missy; there's always water in the sump, and it may be that I smell. But anyhow, it's in God's hands we are."

Somehow that steadied Peter, and she did not mind particularly when the bucket bumped a minute later with a slight splash. "Not more than a foot of water by the sound," the old man said quietly. "Step out, Missy; hold the light up, and tell me what you see."

Peter obeyed, standing ankle deep in black oily water that smelt abominable. What she saw was unexpected. The pit-bottom was much bigger than she thought it would be; there were archways which had once been whitewashed, leading to innumerable passages, upon which were still fixed the remains of lamps. The passages, too, were higher than she had expected, so far as she could see in the rather feeble glow of the safety-lamp held high.

"Which way, Mr. Faraday?" she asked.

"Face me left, Missy," the old man directed. "Now, see if we can get down this passage. Give me the lamp, and I'll go in front. Just watch the flame for me and call out if it changes colour. And tell me all you see as we go."

They started down a passage, where the air was horribly close and sickly.

But the old man marched on unerringly, Peter holding to his sleeve and describing to him what she saw. Twice they turned sideways into another passage, and Peter, with a horror of the darkness and the shut-in-sense only

held at arm's length with enormous difficulty, wondered, with a rather sick sort of wonder, whether they would ever find their way back.

Two or three times old Faraday tapped with his pick, but did not seem to gain any help from the sound. And the air was growing unbearably foul; Peter watched the light anxiously.

Just ahead a mass of rubbish barred their path. "I think the roof, or whatever you call it, is down here," Peter said.

"It is—look careful now, Miss; is there a name carved anywhere, about the level of a man's eyes?"

"Wouldn't it be gone now?" Peter asked wearily. It was growing increasingly difficult to hold her head up.

"No, Miss, I put it there the last day we were at the working, before the seam gave out—M. F. for Michael Faraday."

"It's here," said Peter, taking the lamp from him. "In this corner, just before the fall starts."

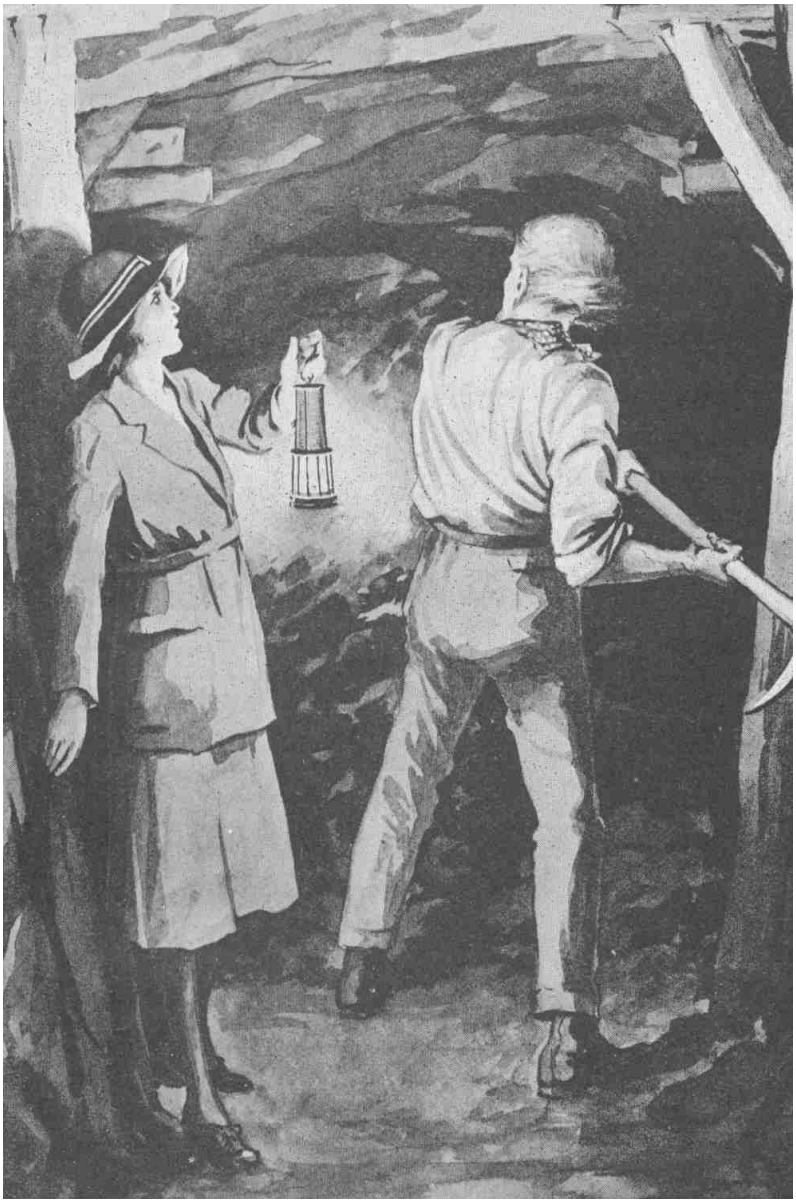
"Praise be to God!" old Faraday said reverently. "If I'm right, that's where the old working joins to the Rustthorpe pit. Give a shout, Missy!"

"Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!" shouted Peter, taking a deep breath, and wondering why she could get out so little voice in spite of it.

There was a silence. "Again!" old Faraday directed. Peter made a great effort; it was a better shout this time, though it seemed to use up every bit of her remaining strength. Something came back faintly.

"It's an answer; they're alive!" old Faraday cried out, and raised his pick with as much vigour as though his years were half their number. Crash! Crash! Crash! Was there an echo? The same sound seemed coming from the other side of the wall.

"They've tools too, praise be. Thank the Lord, they're saved!" old Faraday cried joyously.



"IT'S AN ANSWER, THEY'RE ALIVE."

Peter felt too sick to speak; she held on to the wall, and prayed hard, poor child, that she mightn't "make an ass of herself," as she put it, till it was all over.

Tap! Bang! Crash!

They were coming through—and someone else was coming too—there were twinkling of safety-lamps in the passage behind them—Vivian had sped well—the Rustthorpe miners had forgotten that they had come out on strike, and were rushing down into the foulest air with reckless disregard of risks.

Peter was swept up into the arms of an enormous miner. "We'll have you up at once, Miss."

"Mr. Faraday—he's blind——" Peter tried to choke the words out, but they were drowned in the triumphant yell of "Through!"

So she knew it was all right, and shut her eyes, till the air at the top of the shaft and the sting of brandy forced between her teeth made her open them again. Then she saw that she was in the car that had been sent to fetch Vivian and herself that morning, and that Lady Rustthorpe had her, coal grime and all, resting in her arms.

Peter tried to speak, but Lady Rustthorpe stopped her. "Don't try, my dear. They are safe, thanks to some splendidly brave people. And Vivian is here, and Elena, and everything is all right."

Peter made a struggle for composure. "Then I should think we ought to go back to Windicotes, we are so late."

But she wasn't sorry that Lady Rustthorpe wouldn't let her just that moment, for it was wonderful to hear the crashing cheers as man after man followed old blind Faraday up in the bucket. It was good to see Lady Rustthorpe take the old fellow's knotted hands in hers and tell him that whatever she and her husband could do for him would always leave them in his debt; it was lovely to see those white-faced wives fling themselves upon the men who had been given back to them from the very gate of death. Perhaps it was best of all to see Elena's face, as Alan and Lord Rustthorpe came together to the car. Alan gave a queer little short laugh, as he held out his hand and grasped that of his young cousin, hard.

"And so it was 'only Peter'?" he said, smiling at her.

They drove back through the village—a village that would hardly let the car pass, so eager was everybody to shake hands with someone; but they got back at last, and Lady Rustthorpe tried to make the girls stay for supper and bed, explaining that she had told Dunster to ring up Miss Harrington and explain, when Vivian brought the news.

But Peter stood firm; for one thing she was desperately fearful of disgracing herself with tears if she didn't get away somewhere with Vivian

only, in the dark.

So Lady Rustthorpe sent the car on with the two girls, after she had hugged Peter, grime and all, in a silence that was more eloquent than words.

The drive restored them both a little, but they were two weary and dilapidated people whom Miss Harrington met at the hall door a little later; only she did not seem to notice the dirt or dilapidation. She took Peter's singularly black hand. "Come, my dears, Windicotes wants to see you both."

Peter hung back. "Can't I wash first?"

"Afterwards, I think," Miss Harrington said, smiling. "We like the black."

She pushed Peter in at the door of the Great Hall and left her. Peter stood there, blinking, because she was so desperately tired, distinctly dirty, not at all impressive. She was only rather vaguely conscious that Carol Stewart had come forward and caught her by the shoulder, turning her to face the assembled girls. Carol was flushed, and her pretty eyes were very bright. Peter saw that, though everything else was blurred from sheer tiredness.

Carol stood forward and shouted at the top of her voice, and with a ring in it that Peter had never heard.

And what she shouted was, "Three cheers for *our* Senior Prefect!"

So then Peter knew that she was, as she put it, "through."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LISTS AGAIN

It was the last day of term, a wonderful crisp morning in December.

Signs of departure were everywhere visible; portmanteaux, ready strapped and labelled, were in the corridor ready to be collected that evening; Miss Brooker sat at a table in the common-room with piles of notes and silver before her, dispensing journey money in readiness for the early start to be made by all those going by the school-train next morning; library books were being retrieved by an anxious librarian, and Matron was being besieged by inquiries as to the dormitory arrangements for next term.

Carol Stewart, threading her way through the turmoil in the hall, bumped against Gypsy Carstairs.

"Ah, the very girl I want. I didn't hurt you, did I?" she said pleasantly. "I suppose you know where I can find Petronella?"

"Shall I go and see if she's finished? She's with Miss Harrington—the Public Schools Exam lists have just come, and the Head sent for her," Gypsy answered excitedly.

"The Exam lists come?" Carol had raised her voice, and the girls near her heard it, and sent the information on, "The lists have come!"

"Oh, I do wonder how we've done!" said Carol.

In the sudden silence of anxiety her voice must have been heard inside Miss Harrington's room, for the door opened suddenly, and Peter put her head out. "That you, Carol? Miss Harrington would like you to come in."

Carol went in. Miss Harrington was sitting at the table in company with half a dozen men, all elderly but one, a broad-shouldered, cheery-looking person, whose rather ugly face wore just now a particularly satisfied grin.

"That's right, Carol," said Miss Harrington. "You must meet the Governors as well as Peter. Our Head Girl, Carol Stewart."

Some of the Governors bowed politely in acknowledgment of the introduction, but the young one shook hands.

"Glad to meet you, Miss Carol. Congratulating is always a pleasant job."

“I’m afraid none of the congratulations ought to come my way,” Carol said quickly; “but *have* we done well?”

“Take the list out, you and Peter, and pin it up,” Miss Harrington said, smiling. “There it is.”

Carol’s usual good manners quite deserted her. “*What!* All those passed? Where are the failures?” she stammered.

“I don’t know—not in Windicotes,” Miss Harrington laughed. “Out you go, girls; let the school know what we’ve done.”

They went out together, Senior Prefect and Head Girl—a respectful path cleaving for them through the excited crowd. In silence Peter pinned up the lists.

A crowd was round the notice-board in a moment—a staring, unbelieving crowd. Stunned silence for a second; then Meriel Roper raised a frantic cry:

“Three cheers for the Exam results!”

They cheered violently, that surging, ever-increasing crowd into which was soaking the great news that every candidate for the Exam had passed, two-thirds of them with honours.

“Three cheers for Miss Harrington!” that was Carol.

“Three cheers for the Senior Prefect!” Christine Kington started the shout somewhere from the back, but it was taken up with a will from every side. Indeed, the truly appalling noise made by the Lower School beat all previous records.

“Three cheers for the Head Girl!” chimed in Peter; and as the very hearty cheers given in answer to her call subsided, she added at the pitch of her lungs, “And to finish—*Three Cheers for a United School!*”

Two minutes later, when Windicotes was still busily engaged in yelling itself hoarse, some dejected-looking Governors put their heads out from Miss Harrington’s door and said they almost thought they would go home.

Across the notice-board, with its wonderful announcement, Peter and Carol looked at one another and laughed.

“Pity we didn’t find out we could work together three months ago instead of two,” Carol said.

“Never mind; we’ve found it out now, anyway,” said Peter.

To those whom it may concern; *all* the Careys supported Elena at her wedding, and Robin behaved beautifully, and was the admired of all beholders, in a little brown velvet Kate Greenaway suit. He carried the bride's train to perfection, and only spoke once, to ask Peter, in a penetrating whisper, how soon he could get married himself.

Aleth and Angela looked charming in the brown velvet bridesmaids' dresses, and the lovely amber necklaces, which were "the gift of the bridegroom." Peter looked, as she would have put it, "just ordinary"; but the occasion was remarkable, because, for the first time in her life, she came in for a great deal more attention than either of her pretty sisters.

Mrs. Carey was there, of course, looking lovely, as her family thought, and said; and Lord and Lady Rustthorpe and Miss Harrington, and hosts of other people.

There never could have been a happier wedding, and Peter and Vivian were to be the very first visitors to the new home, when bride and bridegroom came back from their honeymoon; that was arranged from the first.

"In fact," Peter remarked to Vivian, during a pause in the festivities when they chanced to find themselves together, "between the jolliness of this wedding, and the decent way everyone is behaving at Windicotes, and our play being published and paid for, and Lady Rustthorpe giving me that gorgeous fitted dispatch case, and, last not least, having you for a pal, old thing . . ."

She stopped there. Peter never found it very easy to express herself in words.

"It hasn't occurred to you that you deserve your luck?" Vivian said. "Well, anyhow it has to other people. Carol Stewart says 'that there isn't a single girl at Windicotes who isn't glad now that you're Senior Prefect.' "

THE END

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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.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

[The end of *The New Prefect* by Dorothea Moore]