

**THE
JUNIOR
CAPTAIN**

BY
ELSIE
OXENHAM

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CHAMBERS

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THE JUNIOR CAPTAIN

BY

ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

Author of 'The Captain of the Fifth,' 'The Two Form-Captains,' 'A School Camp Fire,' &c.

Illustrated by

PERCY TARRANT

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WITH BEST LOVE
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO MY DEAR
FATHER AND MOTHER



Barbara came striding over the hill.

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CHAPTER I.

A PROBLEM FOR GARD

‘Just *look* at that Garda Svenssen!’ Rita’s voice vibrated with indignant scorn.

‘Oh, well, what can you expect? Those Haven girls will do anything,’ Moll said contemptuously. ‘Who’s she after? Oh, Christine! Don’t they see enough of one another in school?’

‘I should think Christine would be sick of Hildegard!’ and Rita turned away. ‘Come and have an ice, Moll. It’s my turn to pay to-day.’

Hildegard, a sturdy, long-legged blue figure in a neat tunic and close little cap pulled well down on her fair hair, had leapt off the promenade and gone flying across the shingle, her yellow plaits streaming behind, her books slung over her shoulder by a strap. She knew Rita and Moll would be watching, and knew just what they would be saying; they always watched, and they always looked just like that, and said just those things. She rather enjoyed shocking them; and cared nothing for their opinion at any time, and especially when she was in a hurry to catch the head of the school.

‘Christopher, wait a sec., there’s a dear! I haven’t been able to get near you all day. I know you’re in a hurry, but I am too, so I won’t keep you. But I do want to speak to you for one minute.’

Christine paused. She was captain of the Upper School; a high-sounding title which meant very little, since the school was a small one, and particularly weak in seniors. Gard was Lower School captain, and as such had the right, and often the need, to ask her opinion and advice. Of the two positions, Gard’s was really the more important, since there were many more juniors than elder girls; and Christine—sixteen, and the eldest in the school—was always ready to help when appealed to.

‘What’s the row, kid? Who’s worrying you now?’

‘’Tisn’t any one at school.’ Gard pushed back her cap and walked along by the big girl’s side, swinging her books, and kicking up the sand. ‘It’s my cousin, Ven Morris. She’s coming to stop with us.’

‘Oh!’ Christine looked down at her in surprise. ‘And how can I help? Why is she a worry? Don’t you want her to come? What is her name? Of course she will have a weird name if she belongs to you! But—Morris, did you say? That isn’t Swedish.’

‘It’s Welsh. Her mother was our aunt,’ Gard explained. ‘She came from Sweden with father when he married; he settled here, so that mother would be near her people while he was at sea. Aunt Ven came with him; and she married a friend of his, a captain. He was Welsh, and they live somewhere in Wales; and Ven’s their only child. Her real name’s Vendela.’

‘Ven, how much? Trust your family to have weird names!’ Christine laughed. ‘What do you call her? Vendy?’

‘They used to. But the letter this morning talked about Ven. I didn’t hear it all; I have to start just after the post comes in. Granny was still reading it. She just said Ven was coming for three months or so, as her mother hadn’t been well, and was being taken by her husband for a long voyage with him. So Ven’s to come to us.’

‘And why is she worrying you? Don’t you like her? I suppose you know her?’

‘I’ve seen her, but it was a long time ago, and I was just a kid. You see, Christopher, she’s fifteen; she’ll be in the Upper School. That’s what I wanted to speak to you about. I won’t be able to see she has a good time, and all that. Will you look after her for me?’

‘Of course I will,’ the head girl said cheerfully. ‘I’ll do anything I can to make things jolly for her. But we can’t give her much of a time at the Haven, I’m afraid. Pity she’s not a junior; there are so many more of you. Does she know what a handful of seniors we’ve got? What kind of school has she been to? Does she know we’re not exactly the swank school of the place? Will she mind?’

‘That’s what was worrying me,’ and Gard spoke with sudden vehemence. ‘I don’t know how much she knows. I could write to her and prepare her; but I hate writing letters, and it wouldn’t be easy to explain. I’d rather tell her when she comes. But I do know that she’s always had the best of everything. Uncle and Aunt Ven think no end of her. She’s sure to have been to the best school in the town; they won’t send her to boarding-school. She’ll have been to a big school, with heaps of girls, Christopher.’

Christine whistled, and her face clouded till she looked as worried as Gard herself. She walked in silence for a few minutes, gazing out to sea. Then she said abruptly, ‘As far as Ven’s concerned, if it’s only for three months it can’t matter very much. She may laugh at us, and call the Haven a silly little place; and it won’t make things any jollier for us, or for her, if she does. But what she thinks needn’t affect us. She’ll be going away again, and we needn’t worry about what she says. But you’re different. You’ll have her all the time. If she upsets you and makes you grouse and find fault with things, you’ll be sorry she came, and so shall we all. Garda Svenssen, are you going to be ashamed of your school? That’s what it comes to.’

‘No!’ Gard said vehemently. ‘The school’s all right. Of course I can’t say it’s as swanky as the Castle, and I know we have to do without piles of things they have—gym., and playing-fields, and so on—but we get on all right without them, and have ripping times. The way Rita Tompkins and Moll Sanderson swank about their school makes me sick. It’s such utter awful bosh. I’m dying for the time when I’ll go to the High School in Eldingham, of course. Granny has promised I shall go when I’m fourteen, but till then our little school’s quite all right. But Ven may not think so. I am worried about that. I’m afraid she’ll wish she could have gone to the Castle. / know the Haven’s good enough for anybody,’ she ended sturdily.

‘You stick to that!’ Christine said warmly. ‘It’s our school, and we’ve got to stand up for it. Besides, any one who knows would tons rather have the Haven, with the jolly feeling we have in the school, and Miss Hedges at the head, than that awful cliquy, clammy Castle, with that stick of a Miss Duke!’

‘Goodness, yes! They’re the stiffest set of stiffes I ever knew! I should think Ven would soon see it, too. Granny’s frightfully pleased about her coming, you know. She’s always worrying because I’ve no other girl in the house—only the three boys. Says it isn’t good for me. I like it. So now she says it will be so nice for me to have a companion—as if Aunt and Turk weren’t any company at all! But Aunt says, “Hang it all, what do we want another girl for, anyway?” And— —’

‘Oh, Gard, I’m sure she never did!’ Christine remonstrated, laughing. ‘That doesn’t sound the least like an aunt! You’re making it up!’

Gard stared at her, aghast. Then she went off into a peal of laughter. ‘An aunt! No, it doesn’t, Christopher dear. An aunt! I must fly home and tell him! I mean Svante, my eldest brother; the boys all call him Aunt, and you can’t blame them. And Turk, or old Turkey, is Torkel, the second one; Aunt and Turkey!’

‘I said I’d back your family to find weird names. Svante Svenssen! Well!’

‘He tried to keep it a secret,’ Gard said seriously, but with laughing eyes. ‘When he went to the Boys’ College, he told them it was Stanley, and Sidney, and Sam, and Solomon. But they found out; boys always do. So now they call him Aunt, or Swanny. And Torkel’s always known as Turkey. No, I didn’t mean a real aunt, Christopher dear.’

‘It sounded more like a brother than an aunt,’ Christine acknowledged. ‘Well, I have to turn up here. I’ll do what I can for your cousin, Hildegard. And don’t you let her make you ashamed of your school, or begin criticising it. It wouldn’t sound like you.’

‘I’ll see to it!’ Gard said briefly, and tramped off across the firm sand; while Christine ploughed up through the soft shifting white dust to the shingle, and so to the main road.

As she went, Christine was pondering the younger girl’s problem. ‘It is hard for the kid! Till now she’s been just an infant; she’s only twelve. The difference between us and the Castle girls has hardly troubled her. Of course, Rita and her crowd are always rubbing it in that the Castle’s It, and we’re nothing—worms under their feet—that sort of thing. But to Gard that’s all rot. She doesn’t want to go to the Castle; she dreams day and night of the High School in Eldingham, and thinks it beats the Castle into fits. And she’s right.’ And Christine’s thoughts wandered off in the track of a bitter disappointment of her own. She pulled herself up sharply. ‘Idiot, you’ve got to play the game! Thinking of what you can’t have doesn’t help. Better worry about Garda Svenssen; it’s a lot safer. I’m just afraid this cousin may put ideas into her head. There’s no getting away from it. I wouldn’t say it to a soul, but we are a second-rate school, and things are getting worse. Our Head’s a dear, but she’s old, and she ought to retire. I suppose she simply can’t afford to. I wish somebody would come along and buy the school, and let her take a rest. But, of course, nobody would; it’s going down steadily. Gard and the rest of the kids don’t see it; and when Rita’s lot jeer, they jeer back, and are quite happy about it. They call the Castle crowd cliquy and stodgy, which they are; and it doesn’t worry them that we’re getting smaller, and more out-of-date, every term. But this new girl, coming from a big town school, will see the very worst of us. I’m afraid Gard’s days of being satisfied with the Haven are over; or at least she’ll find it very difficult to be loyal. We’ll see what kind of a show she puts up. I believe she’s got a lot in her, but it’s never had much chance to come out yet. It will be jolly interesting to see how she takes Ven Morris’s remarks about the Haven; for there’ll be remarks, or she’s a queer kind of girl. But though it will be interesting for other people, it will be difficult for Gard, I’m afraid. I’m sorry for the kid.’

In her ready sympathy with the problems and troubles of the younger girls, Christine was a good leader for the school. From the point of view of Gard and the other juniors, the great disappointment of Christine’s school life had been a most fortunate happening. She had hoped, as Gard was hoping now, that her years at the Haven were only an introduction to a much more real school life at the big High School for Girls in the cathedral city a few miles inland. Her friends all went there, either by bus or on their cycles; and their brothers went to the Boys’ College in the same town. Christine’s great friend, Suzanne Thorne, went to the High School; and Christine had longed for the time when she would join her there, and they would go together every day.

But circumstances had made it impossible, and Christine had had to resign herself to the prospect of ending her school-days at the Haven. It had been a great blow to her; but she had met it with characteristic courage, and, throwing all her energies into the duties facing her, had become the leader of the small group of elder girls at Miss Hedges’s school, and a great help, as well as an object of fervent love and admiration, to the more numerous juniors.

The position was difficult, of course. Not only was the Haven distinctly a second-rate school, in cramped quarters in an unsuitable building—a small, low house close to the sea, comfortable, but never intended for a school, and without playing-fields and much of the necessary equipment—but it had a serious rival in the other school of the little town, the pretentious Castle. Situated on the more fashionable side, the Castle put forward claims as high-sounding as its name. Its fees were high, its numbers strictly limited; girls desiring admission were accepted only after inquiries as to their parents’ social standing had been satisfactorily answered, and often with the air of conferring a favour. The Haven charged low

fees, and accepted every applicant gladly. And yet, strange to say, there were parents who refused to send their daughters to the Castle, because they disliked some intangible thing they called its 'atmosphere'; while others, more outspoken, said flatly it was too snobbish for their taste. The impression in the town, however, was that the Castle girls had the best of everything, and must therefore necessarily be the best also; and that only sympathy could be given to those condemned to the second-best of the Haven.

It was a point of view which had never yet troubled Gard Svenssen deeply. She was happy at school; she loved Christine, and had friends of her own age; she was, of course, going to the High School in another year or so. She had not the slightest wish to join the select ranks of the Castle girls; and though, in common with her classmates, she resented their attitude bitterly, their jeers and comments had aroused no criticism of her own school in her mind. They were a set of stuffy swanks, and she loathed them all, and Rita Tompkins in particular. As for wanting to go to their school, she would simply have hated it; so she would have said if the idea had been proposed to her.

There was keen antagonism and mutual dislike between the two sets of girls, and rivalry also, for the teaching at the Haven was more practical and thorough than that of the Castle, though less given to showy accomplishments; and the open scholarships at the High School, and the honours in public exams., went as often to the smaller school as to the larger. The Castle girls, in spite of their fine building and good gym, and playing-fields, were not a keen set, either at work or games. The Haven crowd, in spite of their cramped class-rooms, their practices of cricket and hockey on the sands, or in the public gardens when the tide was high, were serious rivals when the two schools met occasionally in competition. Christine knew that her girls, when on their mettle, had a sporting chance of beating the Castle at games and work alike. It was largely owing to her driving power and energy, caught and passed on to the Lower School by Garda Svenssen, that the Haven had won several striking successes during the last few years. The Castle girls resented these successes and their own failures deeply, and the position between the two schools was strained and unhappy.

How would it all strike a new girl, fresh from the freer atmosphere of a big town school? And how would her comments affect Gard, satisfied till now with her school and companions —though only as a stepping-stone to the High School, of course? Gard had no more intention of staying on at the Haven till she was eighteen than Christine had once had. But for the remainder of her time at the Haven, would Vendela's criticisms leave her restless and dissatisfied? Christine wondered much; and wondered, too, what Ven would be like; and wished she could have had a few minutes' private talk with her before her arrival. But as that was out of the question, Ven must say what she liked, and the result, in Gard, remained to be seen.

'I believe she'll be loyal still. I think she's plucky,' Christine said to herself, as she reached her gate. 'But I do think it's hard on her.'

CHAPTER II. THE BLOW FALLS.

'Christopher's a dear, good old thing,' Gard mused, as she strolled homewards across the sands, swinging her books, and taking a running leap over every pool.

She could only take this way home at certain states of the tide. When the waves were breaking on the shingle, she had to go round by the lanes. Several big houses had annexed the sea-front as part of their gardens, and there was no pathway along except by the shore. At low tide there was no obstacle, and any one could wander freely; but at high, or even half, tide a big groyne cut off any way along the shingle; and travellers from the town to the group of small houses tucked away behind the bigger ones must go inland—'round the back,' as Gard and the boys said.

The lanes were pretty enough, with beech and bramble hedges, and fascinating ditches full of water-weeds, and the chance of frogs or a water-rat at any time; and, beyond the fields on the landward side, wide views of the green rolling Downs, with coloured fields creeping up their slopes. But this way 'round the back' could not compare, in Gard's mind, with the way home along the sands. She had an inherited craving for the sea, and went by the shore whenever the tide allowed, jumping pools and groynes with great enjoyment, and wandering away down on the wet sand right to the edge of the tide. This, as her grandmother pointed out, was not a necessary part of the way home, and was very bad for her shoes; but granny had long since given up remonstrating with Gard and the boys for having wet feet. Living, as they did, just above the shingle, they had had wet feet, more or less, all their lives; and she had had to accept the fact.

A shady lane ran behind the gardens of the big houses, then turned inland, and wandered off among the fields. At the corner where it turned, a short side-track ran down to the beach, and here were a few small houses, overhung with creepers and big trees. Captain Svenssen was at sea most of the time. His boys and Hildegard lived in the house nearest the sea, in charge of his wife's mother; and next door lived Suzanne Thorne, Christine's friend, alone with her widowed mother.

Svante and Torkel—Aunty and Turkey—cycled in to Eldingham to the Boys' College every day; and Gard was longing for the time when she would go with them, or with Suzanne, if Suzanne had not left by then. As she reached the house after her talk with Christine, the boys were on the strip of grass—it was hardly a lawn—beside the house, cleaning their bicycles, a ceremony performed less often than it should have been.

At sight of his sister, Turkey sat back on his heels. 'Say, you're awfully late. Now I suppose we'll get some tea.'

'You needn't have waited,' Gard remonstrated.

'Wouldn't have, if we could have got it,' Turkey assured her indignantly. 'But the granny simply wouldn't give us any till you came. I'm going to chuck this job; I'm fed up!'

'I say, Gard!' Svante looked up. 'You know that new kid—the other girl?'

'Vendela Morris? Yes? Did granny tell you any more after I'd gone? I waited till the last sec., and had to fly all the way, but she was still wading through the letter. I think she must have been parsing every word. What about the girl?'

'She's coming at once, that's all. You're not going to have much time to get used to the idea. There was a P.S. to the letter; Aunt Ven had to go off in a hurry, as uncle was sailing sooner than he'd expected, so she'll send the girl on Thursday. Granny was to wire if it wasn't all right; but, of course, she wouldn't dream of doing that.'

‘No such luck!’ groaned Turkey. ‘She’s keen on having another girl; keen as razors!’

‘Thursday? But that’s to-morrow!’ Gard said slowly, beginning to grasp the immediacy of the crisis.

‘As this is Wednesday, it’s likely to be to-morrow, unless you can stop things somehow,’ Svante said briefly, and went on polishing.

Gard dropped her books, hurled her cap at him, and went whirling into the house.

‘Snakes!’ said Turkey blankly. ‘What’s the row? The kid hasn’t half got the wind up!’

‘Doesn’t want t’other girl,’ Svante said curtly. ‘‘Tis a bit rough on her. How would you feel if it was another fellow chucked in to sleep with you and me, and be hanging round all the time?’

‘Rotten!’ Turkey said gloomily. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. I suppose this Ven person will have to be poked in on top of old Gard. She will hate it, of course.’

‘There’s nowhere else, ‘less she sleeps in the cycle-shed. Garda’ll have her every minute, even at school. It will only be breakfast and supper for you and me, ‘cept on Sundays. And there’s no time to get used to the idea; she’s coming to-morrow, bless her! No wonder Gard’s gone off the deep end. I would myself.’

‘Granny, tell me all about this other girl!’ Gard pleaded, racing to the kitchen, where her grandmother was lifting scones from the oven.

But Mrs Unwin knew better. She would never understand Gard’s feelings, and their reasons, very deeply; Gard had many sides which were only foolishness to her grandmother; but Mrs Unwin did know, from all she had heard, that one thing she had to tell would be very upsetting to Garda. It did not seem to matter very much to herself, though it had not pleased her; why it should matter so much to Gard she did not really understand. But she knew that it would matter, and that Gard would take it badly; very badly, she feared. ‘You shall hear all there is to tell after tea,’ she said definitely. ‘You are very late; the boys have had to wait for you. They must have their tea now. We will talk about Vendela’s coming afterwards.’

‘Can’t we talk while we’re having tea?’ Gard urged desperately. ‘I’ve been dying to hear about it all day.’

But Mrs Unwin was adamant. She was young to be the grandmother of Gard and Turkey and Svante, tall and thin, with a strong, determined face, and hair only beginning to turn gray. With a stern sense of responsibility for her daughter’s children, she did her best for them in their father’s absence, carried out his wishes in every respect, and always put their needs before her own. She meant to be kind also, and in a stern, upright way she was kind; but she was not gentle; and she would never yield or alter her mind, on principle, once she had spoken. The children knew that she meant what she said, and that the pier was more likely to give way before the rising tide than Mrs Unwin to yield to their persuasions. So though Gard pleaded urgently, she did it without hope, and followed her grandmother and the teapot into the dining-room still unsatisfied.

‘You would be wiser to stop teasing about the letter and call the boys to tea,’ said Mrs Unwin practically.

It was the kind of sensible remark that always irritated Gard. Svante and Turk said ‘sensible’ things like that now and then, and she threw things at them. It was not possible to throw anything in this case. She gave up the hopeless quest, and called the boys briefly from the window. ‘Aunt! Turk! Tea!’

‘The kid hasn’t got anything out of the granny,’ Svante remarked, rising from his knees as Turkey sprang up hungrily. ‘Don’t rag her, Turk. She’ll be all edgy, and we shall scrap all tea-time if you make a nuisance of yourself.’

The baby of the family, Greger, was scrambling on to his high chair as they appeared. He was a round, rosy boy of five, wearing a loose holland smock, and in his case the family fair

hair formed a mop of yellow curls; in Gard it turned to long, fair plaits; and in the elder boys to rough, untidy fair heads; all four had the same blue eyes, and brown, round, sunburnt faces.

'Goin' to have my tea *now*!' Greg proclaimed.

Gard made the best of it, and began to spread bread-and-butter for him; but her face was impatient and restless; and Svante, after a glance at her, kicked Turkey warningly under the table, and set to work with such energy that tea would evidently not be a long business.

'Any rows with the Rita crowd, Gard?' Turkey asked soothingly.

Gard knit her brows. 'Same as usual. Oh, they've got a new name for us. You know they're always ragging because we play cricket on the sands. They're so frightfully select, of course! They have their own playing-field, you see!' she said in a tone of contempt.

Turkey snorted. 'It *is* cricket, too! I've seen 'em playing. "Ow! Don't hit me with that ball!" Spend half their time arguing whether they're out or not. I wonder they don't use a racquet and a soft ball!'

'Your game's heaps better than theirs,' Svante put in. 'Your captain knows what's what. The way those Castle kids chuck up the ball is too ghastly for words. Miles off the wicket!'

'We're jolly lucky to have Christopher,' Gard acknowledged. 'She does make you play up. If you throw wide, or drop a catch, you hear about it. I know the Castle kids play badly; but there's no reason for them to call us sandhoppers.'

'That's a new term of endearment,' Svante remarked.

'It's their new name for us. You know, granny—sand-fleas; the jumping things on the sand. Of course, no Castle girl could be so vulgar as to *say* sand-fleas! But if they mean it, where's the difference? That's what I say. And Christopher says there isn't much.'

'Sandhoppers are topping things,' Turkey said encouragingly. 'Jolly nice to be jumping about on the sand all day! Wish I had their chances!'

'Rita never goes on the sand, unless she's bathing from their hut. Says it's too much like the day-trippers,' Garda said scornfully.

'She does herself out of an awful lot,' Svante remarked. 'Don't you worry about her, old thing. Let her say what she likes. She doesn't get half the fun out of things you do. I think she's an utter little ass.'

'Same here,' Turkey said warmly.

Mrs Unwin was listening with grim attention. She had heard all these sentiments many times before; but to-day they had new point, in the light of what she had presently to tell. She wondered what kind of explosion would follow the revelation she had to make.

Svante did not always understand his sister, any more than their grandmother did; but he sympathised more, and far more deeply, even without understanding. Often when things were wrong, he knew it by instinct, though without knowing why; and restrained Turkey, who had to have things explained to him very fully before he grasped them. But Turk was only thirteen, only one year older than Gard herself; Svante was sixteen, and was learning to understand many things. So to-night knowing their grandmother, and seeing that Gard was still unsatisfied, he guessed the reason, and knew that the best way to help her was to remove himself and Turkey as quickly as possible. Any one could see that Gard was taking very little tea, and was all impatience to be done with it.

Before long the boys withdrew, on the plea of homework. Greg was still munching steadily, with a large appetite which knew nothing of worries.

Gard looked imploringly at her grandmother. 'Granny, won't you tell me now? Greg will go on for hours.'

'Goin' on for hours an' hours,' Greg agreed cheerfully, and held out his plate for more bread-and-jam.

Gard spread a slice, impatient emphasis in every jerky movement. 'Is she really coming to-morrow, granny? But how hopeless! How can you be ready?'

'Vendela will arrive to-morrow evening. Her father is sailing a week sooner than was expected, so her mother has to go off in a hurry to join him. They will travel together as far as Portsmouth; then Ven, as they seem to call the child, will come on alone to us.'

'But suppose we hadn't been willing to have her?' Gard demanded. 'It's such awfully short notice. Or suppose we hadn't been able? Anything might have been wrong here. We might not have had a bed for her; or Greg might have had measles; or we might have been moving.'

'Goin' to have measles in two minutes.' Greg could never resist the chance which his own name gave to join in the conversation. 'What's moving, Garda?'

'Mrs Morris wrote to me a fortnight ago,' Mrs Unwin explained grimly. 'She was uncertain then as to whether she would be able to sail with her husband. But she asked if we would be able to take Ven, should she decide to go. There was no need to tell you till the matter was settled.'

'Oh!' Gard murmured, rather taken aback. 'But I'd have liked—oh, I think you might have told me! It wouldn't have seemed so fearfully sudden.'—'It was awfully like granny,' she said to Svante afterwards. 'It hadn't occurred to her I might like a little while to get used to the idea of having another girl about all the time! Of course there was no *need* to tell us till it was settled. But it would have been nice to know. But she'd never think of that!'

'I suppose she'll go to school with me?' she asked anxiously, filling Greg's cup with milk-and-water. 'What does Auntie Ven say about that? Can Miss Hedges take her? Have they written to ask? Perhaps the school won't like it. We've been back a week now.'

'I must tell you the arrangements for Ven's schooling while she is with us,' Mrs Unwin began gravely.

Gard looked up at her, startled by her tone. There was surely something granny did not like about the arrangements.

'Ven is not to go with you to the Haven. I am very sorry about it. I think it would have been better for her. Your mother went to Miss Hedges's school; I have always liked her influence on the girls. Most of my friends in the town went to the Haven.'

Gard moved impatiently. She had heard it all before, and knew all about granny's deep regard for Miss Hedges. 'Granny, is Ven to go to the High? Then—oh, couldn't I go, too? I really am old enough; they have heaps of girls younger than I am! I'm dying to go! It—it will be rotten if Ven goes, and I have to stay behind!'

'Ven has been to the best school in the town,' Mrs Unwin said sombrely, 'and nothing less than what is supposed to be the best will do for her here.'

Gard dropped the jam-spoon on the cloth and a slice of bread on Greg's plate, and stared in wide-eyed horror. She knew what was 'supposed to be the best.' 'Granny, you don't mean—you couldn't mean—' she gasped.

Her grandmother picked up the spoon, and frowned at sight of the stained cloth; but she was too much perturbed at the moment to scold. 'Ven's parents wish her to go to the Castle. They have written to Miss Duke, who has consented to admit her, as she is fifteen. They would not have had room for her if she had been younger,' she said, and knew that for once she and Gard were in agreement on one point. Mrs Unwin did not like the Castle school, nor its head-mistress, nor its girls; though her dislike was not so deeply rooted as Gard's, and had different reasons.

Gard sprang to her feet, her face flaming crimson. 'She's to go to the Castle? With all that snobby, swanky lot? Then I'm sorry for her, that's all! But—but she can't, if she lives here! She simply can't! They won't speak to her if they know! And I shall loathe her! Living with a

Castle girl! Having a Castle girl for a cousin! Oh, it will be simply beastly! There's no other word for it!' and she flung away out of the room, out of the house, out of the garden, and was flying down the lane to the shore before the door had banged and warned the boys that something was very much wrong indeed.

CHAPTER III. A NEW PROBLEM.

Svante flung his books into a corner, took up his cap, and went to the door. 'I've nearly done, granny. I want a stroll before supper. I'll bring Garda back with me.'

Mrs Unwin raised no objections. She was not uneasy about Gard, though it was two hours since the girl had gone flying off. She supposed she would be on the shore somewhere; and Svante evidently thought he knew where to find her. With much knowledge, if not much understanding, of Gard's feelings towards the Castle girls, her grandmother had looked for trouble when the news was told. If Gard could work off her ill-humour out-of-doors, or if Svante knew how to talk her round to the necessary acceptance of the situation, so much the better.

Svante had no doubt which way his sister had gone. Refusing Turkey's company, in a voice which made Turk decide it would be more tactful to stop at home, he went without hesitation down the lane, cast one glance at the deserted shore, and turned to the right, where a narrow path ran along between the shingle and the hedge.

The tide had crept up during the evening, and the shore way to the town was cut off. But he knew Gard had not gone towards the town. Turning his back on all the houses, large and small, he took the dusty way under the tamarisk hedge at the top of the shingle beach.

There were endless nooks and corners here, any of which might have been her hiding-place: hollows scooped out of the dry yellow sand; basins where the path dipped, then rose to climb another sandhill; dusty holes under the hedge, where the gathered driftwood suggested camp-fires. But Svante gave these only a glance in passing, and hurried on, up and down, and down and up, as the path climbed the hillocks, always keeping one eye on the banks of shingle which held back the sea.

Gard was more likely to be out there, in the wind and spray, than in any rabbit-burrow under the hedge. Even in the direst trouble, she was not likely to have crawled into shelter; the top of a sandhill, or the crest of a shingle bank, or the post of a groyne with the waves breaking under her, would be more in her line. The last was a favourite resort of hers when homework was puzzling; she always held that the wind blew away all the stupid ideas and left the right ones, on the principle of chaff and corn. The right ones, she argued, were heavier, because they had good reasons in them, and so they stayed, while the silly ones were carried out to France by the wind; and so when worried or puzzled she always made for a windy spot.

There were no groynes here, however. Those ended with the gardens of the big houses; and now the beach was open and unbroken, a long, wide, sweeping expanse of white and yellow shingle, three miles or more of it, curving away in the distance to a long arm flung out to sea. At low tide there were wide, golden sands, firm and flat. At present the waves were breaking on the rolling banks of many-coloured pebbles with a gentle, steady roar and a long-drawn, sighing backwash. In a storm, there were no startling waves broken by the resistance of the foreshore and thrown hundreds of feet high, as by the promenade and groynes of the town. But the thunder of them, as they crashed unhindered on the miles of shingle, swept up and over its banks, and dragged the stones back in armfuls, to toss them up again with another mighty roar, was quite as impressive, if less sensational.

This wide, lonely bay, known as The Stretch, was far more of a playground to Gard and the boys than the beach before the town. Svante knew without any doubt that it was to The Stretch that Gard had gone; and before long he spied her, still far ahead, a small, lone figure on the shingle. She was sitting throwing stones into the sea from the top of her bank, and did

not look round at the sound of his feet on the stones. He knew she must have seen him coming. Even when he dropped beside her on the shingle she did not look at him, but kept on steadily throwing stones out to sea.

He dropped a green jersey into her lap. 'Put that on; it's getting chilly. It's no good, you know, kid; you can't chuck the whole shingle beach into the English Channel, not if you try ever so. It's been here since before the Flood. I'm sure it's miles deep.'

Gard gave a short laugh. 'Aunty, what an awful idea! That would be a nightmare, if ever there was one—to have to clear The Stretch of every single stone.' But she pulled the jersey over her head without thinking about it.

'What were you aiming at? Hit it?' Svante sat up and gazed at the heaving waters. 'I don't see anything.'

'There's a bit of driftwood. It's down in the wave. There! I think I hit it once.'

'What's it called? Rita, as usual? Have another go; hit her again! Do you good! Like her cheek to call you a sandhopper!'

Gard caught her breath, between a laugh and a sob. 'It wasn't Rita this time. It was that hateful Ven. Oh—Aunty! Did granny tell you?' and she bit her lips fiercely. To cry before the boys was a thing which 'was not done,' according to Gard's creed.

'Yes, I went and asked her. It's a rotten idea, Gard, old chap, and I don't see yet how it's going to work out. But, hang it all, it's not the other girl's fault! She can't help it. Give her a chance; I bet she hates it too!'

'I don't know whether it's her fault or not. She may know all about it. She may have said she'd only go to the swankiest school in the place. They'd give in to her; they think nothing's too good for her, evidently,' Gard said resentfully.

'She would be a little beast! But you don't know any of that, old girl. Can't you wait till you see the kid?'

'She's not a kid. She's nearly as old as you. She'll try to boss me all the time. If she was a kid it would be easier,' Gard flashed. 'It looks to me as if she's a stuck-up thing, who'll just fit in at the Castle. I can't understand any girl coming to stay with another one, and not being willing to go to school with her. It isn't decent. It's not playing the game at all—especially when she's going to a school that looks down on mine so fearfully. It's simply hateful!'

'But she may not know all that,' Svante argued. 'I only want you to give her a decent chance, Gard. Wait till you've heard how she speaks about it; it's only till to-morrow night. I say, old chap, how will your dear Rita feel about it?'

Gard's eyes sparkled, almost with enjoyment. 'She'll loathe it! *My* cousin in *her* school! And she'll give Ven a simply awful time! I could almost put up with it because Rita will hate it so, Aunty.'

'That's one way to look at it. If this Ven is really a little beast, I guess Rita will see to her for you; you needn't exert yourself. She won't exactly be received with open arms by the Castle crowd. Of course, if she's jolly, it will be utterly rotten for her,' Svante remarked.

Gard began throwing stones into the sea again. 'I've thought about it all round. Rita will be raging mad, and she'll loathe Ven, and she'll make things as bad for her as she can. And she'll have all the Castle crowd behind her, once they know who Ven is. Our lot won't like Ven when they know she's going to the Castle. I'd asked Christopher to look after her, but she can't possibly do it when Ven's at the Castle. Nobody can do anything for her, it seems to me; she'll have a simply beastly summer. How any mother and father could do such a crazy thing, such an unkind thing, to a girl they pretend to be fond of, is more than I can see!'

'Yes, the fond parents seem to have put their foot in it this time. Tried to be a little too good to their one-and-only, I guess,' Svante said grimly. 'Look here, Gard, old chap, they can't possibly know. You've hit it; nobody would ever plan such a thing for their kid. They

can't have understood. Well, then, if the girl doesn't know what she's falling into, it's worse than rotten for her. Think how she'll loathe it, when she finds out what she's in for!'

'I don't know whether she will or not. I should!'

Svante looked at her expectantly. 'Well, aren't you going to help her out? You may be able to; I don't see that anybody else can.'

'I! I'll have enough to do looking after myself! You don't suppose it isn't going to be beastly for me too, having my cousin at the Castle?'

Svante put his head in his hands, and pretended to think this out. "'You don't suppose it isn't going to be"—oh, you mean it *is* going to be beastly for you too! Two negatives; yes, I see, I've got it now.'

'Idiot! You know what I mean quite well!'

'I'm beginning to get hold of it,' Svante assured her politely. 'What do you think Rita will do to you?'

'Ask me how it is my cousin can afford to go to a decent school if I can't. And—oh, heaps of things! It will be simply beastly!'

'Beastly for the other girl too,' Svante remarked.

'It was going to be beastly for her, anyway. I'd been worrying over her, before I knew about all this,' Gard said sombrely. 'Christopher and I talked it over this afternoon. I was afraid Ven would hate it when she found she was to go to a smaller school, not the best in the town. I was afraid she'd look down on us, and laugh at the Haven, and all that; and I thought it was going to be awfully uncomfortable for us all. But I never dreamed of anything so hideous as her going to the Castle. Now she's either got to make good with Rita and her lot, make them accept her and take her into their crowd— —'

'Could she do that?' Svante interrupted. 'Would they ever take her on? They'll know she's your cousin?'

'Of course they'll know. As for their taking her on, I don't know,' Gard said slowly. 'She might be able to get round them, and make them like her. But she could only do it by running down me and the Haven, and making fun of us, and all that.'

'She'll be a little toad if she does that, when she's living here!' Svante said hotly.

'She's either got to do that,' Gard repeated doggedly, 'or be disliked by both schools, and have no friends at all. She can't expect to have friends at the Haven. She must find them at the Castle, or else she'll have to do without.'

'A cheerful prospect for the poor kid for the whole summer,' Auntie remarked.

'I can't help it. It's not my fault. Do you mean that you think it's my job to help her to make friends?' she asked indignantly.

Svante was playing a little game of his own, selecting all the black stones he could find within reach and building a cairn of them. 'Not your job,' he said slowly. 'I'd think it would be awfully sporting if you'd do it, though.'

Gard stirred uneasily. 'Whatever are you doing with those black stones, you big silly? I shouldn't have thought there were so many black ones on the beach.'

'Neither did I, till I began to look for 'em. The next day-tripper that comes along will think he's struck a prehistoric monument, and will write to the *Times* about it,' Svante explained. 'Or else he'll ring up some scientific society to ask why, on a shingle beach, all the black stones should be washed into a heap in one spot. Or else he'll think it's a sign of buried treasure. There are lots of possibilities. I say, Gard, old chap, suppose the Rita crowd didn't know Ven was your cousin? She's got a different name, fortunately. They might quite well think Vendela was Welsh. How about it, then?'

Gard looked down at him curiously. He was lying on the shingle, still reaching out for black stones, though he had nearly cleared the beach for an arm's length all round. 'It would

make things easier for her, of course. They'd be more willing to be friends. But they'd know she lived here, Auntie! Oh, do you mean she could let them think she was just lodging here?'

'How about it, for you, if she did? It would be better for her, of course.'

'It wouldn't be any better for me,' Gard said decisively. 'Rita would only ask why we were taking in lodgers. But I'd tell everybody she was my cousin, of course.'

'But how about it if you didn't?' Svante suggested, with apparent carelessness, arranging his black stones neatly. 'Wouldn't it make it heaps jollier for her?'

Gard frowned down at him. 'Course it would. But why should I? She is my cousin!'

'Yes; but you always do the decent thing when you see it, old chap,' Auntie said, with seeming irrelevance, and sat up. 'I say, what about getting back? Supper wouldn't be a bad idea. Haven't you any prep?'

'Not much. I did most of it in school. I'll scramble through the rest in bed in the morning. I say, Auntie,' she burst out, as they climbed the shingle bank to the sandy track under the tamarisk hedge, 'do you mean you think I ought to do that? Really?'

'Keep the cousin part dark, to give her a chance to make friends? I think it would be an awfully decent thing to do, and would give her a sporting chance of making good. I don't see any one could say you ought to, or try to make you, but it would be awfully jolly of you if you felt like it. That's how it looks to me.'

'But I don't feel like it!' Gard burst out indignantly. 'I don't like her! I wish she wasn't coming! I don't want to do anything for her! How could I?'

'Well, I'm not asking you to,' Svante said hastily. 'It came into my head for a moment, that's all. I suppose it was a mad idea. I only thought—well, it doesn't matter to any of them whose cousin she is, and things seem so jolly rotten for her, and it's not likely to be anything to do with her; she can't help it. Seems to me she'll have fits when she finds out what she's in for. I thought maybe you'd like to give her a leg-up yourself, 'stead of asking that other girl.'

'Christopher! I've told her Ven's my cousin!' Gard said triumphantly. 'I can't go back on it now, Auntie.'

'No, I guess you can't. Oh, well, that does in my little idea, so you needn't worry about it, old chap. The other girl will have to get through somehow. Wonder how she'll do it? Depends a lot on what she's like.'

'Everything depends on that. If I knew she was nice, I might want to try to help her out.'

Svante shot a side-glance at her. He had meant what he said when he told her she always 'did the decent thing when she saw it.' He had great confidence in Gard, and he did not believe this matter was ended, in spite of Christine's knowledge of the situation. Surely that could be managed somehow, if any one really wanted to. But he knew he had said enough. Gard would think it over for herself now. 'Course I don't want you to do anything that would make things worse for you,' he said hastily; 'not for any old outside girl. There'd be no sense in that. I only thought, if it didn't help you for folks to know she was your cousin, it might help her for them not to. See?'

'I may see, if I think hard about it,' Gard retorted. 'It's quite as bad as anything I said.'

Svante laughed. 'Say, you'll have to apologise to the Greg in the morning. He wept because you weren't in to say good-night to him.'

'How nice of him. I forgot all about him,' Gard said absently, and walked along the narrow track, her eyes on the sea, her thoughts busy.

Single file was necessary, unless somebody was to walk on the shingle. Svante fell behind, whistling to show he was taking no notice of his sister, but with one eye on her all the time.

But Gard turned up the lane and in at the garden-gate without another word, and was silent all through supper-time.

Her grandmother, relieved that the outburst she had dreaded had apparently worked itself off out-of-doors, left her alone, in the comfortable assurance that 'the child was getting over it.' What arguments Svante had used, she could not tell; but they had evidently been successful in persuading Gard to the necessary peaceful acceptance of the situation.

Turkey had no eyes for anything wrong. But Svante knew that the matter was anything but settled in Gard's mind. Her thoughts were still in a whirl, though she was so silent. Vendela must come, of course; there was nothing to do but to put up with that. But how she must be received, how she was to be treated—most of all, thanks to Svante's disturbing suggestion, how the way was to be prepared for her, whether it could be made smoother or would be left for her to make for herself—these questions were still unanswered when Gard, after half-an-hour's strenuous work after supper, said good-night and disappeared.

Only Aunty guessed that she had gone now to wrestle with problems harder and more pressing than any to be solved for school. He was sure of it, and almost wished he had not spoken, so certain was he that Gard could not refuse the call to a 'sporting' act when it came her way.

'It's rotten for her, but she'll do it. Old Gard always does play up in the end,' he said to himself. 'Perhaps I was a beast to worry her. But she'd hate later on to remember she'd been a beast to the other girl. Don't see what else I could do. I believe Gard'll rise to it. She always does the sporting thing when it comes to the point;' and he too went off to bed.

CHAPTER IV.

PREPARING THE WAY FOR VEN.

‘Christopher, just half a sec.; I simply must speak to you before school!’ Gard had started early, and gone flying through the lanes, because the tide was up to the shingle, and had managed to waylay Christine before she reached the school. ‘There are Netta and the rest. Come down on the beach, Christopher dear! I don’t want them to hear,’ she pleaded, and plunged down across the shingle to the nearest groyne.

‘Whatever’s the matter, kid? Don’t make me late,’ Christine urged.

‘No, I won’t. Oh, Christopher, it’s about that other girl! Have you told anybody what I told you last night?’

‘I haven’t had time yet,’ Christine pointed out, in much surprise. ‘I was going to tell the rest this morning, and tell them they’d got to be nice to her, as she’s a stranger. But I haven’t seen any one since you told me, Gard. What’s the row?’

Gard drew a breath of mingled regret and relief. ‘If you had, I couldn’t have done anything. But as it is—look here, Christopher, it’s too awful for words! She’s coming to-night; I heard more about it when I got home. I hadn’t heard the letter yesterday, you know. And this is the awful thing! Her folks always want her to have the best of everything, so they’ve written to Miss Duke, and she’s going to the Castle.’

‘To the Castle!’ and Christine stared at her blankly. ‘Oh, but I say, Gard, what a weird idea!’

‘It’s a simply hateful idea—for her, and for me, and for everybody; even for Rita and her crowd, I suppose. I can’t alter it; I can’t do anything. So you won’t need to give her a leg-up after all, Christopher.’

Christine stared at her still. ‘It will be awfully uncomfortable for you, Gard.’

‘It’s simply hideous! I don’t know how we’re going to get on with her at all. To have her living in the town and going to the Castle would have been bad enough, but to have her living with *me*! Of course, they didn’t know—her people, I mean. They only know I don’t go to the biggest school in the town. They couldn’t know we’re deadly enemies.’

‘No, they wouldn’t understand that. I say, won’t she hate it when she understands? She’ll be awfully uncomfortable,’ Christine said thoughtfully.

‘That depends on what she’s like, and I haven’t a notion,’ Gard said grimly. ‘Look here, Christopher, there isn’t any need to tell the rest about her now, is there?’

‘Not about her not coming to the Haven. But they’ll see her, and have to hear all about it, Gard. You can’t keep her out of sight.’

‘No, of course not,’ Gard said impatiently. ‘I shall tell them there’s a girl coming to live with us, and that she’s going to the Castle. But I’ve been thinking—look here, Christopher! The worst thing about her, to Rita and all those Castle girls, will be that she’s my cousin, won’t it? They’ll simply hate her for that. They wouldn’t mind her so much if they thought she was just stopping with us?’

‘No. No, I suppose not,’ Christine said slowly, and looked down at her curiously.

‘Well, then, suppose we don’t tell them. Nobody knows but you. What d’you think, Christopher?’

‘Not tell them she’s your cousin? Gard, what a funny idea!’

‘Not say she’s anything to do with me. Don’t you think it would make things better for her?’

'I think she'd find it easier to make friends among the Castle crowd if they didn't know.' Christine considered the position carefully.

'Rita will think we're taking in lodgers. It will give her something new to tease about,' Gard said brazenly; but the effort with which she spoke did not escape the elder girl.

'Gard, tell me more about this!' she demanded. 'What put it into your head? It's an awfully decent idea, from the other girl's point of view, and I'm sure it would make things better for her. But it may not be very nice for you. Rita's just the sort to fasten on a thing like that, and fling it at you every chance she gets.'

'I know. I thought of that. I was thinking about it in the night.'

Christine gave her a quick look. 'Have you been lying awake worrying about this girl?'

'Seems to me I'm not doing the proper thing if I go and tell everybody the thing that will make it hard for her,' Gard said sturdily; 'for it would get round to Rita, of course. If I keep dark about it, and don't let on that she's anything to do with me, it gives her a fair chance to do the best she can for herself. Don't you see?'

'Yes, I quite see that,' Christine said slowly. 'It's rather a nice idea on your part, Garda.'

Gard was the soul of honesty where her own credit was concerned, although she was urging concealment for Vendela's sake. 'Oh, it wasn't my idea,' she said off-handedly. 'Auntie put it up to me to do the proper thing. He thought of it. And when you're living with boys, and they expect you to be sporting, you can't let them down, Christopher.'

'Oh!' Christine said thoughtfully. 'Oh, that's it, is it? It was Svante's idea, but you feel you've got to rise to it?'

'That's about it. He'd think me such a rotter if I didn't. I could see he thought I ought to give Vendela a decent chance. I didn't want to do it, Christopher. I'm mad with her for coming at all; and most of all for going to the Castle. It will be simply hideous; and I don't in the least want to do anything for her. But Svante put it up to me, and I can't be a slacker.'

'No, of course you can't,' Christine said hastily. 'I say, though, Gard, it must be awfully jolly to have boys like that at home. You are lucky, you know.'

'Oh, Svante's all right,' Gard said airily. 'But you do have to mind what you're about when you're living with boys. He'd be awfully upset if I did anything he thought was rotten. He doesn't care a scrap about Vendela; he doesn't want her any more than I do. But he doesn't want me to be a slacker; that's what it comes to.'

'No; he wants you to do the proper thing. It's time, Gard; we'll have to run. You've kept me too long, you bad kid! Good luck to you with the funny cousin!'

'And you won't tell a soul?' Gard pleaded, as they hastened up the heavy shingle as quickly as they could.

'Not a soul. I think it's jolly decent of you and Svante. You tell the rest what you think fit. I'll lie low, and not know anything about it.'

'Right-o! Thanks awfully, Christopher!'

'Now I wonder how all that will affect last night's problem?' Christine pondered, between classes. 'I should think it will make matters worse. If Gard's cousin goes to the Castle, she's still more likely to run down the Haven; she'll catch it from Rita and the rest! She'll have to be in the fashion. Then it will be still harder for Gard not to get dissatisfied. She'll have a struggle to keep loyal to us; unless, of course, the more Vendela cracks up the Castle, the more Gard feels she has to stand up for her own school;' and Christine laughed. 'That's possible. She may stick up for us out of sheer contrariness, as she's always done with Rita and her crowd. But I'm not sure how she'll feel inside her. Rather bad, I'm afraid, poor kid!'

The Haven was a long, low house close to the sea, and had not been built for a school. The windows of the two big sitting-rooms and the front bedrooms, which had been transformed into class-rooms, all looked towards the sea in a way which was very delightful, but not at all

good for work. The girls were used to it, however; and though this morning the tide crept nearer and nearer, till the waves were breaking on the shingle with glorious rhythmic music just below Gard Svenssen's desk by the open window, the sound did not distract her. She had those lost hours of last night to make up for; she had worked in bed that morning, as she had promised Svante; but all the same, unusually severe concentration was necessary if she was to get through the morning without betraying herself as unprepared.

She worked hard, and thought hard, and almost forgot Vendela and the ordeal of her arrival that night. During the mid-morning break she was feverishly looking up French verbs for the lesson to come immediately after, and besought her friends not to speak to her. It was only after morning school that she turned to Netta and Nancy and Meg, who had been begging at intervals to know what was the matter with her.

'Didn't do my prep. last night. I should think you could see that. I've only just scraped through. You saved my life by leaving me alone at break; I didn't know a word of those old verbs. I had bad news last night; that's why I couldn't stick at prep.'

'Oh? What's the row?'

'Not anything to do with your father?' Meg asked sharply.

'Surely Greg hasn't got measles again? Oh, but I suppose you wouldn't be here if he had!'

'Hardly,' Gard said dryly. 'Oh, father's all right; it's not as bad as all that. But we've got a queer girl coming to stop with us while her people are abroad, for three months or so. And she's coming to-night. Granny knew all about it, but didn't tell me till it was all fixed up. It was a bit of a shock, I can tell you!'

'How is she queer?' Netta asked with interest; and others crowded round to listen.

'This way.' Gard braced herself to tell the worst. 'She's going to live, and sleep, with *me*; but she's going to school at the Castle! Now, if that's not queer, I'd like to know what is!'

There was a moment's stunned silence. Then Netta gasped, 'But will they take her? After the term's begun? They're so fearfully particular!'

'Who is she, anyhow? The first thing they'll ask at the Castle is what her father is!' Nancy mocked.

'Oh, that doesn't matter! She doesn't live in the town. You can be a butcher or a grocer, if it's in some other town!' Gard said scornfully. 'She lives in Wales, so she can be any old thing she likes. I don't mean, of course, that her father is a butcher,' she added hastily. 'I believe he's a sailor, like mine—captain of a big liner, I think. Oh yes, they'll take her; it's all arranged. You see, she's fifteen. They aren't overcrowded with girls as old as that.'

'No, they mostly go to the High. I wonder she isn't going there, too.'

'Why is she going to live with you, captain?' asked Netta curiously.

'Her mother knows granny. They fixed it all up,' Gard said simply, but with flushed cheeks. The feeling of a half-truth was very unpleasant to her, even for another girl's sake. 'She's called Vendela Morris. She's Welsh,' she added.

'Help! What a name! It's as bad as Hildegard Svenssen!' Meg laughed.

'They seem to call her Ven. I say, will you all be nice to her, just at first? I suppose she'll make friends with the Castle crowd, and then if we don't like her, we can drop her. At least, you can. I sha'n't be able to; but I needn't hang round her all the time if I've had enough of her. But till she knows somebody, and till we see if we can stand her, will some of you be nice to her? I've got to, so you might see me through.'

This argument had weight with the girls. It was more from clannishness, and a desire to back up their chum, than from any sympathy with the stranger, that Netta and Meg said readily, 'Oh, we'll be nice to her, Gard! You bring her along.'

'But if she's fifteen, will she want to come?' Nancy doubted. 'Meg's the oldest of us, and she's only thirteen.'

‘We’ll give her the chance, anyway. She can cry off if she doesn’t like us,’ Netta remarked. ‘I say, though, what about Saturday, Gard? Shall you bring her?’

‘You can’t!’ There was an instant chorus. ‘If she goes to the Castle afterwards, she’ll give us away. You can’t possibly, Gard!’

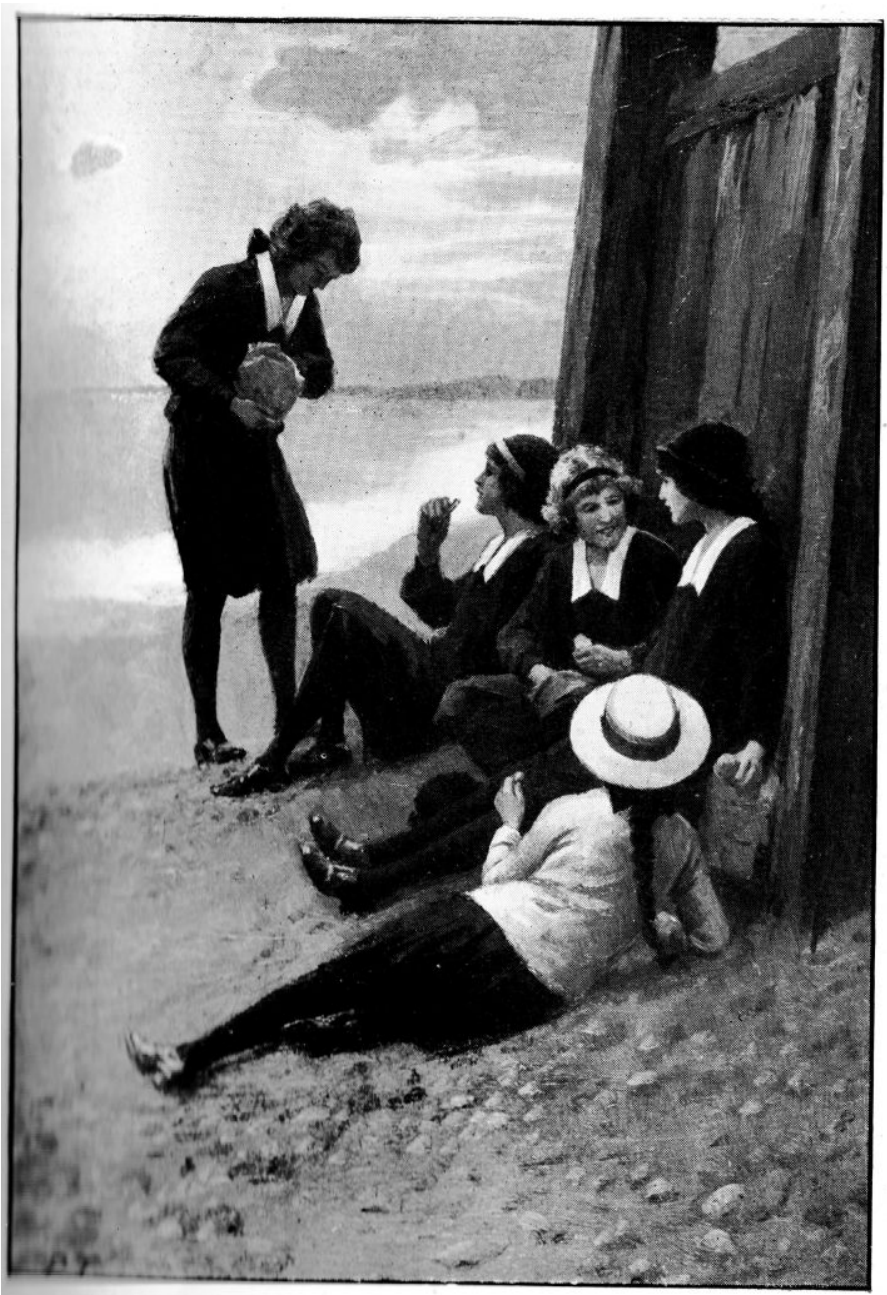
Gard considered the matter. ‘I’ll have to see what she’s like,’ she said at last. ‘If she’s up to any fun at all, she won’t give us away. If I don’t feel sure of her, of course I won’t bring her. You’ll have to do without me for once.’

‘Oh, but we can’t! Captain, we never could!’ This chorus was even more emphatic.

‘Oh yes, you could. Don’t be a set of silly kids!’ but Gard had flushed at their tone. ‘You’ll have to, unless I feel awfully sure of Ven. For I’ll simply have to look after her; I can’t possibly go off and leave her for the whole afternoon on her first Saturday.’

‘Let her do something with the boys,’ Meg suggested.

‘Likely, isn’t it?’ Gard retorted hotly. ‘I’ll *not*!’



Lunch-time at the groyne.

They were sitting on the shingle in a row, now that the first excitement which had made them crowd round Gard was over. Their backs to a wooden groyne, and the high tide rushing up the stones not many feet below, they were all busy with the lunch brought from home—sandwiches, cakes, apples. Presently they would adjourn in a noisy crowd to a near-by

confectioner's, to finish off with milk, lemonade, or ices, according to the state of the weather and of their finances, the last being usually determined by the day of the week. There would have been just time for any of them to go home for a proper dinner. Gard had the longest distance to go, and she could just manage it by running all the way there and back. But that was an exhausting and unhealthful proceeding; it was easier for her grandmother, also, to give her lunch, and prepare a proper meal for her and the boys all together at tea-time. To stay at school for the dinner-hour meant a picnic meal and games afterwards; and not many schools could offer as tempting a playground for these as the sand and shingle under the Haven's own windows. Gard much preferred to take her lunch to school, and so did many of the others; and the beach picnic, 'under the posts,' at one o'clock, had become an enjoyable part of the routine of every fine day.

They strolled up to their favourite shop at last, and gathered round a couple of marble-topped tables; while Meg, chosen as deputy for the day, went to the counter to give the order. 'One coffee, one milk, three lemonades, and five small ices, please.'

'The Sandhoppers must have come into fortunes! Ices for everybody, besides drinks all round!' a mocking voice spoke from the inner room, where little tables with white cloths stood ready for luncheon-parties.

'But only *small* ices, Rita! And they must have drinks! Whelks and winkles must be awfully dry!'

'D'you think that's what they live on?' another voice asked reflectively. 'What about shrimps? And aren't there mussels on those posts?'

Meg strolled across to Gard's table, her back to the inner room, her face working in expressive pantomime. 'Pity we came in here! I don't know if we'll get served. There seem to be packs of tripper-people having lunch in there—eggs and messy things like that! It's awfully stuffy. Fancy sticking in there when you could be out on the beach!'

'Of course, it *is* cheap trip day!' Gard seconded her efforts nobly. 'What a nuisance! I don't like those half-day excursion people, do you? They come for a few hours at the sea, and spend it all in tea-shops!'

'Still, it's nice for them to see the sea sometimes,' Netta urged kindly. 'Living out in the country, like some people we know, think what a treat it must be to get a day at the sea now and then! It's a good thing there are cheap trips!'

An ominous silence had fallen on the inner room. Rita's summer home was in the country, up on the Downs, a few miles inland, and she came and went by bus every day. Suddenly the curtain was drawn aside, revealing a wrathful girl in the big straw hat of the Castle. 'Gard Svenssen, what on earth do you mean? What utter rot you're talking!'

The bunch of blue Haven caps turned in innocent surprise towards the speaker. Gard spoke for the rest, with a politeness very unusual in such company. 'Oh, Rita, is that you? Do you have lunch in here? I should have thought you'd prefer the hotel; it's so much more swanky. Did we disturb you? Aren't there a lot of excursion people in there? Meg thought she heard them. We were talking about them.'

'Meg didn't. She never thought that!' Rita flashed.

'Oh, well, if you know what Meg thought better than she does, we needn't say any more. She thought she thought so, but I suppose she made a mistake. You're sure to know best, of course.'

'Meg knew perfectly well,' Rita said indignantly. 'You haven't a scrap of manners between you!'

'Now I ask you'—Gard addressed her friends seriously—'who's got the bad manners, Meg or Rita? Meg gives her order in a quiet and lady-like fashion; any one will agree to that.'

Rita comes bouncing out and begins slanging people who had never even spoken to her. What about it, girls?’

‘Meg said things about us. She knew we were there, and that there wasn’t any one else—except one of your own precious lot! Perhaps Meg meant her?’ Rita demanded scornfully.

‘Who? Who’s there?’ The Haven girls rose in a delighted body to peer over Rita’s shoulders, regardless of their coffee and milk and ices.

From a quiet corner, where she had a table to herself, Christine’s laughing eyes met theirs. She, too, had eaten sandwiches and fruit on the shore; and now, with coffee and a cake before her, was studying a book propped against the wall. She glanced at them, meeting Gard’s eyes for an instant; then, with twitching lips, returned to her book.

‘Oh no, Meg didn’t mean old Christopher. Christopher’s quiet. She meant a noisy, common crowd, the kind who shout personal remarks at other people. Sort of Bank Holiday lot, you know!’

‘Hildegard, Miss Hedges wouldn’t like you going on like this in a shop.’ Christine looked up sharply. ‘You aren’t behaving nicely. Go on with your ices; and then go out and play.’

‘Oh, I say, Christopher,’ Gard remonstrated indignantly, ‘what about them? After all, they began it! They always do! We wouldn’t take the trouble!’

‘They’re nothing to do with me,’ Christine said crisply. ‘If Castle girls are allowed to be rowdy in shops, that’s none of our business. They certainly began it, so we can only suppose their school has no objection to that kind of thing. But yours has; and I happen to be its head. Kindly remember you’re a Haven girl, and behave better in future.’

She returned to her book, and apparently became again absorbed in history.

Gard and Meg and the rest withdrew meekly. They would do a good deal for ‘old Christopher.’ But their eyes met as they sat down to their ices, and Gard’s twinkle kindled a response all round the circle.

‘Good old captain! I wonder how Rita liked that? It was one for her and the Castle!’ Netta murmured.

‘She gave it them awfully neatly. Don’t giggle, Meg, you ass! If Christopher has to go for us again, it will be in earnest next time. She’s all for us at present.’

‘She’s right, though. Miss Hedges wouldn’t like it,’ said quiet Winifred in the corner.

‘Oh, but we had to rise to it, when Rita let out like that! She only got what she deserved. Buck up with that coffee, Nancy! Let’s get out of this before they’re finished, or we shall be tempted to renew the fray out in the street. And if I know Christopher, she’ll say a thing or two if we do.’

‘I guess Rita’s mad with herself,’ Meg murmured, as they hurried over their ices. ‘She got the worst of it, and she’ll know it, and so will the rest. I guess the Sandhoppers scored that time, Gard.’

‘Well, they’ve called us tripper-kids for long enough, because we play cricket on the sands. And Rita does come in for the day,’ Gard urged.

‘Yes, but not on a cheap excursion ticket;’ and at that a laugh rippled round.

The girls who were lunching with Rita in the inner room looked at one another. But they had suddenly become very quiet. They were not sure of the silent girl in the corner; and they were only too sure of the attitude of their head-mistress, and even of their own seniors, if the story should ever reach their ears. Miss Duke had spoken lately of providing lunch in the school for those who could not go home; several of the girls came from big country-houses outside the town. A school dinner would be far less fun than an unofficial shop lunch; they had no wish to provoke a crisis which might mean the end of their midday liberty. So they swallowed Christine’s veiled rebuke as best they might, and only let themselves go when she had followed Gard’s tribe from the shop.

CHAPTER V. THE COMING OF VENDELA.

Gard hung over the gate as her next-door neighbour, Suzanne Thorne, came along the lane from the corner where the motor-bus put her down every evening.

'Hello, Sue! How's the High?'

'Much as usual,' Suzanne smiled. 'When are you coming with me?'

'Soon as ever I can. But granny won't let me for another year at least. It's rotten! I'd love it! I say, Suzanne, I was fearfully rude to Rita and all that lot at lunch to-day!' There was far more triumph than contrition in Gard's face and tone.

'Oh! You shouldn't, Hildegard! No good will come of it.'

'We gave them some of their own back, for once. Never had such a good chance before,' and Gard retailed the conversation at lunch-time.

'In a shop? Gard, you simply mustn't! Miss Hedges would hate it. You'll give the schools an awfully bad name. You and Rita might at least do your scrapping in private.'

'That's what Christopher says. But we had to say something, Suzanne. You couldn't ask us to take that lying down! They've called us tripper-kids for ages. It was rather joyful to get the chance of saying we thought they were half-day excursionists from the country!' and Gard hugged herself in wicked glee. 'I say, have you heard what's happened?'

'No?' Suzanne paused at her own gate. 'What's up? Don't say Greg's begun with measles again?'

'Not yet,' Gard laughed. 'He's quite all right at present, thank you. There's a girl coming to stay with us, Susy—for months and months. Her mother's going abroad, so she asked granny to have her. She's called Vendela, and she's nearly as old as you.'

Suzanne leaned over the low wall between the two gardens. 'I say, rather jolly! May I come in and see her? Where does she come from?'

'Somewhere in Wales. But where she's going to matters more,' Gard said grimly. 'Oh, do come, please! I'll be awfully glad, and I'm sure she will. Things are going to be frightfully awkward, Sue. She's—just think of it!—she's going to school at the Castle!'

'Gracious! What is she doing that for?' Suzanne was beginning blankly, when round the corner came a taxi, which drew up beside them.

Suzanne, keenly interested, knew she ought to go, and was withdrawing reluctantly, while Gard was still gasping in dismay, now that the moment had come, when a tall girl jumped out, almost before the car had stopped, and long before the man could get down to open the door for her. She seemed to burst out, and was confronting the two girls before Gard could come forward or Suzanne could escape.

'Which of you is my cousin Hildegard, for I'm in a frantic hurry to say something to her? Oh, you are!' to Gard. 'I can see the family likeness. I'm like mother, and you're a Svenssen all over! I wonder if people will think we're much alike—'

'My hat!' said Gard. 'I never thought of the family likeness! Now you've done it!' she cried indignantly. 'What's the use of my trying—'

'Your cousin, Garda Svenssen? You never said she was your cousin!' Suzanne's surprised cry rang out.

Vendela's eyes swept from one to the other. 'What is it all about? Of course I'm her cousin! Didn't she want you to know? Doesn't she want me to come?—Didn't you?' and she turned on breathless, startled Gard.

‘Oh yes! No! Not the way you think. If you’ll come in, I’ll tell you.—Suzanne, I’ll tell you later.’ Gard spoke incoherently.—‘This is our house,’ to Vendela. ‘Suzanne lives next door. I’d just been asking her to come in and see you.’

‘But I don’t understand. Why didn’t she know? Didn’t you want her to know?’

But Gard had flung open the front-door, crying, ‘Granny, here she is! Here’s Ven!—Greg, come and speak to her!—The other boys will be late to-night,’ she explained swiftly. ‘They have a lecture after school, or, of course, Svante would have met you at the station. Granny wouldn’t let me go.’

Greg appeared at the end of the passage, a curly-haired mite in a holland smock as usual. Mrs Unwin came hurrying out to give a hearty welcome.

Ven was a tall girl, dressed in brown, and Gard saw at once with much dismay that she had sufficient likeness to the boys and herself to make denial of the relationship awkward. There were differences, of course. Ven’s eyes were deep brown, and Svenssen eyes were always very blue; her face was more oval in shape, instead of being round; she was slim, almost thin, whereas Gard and the boys were sturdily built. But her hair was very like theirs, fair and thick, with little curls where it was short; and she had two plaits just like Gard’s, but a little longer and thicker. She was so like her mother, in fact, that Gard feared from the first moment that her plan was doomed to failure. The very sight of Ven provoked doubt. It was most upsetting of her.

‘I may call you granny, mayn’t I, please?’ Ven asked anxiously, as she sat down to tea. ‘“Mrs Unwin” sounds so stiff and far-away. I know you’re not really; but I thought perhaps you’d let me pretend. I haven’t any grandmother of my own, so I’ve room for an adopted one. May I?’

Mrs Unwin smiled, well pleased. Perhaps this ‘adopted’ grandchild would be easier to understand than the real one. ‘I did not expect to be adopted at my age, but I am very willing, my dear. It will be pleasanter, as you say.’

‘That’s all right! We’ll just forget I don’t belong.—Won’t we, Greg?—I say, Hildegard, he is a darling! You’re in luck to have him. It’s rotten being an only kid.’

‘I’d forgotten granny wouldn’t be your granny too. But I suppose she isn’t,’ Gard said, in some astonishment. ‘I was thinking all cousins had to have the same grandparents. But don’t call me that, please. Nobody does, even at school.’

Vendela’s eyes danced. ‘I wondered,’ she admitted. ‘It seemed rather—rather heavy for every day. What do you do with it?’

‘Behead it,’ Gard said promptly. ‘Cut it down by two-thirds. I’m always called Gard, or Garda.’

‘Oh, I like that! It sounds more like a boy, though. Right-o! I’ll call you Gard. I’m Ven, you know. If you bob mine—leave off its tail—I’ll behead yours. That’s settled. Have you had your tea? Couldn’t you have some more? I can’t eat if you sit staring at me.’

‘I will have some more,’ Greg announced joyfully, and ran to pull up his high chair.

‘It will have to be your supper, then,’ and Gard spread a slice of bread for him. ‘I spend my life doing this,’ she explained to Ven. ‘In between times I go to school, and so on; but mostly I’m spreading bread for Greg. He spends his time having measles and putting us all in quarantine. I hope he won’t do it while you’re here; but if you stop some months, he’s sure to have something. I had my tea when I came in from school. I don’t have dinner at midday, only sandwiches; so granny wouldn’t let me wait for you. We knew you couldn’t be here till nearly seven, so I’m afraid you’ll have to have it without me. But Greg will keep you from being nervous.’

‘I’m not really shy, you know. I think I’ll manage to peck at a little.’ Ven was making a hearty tea. ‘I say, Gard, I’ve been dying to speak to you! I ought to have written, but I do

loathe writing letters, and they never explain things properly—at least, mine don't. Besides, it wasn't decided I was to come until two days ago; there really hasn't been time for a letter. I've been so busy getting ready to come!' grasping happily at an excuse which had only just occurred to her. 'You do understand, don't you?'

Gard was looking at her curiously. 'I understand why you didn't write. That's all right. I don't like writing myself. And you must have had a lot to do. But I don't understand what it was you wanted to say that there was any hurry about.' She was polite enough; but there was a touch of reserve, almost suspicion, in her manner. Her welcome had been outwardly all that was necessary, but it had not been hearty. Vendela knew it, and thought she knew the reason.

'About school, you know,' she said quickly; and in the swift glance Gard shot at her she read that she had been right. 'Do you mind awfully and fearfully much about my not going with you? Mother thought it wouldn't matter so very much, as we'd be in such different classes. You're twelve, aren't you? I'm fifteen; we couldn't have been together.'

She watched Gard anxiously, and waited for some response.

Gard, with compressed lips, was staring at the table-cloth, and disregarding Greg's clamour for 'Nother piece, Gardal!' She roused herself, and began to spread it for him. 'No; we couldn't have been together in classes, of course.'

'We can still go and come home together a good part of the way, can't we?' Ven urged, watching her anxiously. 'I've been hoping we could. I don't know anything about the schools, or how far apart they are, or anything. I've been hoping they were close together, so that we could always go together. But I know,' she said unhappily, 'that it does look as if we thought your school wasn't good enough for me. Gard, I'm awfully sorry. I say, if it's good enough for you, it must be good enough for me. But—but it's father, you see. We have to give in to him, and he insisted. He's at home so little, that mother hates to argue with him when he does come. I'm afraid I would argue, if she'd let me; but I hate to worry her. She isn't strong, and she's been worse lately. I'd have put up with anything rather than make a fuss that would upset her. You'll understand that?'

'Oh, of course!' Gard spoke swiftly, and more warmly than she had yet done. 'You couldn't make a row when she was ill. He wanted you to go to a swanky school, and you felt you had to?'

'Is it swanky? Horrors! It's getting worse and worse!' Ven groaned. 'Father said I must go to the best school in the town, and that was the end of it. Mother wrote to Mrs Unwin, and had a letter saying there was another school which some people thought better than yours, though she didn't agree, and wouldn't recommend it herself—'

'That was jolly honest of granny,' Gard remarked, 'for she doesn't like the Castle a scrap.'

'Mother made inquiries from other friends. She knows several people in the town, you know—she once lived here with your father for a while—and they fixed on the Castle for me. I said all I could, Gard. I begged to be allowed to go with you. But mother was so anxious to do what father wanted, and she was so poorly, that I had to shut up. She knew I didn't like it, and she got so worried, poor dear, so I simply had to put up with it. I hoped I'd be able to make you understand.'

Gard leaned forward suddenly. 'I say, it's beastly for you!'

'Of course it is. I'd far rather have gone with you. And I hate you to think we weren't satisfied with your school. I'm sure it's jolly, and an awfully good one.'

'It's the jolliest school there is, and we've got some topping girls!'

'Of course. But I can know them, even though I don't go to their school, can't I, Gard? They won't mind, will they?'

'No. But you don't know yet how beastly it is for you.' Gard spoke energetically, and with more sympathy for Ven's blissful ignorance than she would have believed herself capable of

an hour ago. 'I suppose I'll have to tell you. Have you finished? Have you had a good tea? A really good one?'—Oh, of course you have, Greg! Trust you for that!'

Vendela pushed away her plate. 'Is it as bad as all that?' she asked tragically. 'Get going, then. I think I can bear it. I've had a ripping tea. I feel quite strong, really.'

Gard laughed. 'No, but really, it's rotten. You won't like it a bit.'

'Couldn't we go upstairs and have it out alone together?' Ven pleaded, mock distress in her tone. 'Then if I swoon, you can just roll me into bed and leave me there. I am to sleep with you, I hope? Oh, good! I hoped I would. Do you mind? I've never had a girl to sleep with before. Mother would never let me go to boarding-school; she doesn't like them. I think I'd have loved it. I'm not trying to put off the evil day, you know; but I do think I ought to go and begin unpacking, and you can tell me the awful worst while I do it. I'm sure Mrs Unwin is the kind of good, dear person who always does the proper thing at the proper minute; and unpacking's the proper thing when you've just arrived. If we begin talking about anything that really matters, she's sure to come in in the middle and send me up to unpack, so I thought it might be tactful to—well, to pretend I'm doing it, anyway.'

'Yes, it would be better,' Gard conceded. 'You're right about granny, of course. And if she begins to want you to do a thing, you may as well go and do it just at once, for you'll get no peace till you do; she keeps on and on.'

'She looks determined,' Ven laughed. 'Let's go and unpack, then. I'm dying to hear the worst half that I don't know yet. Is it really bad, Gard? Or just bad enough to be thrilling? Are our schools deadly enemies?'

'You've about hit it,' Gard said grimly, as she went first up the narrow stair to show the way.

As she closed the door, Vendela faced her with dancing eyes. 'Really? And am I going to be a kind of football between the two—first with you and your lot; of course you've got a crowd; don't tell me you haven't; you've heaps of friends—first with your crowd, and then, when I get to school, with their lot? Tell me more about it, Gard, there's a good kid!' She sat on the edge of the box Mrs Unwin had had opened for her, and waited, her face alight with expectation.

Gard leaned against the door and spoke vehemently. 'The Castle girls are the swankiest, most hatefully stuck-up, and conceited lot you ever dreamt of. And they hate us and the Haven like poison. We scrap whenever we meet, and say all sorts of things at one another. We haven't playing-fields, so we practise on the sands at low tide; so they call us tripper-kids, and the latest name is sandhoppers. We simply loathe them. The worst of the lot are Rita Tompkins and her chum Moll Sanderson, and they can't stand the sight of me. Of course, our school isn't as swanky as theirs,' she conceded unwillingly. 'We have to do without lots of things they have; they've a decent gym., while we have to do with just drill; all that kind of thing. But we get on just as well, and we've got an awfully jolly set of girls. We do just as well as they do in exams.; we even beat them sometimes. But they look down on us fearfully, and treat us as if we were worms. Naturally we don't exactly love them for it. We're as much cut off from them as if we were black and they were white. And now you come, and you're going to do an absolutely unheard-of thing. You're going to live with *me*, one of the very worst of the Havenites, and go to school at the Castle! Of course, your folks didn't know; and, of course, you've got to do what they want. We've got to worry through somehow. But I can't just see what will happen. Can't you see that—well, that that kind of thing simply isn't done, Ven Morris?'

The sparkle of anticipation had died out of Ven's face, and she was staring at the floor, her chin resting on her doubled fists, one long plait falling over her shoulder and trailing on the carpet. She swept it back at last and looked up. 'It's all rather horrid, Gard. It's rotten for me,

and for you, and for your friends, and for the other lot. The whole thing's horrid. I do hate that kind of feeling.'

'So do I. They started it. I think it's beastly. But we couldn't take it lying down, Ven!'

'No. You'd give them back as good as they gave you,' Ven acknowledged. 'I've only known you half-an-hour, but I can see that. It might have been better if you hadn't slanged them back. If you'd been an angel, you might have been able not to; and if you'd been beautifully meek and gentle, they'd have got tired in time. If you answered back, of course they'd keep on. But you couldn't possibly help giving them one back every time; being you, you'd have to; I can see that. But all that doesn't matter now. The question is, how are we going to worry through? Most of all, how am I? For I *am* to be the football, it seems to me; and in the thick of a rugby scrum, most likely. Both sides will be down on me; yours, because I'm going to the Castle; and the Castle crowd, because I'm your cousin. Jolly for me! I wish we'd known. Mother never would have asked me to do anything so horrid!' She sat staring gloomily at the floor again.

Gard came forward slowly and stood beside her. 'I think it's simply beastly for you,' she said; 'and so does Auntie. He saw your side of it first. I could only think how rotten it was for me. But Auntie said, hang it all, it was worse still for you.'

'Auntie?' Ven stared at her blankly. 'Auntie who? I never knew you had an aunt. Is she mine too, or does she need adopting as well as granny? But what a weird aunt to talk like that!'

Gard's eyes danced. 'I mean Svante,' she said. 'You've heard of Svante and Torkel, I suppose? Auntie and Turkey!' And she explained the nicknames.

Ven laughed. 'Auntie Svante! What a name! But how jolly decent of him!'

'Oh, Auntie's a sport! He said to me last night it was up to me to give you a sporting chance of making friends. And, of course, Rita and all the Castle crowd matter most to you, for, after all, you will be going to school with them every day. And the thing they'll feel worst about is that you're my cousin. They'll simply hate having my cousin in their school. They look on me as the worst of the lot, you know.'

'You said that before. I want to know why? Have you been the cheekiest?' Ven spoke in an elder-sisterly tone of rebuke.

'No; well, I don't know. Perhaps I think of things quickest. But I'm Junior Captain at the Haven, you see.'

'Oh, I didn't know! Congrats.!' said Ven, in a tone of respect. 'And I suppose the whole of the Junior School follows your lead? I see! Things are getting jollier and jollier! I, a Castle girl, am not only cousin to a Havenite, but to the ringleader of all the cheeky Haven juniors! That's what it comes to, is it?'

'That's about it,' Gard acknowledged. 'They don't like me, Ven.'

'I can quite understand that,' Ven said politely, but added hastily, 'I don't mean that I don't like you myself, of course! I like you very much, considering I haven't known you for an hour yet; but I can quite see their point of view.'

'I thought you would, after a bit.' Gard stood beside her, and looked down at her, twisting her two yellow plaits into one fat one. 'They'll hate to think you're my cousin. That's why I hadn't told Suzanne, don't you see? I wasn't going to tell her at all.'

'Oh!' Ven slowly grasped this idea. 'Oh! Is that what you meant? You thought perhaps they needn't know? Oh, but what a jolly decent idea, Garda!'

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT VEN SAID ABOUT IT.

'And then you went and gave the whole thing away to Suzanne, the very first words you said.' Gard spoke in a tone of grieved reproach. 'What's the good of me making plans to try to smooth things out for you, when you go and upset them like that?'

Vendela laughed. 'But I didn't know. How could I ever guess at such a thing? It's such a topping idea for you to have thought of, Gard.'

'Oh, I didn't! It was Auntie's idea. I only came round to it; well, I mean — —'

But Ven understood. 'You must have felt awfully bad towards me, when you heard about the Castle bit of it,' she said gently. 'It is rotten for you. I'm afraid I've only been seeing my side of it. So Svante saw how it would be for me, and suggested this idea, and you came round to it? I think it was awfully decent of you. No one could have blamed you if you'd set out to make things as rotten for me as you could, instead of trying to help.'

'Oh, I'm not such a pig as that!' Gard said swiftly. 'And it doesn't really matter about Suzanne. We'll get hold of her and explain, and she won't say a word to any one.'

'Oh, but I won't have that! Does Suzanne go to the Castle or the Haven, by the way?' Ven asked with interest. 'Oh, but I suppose she wouldn't be a friend of yours if she were Castle!'

'Rather not. But she's neither now. That's why it won't matter; she won't be seeing any of the girls. She goes to the big High School in Eldingham. I'm going soon. I'm simply dying for it. That's where you ought to have gone, you know. It's a far better school than either of ours, if your father had only known. But you might not have been able to get in; you have to put your name down years before you want to go. Granny's entered mine already, though I'm not to go for another year at least. Suzanne used to go to the Haven, but she left two years ago to go to the High. Most of the girls do; we've very few seniors. I'd told Christopher about you too, before Auntie suggested keeping the cousin part of you dark. But I got hold of her this morning, and she promised she'd lie low about it. Suzanne will too, I'm sure, so it won't really matter.'

'Who is Christopher?' Ven asked, a little bewildered by all this.

'Christine; our Senior Captain. She's sixteen, and an awfully decent sort. She wants to make friends, if you will.'

'I'd like to. If the Castle crowd object to my having friends among your lot, they're going to get some shocks, that's all. Have you told the rest of your crowd about me?'

'Yes; but not that you're my cousin. Only that there was a girl coming to stop with me, and that she was to go to the Castle. They're quite ready to be nice to you, Ven. They said so.'

Vendela laughed. 'Considering everything, it's awfully sporting of them. Do they think you've begun taking in lodgers, or what?'

'That, I suppose. Rita will think it's that. We can't help it. There's no way to explain.'

'Only one way. My dear kid, do you really suppose I won't tell them?'

Gard stared at her blankly. 'Tell them what?'

'That we're cousins. Did you really think I'd be willing to keep it dark? Well, of course, you didn't know anything about me, so I can't be offended. But I should be if we'd been friends, and you'd thought that of me. How could I be so mean?'

Gard was staring at her wide-eyed. 'But it would be so much better for you!' she cried. 'It's your only chance, Ven!'

'Of making friends, do you mean? I'm not so sure; that remains to be seen. I'll have a jolly good shot at it, anyway. I'm used to having friends. But if making friends depends on keeping

my connection with my relations a secret while they're being kind to me, and means going to school under false pretences, then I won't make friends, that's all! I simply couldn't do it. I'd be ashamed to look myself in the face. I'd feel an utter rotter!

'Oh!' gasped Gard. 'But I don't feel that way about it at all; and neither did Svante, I'm quite sure. He thought it would be quite all right for you to lie low.'

'Did he? Would he have done it himself? I'll tell him—no, I won't!' and Ven's spurt of anger subsided suddenly. 'I'm an idiot! It was awfully nice of him to think of it, and still nicer of you to be willing to try it, for it would have made things worse for you. But I won't agree to it for a single second, Gard, and that's all about it.'

'You'll tell everybody?' Gard was staring at her incredulously. 'You won't care a scrap what they say?'

'Rather not. Of course they've all got to know. It's the only straight way to act, and I'd hate to do anything crooked. As for how you're going to explain to Suzanne, and to all the crowd at school to-morrow, that I'm your cousin on Friday when I wasn't on Thursday, or just why you didn't tell them all about it at first—that's for you to say!' and she laughed mischievously.

'Oh, we'll just tell them,' Gard said casually.

Ven nodded. 'I'll tell them for you, shall I? You can say, "Here's the queer girl who's going to the Castle!" and I'll say, "Yes, and I'm her cousin. Isn't it funny?" Oh, you did say there was a queer girl coming to stop with you, then?' she laughed, as Gard reddened guiltily. 'I don't blame you, really. It is a queer thing to do; I quite see that. I can tell you I wouldn't be doing it if I could help it. But as it is, I intend to see it through somehow, and without any sneaky tricks to help me.'

'Oh!' Gard said quickly. 'Oh, but we never meant you to do anything sneaky!'

'I know you didn't. When you proposed it, it was just a kind suggestion, and a very brainy idea of Svante's into the bargain. But it would be a sneaky trick if I took advantage of it, don't you see? So that's that! Now I'm going to unpack. I really do mean to do it this time. Suppose you run in and tell Suzanne why you hadn't told her I'm your cousin? And say I'm quite harmless, though I am going to the Castle, and I'd like to meet her and make friends as soon as she has time.'

In a whirl of amazement Gard went to take the message, glad of the chance to talk it over with Suzanne. So far she only knew that she liked Ven better, far better, than she would have believed possible, and that she thought Ven was going to like her too.

She came back an hour later, much cheered by some warm words Suzanne had spoken in appreciation of her efforts on Ven's behalf and of Ven's courage and honesty. If the unpacking was finished, perhaps they could go down to the beach for a little while before supper. She knew she ought to do her homework, but knew also that she could not possibly settle to it to-night.

From upstairs came peals of laughter. Gard paused in surprise, then went flying up to remonstrate. Her grandmother would be out at a meeting round at the church, she knew; and the little maid was supposed to be in charge. Greg ought to have been asleep an hour ago.

At the door of the room he shared with Mrs Unwin, she stood and stared. Greg was sitting up in his cot, watching and giggling; while Ven, sitting on the second bed, dressed up a dummy—or was it a Guy Fawkes? She had stuffed a pillow into her blue gym. tunic, and pinned on long, limp black stockings for arms, and another pair for legs. She was considering the effect of a big hat stuck rakishly on top when Gard's voice from behind made her jump.

'What *are* you doing? Oh, I say, what a ripping scarecrow! But Greg will dream and wake up howling if he giggles like that.'

‘Oh, you’ve come back too soon! This creature was to be sitting up in your bed,’ Ven said mournfully. ‘What shall we do with him now? Don’t say all my toil and labour must be wasted. Greg, you bad infant, why didn’t you tell me you had nightmares? We’d better retire and leave you to get over it. Gard, would we dare to put this in granny’s bed? Would she appreciate it? I’m afraid she wouldn’t see the joke.’

‘I’m afraid she wouldn’t, too. And it would give Ellen fits; she’d scream the house down. But I don’t believe it would upset the boys,’ Gard suggested. ‘Their room’s across the passage.’

Ven’s eyes danced. ‘Come on! Do you ever do that sort of thing, or will they take it as a sign I’ve arrived? We’ll put it in Svante’s bed, because he made that kind little plan for me. I’ll stick a note on its chest. You put it in the bed. I’m sure it wouldn’t be proper for me to do it. Besides, I don’t know which bed is his. Then we can both deny it, don’t you see? *I* never put anything in his bed! *You* never dressed up any dummy!’ She went flying off to her room for pencil and paper.

Gard laughed, and carried the pillow tenderly to Svante’s bed, and arranged it in a graceful attitude, sitting upright staring at the door, big hat perched sideways on a protruding lump of pillow, dangling arms and legs spread over the white bed.

Ven, helpless with laughter at sight of the thing, triumphantly brought Greg’s spade and red pail, and placed one in each of the creature’s hands, and pinned on its lumpy chest a big sheet of notepaper from her block, inscribed, ‘Your cousin Ven at the seaside.’

‘There! Isn’t she simply beautiful? I’m sure he’ll like his new cousin! Now couldn’t we race down and have a look at the sea? I’m dying to see it. What kind of beach is it? I’m fearfully thrilled to be living at the seaside!’

‘Don’t you have the sea at home?’ Gard asked, as they fetched their jerseys.

‘No, we’re miles from it; right in town. We go every summer for a fortnight, but it’s never half long enough. I love the sea; both sides of me love it. Father’s a sailor, and mother’s of a sailor family for generations back, like your father. She’s always saying we’ll move and live by the sea; but we’ve lots of friends where we are, and she thinks she’d be lonely in a new place. How far are we from the sea here? Oh, how gorgeous! But I’ll have to get a cap like yours!’ she exclaimed as they reached the gate, and the wind off the sea met them, full of salt and freshness and vigour, and whirled her long plaits wildly round her head.

‘Is that the sea, just at the end of the lane?’ Ven shouted, gazing delightedly at the tree-hung opening, through which she could see shingle and a gleaming patch of silver water. ‘Oh, how top-hole! Come on! It’s worth any amount of silly old school worries to have the sea so near;’ and she raced away, Gard at her heels.

The tide had just reached the shingle, and was churning noisily among the pebbles, as if indignant at meeting this opposition after its easy conquest of the sands. Gard explained the lie of the land, the position of the town and schools, the way to the lonely Stretch, gave the name of the long tapering point on the western horizon, and showed how the big groyne closed the shore road to school except at low tide.

Ven listened absently, her eyes on the sea and the lonely banks of shingle. ‘Could I go away along there to-morrow?’ she asked wistfully. ‘I’m not to begin school till Monday, you know. I’d love to wander miles and miles along those lonely stones.’

‘You’d soon get fagged out. It’s jolly hard work. But there’s a decent little path along here, at the top of the shingle, under the hedge; that’s the way to go. It’s hard work sometimes too, for the sand’s loose and runny, but it’s better than the shingle.’

‘What a pretty hedge! It’s not like anything I ever saw before,’ and Ven fingered the feathery green sprays.

‘It’s tamarisk. It has pretty pink flowers. Along The Stretch is our favourite walk. I’d have liked to come with you the first time, but I’ll have to go to school,’ Gard said regretfully.

‘Oh, but you’ll take me the second time, and show me all the things I’ve missed! I’m sure to miss the best things. I’ll go alone first, and see what I can find; and then you’ll go with me, and show me all the rest.’

‘All right! You see if you find anything.’

Ven turned on her quickly, struck by what seemed a hidden meaning in her tone. ‘What do you mean? Is there anything to find?’

‘I don’t know yet. I’ve been along there often, and I’ve always thought it was the sort of place where you’d expect to find things.’ Gard’s tone was so intentionally vague that Vendela looked at her sharply again.

‘What kind of things? Do you mean things thrown up by the sea? Treasures from wrecks? Do you have wrecks here? I know a bay in Wales where things are always coming ashore.’

‘Oh, we don’t have wrecks! There are no rocks worth speaking of. No; I just mean there’s so much room, and so few people about, that you feel queer things might happen. You go tomorrow and see for yourself.’

‘And you’ll come again on Saturday? You don’t have school on Saturdays?’

‘No; but—well, we’ll see about Saturday.’ Gard felt their acquaintance was too new to warrant a full invitation to Ven to join in all her doings, though she began to see it would have to be given. Ven was hardly one to be left out of anything. ‘Let’s go back now,’ she said abruptly. ‘There isn’t time for a walk to-night. And it’s time the boys were home.’

‘I wonder how Auntie likes his new cousin?’ Ven said, laughing. ‘He’d hardly expect to find her in his bed, would he? Well, *I* didn’t put her there!’

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT OTHER PEOPLE SAID.

As the girls entered the gate, something white and navy-blue and black came hurtling down from an upper window, and caught Ven full in the face. She gasped, and sat down suddenly under the shock. 'Well, that's one way to welcome your relations!' she cried indignantly.

'Oh, sorry!' A fair-haired boy leaned out to call a hasty apology. 'That was meant for old Gard! Turkey, you ass, you've hit the wrong girl!'

'I thought it was only girls who threw things at one person and hit another?' Ven asked politely, still sitting on the path and pulling her dummy into shape again. Nursing it in her arms, she rose with dignity and carried it into the house. 'How do you like your new cousin, Aunty?'

Her eyes scanned the boys keenly, as Svante came leaping down the stairs to repeat his apology; while Turk, squatting on the top step, stared down at her. They and Gard were all much alike; she would have known them for her cousins anywhere, by their likeness to her mother and to family portraits. Svante was a year older than herself, pleasant-faced, and 'an all-round jolly good sort,' she felt sure; Turkey was nearer Gard in age and size, with inquisitive blue eyes which yet saw less than Svante's more thoughtful ones.

'I say, I'm really awfully sorry we chucked that chap at you!' Aunty apologised again, but with laughing eyes. 'He wasn't meant for you. But all the same, it wasn't half cheek to go messing about with our beds before we'd ever seen you.'

'I never touched your bed!' Ven declared haughtily.

'Oh, come off! That wasn't Garda's scrawl!'

'N-no. Well, no, it wasn't,' she confessed, laughing. 'It was this way,' she went on, surrendering. 'I made the thing for her bed; she was in next door, telling Suzanne how queer I am. She came in too soon and saw the creature, and spoiled my little game. We couldn't waste him, and we were afraid granny wouldn't appreciate him quite as much as he deserved, so we passed him on to you and Turkey. Greg had seen him already, and loved him. But it was Gard who put him in your bed.'

'I say, Aunty, she is queer!' Gard spoke up from behind. 'Says she'll tell everybody who she is, and she won't have secrets. Says it would be sneaky, and she'd rather not make friends that way.'

'Oh!' Svante looked at Vendela, raising his brows inquiringly. 'We didn't quite look at it that way. We were only thinking of smoothing things out for you. It's such a rotten arrangement at present.'

'I know you were,' she said warmly, stuffing the pillow under her arm to be out of the way. 'It was awfully decent of you to think of it. I was ever so surprised and—and touched, when I heard. Yes, I was! Don't be rude, Garda; it is rude to snigger. I thought it was simply awfully kind of him; and of you too, of course. But I couldn't feel comfortable if I kept such a secret, so it couldn't be right for me to do it, could it?' and she appealed to Svante again. 'It was quite all right for you to propose it, and it was a kind idea, and very brainy. But it wouldn't be right for me to do it; not when I'm living with you, and taking all sorts of kindness from your grandmother, and having the use of your house, and all that. To keep quiet about being related to you would be simply beastly. I'd feel a shabby object.'

'No one wants you to feel like that,' Svante interjected, managing at last to get in a word. 'But, I say, did old Gard tell you all about it—I mean the reason, and all that?'

‘Oh yes; she explained thoroughly. If I can’t tell everything and still have friends, I’ll go without the friends. Look here, Aunty, if I did lie low about it and made great friends with some girl, I’d feel awfully mean if I didn’t tell her at once.’

Swante looked at her thoughtfully. ‘I suppose—perhaps you would,’ he admitted.

‘I know I should. I’d far rather tell beforehand. If it matters as much as you say, there’s all the more reason. The more it matters, the more reason there is to tell everything, and start square.’

‘I guess you’re right. I hadn’t got as far as that,’ he confessed. ‘I was only thinking of giving you a good start.’

‘I know you were. It was awfully decent of you. I’m sure I don’t know why you should.’

‘It seemed so rotten for you. I say,’ he said, awkwardly but sincerely, ‘I hope you’ll get on all right. I guess you will. Good luck! They’re a soft lot at that other school. Perhaps you’ll buck them up a bit.’

Ven laughed. ‘I think they’re a jolly soft lot!’ she assured him. ‘Now I must take my namesake up and undress her. Did you laugh when you saw her?’

‘Rather! Old Turk gave a squeal, and then stood and yelled.’

‘Are we to call her that?’ ‘Old Turk’s’ voice came from the top step in the gathering darkness. ‘Ven, you know?’

‘Please do. Saves heaps of time. I say, little Ven the Second and I had better quit! Here comes grandma!’ and Ven went leaping upstairs, passed Turkey, and vanished into Gard’s room, as the latch of the gate clicked warningly.

‘She’s a jolly good sort, Aunty!’ Gard whispered, as she followed.

He nodded. ‘A little bit of all right. She’ll wake up that stuffy crowd. Give her a boost up if you can, Gard.’

‘Of course I will. I’m going to make our lot adopt her, anyway.’

‘What’s that?’ Ven had been in bed for less than five minutes, when she sat up and called across to Gard in her bed in the other corner. ‘That noise, Gard—is it really the sea?’

‘High tide’s about eleven,’ Gard said sleepily. ‘There’ll be a bigger row still when it’s quite high; it’s only coming up yet. There’s a sea wind, you see. Some nights we hardly hear it, if the wind’s from the hills.’

‘It is topping to hear it!’ and Ven crept to the window and pushed it a little wider. ‘Do you mind? I want to hear it as clearly as I can.’

‘Love it. I have it as wide as it will go. But granny said you wouldn’t be used to it.’

‘What a libel! Why ever not? Do I look as if I lived without fresh air?’

‘No, rather not! But she meant the sea. It’s colder than you’re used to.’

‘I don’t mind. I like it. I’m going to listen to it. But I won’t keep you awake; that would be mean. You’re used to it. I won’t talk, Gard. Good-night.’

Gard would have liked to sit up and talk. This new cousin was very much more interesting than she had expected. But she was very sleepy; and Ven, having a conscience, did not encourage her, and refused to be conversational. So Gard fell asleep, her last impression one of Ven sitting up in bed, wrapped in her dressing-gown, and listening joyfully to the sea.

Gard’s chances of smoothing Vendela’s way came with the need for explanations next morning. She caught Christine at the school gate, and went in hanging on her arm. ‘Christopher dear, there’s no need to keep dark about what I told you two days ago. Ven’s a funny thing, and she won’t hear of it, so it doesn’t have to be a secret after all. Thanks muchly, all the same.’

Christine stopped and looked down at her. 'How do you mean, Garda? Ven won't hear of what?'

'Secrets. She's quite determined about it. Says she'll tell everybody she's my cousin, and they can do what they like about making friends. But she won't lie low about that or anything else.'

'How jolly plucky of her!' Christine said slowly. 'I say, will she come along here and let us have a chance to get to know her?'

'She wants to. But she's gone out exploring to-day. She's frightfully excited at living near the sea. But she will come here. I told her about you, and she wants to get to know you. She's going to be friends with Suzanne too, of course.'

'Jolly ripping! I'd like to know her,' Christine said warmly, then nodded and hurried away as the gong rang.

'Has the weird girl come, Gard?' whispered Nancy, as Gard slipped into her place.

'Yes, and she's heaps weirder than I've told you yet. Jolly nice, though. I'll tell you under the posts at dinner,' and Gard opened her books. 'I'll have to swot all through break again. I haven't done any prep., hardly. It was far too exciting last night; so keep away, if you love me, all of you.'

Either their love for her, or, much more likely, her very discouraging manner, kept them at bay during the morning; but when the moment came for midday lunch, 'under the posts,' to use the school expression, she was besieged by Netta, and Nancy, and Meg, reinforced by Agatha, and Edith, and Winifred, all clamouring to know why the new girl was so weird, and when they were to see her.

Gard made herself comfortable on the shingle, with her back propped against one of the posts of the groyne, and cracked a hard-boiled egg on a piece of flint; sandwiches lay in her lap, and salt in a packet on a ledge at her side. Thus prepared, she peeled her egg neatly, dropped the pieces of shell into a hole among the stones, and delivered her news to the waiting circle.

'She came all right. She's jolly nice; you'll like her. Awfully sporting, and frightfully keen on the sea. You'll see her to-morrow. I'm going to bring her along The Stretch to the picnic.'

'Gard! Oh, but —'

'I say, Gard, isn't that a bit too much?'

'If she's going to the Castle, you simply can't!'

'Isn't it a bit risky, captain?'

'I've got to,' Gard said briefly. 'You won't mind. I tell you, you'll like her. She's all right. She'll never give us away. I guess she'll be a help; I'm quite sure she can bowl. Looks like it, though I haven't asked her yet. But, anyway, she's got to come, or I've got to stop away, and I don't want to do that.'

'Must you take her everywhere, just because she's lodging with you?' Netta asked anxiously. 'She'll be a frightful nuisance, chipping in all the time!' and the faces all round the circle were worried.

Gard's egg was nicely peeled by this time. 'Lodging be bothered!' she said bluntly. 'She's my cousin. I've got to do the decent thing by her.'

'Your *cousin*? Garda Svenssen, you never said so yesterday!'

'Didn't you know?' Meg cried incredulously.

'Oh, I knew all right, but I wasn't going to tell any of you,' Gard said simply.

Then at the astounded howl of wrath that went up, she looked at them indignantly. 'Don't be utter idiots! How could I? If I'd told you, it would have been sure to get round to Rita and her lot; and the poor girl's got to go to school with them. How d'you suppose they'd receive

her if they knew she belonged to me? Just living with us was bad enough. But they won't like having one of my family in their precious school.'

'Won't like! They'll hate it! They won't have anything to do with her if she's your cousin! But why have you told us now, Gard? Isn't she going to the Castle, after all?'

'Oh, she's going all right. She didn't know a thing about the schools till I told her last night, though. She hates it as much as we'd do. Well, don't you see, I couldn't tell you, knowing how rotten it would make things for her. I meant to keep it dark, and just let you think she was only a visitor.'

'How nice of you, Garda!' Agatha spoke sentimentally. She had an admiration for her captain which never failed, and was more outspoken about it than the rest, much to Gard's discomfort.

'Don't be an idiot!' The captain was brief and crushing. 'What else could I do? I couldn't go and churn up things for her before she came!'

'"Churn up things" is good,' Winifred said appreciatively. 'Exactly fits the case! No, of course you couldn't, captain!' she added soothingly. 'I'm not sure if it would have occurred to any of the rest of us to look at it in quite that way, all the same. I'm inclined to agree with Agatha.'

Gard grew suddenly hot, and looked it. 'I didn't think of it. I wish I had. I'm always having to explain,' she said hurriedly. 'It was Svante's idea; but I saw he thought I ought to do it, and I couldn't be a slacker after that. I never thought of it for myself, though.'

'But why have you told us now, Gard?' Netta insisted. 'What's changed your mind? Aren't we to tell anybody? Or is it not a secret after all? What's happened?'

'Ven's happened,' Gard said simply. 'I told her all about it, and how I'd tried to arrange things for her, and she won't have it. Won't have secrets at any price. That's all. Of course, it's for her to say. If she's keen for Rita to know she's my cousin, I can't help it.'

'Oh!' The girls looked at one another. 'But does she understand, Gard?'

'Quite. I told her straight.'

'And what did she say?'

'Said it was beastly, and she hated it as much as I did, and it was rotten for Rita and her lot, too. But she wouldn't have anything to do with secrets. Said it would be sneaky, and going under false pretences, and she'd hate it.'

'I think I'm beginning to like her,' Meg announced.

'I began quite soon myself; far sooner than I'd expected to,' Gard agreed.

'I guess she's a sport!' Netta said warmly. 'Don't you wonder how she'll get on at the Castle?'

'She'll be jolly good for the Castle!' Nancy said darkly.

'I'm dying to know what will happen on Monday!' Gard confessed. 'But we've got to wait. D'you still object to her coming along to-morrow? She'll never give us away; she's far too sporting.'

'Oh no, bring her, do, and we'll get to know her!' Netta and Meg spoke together.

'But if she's going to the Castle, she'd be far better not to make friends with our crowd, Gard,' Winifred objected. 'For her own sake, of course, I mean.'

'I'll point that out to her when I invite her, but I don't suppose it will make a scrap of difference. If she wants to come, she'll come, and not care what Rita Tompkins says about it. Oh, I remember! She asked when I'd take her along to meet my crowd, and said if the Castle lot objected to her having friends among us, they'd get some shocks, that was all.'

There was an appreciative giggle from the crowd. The thought of this stranger appearing suddenly, prepared to defy Rita and flout all public opinion in the rival school, was very fascinating.

‘She’ll come, if she wants to; unless she thinks the rest of you don’t want her,’ Gard explained. ‘I’m not sure that even that would stop her. I feel as if she’d say that was all rot, and come all the same. She’s not conceited a scrap, but she is used to making friends wherever she goes. She just fitted in at home at once, and gets on awfully well with the boys;’ and she laughed, and told the story of the pillow in the gym. tunic.

‘She’s a jolly decent sort, too,’ she added. ‘I’ll tell you what happened this morning. She decided to go off and explore The Stretch on her own. Oh, I couldn’t stop her!’ Gard exclaimed at a murmur of protest from Edith and Agatha. ‘It’s a free country, and the beach is free. She had to go somewhere, and it was sure to be somewhere by the sea; she’s crazy for it, and won’t look at the town or the Downs at present. If I’d tried to put her off going to The Stretch, she’d have guessed there was something up. She wants to go again to-morrow, with me to show her things.’

‘I guess we’ll do it!’ Netta laughed mysteriously.

‘If we can. We can’t be sure. We may not have luck again. But about this morning. Greg heard she was going along the shore, and he teased and begged till she said she’d take him along. Well, you know what that means. She won’t get far. She may never get as far as the bungalows. He’ll get tired, and keep her back, and be in the way all day. I warned her, but she said she’d love to have him. She’s never had a kid at home, and she’s fearfully gone on him. I’m keen to know if she does see anything queer, of course. She’ll tell me to-night.’

‘And you’ll tell us to-morrow?’

‘Of course. Come in good time. No, I’m not going near the shops to-day!’ she said in response to an invitation from Netta and Meg. ‘I don’t want to scrap with Rita just at present. I’m going to leave Ven a clear field now, and not make things any worse than they are already.’

CHAPTER VIII. THE FIRE-GIRL.

Racing home across the sands at tea-time, Gard met Ven near the big breakwater; on it, in fact, for Ven was astride a post, waiting for her. The tide had left big pools in the hollows under the groyne, and Ven had had to crawl along the beams, slippery with green seaweed and mussels, to reach her position on the final post, water all around her.

As Gard came flying up to her, she waved her cap and began a cautious retreat backwards, till she reached a place from which she could jump safely. She cleared the pool with a wide leap, and landed at Gard's side. 'I came to meet you, old thing! I meant to come all the way, but those posts were too fascinating. There are topping rocks up by the wall, too. I simply had to explore.'

'You've been falling into pools!' Gard remarked. 'I suppose your feet are wet? Mine are, most days; they're used to it. You won't catch cold, will you?'

'I hope not. They're dry now. I chased sea-gulls; it's a very drying job!'

'I hope you caught a lot?' Gard mocked.

'I did not. They didn't seem to like me, somehow. We got back early from The Stretch. Greg got tired, and I was afraid to take him too far, or to leave him too long while I went on alone. He was awfully good, and stayed decorating a castle with stones; I'd built it for him. But it didn't seem fair to leave him too long.'

'Greg will have had a heavenly time if you've been building castles for him! Well, did you find anything along The Stretch?' Gard's eyes were on her curiously, though she tried to speak without betraying her anxiety.

Ven's answer was grave. 'Yes; I found a girl.'

'Oh! *Did* you?' Gard whirled round on her. 'It didn't take you long!'

'What do you mean? Do you know her?' Ven asked quickly. 'I didn't speak to her. I thought I'd ask you first if you'd ever seen her, and what you thought of her.'

Gard caught her arm and drew her into a corner by the groyne. 'I say, Ven, don't talk about her before the boys, there's a dear! They don't know anything about her. Did Greg see her?'

'No; he was down at his castle. Of course I won't, Gard! But do tell me more! Tell me about her!'

'What did you think of her?' Gard sat on a black beam swinging her legs. 'What was she like, by the way? I suppose it is the same girl—our girl? There's a queer girl out there on the shingle banks; I and the crowd from school have seen her. What was your girl like?'

'Thin and tall, with black hair in two plaits, worn down here'—Ven touched her breast and shoulders—'not down the back, like yours and mine. She was all alone, in a big, sandy, yellow hollow beside the path—'

'Had she got a fire?' Gard interrupted. 'And was she talking to it? She makes fires, and says things to them—recites verses, and sings. The girls and I wonder if she's a little—well, funny, you know.'

'I wondered too,' Ven admitted. 'When I first peeped over into the hollow—for I'd seen a curl of smoke—she was coming down a tiny path, and her arms were full of bits of wood that she'd been gathering for the fire.'

'Was she dressed up?' Gard asked eagerly. 'In a long yellow robe, with fringe, and beads?'

With widening eyes, Ven stared at her for a moment. Then Gard thought she, too, had gone mad, for she sprang up, tossing her cap into the air, with a shout of joy. 'Camp Fire! Camp Fire! Now I know! I couldn't think what she reminded me of! That's it, of course! No, Gard,

she's not crazy! She's all right! Oh, but what a queer thing! What a gorgeous, impossible, unlikely thing to happen!

'If you'd just tell me what you mean, and stop going on like a lunatic!' Gard began, in exasperation.

'Oh, I'll tell you! I will. But I've wanted this for such ages! And to come here, and find it out there on those shingle banks! I wonder how much the Fire-Girl knows? Everything, I suppose. But she's Camp Fire right enough. Her hair done like that—and she had the band of beads across her forehead, and a chain round her neck! Oh yes, she's all right!'

'She's always making fires; that's almost all we know about her. We call her the Fire-Girl, too. We saw the beads round her head,' Gard remarked; 'red, and silver, and gold, and green.'

'But did you say she had a yellow gown with fringe? She was wearing a short brown skirt to-day, and a loose jumper of tussore silk, with a big brown tie,' Ven said doubtfully. 'If she'd had on a yellow gown, I'd have thought of Camp Fire at once, I'm sure. And, of course, if she is Camp Fire, she ought to have a silver ring on her left hand; they all do. But I was too far off to see it, I suppose. I never noticed any ring.'

'What *is* Camp Fire?' Gard pleaded.

'Oh, don't you know? Haven't you come across it in books? I've read two books about it; girls' stories, you know. It's a—a thing for girls to belong to! They all have gowns, like the one you saw, and rings, and they sit round fires or candles, and they wear beads, and have to work to win them. I don't know much more than that,' Ven confessed. 'I've never heard anything about it except in those story-books. I hardly believed it was a real thing. I *never* expected to see a real Camp Fire Girl!'

Gard, with a wriggle of complete enjoyment, forgot tea, the boys, her grandmother, homework, and everything. 'Tell me more, Ven! What did the Fire-Girl do to-day? I wonder why she hadn't got the gown on? You say she had the bead-thing round her head. Did she kneel down by the fire and recite things to it? And did she sing, and do queer actions, holding out her arms to the fire, and twiddling her fingers in the sand, and then flinging her arms out as if she were inviting somebody to come? Did she do all that?'

'Help, no!' said Ven, greatly interested. 'That must have been quite a pantomime! I wish she had! Oh, she was quite quiet to-day, compared with that! At first, at least,' and she began to laugh. 'I did wonder if she'd gone off afterwards. But when did you see her doing all those antics, Gard? Did she know you were there?'

'Rather not. We were lying in the bushes. She never knew. We'd been having tea in a little cave-place we'd found under the bank. The bushes are so thick in front that no one would dream anybody was there. But you can look through, right down into that hollow where you saw the Fire-Girl. We saw her come along the path, carrying whole bushes of dry wood, and dump it down on the sand; and then we saw that she was all dressed up, and, of course, we were fearfully thrilled. We lay like mice, and watched while she lit the fire, and said verses to it, and sang, and did funny things with her arms; and Agatha thought she was quite dotty; but Netta and Winifred and I thought there must be something in it. Meg was sure it all meant something.'

'From all I've read, every bit of it means something. You didn't go down and ask her?'

'We didn't like. She was so much bigger than any of us; I'm sure she's as old as Christopher. She sat down beside the fire and seemed to go to sleep; and it was getting dark, so we crawled away, and didn't disturb her. That was last Saturday, and we've been talking about her ever since. But we haven't said a word to anybody about her. We felt somehow'—Gard hesitated for the right words—'as if we'd been watching something we weren't meant to see, and we oughtn't to talk about it.'

'I'm sure you were. You weren't meant to see it, of course. But she risked that when she did it out-of-doors.'

'It's awfully lonely on The Stretch. Hardly anybody goes there, except in summer, and it isn't summer yet. What did she do to-day, Ven? Just light the fire and sit beside it?'

Ven laughed. 'I thought she was a little queer in the head, too. But if the one part's all right—the fire part—perhaps the rest is as well. She piled the wood on her fire; it was a very little one; and then she climbed up out of the hollow and looked both ways, all along the banks and the sands; the tide had just gone down. I tell you, I shrank right out of sight among the bushes, till I felt about the size of a baby crab. I wanted to see what she'd do. There wasn't a soul in sight but Greg, and he was half a mile away, and busy with his castle; he only looked a spot on the sands. She ran down the shingle—she'd got on plimsolls, I noticed—and ran out on the hard sand. I could see everything she did. And then I did wonder if she was quite all right, for she began to dance. I don't mean just jumping and jigging about; she knew what she was doing. But it wasn't like anything I'd ever seen before.'

'What was it like?' Gard asked, enthralled.

'A funny step, with now and then a high jump, and sometimes with bent knees; rather a queer kind of dancing for a girl. And she used her arms all the time. She had a big white handkerchief in each hand, and she waved them this way;' and Ven stood and gave a very good imitation of the Bampton arm-movement. 'It looked to me like a girl sowing seed, or feeding hens. She ran along the sands doing it. And then she pulled her hands apart and jumped, like this!' and she did her best to demonstrate the 'gargoyle' position. 'Then she went round in a big circle, jumping all the time. I couldn't possibly show you that!'

'I wish I'd seen her!' Gard groaned. 'She didn't do anything as exciting as that last week! What do you suppose it was? A jig of some kind?'

'I thought, perhaps, it was an Indian war-dance,' Ven suggested. 'The Camp Fire has heaps of Indian ideas in it. It would be just like them to do Indian dances.'

'And didn't she see you watching her? What did she do after the dance?'

'Went flying off along the sands, ever so far; much farther than I could go while I'd got Greg on my hands. So I brought him home, and thought I'd ask you if you knew the Fire-Girl, and if we could go back again to-morrow.'

'We're going!' Gard sprang up, drawing a long breath of anticipation. 'Come on home to tea! I'll tell you all about our Saturday stunt. But don't tell the boys about the Fire-Girl, Ven! They'll be out at a match to-morrow, anyway. After we'd watched her last week, we all promised faithfully we wouldn't tell a soul. We don't want people following us along The Stretch.'

'Do you go there often?' Ven asked curiously.

'Every Saturday; just a few of us juniors. It's a surprise we're getting ready for Christopher,' Gard explained importantly.

'Chris—oh yes, I remember; your Senior Captain. But what's the surprise, Gard?'

'Cricket. She's frightfully keen on the school team doing well this summer. We have a mixed team, seniors and juniors; there aren't enough seniors to make one alone. Christopher coaches us when she has time. She was such a sport about it last summer that we thought it was up to us to back her up, so we decided to have extra practices on Saturdays without telling her, and then surprise her by the wonderful improvement in our play—at least, we hope it will work out that way.'

'So you go along the sands to practise where you won't be seen?' Ven asked with interest.

'Away along The Stretch. We have a picnic every Saturday, and work like niggers at our bowling. Sometimes it has to be in the morning, and sometimes in the afternoon, according to the tide; we can only play when the sands are bare. We've been going for several weeks now,

but we never saw the Fire-Girl till last week. The practice bit of the picnic is really important, you know. We simply must beat the Castle team this year.'

'Oh, they condescend to play you, do they? I thought perhaps they didn't.'

'They can't get out of it. It's been played for years now. Once upon a time the schools were quite good friends. There's really no *need* for us to be deadly enemies, I suppose,' Gard admitted grudgingly. 'There's room for both. And, of course, Miss Hedges and Miss Duke aren't enemies; it's only the girls, and chiefly the juniors.'

'And most of all Gard Svenssen and Rita Somebody-or-other!' Ven remarked shrewdly. 'Isn't that about it?'

'Rita's a pig!' Gard said briefly. 'And the rest back us up. They all feel as we do. We only happen to be—well, I'm the captain. Rita isn't anything; but the rest all copy her.'

'You ought both to be put on the end of the pier and left there till you make up your minds to be sensible. Who won the match last year?'

'We did, and it was a fearful shock to them. They've got a good playing-field and a games'-mistress to coach them; we play in the gardens or on the sands, with only Christopher to boss; but she's jolly good. They were mad at having to play. I believe the girls wanted the match scratched, but they couldn't quite work that. They had to play, and they were sulky, and they didn't put their backs into it. We played for all we were worth, and, of course, we won. So this year they're sure to buck up and try to get their own back; and we simply can't let them beat us!'

'You ought to win if you're working so hard.'

'Oh, but we've lost our two best men! They left and went to the High, and it leaves us in an awful hole. We could always depend on Kitty's bowling; and Alice had brilliant days when she almost made centuries, and, of course, the Castle match was one of them. Those two simply carried us through. It's frightfully hard lines to have to fill both their places.'

'Haven't the Castle girls lost some too?'

'Nobody who mattered a scrap,' Gard said disgustedly. 'I say, Ven, what about you? If you'd play for us, it would be ripping!' she began eagerly. 'It's an all-ages team, you know; not only juniors. Christopher plays for us; she's older than you. You're not too big. I'm sure you do play, don't you?'

'A bit,' Ven admitted. 'But, my dear kid, it seems to me I shall have to play for the Castle.'

'Ven!' Gard stood and gazed at her in horror. 'Ven, you couldn't! You wouldn't do anything so awful!'

'I don't know that I'll be able to help it. If the Castle is my school, and if they ask me to play, what can I do, Gard?'

'Oh, but what a rotten idea!' Gard wailed. 'Ven, you must say you don't play, that's all! Say you've been forbidden by the doctor!'

Ven shook her head. 'That wouldn't be playing the game. I don't know yet what I'll do, but it won't be that. But I don't want to play against you, Gard. They may not ask me to play. They'll have their own team; they won't want to put any one out for a new girl. I hope they won't ask me. If they do, it will need some thinking over.'

'It will be simply beastly if you have to play against us; and absolutely hopeless for us!' Gard groaned. 'I'd never thought of anything so awful!'

'I can't play *for* you against the Castle, that's certain!' Ven said conclusively. 'But I won't play *for* them either if I can help it. After all, I shall be in a very peculiar position,' she added with a touch of importance in her tone. 'They'll see that. Perhaps they won't ask me to play in matches.'

'Oh, they'll see it right enough!' said Gard; and marvelled at the attitude which made Ven evidently expect to be received as a friend in the rival school, while not concealing her

connection with the despised Haven.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRE-GIRL'S VISITORS.

Netta and Nancy, brown-haired twins; Meg, small and dark and sharp-featured; Agatha, pretty and fair, but a trifle sentimental; Winifred, red-haired and practical; Edith, tall and thin and quiet—Ven's eyes looked them all over in a quick critical glance as they stood round the gate waiting for Gard. Then, since Gard was still trying to pacify Greg, who wanted to go to the picnic too, she went out to introduce herself.

'I'm the queer person who's going to the Castle when she'd very much rather go to the Haven. I'm Gard's cousin, Ven Morris. Suppose you tell me your names. I've heard heaps about you all, but I don't know you apart yet.'

Their eyes were devouring her, too, with eager interest and delight. Two or three years older than any of them, she was just at the stage to win their admiration, if not even hero-worship; and, tall and straight and very good to look at, she was worthy of it.

'We'd have known you were Garda's cousin.' Agatha's eyes were on her yearningly. 'You're awfully like her!'

'It's a good thing she told us!' Winifred laughed.

'Come on, children, we're wasting time!' and Gard came whirling out. 'We ought to have started before dinner, really. The tide's off the shingle already, and we've all that way to go before we can begin the practice. I say, all of you,' as they went down the lane, 'Ven saw the Fire-Girl yesterday!'

'You lucky thing!' said Meg. 'It didn't take you long!'

'Your first visit! And what was she doing?'

'Making a fire,' Ven said solemnly.

'And then she danced, down on the sand!' Gard said eagerly. 'All by herself, jumping, and waving handkerchiefs! Do you think perhaps she is a little bit funny after all, Netta?'

'It was a proper dance,' Ven remarked. 'She kept time; I could see that. And she knew what came next. She wasn't making it up as she went along. But I'd never seen anything like it before. I don't think she's really soft in the head, Gard. It may be a regular part of Camp Fire, like the song with actions that you saw last week. We know so little about it.'

'Ven says she makes fires, and wears beads, and does her hair like that, because she belongs to something called a Camp Fire; a kind of club or society for girls,' Gard explained eagerly. 'She's read about it in books. Have any of you? I hadn't.'

Nobody had, however. So Ven, who always enjoyed an appreciative audience, and certainly had one now, launched out on the subject of 'Camp Fires,' and told all she had gleaned from the books she had read. 'They were only stories, though,' she added. 'I don't know very much. I've always wanted to hear more, but I didn't know any one to ask. I'm going to ask this girl. It's a gorgeous chance! I never dreamt of such luck!'

'Perhaps we'll see her again to-day,' Nancy said longingly.

'If we do, nothing will stop me. If I see she has a silver ring on, I shall simply dash at her and begin asking questions. I say, what are you going to play with? You've only got a ball among you. Hasn't anybody brought a bat?'

'Our bats and stumps are over there,' and Meg nodded towards the distant Stretch. 'An old man takes care of them for us.'

'We couldn't possibly go along the shore every Saturday carrying cricket things!' Winifred laughed. 'The Castle crowd would soon know all about it.'

'To say nothing of Christopher,' Gard added.

'I didn't think of that,' Ven admitted.

They went a very long way along the shore before Gard agreed that they had gone far enough to be out of reach of casual stragglers from town. The tide was still very low, leaving a long stretch of firm dry sand, perfect for cricket or hockey. While the rest sat on the shingle, Gard and Netta went to fetch the stumps and bats from the old fisherman who had promised to keep them in a corner; and Ven, curious to see all she could, followed them up the shingle bank and stood looking round.

'What funny houses! *Are* they houses? Why, they're railway-carriages!' she cried.

'Yes, the bungalows.' Nancy and Winifred had followed her. 'They're mostly made out of old huts or railway-carriages. I suppose they do look funny if you aren't used to them.'

Dotted here and there about the shingle, which here reached inland in a wide level sweep, were low, rambling bungalows, many of them raised on posts driven into the beach, and approached by flights of steps. Many, as Ven had seen, were merely old railway-carriages or tram-cars; some were single cars; others, more ambitious, were built of two or three, or had shed-like additions tacked on. Some had outhouses; some had upturned boats lying beside them; some had little gardens, with the shingle fenced off from a carefully guarded patch of soil.

'What kind of people live here? Fishermen?' Ven asked curiously.

'Oh no, proper people!' was Nancy's rather ambiguous answer.

'Anybody, Ven. People let them to visitors for the summer. You do your shopping in the village, up that lane,' Winifred explained. 'Farther along the coast there's a whole town of railway-carriages, called Bungalow Town, with a station, and shops, and everything. Some of the people live here all the year round, but it must be awfully cold in winter.'

'Does the Fire-Girl live in one of them?'

'I suppose so.' Nancy gave her a startled look. 'We hadn't thought of that.'

'She can't have come far, if she was all dressed up when you saw her,' Ven remarked. 'I wonder which is hers? I'd like to explore them. They're weird!'

'In Bungalow Town they have proper streets. But these houses are just dumped down anyhow.' Nancy stated an obvious fact.

'Here come Gard and Netta! Cheers! Now we can get on!' and Winifred led the way back to the sand with as much speed as was possible on the shingle.

Ven, politely invited to bat first, declined, and chose rather to field. 'I want to see your style. Perhaps I can give you some hints,' said she, and used her eyes hard for the next half-hour.

At the end she delivered judgment. 'You're all shaping quite well. I've seen much worse play. Nancy, you'll be a decent slow bowler if you keep up your practice. Netta, you run awfully well, but you aren't reliable yet, and your throwing in is rotten. You spoil your fielding. So does Meg; she just chucks the ball anywhere. Edith, you handle your bat well, and you've got good judgment, but you're timid. You needn't be so scared of the ball. Gard, my dear kid, you've got the makings of a jolly swift bowler in you, but your balls aren't straight enough yet. You slog at them and work hard, and you'll be jolly good, and a treasure to your team. Agatha, you've got to pull yourself together, and put some more spunk into it. You could be brilliant, but you're a long way off it yet. You pat the ball; it isn't good enough. And you've all—*all*—got to work like niggers at your fielding. You're slack there. It's very important. Gard, you're inclined to hit up catches; it's dangerous. Watch that! But when she does, you all, every one of you, drop them. I should give a few minutes of every picnic to practising catches, if I were you. It would pay you. Who's your wicket-keeper?'

The girls looked at one another. 'We haven't one,' Gard confessed: 'not a regular one.'

'Oh, but you must! Winifred's the best; she's quick, and she watches. She ought to practise. Do you have practice with the rest?'

'Oh, of course! With Christopher to coach us, you know.'

'Well, Winifred ought to ask if she may keep wicket regularly. I believe she'd do it well.'

'Ven, you're just exactly what we've been needing!' Netta and Nancy spoke together.

'We can't ask Christopher, because we want to give her a surprise,' Meg added. 'But we have been needing somebody to tell us what to do. That's just the way she goes on at us at school. For the same things, too. She's always rowing me because I throw in so badly.'

'Don't blame her,' Ven laughed.

'Won't you play for us in the match, Ven?' Agatha asked eagerly.

At Gard's suggestion, they sat in a big ring on the top of a shingle bank and ate the sandwiches and buns they had brought with them for tea; and over these Ven explained the peculiarity of her position in regard to the Castle match. The rest looked sober when they realised it; and Winifred said anxiously, 'I hope you won't have to play against us, that's all! That would be rather awful!'

'Help! That would be the last straw!' Netta groaned.

'I won't, unless I have to,' Ven promised.

When tea was over, she begged for a little time to explore, before play began again. 'I'm awfully interested in this bungalow village! I didn't get so far yesterday, because of Greg. Couldn't we look round a bit? We might come across the Fire-Girl,' she tempted.

'Well, if we do, you will ask her about it, won't you?' Gard pleaded. 'We didn't like to, but you're older.'

'Oh, I'm not shy! I'll ask questions, and apologise for watching her, all at the same time. Shall we go up and see if she's in that hollow where she makes her fires?'

'I think we'd have seen her going. We can see all over the beach from here,' Winifred remarked.

'We'll look there on our way back. I want Ven to see the Lagoon. There's one other very jolly place here, Ven! You come and see;' and Gard led the crowd up over the shingle bank on whose crest they had been sitting in the wind, and off across the stones and among the bungalows towards the far corner, beyond the lane leading to the village.

'There's an old church in there, and some cottages, and a few houses. But this is the jolliest place!'

The path by the tamarisk hedge had lost itself in the wide shingle bay that overran the fields and met the sandy lane. Beyond the lane it found itself again in a waste of gorse bushes, all ablaze with gold; and the one path became a dozen little winding tracks, sandy and shingly, with prickly furze bushes dividing them like high walls, and wire-grass breaking through here and there.

'It's a perfect maze!' Ven said in delight. 'What topping games you could have here!—smugglers, and highwaymen, and explorers! And isn't the gorse gorgeous? Oh, I say, here's water again, on the wrong side of us! Does the sea come in? It's between us and the village,' and she went plunging forward to a higher hill than the little one from which she had seen a first glint of blue.

The others laughed and followed, and stood beside her on the hillock, their hair blowing wildly in the wind, all gazing at an inland strip of blue water winding among shingly banks, the gorse making sheets of gold almost to its edges.

'It's the Lagoon,' said Gard, as proudly as if she had made it herself. 'We found it weeks ago. Hardly anybody comes here. Isn't it top-hole?'

'But what is it? Is it the sea? It's gorgeous! Look at the colour—the blue, and that yellow!'

'The sea comes in round that big hill— —'

But Ven was off at once to see for herself, and the rest laughed to each other, and followed. 'There won't be any more cricket to-day. We might as well take the stumps back,' Netta remarked. 'She'll never tear herself away till she has to, even for cricket.'

'Well, it's the first time she's seen it. You know how we loved it when it was new,' Winifred reminded her. 'And she has helped us awfully well already.'

Ven's thirst for exploration was not easily satisfied. She wanted to follow out every path and see the Lagoon from every point of view; and, when there really seemed no more of it to see, to visit each bungalow and see how it differed from the rest. 'I know I'm an awful nuisance,' she apologised, 'but it's all so fascinating! Won't you go and practise some more, and I'll come presently when I've been right round? No two of these dinky little houses are alike; I simply must see the lot while I'm here! I'll come down to you on the sands; I can't possibly lose myself, or you. I've only got to go over the shingle till I find the sea, and I'll find you, too.'

They would not have it, however, so they all went in a merry, noisy crowd, crunching over the shingle, to look at bungalow after bungalow, read the name over the door, and criticise the points of each.

Tired at last, they turned back and wandered to the little black-tarred hut where their fisherman friend housed the stumps and bats, and delivered them into his keeping for another week.

'Now we'll show you our cave under the hedge, and have a look for the Fire-Girl,' said Gard; 'and if she isn't there, we'll wander homewards.'

'Let's have a look at these two black bungalows away from all the rest,' Meg suggested. 'It's on our way. I think there are people living in one of them.'

'I'm sure there aren't people in the other; it looks awfully deserted,' said Netta, as they turned towards the bungalows, which stood close to one another, but a long way from all the rest, up near the hedge-path. Both were built, as usual, of railway-carriages, in this case painted black and white; but one was merely a long, single carriage, and seemed to be deserted and badly out of repair, while the other, very newly painted, and with dainty little curtains at all the windows, had side wings made of other carriages reaching towards the sea at both ends, so as to form quite a large house of several rooms.

'Looks quite comfy,' Ven said, with approval.

'I'd rather be nearer the sea, though,' Netta objected. 'Why did they poke it away back here?'

'I think it's quite near enough,' Edith remarked. 'There must be a fearful row at high tide, when the sea's breaking on the shingle. And sometimes it comes up too far, and you hear of the bungalows being swept away.'

'Don't be an idiot, Edith!' Gard laughed. 'It could never get up that bank, whatever kind of storm it was!'

'Still, even the chance would be exciting! Think of lying in bed, waiting to be swept away at high tide!' Ven shivered pleasantly. 'I say, this one is empty! I'm going to look in at the windows.'

'Nothing to see but cobwebs,' Meg announced disappointedly.

'Isn't it high off the ground? I wonder if it gets swampy here in winter? I believe I could crawl underneath!' Nancy cried.

'Don't get stuck. And you'll get filthy dirty,' Winifred began warningly.

But Ven, with a laughing, 'I'm game! I'll race you across to the other side, Nancy!' was down on her hands and knees, plunging into the dim recess under the empty bungalow. 'I say, there's heaps of room! Come on, all of you, and let's have a secret meeting!' she proclaimed.

'I'm sure I don't know what it's to be about, nor why it should be secret; but this hole is just made for secret meetings!'

'Smugglers!' Netta laughed. 'There's quite a dip here in the middle. I'm sure no one outside could see us.'

'Eight of us under one house!' Agatha giggled. 'What's the matter, captain?'

'People coming out of the next house. Lie low, all of you! They'll never notice us.'

Gard had been the last to squeeze under the bungalow, and her ears had caught a sound from its neighbour, a few yards farther along the beach. 'As still as sardines in a tin,' as Ven said afterwards, the eight girls lay and watched, while the door in the back of the big bungalow opened, and four people—four girls—came down the flight of wooden steps.

At the first they merely looked with interest. She was tall, bare-headed, with dark hair, wearing a knitted jumper and a short skirt; she was grown-up, but not much more, and, but for her height, the girls would hardly have realised she was much older than Ven, for her black hair was bobbed and wavy, and took years off her age instead of adding to it. She carried a violin in her left hand, and turned to give the other to the girls who followed her down the steps.

At sight of the second girl all the eight under the bungalow gave one gasp of satisfied delight, for she was not only obviously the younger sister of the first-comer, but was as certainly their Fire-Girl, though she carried no wood and made no fires to-day. She wore no beads or headband either, nor yet the American 'middy' blouse in which Ven had seen her, but a jumper like her sister's; and her long black hair was plaited in two, as before, but now was thrown back and hung down behind, in more usual style.

She was followed by two younger girls; and at sight of them, seven out of the eight watchers broke into groans of incredulous dismay.

Ven stared at them in amazement. 'What's the matter? You haven't all been taken ill suddenly, have you? Gard, what is it? What's wrong?'

'Rita, by all that's horrible!' Gard groaned. 'Rita Tompkins and Moll Sanderson! With *our* Fire-Girl! Oh, it's too ghastly for words!'

'But how can they know her?' Netta raged. 'How did they get to know her, that's what I want to know?'

'And what do they mean by it? They haven't any business to be hanging round her.'

'Oh, Meg,' Ven laughed, 'you know you're dying to know her yourself!'

'We're done for now, though!' Nancy moaned. 'If she's a friend of theirs, we sha'n't get a look in.'

'They've evidently been to tea with her. Oh, isn't it rotten?' Agatha almost wept with disappointment.

'I say, Ven,' Netta cried in an accusing whisper, 'she hasn't got any silver ring! I can see her left hand quite plainly!'

All the rest turned reproachful eyes on Ven; for the Fire-Girl's left hand was certainly bare, though she carried something white in her right.

'I can't help it,' Ven said doggedly. 'She ought to have a ring. Perhaps she only wears it when she's making fires. Camp Fire Girls have silver rings on the little finger of their left hands; the books all say so.'

'What are they going to do?' Gard whispered, breathing hard in her excitement. 'Oh, look, girls, the big one's going to play! Oh, are we going to see her dance, as Ven did yesterday?'

Tense with excitement, they waited. The Fire-Girl and her sister and the two school-girls had gone through a gap in the tamarisk hedge; beyond was a wide ploughed field, with no one anywhere in sight. There was a hard-trodden space, a widening of the path, before the loose soil began, however; and here the elder girl stood and tuned her violin, resting it on her knee.

Rita and Moll dropped on the bank below the hedge, an interested audience of two; and from below the bungalow, able to see, but unnoticed by any one, a still more thrilled audience of eight lay and watched every movement.

The Fire-Girl's face was tense and rather stern—cross, said Meg afterwards—as she shook out the handkerchiefs she carried, and stood with one hanging from each hand, gripping them firmly, her eyes on her sister.

‘What is it to be, Barbara?’ asked the bobbed-hair girl. ‘“Princess Royal”?’

‘No; there isn't room. Bledington “Lumps of Plum-Pudding,” Audrey. It's all on one spot.’

As the music began, the Fire-Girl's set expression relaxed; it seemed as if she had forgotten whatever had been annoying her. Her eyes, fixed on the distant Downs, had a far-away look, and she quivered in sympathy with the music as she waited while the air was played through. As it ended, she began a strange, backwards, shuffling step on the last few beats, her hands held wide; and then, with raised hands describing circles before her face, she was into the queer, brisk, hopping step Ven had seen the day before.

‘That's what she did yesterday,’ Ven whispered eagerly. ‘But she didn't hold her hands up there. They were just swinging, lower down. It's a different dance. I couldn't twist my left hand round like that. It simply wouldn't do it!’

‘Her name's Barbara,’ Meg murmured. ‘We needn't call her the Fire-Girl any longer.’

‘She doesn't look so cross now. I wonder if she didn't want to dance to Rita and Moll?’

‘Don't blame her!’ Gard growled.

‘Oh, I say, look! How weird!’ Winifred cried softly, at sight of another curious step, when the dancing girl leaned suddenly forward with one knee bent and outstretched hands for balance, then sprang upright, her arms thrown high above her head in response to slower, emphatic notes from the violin. Interspersed with these slower movements were the shuffling steps again; then came the circles, sometimes only with one hand raised to one side, and with quick foot-movements and an occasional high, light spring; and then an astonished murmur ran round under the bungalow, and Rita and Moll broke out into delighted applause, as the Fire-Girl, responding to the slower music again, leapt upright, her body very straight, her knees dividing in a quick kick, one foot forward, the other doubled up backwards; and, landing neatly on both feet, repeated the movement three times more, her arms flung straight up as she sprang, before ending with the quieter refrain of the backward shuffles again. Then, in a moment, the dance was over, with four high leaps from foot to foot, and big, energetic circles of the strong little hands low down at waist level.

She paused, breathing a little more quickly, and the frown came over her face again as, for the first time, she seemed to hear the clapping from the audience below the hedge.

‘She was miles away while she did it,’ Ven murmured. ‘She only wakened up at the end. Rita and Moll simply didn't exist. Fancy being lost in music like that!’

‘She doesn't look very loving towards them!’ Meg whispered. ‘I wonder why she did it, if she didn't want to!’

‘Perhaps the other one—Audrey, was it?—wanted her to,’ Winifred remarked. ‘I wish we could clap too!’

‘I simply loved it!’ Netta sighed. ‘I wish she'd do another.’

‘She's going to,’ Gard said shortly. ‘She's talking to her sister about it.’

‘Gard's fearfully upset because the Fire-Girl knows her deadly enemies,’ Ven said, glancing at her cousin. ‘She can't get over it. Cheer up, old thing! It is rotten luck, when you thought she was your discovery. But there's no reason she shouldn't know you too. She doesn't look frightfully pleased with your Rita and Moll, I must say. Perhaps she'll like you better. Or perhaps she doesn't want to have friends.’

Barbara had been speaking to her sister. Now she threw down the big handkerchiefs which had been in her hands throughout the first dance, and turned to the girls under the hedge. 'I'll do you one from Field Town,' she said shortly. 'The first was a Bledington dance. You'll see the difference. This one is called "None-so-Pretty," but it's to the old "Constant Billy" tune.'

'The dances of each village are different,' Audrey explained, as she raised her fiddle again. 'Barbara knows them all, and all the points of each. I get them all mixed up. It's rather fascinating to discover the peculiar points of each tradition—each village. What were the special things about that last one, Barbara?'

'Counter-twists,' Barbara said briefly, and demonstrated with her hands. 'That's an ordinary circle; all through that last jig they were reversed, backwards; this way.'

Under the bungalow Ven and Netta and Winifred were trying to do 'counter-twists' with their left hands in extremely limited space, and failing ignominiously. 'It's harder than it looks,' Ven murmured. 'Needs practice, I suppose!'

'In this new one it's the hop-back step,' said Barbara shortly. 'Not the clapping! Other villages have that too, or almost the same. But this is the special Field Town step,' and she hopped backwards, giving her free foot a dexterous little twist in front of the hopping one, her empty hands again swinging wide for balance.

'Pretty,' Nancy commented; 'but not as easy as it looks, I guess!'

'Of course the capers are always different in every tradition. The capers are the slow, high steps,' Barbara explained briefly. 'You'll see these are quite different from the Bledington capers. I'm ready, Audrey!'

'Oh, how funny! How weird!' and a laugh went round under the bungalow.

For the dancer, after some introductory bars, with hopping feet and loosely swinging arms, was standing, bending slightly forward, towards her audience, and, in time with the music, was alternately and very dexterously clapping her hands and touching her right cheek, her left, her breasts, and then, to the delighted laughter of the onlookers, clapping her hands below her knees alternately, and then before and behind her back; the movements were very quick and neat, the little hands flashing from one position to the next; then she was hopping and swinging her arms again, and finishing with a wonderful step, which made them all gasp—a spring on to one foot and quick, high circles with the other, which turned her body completely round to face them again. Then came the slow capers, with their precise foot-movements and sudden straightening into the upright position, with high-flung arms—the same, in principle, as what she had done in the earlier dance, but utterly different in the way they were done; the clapping all repeated; more capers, with a strange, forward leap with both feet close together; and more of the swift clapping, with that strange, high step to finish.

'Oh, I like that! It *is* pretty! What did she call it? I heard something about Field Town. It doesn't sound Indian, by the way!' Ven found it hard to whisper in her excitement.

'"None-so-Pretty," she said. Sounds extremely English. They're going in again. We'd better slip away as soon as they're out of sight,' Netta said cautiously. 'If we ever get a chance of making friends with her, it might not help matters if she knew we'd been watching on the quiet.'

'I don't think it would matter. She knew she'd got an audience. Oh, we'll make friends all right!' Ven said confidently, as they crept out of their shelter as soon as the bungalow door had closed on the four girls. 'But not to-day. It's not exactly a suitable occasion. I said if I saw her nothing would stop me speaking to her and asking questions. But I guess your Rita and Moll are having their innings to-day. Our turn will come!' she added dramatically.

'I hope so,' Meg said, rather doubtfully.

'I don't know how they've managed it. It's simply beastly of them!' Gard said gloomily.

‘Oh, don’t be so grumpy, old thing! We haven’t done so badly to-day, though we haven’t spoken to her,’ Ven said cheerily. ‘We’ve found out her name, and where she lives, and that she’s got a sister, and that she has friends in the town, and you’ve all seen her dance. It’s quite a good beginning!’

‘And we saw that she hasn’t got a Camp Fire ring!’ Winifred suggested wickedly.

‘Er—yes. It’s most disappointing of her. She ought to have a ring. But perhaps she didn’t want those two to see it. Perhaps they don’t know that she makes fires. She may want that to be a secret,’ Ven said hopefully.

‘Perhaps we know more than Rita does, after all,’ Netta chuckled. ‘We’ve seen her in her yellow gown and beads, singing to the fire, anyway!’

‘All the same, it’s rotten to see Rita and Moll with her!’ Gard was inconsolable.

‘Oh, I don’t know!’ Ven was an incurable optimist. ‘It may be rather a good thing. Don’t you see, old chap? I’m going to the Castle on Monday. I shall make a point of getting friendly with Rita, and finding out all she knows about the Fire-Girl—about Barbara. I shan’t refer to her as the Fire-Girl; at least, I’ll try not to. I sha’n’t tell her anything we know, of course; but I shall get all she knows out of her, you can be sure of that.’

‘There’s something in that,’ Netta acknowledged. ‘It’s a good thing you’ve come, Ven. *We* couldn’t get anything out of Rita; but you may be able to.’

‘I shall have a good try at it, anyhow. I think I shall manage it, too,’ Ven said complacently.

‘I shouldn’t wonder if you did!’ Meg said admiringly.

CHAPTER X. IN THE SENIOR ROOM.

'Good luck!' called Auntie, as he mounted his cycle and set off up the lane after Turkey on Monday morning.

Ven nodded soberly; she knew what he meant.

'Come on,' said Gard; 'we can just get through by the shore. The tide won't be quite up to the big groyne yet. To-morrow will be better. We'll have to come home by the back way most of this week, I'm afraid.'

Sunday afternoon had shown Ven that the boys were at one with Gard in their love for The Stretch. It did not occur to any one of the family to turn in any other direction for a walk; the tide had been high, so they had gone by the path under the tamarisk hedge, returning later by the sands. They had seen nothing of the Fire-Girl, and she had not been mentioned. For a while they had sat in a row on the shingle, facing the sea and wind, bare-headed all, in strong sunshine, and Svante had told a story of an old-time ship, a missionary who had come ashore on a shingle beach, a horde of wild, naked men, stained blue, brandishing weapons, and yelling and dancing among the sandhills; and then had announced dramatically to Ven that she was sitting on the very spot, as nearly as any one could tell, where it had all happened thirteen hundred years ago or more. The story of Wilfrid was new to Ven, and she had been properly thrilled and impressed by this personal contact with bygone days.

'Auntie hopes I'll get on well with your funny Rita crowd,' Ven said gravely, as they crossed the shingle on Monday morning. 'It's decent of him to care. I hope I shall.'

'We'll have to run if we're to get past that groyne without getting wet, and they don't like us getting to school with wet feet,' Gard remarked, and conversation was interrupted while they raced down the rapidly diminishing stretch of sand to a point where the groyne was climbable.

Gard went up like a squirrel, books flung over first, and turned on the top to give advice as to the best places for hands and feet. But Ven, with a laugh, was already up beside her, and needed no help.

'Do your books ever go in a pool when you sling them over like that? Isn't it a bit risky?'

'I chuck them a long way. They're all right. There's always a pool on the other side.'

'I know; I've discovered that. Jolly big one here! Can you clear it?'

'Rather!' and Gard launched herself forward, and landed safely on the sand.

Ven followed, with a wide jump, and sprang up. 'I'm dry! Are you? Right-o! Now we're safe, aren't we? What a topping way to go to school!'

'We can generally either go or come home this way, but not both. The tide's a bother.'

'Oh, but I love it when it gets to the shingle! It would be awfully tame if it were only sand all the time.'

'There's one thing about you going to the Castle,' Gard said abruptly; 'we'll hear things about it that we can believe. We've heard stacks of stuff, but we don't know how much of it is true. You'll be able to tell us all their funny little ways.' She glanced at her cousin, a trifle doubtfully.

'H'm! I suppose so,' Ven said slowly, and walked in silence for several minutes, frowning in troubled thought.

'I say, Gard, old thing, that won't do!' she burst out at last. 'I'm sorry. I can just imagine how you'd love to pump me about the Castle, and how you, and Netta, and Winifred, and Meg, and all the rest of the crowd, would get together and giggle if the things I told you

happened to strike you as funny. And when you next met Rita, you'd fling them back at her; and then where should I be? It can't be done, old chap! You must see that. I'm sorry to be disappointing, and all that, but if I go to the Castle, I've got to do the decent thing by it. It will be my school; I can't come home and give it away to you—especially as you're deadly enemies.'

'But you must talk to me when you come home!' Gard remonstrated. 'I'll want to know how you get on!'

'Talk! Yes, of course I'll talk! I always do, anyway. That's all right. But you said "all their funny little ways." Don't you see, if anything strikes me as funny, that's the very thing I mustn't tell you? If I come home and make fun of my school with you, what kind of an object shall I be? And how all the rest would hate me—though that isn't what really matters. But they would. And you'd hate me if I told Rita funny little things about your school. Perhaps she'll try to pump me. Wouldn't you hate me, Gard?'

'You couldn't do it.' Gard was looking unhappy. 'You couldn't give us away to Rita!'

'Of course I couldn't! But I couldn't do the other, either. It's just the same thing. Don't be an idiot, Gard dear! It's simply hateful having to go to a different school from yours, and I loathe it; but as I've no way of getting out of it, I've got to be loyal to the school I go to. I'll tell you a lot about it; but if there's anything you'd particularly like to hear, so that you could spread it round the Haven, of course that will be the one thing I'll have to keep dark. I sha'n't want to, of course; I shall hate it! I'll want to come straight home and tell you every single thing. But it won't do. I can't have the rest thinking I'm a sneak and a spy and a tell-tale. It's going to be bad enough without that.'

'They will think it,' Gard said gloomily. 'I don't know how you're going to stop them.'

'Do you expect me to tell all your private affairs to Rita?' Ven demanded.

'No, of course not. I know you won't. But, then, I know it wouldn't be like you.'

'That's just it. They've got to get to know me, and then they won't think anything so mad. And I intend to make friends with Rita, you know. At first I thought I wouldn't bother about her particularly, but just do my best to fit in all round. But after Saturday, I've got to find out how she comes to know the Fire-Girl, and how much she knows about her, for no one else can tell me. And we've got to get to know Barbara, too. Rita's going to help me, or I'll know the reason why.'

'She won't help you if she knows it will be helping me too. Ven, it's an awful pity you won't keep quiet about the cousin part of you!'

'Can't be done! I don't think it's a pity,' Ven said stoutly. 'If all's clear and open, I can go ahead. I'd feel I couldn't get anywhere with—with a secret shadowing my steps! And it would be sure to come out; and then, where should I be? No fear! I'll do the straight thing, whether it's owning up to being your relation or keeping quiet about school secrets, however difficult it makes things. I can quite see it complicates matters. But anything else wouldn't be playing the game, and I've no use for it.'

'Well,' Gard paused as they reached the shingle again, 'good luck from me too! I hope you'll have a jolly day! This is the Haven, this funny, long, low house just above the beach. Sure you can find your way to your Castle? I've told you as well as I can, but I'll come with you if you like.'

'No, I'll find it all right, thanks! I'd better run. Miss Duke's expecting to interview me before school.'

'Good luck, you queer thing!' said Gard again, and sighed as she turned to her own school. 'If only she could have come with me! What a nuisance grown-up people are, chipping in where they don't understand!'

Ven ran her fastest up the street. 'Better get it over! I'll confess I'm not looking forward to this particular morning! But I've a few minutes yet before the worst happens. I don't suppose the Head will rag me because I'm Gard Svenssen's cousin! She won't care whose relation I am. And, anyway, she knows all about me, so it won't be any shock to her.'

Miss Duke was elderly and austere, 'miles above the girls! No chance of getting chummy with her!' Ven decided. 'Keeps us in our proper place, and all that; makes us feel we're worms, and that it would be presumption to look at her. I feel as if I ought to curtsy at the very least, if not grovel! Now Gard simply loves her old Miss Hedges; raves about her, and says all the rest do, too. I suppose there are a good many kinds of Heads; but the Duchess—no, I mean the Duke; sorry!—seems a particularly stiff and starched one.'

Miss Duke asked a few questions, and gave her a word of caution. 'You will be working chiefly under my eye, so that I shall know more of your standard very shortly. Our upper class is small; our elder girls leave us to go to the High School, as is only natural. I make a point of supervising the work of our seniors personally. There is one other point. You have perhaps heard of the—er—somewhat strained feeling between our girls and those of the other school in the town?'

'I've heard something of it, Miss Duke,' Ven said sedately.

'I expected that. You will be aware, then, that your own position, with relations in the other school, may not be easy just at first. The girls may misunderstand, and be a little prejudiced, but I have no doubt you will make friends quickly. I thought it well to warn you of possible difficulties, however.'

'In a little place like this, I suppose everybody knows everybody else's business,' Ven mused; and she thanked Miss Duke for her warning, and went gravely upstairs to find her new class-room. 'I doubt if that dreadful relationship could have been kept a secret, even if I'd been willing. Just at first the girls might have thought I was only living with Gard, but it wouldn't have lasted long. It's much better in every way to have it out at once.'

Any one who knew her well would have seen the touch of defiance in her manner as she entered the class-room to which she had been directed. She came to know it later as the senior room, and it housed one big class of girls between twelve and fourteen years of age, and the few seniors who still remained to the school. These seniors, Form A, had desks in the back row in which to keep their books; but for most subjects they retired to work in state and in dignified seclusion in the study, a small room downstairs, where they sat round a big table with Miss Duke, leaving the class-room to the more noisy girls of Form B. The younger children had other class-rooms under their own mistresses; but of them Ven saw little. Her interest, she saw at once, must lie in the senior room, with the other five 'A' girls, and particularly with those members of 'B' who were the outstanding rivals of Gard and her Haven friends.

Letty, and Lilian, and Iris, and Queenie, and Muriel, sitting on the lids of their desks in the back row, with their backs to the common herd of Form B, were discussing the astounding rumour, which was being whispered round the school, that a new girl was coming a fortnight after the term had started, and that she was to be a senior. The last item they could hardly believe. New girls were never seniors; it was an unheard-of thing; it simply wasn't done! But if by any chance it could be true, how weird it would be to have a new girl in the school who was not a mere infant! She would be far more interesting; new kids came occasionally, but they hardly counted. But a new senior would be thrilling!

'Here she is, Queen!' A dark-haired girl from Form B spoke up, since the seniors did not seem to have noticed the meaning silence that had fallen.

Form B had been discussing the new girl also. To them, as to Form A, she mattered greatly. Could they depend on her for the cricket team? That was the great point with Form B.

A good batsman or a strong bowler would be an invaluable asset to the Castle at the present moment.

Ven's eyes, sweeping over the score of girls, as she stood unnoticed for a moment, had found and fixed upon that dark-haired girl who had called the attention of Form A to her. That was one of the girls who had sat under the hedge on Saturday watching the Fire-Girl's dance; and the brown girl beside her, her friend, was the other. Probably the dark one was Rita, since Rita always seemed to lead.

The five seniors had turned quickly to look at their new comrade; and for a moment Ven bore the concentrated gaze of Forms A and B, and returned it steadily. Then she said frankly, and with no trace of shyness, 'I've been told to find an empty desk in the back row, and sit in it till I'm told to go somewhere else. I hope it won't be for long, for I hate sitting still. Do just tell me, please! Am I put in the back row because I'm new and helpless, and won't know what to do? So that I can watch the rest of you? Or is it a special honour? Ought I to feel uplifted, or frightfully offended?'

'Oh, frightfully bucked!' There was a ripple of laughter from Form B. 'It means you're a senior; A, you know; and a frightful swank.'

'Oh, but I don't know how to swank —' Ven began.

But Muriel came forward. 'We're awfully glad to see you,' she said cordially. 'It's topping to have another senior. We could hardly believe we'd have such luck. We were told you were to be with us, but we didn't quite believe it. We never get new seniors; we have to wait for them to grow.'

'And by that time we've grown up ourselves and left,' Iris added. 'There's an empty desk here, between me and the Queen. Come and sit on the lid and join our happy throng. It is a relief that you really are quite old!'

'I'm nearly sixteen.' Ven laughed. 'I suppose that's fairly aged here.'

'Oh, quite ancient! Muriel's sixteen, and she's our very oldest inhabitant. Have you been to a big school, with heaps of seniors, like the High?' Iris asked enviously. 'Every one of us wants to go there, but our folks won't send us for various silly reasons. We're frightfully jealous of the girls who do go. Are we to be jealous of you, too?'

'I do go to a big jolly school at home,' Ven admitted. 'I'm only staying here for three months or so, while my mother goes for a long voyage. My father's a sailor, and she's gone on his ship, so I'm staying with relations in the town here. Perhaps you know my people?' she asked pleasantly. 'My cousin is called Gard Svenssen.'

CHAPTER XI.

ADOPTED BY THE CASTLE.

If Ven had launched a real thunderbolt, she could hardly have created a greater sensation. A moment's incredulous outcry, '*Garda Svenssen!*' was followed by a stricken silence, and Forms A and B stared at the new girl aghast and unbelieving.

In spite of her anxiety as to the result of her confession, Ven almost laughed at their dismay. But when Rita, finding her voice first, gave a strained cry, 'That girl! And you're coming to *our* school!' Ven flared up and spoke warmly and indignantly.

'I don't know why you should say "that girl" in that way! She's a very nice girl! I've known her for three days now, and slept with her for four nights, and I like her a jolly lot. I know, of course, that you and she don't get on well. I know you're Rita. I saw you the other day when I was out with Gard, though you didn't see me. The thing that surprises me, and that I didn't understand from her, is that you're older than she is. She's just a kid; she's twelve, and not very old for that. You're thirteen or fourteen. If you've been nasty about her school, and slanged her and her crowd whenever you met, how could you expect her not to give you something back? If she's been able to hold her own, she's done jolly well; and she must have done that, or you wouldn't hate her so. It's because she's been able to stand up to you that you're all so down on her. I call her jolly plucky! You needn't talk about "that girl" when I'm anywhere near. I'll thank you to remember she's my cousin. But I know,' and Ven turned from Rita, who was staring at her in blank amazement, and faced the troubled seniors—'I know it's queer, and horrid for you, to have a girl pitched in among you whose cousin goes to the other school. I've heard a little about how things are. I'm awfully sorry about it, and I didn't want to come. It's rotten for all of you; but it's awfully rotten for me, too! Won't you try to see that? Shall I tell you how it happened, and why I can't help it? We really didn't know, you know. Don't you want me to explain?'

'Please do,' said Muriel gravely. 'It's very upsetting. We were so pleased to hear about you. But we never imagined anything like this! We do dislike those Haven girls!'

'They're awful! And Garda Svenssen is the worst of the lot,' Lilian said flatly.

'That's only because she's their captain. You only mean she's the leader,' Ven said swiftly. 'And as for "worst" and being "awful," I've heard stories of things said by Castle girls that weren't any too pretty.'

'I expect they weren't true,' Moll Sanderson muttered.

Ven turned on her at once. 'You look awfully guilty! I wonder why, if they weren't true? I'd rather believe my cousin than any one who looked like that.'

She turned back quickly to the seniors, and gave a swift explanation of her presence there. 'Mother didn't know. Nobody explained. And now she's away off on the sea, and we can't do anything. I've no choice in the matter. I have to come here, though I'd far rather have gone with Gard. So won't you—'

'You can't mean *that*!' Letty interrupted incredulously. 'Why, the Haven's an awfully silly little place!'

'Of course I mean it. I'd have managed to have a good time there; I generally do! I'd far rather have gone with Gard. I'd have liked the High School best, of course. I feel just as you do about that,' she said to Iris. 'But since I can't go there, I've got to do what I suppose you're all doing, and make the best of it. And since it isn't my fault that I have to come here, and since you have to put up with me somehow, for this term at least, couldn't you'—she laughed a little—'overlook my unfortunate relationship with Gard and put up with me nicely? If you'd

rather not speak to me, of course I can't help it; but it will be as uncomfortable for you as for me; and it seems to me it would be rather silly. Don't you think so? Mere kids might go on like that; but, after all, we are seniors. We ought to be past being utterly silly.'

Letty was the youngest girl in Form A, and she certainly did not want to be considered "utterly silly" and "a mere kid" by a new girl whose experience of school life was obviously much greater than her own. Still less did the idea appeal to Iris or Queenie or Lilian, and least of all to Muriel.

'Of course it would be silly,' Muriel said reluctantly. 'I hope none of us are as stupid as that. But you can hardly understand how we feel about the other school. You're a stranger to the town, as well as to us. And you've only heard one version of the state of affairs—the Haven version.'

'It's a simply unheard-of thing for any one connected with the Haven to come to our school,' Queenie remarked; 'the kind of thing nobody would ever dream of happening.'

'I guessed that. The trouble is, that it has happened. Which is my empty desk? Next to you, I think you said, Iris. That one? Oh, thanks!' and Ven sat on the lid as the rest had been doing till astonishment brought them to their feet. 'As it has happened,' she said, 'we've got to stand up to it somehow. It's rotten all round. It's even rotten for the Haven girls, for they'd love to have me there, and you don't seem overkeen on me here.'

There was a moment's silence. Then Muriel said more hospitably, 'It isn't that. We aren't pigs. But we're still—well— —'

'Getting over the shock. I know. I'm awfully sorry for you. I had it myself when I'd just arrived on Thursday night; Gard had had it the night before. Take your time to get used to it, please. Don't mind me. I've had the whole week-end.'

'How do you know they'd like to have you at the Haven? Do you know the whole lot of them?' groaned Iris, stunned, as were the others, by the new girl's calmness in face of the tragic situation. She admitted its seriousness—to them—but did not seem in any way properly distressed by it herself. Several of the elder Castle girls had a secret, horrible suspicion that to her, an outsider, it all seemed rather silly.

'Oh, not them all! I met a few of them on Saturday—Gard's crowd, you know. She was going out with them; you couldn't expect me not to go too.'

At her matter-of-fact tones the girls looked at one another again. 'Isn't she queer?' was in all their eyes.

Ven was chuckling inwardly. 'I'm making quite a sensation,' she thought cheerfully.

'And are you going to keep on going out with them now that you've come here?' Rita came up to the top of the room, and voiced the question which was present in several minds. 'Are you going to try to have friends in both schools?'

'Of course!' Ven looked innocently surprised. 'You don't expect me to drop them now, do you? Gard will want to be with them; and I shall want to be with Gard; and there you are! As for how much time I have for them, that depends on all of you. If you cut me out of your Castle stunts, you can't object if I toddle off and play with the Haven kids. But if there's anything doing here and you want my help, of course I'll play up and do the proper thing by my school. It's for you to say. I can't insist on being received into the bosom of the family, so to speak. But if you don't want me, that doesn't mean I shall sit down in a corner and sob because nobody loves me. I'll have friends somewhere and somehow. I know the Haven crowd would like to have me; they said so—several times, in fact! The Head girl wants to meet me; and Gard's bunch like me quite a lot. I seem to be delivering an ultimatum, and it's rather cheek from a new girl, I know. I'm sorry. But I thought I ought to tell you how things are.'

'It's rotten cheek from a new girl!' But there was a glimmer of laughter in Muriel's eyes, though she was trying to hide it. Some of Ven's phrases had almost upset her. 'We don't even know your name, do we?'

'I don't suppose so. I'm Vendela Morris.'

'Ven—how much?'

'Is that another foreign name, like the crazy ones Gard Svenssen's brothers have?' Letty demanded. 'You aren't called Svenssen, then?'

'No; isn't it convenient of me? You can easily overlook the relationship,' Ven said kindly.

'I wonder you didn't decide to say nothing about it,' Iris said curiously. 'Why did you tell us? Couldn't you have kept it dark; until we got to know you, anyway?'

'No, she couldn't possibly. She's as like Gard as she can be, only bigger and nicer,' said Lilian.

Ven laughed, and bowed graciously. 'But you can't tell how nice Gard will be by the time she's my age. I've three years' start.—As for your idea, Iris, Gard and Svante had thought of that, and had it all arranged before I came. I was to say nothing about the cousinship, and it would be far better for me in every way. Gard had told her crowd about me without saying I was a cousin. It was awfully decent of them. They did their level best to smooth things for me, though Gard was awfully upset at my coming here instead of going with her. They'd even decided I was to let you think Vendela was Welsh; my father's Welsh; and it might quite well have been. Actually it's my mother's name; she was Vendela Svenssen. But you couldn't have told it wasn't Welsh.'

'Well, why did you tell us, then?' Iris and Queenie got out the question together.

'We might not have guessed, though you are like Gard and the boys, you know,' Lilian added.

'Yes, but they didn't know I was going to be. They hadn't seen me for years and years. They honestly thought it could be kept dark.'

'And why didn't you try?'

'Didn't you understand? Oh, but Gard would tell you all about it!'

'Gard told me heaps about it, and begged me to try their plan—for my own sake, of course. But I wanted to be straight with you from the very first. I'd have hated to make friends under false pretences; it would have felt like cheating you. I knew it was risky, but I thought I'd rather take the risk. It would only have come out later, and then you'd have hated me.'

A quick look went round Form A. Then Muriel spoke up swiftly. 'As it is, we're more likely to do the other thing. I think it was awfully decent of you to tell us, when there wasn't really any need; and as for taking risks, so far as I'm concerned, there aren't any. You've been jolly sporting over it, and I'm sure we shall get on well together. If there's any family for you to be adopted into the bosom of, I suppose I'm the head of it, and I say, "Come right in, no matter who your relations are!"'

'You can't help them, of course,' Lilian acknowledged.

'Do you bowl?' Iris asked in a business-like tone. 'We haven't picked our team for the season finally yet. If you're any good, and if you'll play, we'll drop one of the juniors joyfully. It's a great and unexpected chance to get another senior. Do say you bowl a bit! Our bowling's very weak.'

'Right-o!' Ven laughed. 'You can try me, and judge for yourself. I don't want to cut out anybody else, though. But I have bowled, and I was in the team at home.'

'Cheers! You'll save our lives! We were dying for another bowler!'

'She'll tell Gard, and it will be all over the Haven by to-morrow,' Rita cried warningly. 'You must be careful, Iris!'

An awkward silence fell, as the girls grasped this horrible development of the situation. Some looked at Muriel and Iris; others turned to Ven, feeling instinctively that she would, and could, defend herself.

Ven was sharpening the pencils she had brought, carefully, one by one. She finished the one she was busy over before she looked up, giving the idea plenty of time to soak in, and the silence time to be felt. Then she looked round Form A.

‘There is that danger, if I’m enough of a rotter to do it. I can run along home to Gard and tell her every mortal thing I’ve heard you say. None of you can stop me. It just depends whether I care to do that sort of thing or not. What d’you think about it?’

‘You wouldn’t do it,’ said Muriel, with conviction. ‘It wouldn’t be fair, and you care about that.’

‘Fair! It would be utter abominable meanness. If you think I’m like that, there’s no more to be said.’

‘She isn’t,’ Iris said brusquely. — ‘Rita, you’re an idiot!’

‘If she’d tried to cheat us about her family, for the sake of making friends easily, we might have been afraid she’d be a sneak in other ways too,’ Letty remarked. ‘But she didn’t; she doesn’t like that sort of thing. She’s all right, Rita. You needn’t be so nervy.—But, I say, Vendela—’

‘Oh, you don’t have to call me all that. People who like me are allowed to cut it down to Ven.’

‘We’ll call you Ven,’ Muriel laughed, in much relief.

‘But, Ven, won’t it be awfully awkward at home?’ Letty persisted. ‘Gard and her lot will ask reams of questions.’

‘I don’t have to answer ’em. I shall tell them heaps, of course, but not any of the things you’d mind—nothing about cricket, or teams, or anybody’s style; nothing that could help them in the match. Oh, of course I’ve heard about the match! You don’t suppose I’m going to tell you things about them, do you? Very well, then, I’ll keep dark on both sides. And there’s another thing. I know how each lot of you runs down the other and makes fun of the other school. I think it’s a lot of silly rot myself; frightfully feeble! Such utter tosh! There are things so much more worth while to worry about. But if it amuses you, I suppose it’s all right. It’s nothing to do with me, thank goodness! The point is, I’ll have nothing to do with any of it. I won’t tell you anything about the Haven, and I won’t tell the Haven anything about you, that could help either them or you. If I see things that I think are funny, I’ll keep them to myself. I shouldn’t wonder if I did,’ she said simply, ‘for beside my school at home, both this and the Haven are frightfully feeble little places; I don’t mind telling you that. We’ve five hundred girls, to begin with, and lots of the Sixth stay on until they’ve passed Matric., and even Inter. Yes, it’s “some” school. You can imagine how weird a little one looks after that. But it’s right enough for a little place like this; and as long as I belong to this school, I’ll do my best for it, and I’ll try to be decent to it and its girls. And that doesn’t include making fun of it to Gard or any one else.’

‘It’s frightfully good of you to be willing to condescend to speak to us, I suppose!’ Queenie remarked, not quite sure herself whether she really meant it, or whether she was venturing to be sarcastic.

Ven glanced at her quickly. ‘Was I swanking? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. Perhaps I oughtn’t to have said that about my old school. But I didn’t want you to think I was being beastly and superior about things that matter a lot to you. I only meant that in a big school we hadn’t time to be jealous of any other. And we wouldn’t have dreamed of ragging other girls because their school was smaller than ours. Being the bigger one, we’d have felt it was bad form, of course.’

Muriel and Iris had turned to their desks, and were hastily selecting the books they would need downstairs. They had not taken much part in the ‘ragging’ of the Haven girls, but they had listened, and laughed, and applauded Rita’s stories of the various encounters, more from thoughtlessness than because they cared very much about it. It was plain enough to them, whether Ven had meant it so or not, that the Castle, as the more important school, had been guilty of ‘bad form’ in its behaviour towards its smaller rival. They knew very well who had been the aggressors; the fact that Gard and her friends had responded so readily and retaliated so successfully was no excuse. Ven’s casual, ‘We’d have felt it was bad form,’ had a deep effect; and her ‘of course’ went even deeper. So that was how it might all look to a stranger! They wondered if she had applied her doctrine to their case, but could not tell from her frankly innocent face. If she had, it was ‘jolly decent’ of her not to have said it openly, and they were grateful. But, secretly, they felt a little crushed; and yet somehow they did not hate her for it.

‘I’ve been asked to play for the Haven!’ Ven said suddenly, and laughed. ‘Of course I said I couldn’t possibly. But I’d really rather not play against them, if I can help it. I told them I might have to play for you, but I’d get out of it if I could. So unless you really need me badly, I wish you’d leave me out of the team, for that match at least, and altogether, if you’d rather.’

‘I think we shall need you rather badly!’ Iris said grimly. ‘If you were chosen to play for a school of five hundred, we’re not likely to let you off playing for us. We know when we’re in luck!’

‘As for the Haven—what thundering cheek!’ Letty said indignantly.

Ven laughed. ‘I don’t see that you can blame them. I got to know them first.—I’d like a few minutes’ quiet talk with dear Rita in a corner,’ she said to herself; ‘and after that, I’d like to turn her down and never speak to her again. She’s the worst of the lot. But there’s the Fire-Girl in the background, so I must restrain myself till I’ve found out what we want to know.’

CHAPTER XII.

ALL-CONQUERING VEN.

Heartily adopted by the five seniors of Form A, Ven found the morning's work very pleasant. Miss Duke's standard was high enough to be stimulating. Ven felt from the first that she must work in earnest or throw discredit on the teaching of her former school, and that, of course, could not for a moment be allowed. The system of individual attention was very different from classwork. She preferred to compete with others in a class, but this new style was interesting for a change. The head-mistress soon took her measure, and knew what to expect from her; she knew exactly what each of her six seniors could do, and set them to work together or separately, as seemed most suitable at the moment. As all the books were new to Ven, she was set to read up what the others had already done in most subjects. In mathematics she was well up to Muriel's level, and in languages was ahead of any of the form. Chemistry, which she had enjoyed at home, they had not touched, so, much to her regret, she had to give that up for the time.

The five other girls found her presence stimulating. She had new ideas, and was not afraid to defend and discuss them; her work was good enough to spur them on, and even Muriel felt she might be a dangerous rival. It would be very galling to have a new girl coming out top of the school! Obviously, that would not do; but it was soon equally obvious that real hard work would be necessary to prevent it. Miss Duke soon found her senior form working as they had not done for some terms; she watched them carefully, and guided Ven's work so that the rivalry should not become too keen.

'I say, tell me one thing!' Ven asked of Iris as the morning's work ended. 'You say our seniors usually leave to go to the High School. I know the Haven girls go there, too. What happens? How do they get on together? Gard, for instance; she's simply living for the day she'll go to the High; I'm always hearing about it. Well, what if Rita goes too?'

'It's such a big school. They needn't be friends. There's Suzanne Thorne, next door to you; she went from the Haven. I don't suppose she chums with our old girls. But, anyway, it won't seem to matter so much there. You said yourself it didn't matter in a big school.'

'Of course it doesn't. But I didn't know if they'd see it. Is Rita going? I hope she and Gard don't get in the same class, all the same!'

'I suppose she will. She's got a cousin there.'

'I—say!' burst from Ven, in a tone of utter amazement. They were crossing the playground towards the gate, on their way to lunch together in the town. 'Who was that?' she asked swiftly; 'that girl with bobbed black hair, carrying a violin? I saw her cross that doorway. Who is she, Iris?'

'That's Miss Holt, our new music-mistress,' Iris explained. 'She's new this term. She's jolly good, and we all like her ever so much. She teaches piano too, but you should hear her play that fiddle!'

'I have heard her!' Ven said exuberantly. 'She's topping! But I didn't know she taught here. What luck! Oh, I do want to tell Gard!'

'Where did you hear her play? Oh, *don't* go running after those Haven girls in the lunch-hour!' Iris pleaded. 'You know you promised to come to the field with me as soon as we've had something to eat! And the rest are all coming too! Don't let us down, Ven! You belong to us till half-past four!'

'Well, I'll try to wait. I'll bottle it up. But I'm dying to tell Gard. She's keen on Miss Holt too. We never dreamt she taught at the Castle. I want to know her. I'm jolly glad I came!—I

wanted to have lunch with Gard and her crowd,' she said, as they joined Muriel and Letty in the dairy. 'But she said I'd better not; said I ought to go with you. She said I ought to be one thing or the other, during school hours. It's true, of course.'

'Shows her good sense,' Muriel remarked.

'She's jolly sensible, for a kid. And she's keen for me to have the best kind of time I can, considering how things have been messed up for me. It's awfully decent of her, when you come to think of it. She was quite upset because I spoiled her plan about not being her cousin.'

'Where did you hear Miss Holt play, Ven?' Iris asked.

'Oh, out on the shore!' Ven said vaguely. 'It wasn't exactly a concert. She didn't know I could hear. But I loved her playing.'

'She lives away along the shore, in a bungalow, Rita says. She cycles home every day. Rita went to tea with her.'

'I expect Miss Holt thought it would be nice for Barbara to know some of the girls, so she asked those two for a beginning,' Ven was thinking rapidly. 'Perhaps they don't all know she has a sister. I'm sure they don't know she has a sister who makes fires! I wonder if even Rita knows that? And I wonder if the rest have heard about the funny dances? I'd better not say anything till I know a little more. I wonder when I shall have a music-lesson? Not to-day, I'm afraid; that would be too much luck! Oh, I do want to talk it over with Gard! But there's no need to say anything to Rita at present. I'd far rather find things out from the Fire-Girl's sister. I'll see what Gard says about it first.'

'Are you asleep, Ven? Isn't your egg good? Or what's the matter?' Muriel asked curiously.

'I was having a little dream all to myself,' and Ven roused herself and laughed. 'Poke me if I do it again. I say, what's that big new building I passed between here and the sea? I was meaning to ask Gard, but you'll do as well. A bank? or a hall of some kind? or an institute? It's going to be a huge place!'

'That's the great local mystery!' Muriel informed her importantly. 'Nobody knows what it's going to be; or if anybody knows, nobody will tell. There are all kinds of ideas in the air, but no one knows anything for certain.'

'It's been an eyesore for years,' Iris added; 'a great ugly waste patch that nobody would buy. Now it's sold at last, and they're building hard. I suppose we shall know in time. It may be a big hotel; but with those huge hoardings, no one can see much.'

'How thrilling! I hope the mystery will be solved while I'm here! Perhaps it's a new cinema, or a casino, or something awfully, frightfully wicked! A hotel's much more likely, though.'

'Now come and show us your bowling!' Iris was so impatient that she would hardly let the rest finish their lunch.

'You'll make me nervous, and I'll send down nothing but wides,' Ven complained. 'And, anyway, I'll have frightful indigestion.'

However, neither indigestion nor nerves seemed to trouble her much when they reached the nets, and she took Iris's middle stump with her third ball.

'Gosh!' said Iris, in a tone of rapturous dismay. 'If I can't stand up to you, none of the rest can, that's certain! Say, Ven, we're not half glad you came!'

'It doesn't always come off, though,' Ven laughed. 'You weren't prepared; but the next man in would be, and she'd be more careful.'

'How did you do it?' Muriel asked respectfully. 'Iris is our captain and easily our best bat.'

'Tried a slow ball after two swift ones. Iris wasn't ready for it; she wasn't watching. If she goes in again, it won't happen so easily. She won't be caught.—Won't you try again?' she said, turning to Iris.

'Have you lots more of those sneaky ones up your sleeve? I hope you have!' Iris said warmly. 'You'll be a treasure to the team!'

'Won't you stay after school and have a good game, and let us join in?' Rita asked eagerly, from the crowd of B girls who were watching in mingled surprise and delight. 'You and Iris could pick up sides, and we'd see your batting, too.'

'Not to-day. I will, of course, if you let me know beforehand, but to-day I'm meeting Gard. I shall go home with her always, unless you've fixed up a game,' Ven said casually, and laughed at Rita's disgusted look. 'You'll have to stick it, so you may as well get used to it, you know.'

'You have her at home,' Letty grumbled.

Ven wanted Gard at the earliest possible moment, however; and as soon as she could escape after school she raced away from Iris and Muriel and Letty, and went flying down towards the sea, and landed with a crash on the shingle near the Haven gate.

Her new schoolmates watched her with some disapproval, and Queenie voiced the general feeling, 'Just like Gard and the Haven kids! We must tell her that sort of thing isn't done by Castle girls! It's altogether too trippery!'

'You can tell her anything you like, but I don't believe it will be a scrap of good,' Iris said gloomily. 'She'll go on doing whatever she likes, and not care what anybody says.'

'If she says anything at all, she'll say it's tosh, and utter rot!' Letty groaned.

'All the same, we aren't used to having girls in Castle hats behaving like tripper children!' Lilian agreed with Queenie.

'She's not used to the sea, of course,' Muriel apologised for Ven's conduct. 'Perhaps in a week or so she won't be so crazy for it.'

'We've got to put up with whatever she does, anyway,' Iris remarked. 'She's too jolly useful for us to turn her down. There, she's got her Hildegard! Now she'll be happy. We may as well clear out, and leave them to go home arm-in-arm.'

'You'd rather Ven was arm-in-arm with you, wouldn't you, Iris?' Letty teased. 'You aren't going to get more than half of her, that's evident. Garda Svenssen's bagged the first half.'

'I wonder how Gard's done it?' Muriel pondered; 'made Ven so keen on her, I mean? For Ven's got a lot in her; we never imagined Gard Svenssen had. And yet Ven must see something in her.'

'Won't people stare to see a Castle hat arm-in-arm with a Haven cap?' Lilian groaned. 'It's never been seen before! No one will know what to make of it!'

Ven had found Gard at the gate, and had whirled her away from a crowd of friends, regardless of the consternation her new hat with its Castle ribbon might cause by being seen in the company of Gard's turned-up blue cap.

'Come on, old thing, I want you badly.—Oh yes, quite all right, thanks! It's going to be quite passable,' she said in answer to a storm of inquiries from Netta and Nancy and Meg. —'Cut out the farewell words to-day, Gard, there's a good chap! You'll see them all to-morrow morning. Look here, old girl,' when she had got Gard all to herself behind a groyne, 'the Fire-Girl's sister, the fiddling girl with the bobbed hair, is the new music-mistress at the Castle! I haven't had a lesson yet, but I saw her this morning. Isn't it thrilling?'

'Do they all know Barbara, then?' There was grievous disappointment in Gard's tone.

'Oh, I don't think so. Nobody mentioned her; and, of course, I didn't. I never spoke to Rita about her. I thought I'd rather not, if I could help it. I didn't want to rouse suspicion by showing too much interest; all that kind of thing! I'd rather ask Miss Holt herself. It's not Rita's business, any way you look at it. The rest just said Rita had been to tea with Miss Holt.'

'I wonder why?' and Gard frowned. 'I wish it hadn't been Rita!'

‘I guess Miss Holt thought it would be nice for Barbara to know some of the girls, so she asked Rita and Moll as a beginning. The Fire-Girl didn’t look as if it had been a particularly good choice. I thought she looked rather fierce about it,’ Ven laughed.

‘What shall we do now? Wait till you have a music-lesson, and then tell Miss Holt you’d like to go to tea with her sister?’

‘I don’t know about the “going to tea” part. But I think I’ll say I’ve seen her sister dance, and I’d like to know her, and ask if I may. Nobody could object to that. I may think of some better plan, but that’s as far as I’ve got yet. Why don’t we see Miss Holt cycling home?’ she asked, as they left the shore and turned into the road that ran behind the big houses to the little ones in the lane.

‘This isn’t her way. She couldn’t ride along the footpath under the hedge. There’s a good road over there,’ nodding across the fields. ‘It goes straight to the village near the bungalows. That’s the way she’ll go.’

At the corner of the lane, from which they could just see the house, Turkey met them, a big red handkerchief in one hand, a white one in the other.

‘Help! Are you going to dance?’ Ven asked, laughing, forgetting that the boys had not heard about the Fire-Girl.

‘Auntie wants to know if it’s peace or war?’ Turkey asked dramatically. ‘Shall he play “See the Conquering Hero comes,” or “The Dead March”?’

‘It’s peace all round,’ Ven said gravely. ‘They were completely won over when I bowled their captain middle stump.’

‘Bully! That was hot stuff!’ Turkey said admiringly, and waved the white handkerchief.

At the gate Svante met them, and preceded them up the path, playing ‘The Conquering Hero’ on a comb, while Turkey followed carrying a cricket-bat triumphantly aloft.

Ven laughed, and bowed impressively to right and left into empty space. ‘You are a silly goat, Auntie Svenssen!’ she mocked.

‘All the same, congrats.! I thought you’d get on all right. Tell us how you did it,’ Auntie begged.

‘Oh, I just said I thought they knew my cousin, Gard Svenssen,’ Ven said airily.

‘And Rita had apoplexy, and Moll died on the spot, and all the rest swooned in horror,’ Svante suggested, kindly trying to help her out.

‘Oh no, they didn’t. They were a bit upset, but they soon began to get over it. Before long I’d intimidated, very gently and tactfully, but quite firmly, that I thought they were a set of silly idiots, and that they’d been going on like a lot of kids; I believe I said things like “utter tosh” and “silly rot” and “frightfully feeble.” And some of them, Muriel and her lot especially, looked a bit conscience-stricken.’

‘Snakes! Did they take all that lying down?’

‘They didn’t like it. But I told them the kind of school I come from—five hundred girls, you know—and that I’d been in the school team; and they crumpled up and thought they’d better not say too much, if they wanted to hook me for their team.—I’m afraid there’s no help for it, Gard, old thing! I can’t get out of it anyhow. I hope we sha’n’t beat you, but I’ll have to play up and do my best.’

‘That’s the stuff!’ Svante agreed.—‘It’s no use grouching, old chap!’ to Gard, who was looking downcast. ‘What you’ve got to do is to buck up and beat Ven as well as the rest. Think how you could swank if you beat them when they’d a crack player in their team!’

‘I’m awfully glad you asked me on Saturday,’ Ven said to Gard. ‘It was all right for me to give you points while I was a stranger and hadn’t been asked to play for anybody. It’s different now. I can’t coach you to play against my school. But if you remember all I told you on

Saturday, you won't do so badly. I gave you all the help I could then, just for fear I'd feel I couldn't do it again. I saw it coming.'

'I'm awfully glad you're getting on well,' Gard said bravely, but with an obvious effort. 'Of course I hoped you would, but I didn't think you'd get round them all on your first day.' There was a touch of envy in her tone, try as she would to conceal it.

'I wanted to come to lunch with you, but I simply couldn't get away. They wanted me after school too, but I wouldn't stay. I told them I was going home with you. They didn't like it at all,' Ven laughed.

That night Gard woke to find a light in the room. She turned sleepily to look, and saw Ven sitting up in bed, a candle on the table by her side. 'What is it, Ven? Are you waiting to hear the sea? It's not high tide till two in the morning. Oh, are you writing? Is it lessons?'

'Sorry I woke you, but I simply had to put it down,' Ven answered in a cautious tone. 'No, it's a letter. I kept going over it in my head, so I thought I'd better write it down. I'll copy it out in the morning—if I can read it. I'm rather doubtful.'

Gard propped herself on her elbow and stared at her. 'Who is it to? Why is it in such a hurry?'

'It's the plan I was wanting. It's a letter to the Fire-Girl. I'm going to ask her sister to take it to her.'

'Oh, Ven, what a ripping plan! What are you saying to her?' And Gard was out of bed and hopping across the bare floor in a moment. She squatted on the other bed, and looked over her cousin's shoulder. 'I can't read it. I don't believe you can, either. Oh, Ven, what an awful scrawl!'

Ven studied her hieroglyphics intently. 'It is bad, isn't it? But I can make it out. Here's as far as I've got:

“DEAR BARBARA,—Last Friday I was on the beach, and I saw you making a fire among the sandhills. Then you went down on the sands and danced a queer kind of dance I'd never seen before. I'd like to know more about it; but I want still more to hear about your fire.

“I've read in stories about the Camp Fire. I feel sure you are a Camp Fire Girl, by your headband and beads, and the way you do your hair, though you don't wear a silver ring. I was rather disappointed about that. But I know hardly anything about it—only what I've read in two story-books. I'm simply dying to know all about it. May I come to see you one Saturday, and ask heaps of questions? I love the idea of the Camp Fire, so far as I know about it. Do you belong to a camp now? What is your Indian name? May I see your gown? Will you tell me how you won your beads? I suppose there isn't a Camp Fire anywhere near here that I could join? I'd simply love to belong to one.”

'Now, what else can I say?' And Ven sucked the stump of her pencil and gazed at Gard.

'I can't think of any more. It's an awfully jolly letter,' Gard said admiringly.

'There was something else in my head when you spoke.' And Ven frowned and chased the wandering thought. 'I know! I say, Gard, I ought to explain how I guessed that Miss Holt is her sister. I've said nothing about Saturday. I thought we'd confess that later, when we know her a little. So she won't know we've seen them together.'

'Oh, but they're awfully much alike! Couldn't you ask Miss Holt if she hasn't got a sister, and say you saw her on the beach, and were sure she must belong to her?'

'And then produce the letter, all ready written?' Ven frowned doubtfully. 'Oh, well, I'll be honest about it, and tell the whole thing! That's best. I'll say we saw them together on the

beach, but didn't like to speak to them. If she asks when, I'll tell her all about it, and apologise for watching those dances when we hadn't been asked. It's not so very dreadful. I don't believe she'd mind; and, of course, when I copy the letter out, I'm going to ask if you may go with me. I'm not leaving you out; this is only a first attempt, to see how it would sound. I kept wondering how I'd put things. Now I've got it off my mind, so I'll be able to go to sleep. Hop back to bed, Gard, there's a good kid!

'I've been making a plan,' said Gard, as she lay closely against her, and showed no sign of going back to bed. 'It's awfully horrid having you going to another school, Ven. I simply hate it! I've been planning that you'll come and stay with us again in about two years. I'm sure your mother will need another voyage in two years. By that time I'll be going to the High School, and, of course, when your folks understand how much better it is than the Castle, they'll send you there too; you'll be too old for the Castle by that time, you know. We'll go together, you and I and Suzanne, and have all the jolly time we're missing just now. How's that?'

'Topping!' Ven agreed warmly. 'I'd love it—except that I hate being away from my own school. But what if you find Rita there, Gard, my dear kid? Shall you fire rude things at her whenever you meet her? Suppose you're in the same class?'

'She'll hate it if I am,' Gard said wisely. 'I just won't take any notice of her, Ven. You have to choose your friends in a big school like that; Susanne says so. I sha'n't choose Rita!'

'No, I suppose you'd be in different sets. Jolly awkward if there was anybody who wanted to chum with both of you, though.'

'She couldn't do it,' Gard said decisively. 'You will come back as soon as I go to the High, won't you, Ven?'

'I can't promise,' Ven said seriously. 'It partly depends on mother, you see. You buck up and get to the High, and we'll see about it.'

'Oh, I'm going at the first possible moment! I'm only living for that!' Gard assured her eagerly.

'So are Rita and Moll, and lots of the Castle girls,' Ven said solemnly. 'Good-night, Gard dear.'

Gard took the hint, and slipped to the floor. 'Good-night, old chap. I'll go to school with you one day; see if I don't. And it won't be at any silly little Castle school, or even at the Haven, though,' she added defiantly, 'the Haven's ripping! But there's one place even better still, and some day we'll go there together.'

'I hope so,' Ven laughed, and blew out the candle.

CHAPTER XIII. TWO LETTERS.

‘Miss Holt, will you give your sister a letter from me?’ It was the close of Ven’s first music-lesson on the following day.

Audrey Holt looked up in surprise from the music she was sorting. ‘My sister? Do you mean Barbara? Why, Vendela, what do you know about her?’

‘Hardly anything at all; but I want to, Miss Holt. I saw her on the beach last Friday before I’d come to school, and again on Saturday, and that time she was with you. She’s so awfully like you that I think I’d have guessed she was your sister, but I might not have dared to ask if I hadn’t seen you with her. On Friday, when she was alone, she went down on to the sands and did a weird dance, without any music, all by herself. I’d never seen anything like it before.’

‘“Princess Royal”!’ Audrey laughed. ‘She told me she couldn’t resist the sight of the empty sands; there was such a lot of room. But she thought there was nobody about.’

‘She didn’t see me. I was up by the hedge, and I kept out of sight for fear she wouldn’t like to be interrupted. I’d like to know her, so I thought I might begin by writing a letter, if you wouldn’t mind taking it to her. Do you mind? Is it frightful cheek to ask you?’

‘I don’t mind being your postman,’ said Audrey, as she took the letter. ‘But I can’t say what the answer will be. Barbara is a queer, shy girl, and doesn’t always get on well with others. She has certain ideas and certain things that mean a great deal to her, and if she thinks any one will laugh at them, she shuts up inside herself and you can’t get anything out.’

‘Oh, I’d never laugh! Is she very keen on that dancing? I thought she looked quite lost in the music— —’ And then Ven stopped abruptly.

Audrey looked at her quickly. ‘Music? She had no music. You said she was alone. Besides, I was in school.’

Ven laughed ruefully. ‘Miss Holt, I saw her dance again on Saturday, and you played for her then. The dances were different that time. I hadn’t any right to watch, I know; but it did no harm, and I was awfully keen on seeing some more. That was when you were together. She knew she was doing it to an audience; it was a bigger one than she knew, that was all. I do hope she’ll forgive us.’

‘Where were you? We saw nothing of you.’

‘Under the next bungalow,’ Ven confessed, laughing and reddening. ‘I’m afraid it sounds awfully infantile; but we’d been having a picnic, my cousin and a few of her friends and I, and we’d been playing on the sands, and exploring the Lagoon, and we were just feeling ready to do anything silly when we saw that empty bungalow, and one girl said she was sure she could crawl right across under it. I said I’d race her, and called to the rest to come, and, of course, they did. As soon as we were all underneath you came out of your door, and your sister came next, and I said she was the girl I’d seen dance. The rest were keen to see too, so we lay low and watched. It wouldn’t have been easy to escape. You’d have heard us if we’d crunched away across the shingle. There, now I’ve confessed. Do you mind very much? The dances were topping, especially the clapping one. She did the weirdest step now and then; on one foot, and twiddling the other in the air. Gard and I have been trying to do it ever since, but we can’t get it like hers.’

‘Galleys!’ Audrey said, laughing. ‘Don’t dislocate yourselves trying to do galleys without knowing how. Better let Barbara show you slowly; I believe her galleys are good. She’s had the best teachers—in London, you know. Those were morris-jigs you saw. She’s very keen on all the morris-dances.’

‘Morris!’ Ven exclaimed, struck by the resemblance to her own name. ‘What you read of in Shakespeare?’

Audrey nodded, with a laugh. ‘There are classes in London where they are taught. Barbara has been going to them for two years; she began when she was fourteen. She’s very young for it, but very keen, and I believe she’s very good. She is very musical, and is lost to everything but the dance as soon as I begin to play.’

‘That’s how she looked,’ Ven agreed. ‘A thousand miles away!’

‘It was only by saying I’d play for her that I persuaded her to dance to Rita and Moll. She said it would be like showing off, and she hated doing that; but I thought the girls would like it. I had asked Rita because, musically, she is more promising than any other girl in the school, so I thought she and Barbara might have something in common; so I offered to play, and Barbara couldn’t resist that.’

‘We thought she didn’t look awfully pleased, but we didn’t know what was wrong,’ Ven said thoughtfully. ‘“Hated showing off!” That’s something nowadays. Most people seem to like it. Then are those dances really old, Miss Holt? As old as Shakespeare? But how thrilling to be able to learn them still!’

‘You speak as if Shakespeare had been about the time of Julius Cæsar or Wilfrid,’ Audrey laughed.

‘Oh, do you know about Wilfrid? I was told about him on Sunday. He landed just about where your bungalow is, didn’t he? But are the dances as old as Shakespeare, Miss Holt?’

‘I fancy they were old even in his day. You must come and let Barbara tell you about traditions, and the differences between the dances of all the villages. I’ll give her your letter, Vendela, and I hope she’ll answer it nicely.’

‘Out of school I’m just called Ven,’ Vendela hinted.

Audrey Holt laughed. ‘I hope Barbara will call you Ven.’

‘She never said a word about fires!’ Ven said pensively, when telling Gard all about it at night. ‘Of course, neither did I. She couldn’t know I knew about the fires. Perhaps that’s one of the things Barbara’s afraid people will laugh at, and so she won’t let anybody know.’

‘She’ll know you know when she reads your letter,’ Gard pointed out.

‘Yes, but I don’t think she’ll be afraid I’d want to laugh. She’ll see how frightfully keen I am to know more about it. Won’t it be difficult to wait for her answer?’

It was difficult; and when Miss Holt appeared at school next morning without any letter, and shook her head smilingly in answer to Ven’s anxious look, it was harder still, with a whole day of waiting to be got through somehow.

‘Barbara says she’ll write to you,’ said Audrey, as Ven’s face fell. ‘She hasn’t had time yet, you know.’

Gard reached home aching to hear the answer; and groaned when she found they must wait another day. ‘I do think she might have written! She could have got up early and scribbled something,’ she said disappointedly.

On Thursday morning, however, both she and Ven gave whoops of delight at sight of the letters which covered the mat just as they were finishing breakfast. ‘Letters! Stacks of them! Letters for all of us! Surely one will be from the Fire-Girl!’ cried Ven, and began tossing hers aside in great haste. ‘From girls at school; from mother—topping! I’ll read it in a sec. From—I don’t know. I bet you that’s Barbara’s! Oh, Gard, it is! Look! How ripping of her!’

‘Letters from father.’ Gard caught hers up eagerly. ‘Granny has one too, but there’s one all for me. How good of him! What is it, Ven?’

Ven showed the envelope. In the corner opposite the stamp was a tiny ink drawing of crossed logs and a curling flame. ‘Isn’t it pretty? Now we know it’s a Camp Fire letter!’

'Father's will keep. What does she say?' and Gard hung over Ven's shoulder. 'Isn't it a mercy the boys went early this morning?'

The Fire-Girl's letter was brief.

DEAR VENDELA (usually called Ven!)—I know very little about Camp Fire, not much more than you do, I expect. But we'll talk about it and see. I'll be glad to tell you anything I know; it wouldn't be Camp Firey to refuse if you are really keen. I haven't a ring, because I don't really belong. I'm only pretending. Will you come to tea with me on Saturday afternoon, and bring your cousin, and we'll talk it over. Audrey says you know our bungalow, so we had better meet here.—Yours sincerely,

BARBARA HOLT,
Apukwa, The Bulrush.

The letter was headed by another little drawing of crossed logs and flame in the middle of the sheet, while in the left-hand upper corner was a quaint diagram of two extremely pointed little figures, with triangular bodies and heads, standing hand-in-hand. Below, in the lower corner, they were sitting, with feet stuck out before them and toes turned up, and between them burned a tiny fire. Below the signature was a drawing of a long-stemmed bulrush. The address at the top was 'Pro. Tem. Bungalow, The Beach,' and the date was a half moon, and inside it a note of music.

'Oh, how I love those little pictures!' and Ven pored over her letter ecstatically. 'Those are symbols, Gard. Camp Fire people always use symbols. That's her own one, a bulrush. This is herself and me, I suppose, and she's just held out her hand and taken mine; here we're sitting together beside a fire. And look at the date! What does it mean? The moon of what? Music?'

'Singing birds, I should think; May, you know,' Gard said brilliantly. 'Yes, it's lovely. I think she'll be nice. Now I want to read father's letter, Ven.' Even Fire-Girls could hardly compare in interest with letters from abroad.

'It's a perfectly topping letter from a Fire-Girl!' Ven said joyfully.

Gard's letter was not from abroad this time, however; the postmark was 'London.' She opened it eagerly, hopeful that it would tell of a coming visit, though Captain Svenssen was often in port at London without being able to leave his ship long enough to run down to the coast to see his children.

Ven opened her mother's letter. She was deep in it, knitting her brows over something unexplainable in its tone, when at a low cry from Gard she looked up quickly. 'What's the matter? Why, Gard, what is it? What's wrong, kid? Is it bad news?' and she sprang up and ran to put her arm round her cousin.

Gard crushed the letter into her lap, with a brave instinct to please her father, though she did not understand; for written at the top she had read, 'Don't let your cousin Ven hear anything of this.'

'I haven't read it all. I've only just begun the letter. But he says'—her voice broke—'he says I must give up all thoughts of going to the High School, and be content with the Haven. Oh, I can't! I can't!'

'But not altogether, Gard dear?' Ven cried, in dismay nearly equal to Gard's own, for she knew, if this were so, that it must almost break Gard's heart. 'But why, Gard? Why?'

'Granny, you tell her. He says it's in your letter too.' Gard's head had dropped on her arms on the table, but now she looked up, her face white and quivering. 'I'd like to go upstairs and read mine through quietly. Ven, you'd better start without me. I'll be late; but I couldn't go to school without knowing if—and—and why'—and with a break in her voice she fled.

‘I can’t go after her! it would be brutal!’ Ven wailed despairingly.—‘Oh, granny, is it true? Do say it isn’t true! She’ll never be the same again!’

Mrs Unwin had been reading her letter for some minutes, her face very grave. She did not reply at once. When she spoke, it was slowly, as though choosing her words. ‘I do not know how much Gard’s father has told her. It is enough for you to know, Vendela, that he has been counting on a certain appointment, which he had every right to think would be given him, and which would have meant a considerable improvement in his income. He writes now that the appointment has been given to some one else, and there is not likely to be a chance of another of the same kind for several years. He has therefore been obliged, very regretfully, to decide that he cannot afford to spend more on Gard’s education than he is doing at present, and so he asks me to remove her name from the waiting-list at the High School.’

‘But hasn’t he anything saved up that he could use for her?’ Ven wailed. ‘It’s so hideously cruel! She often says she’s only living for the time when she’ll go to the High, and I believe it’s true. To stay at the Haven all her life—oh, it isn’t fair, granny!’

‘I am afraid she will feel it terribly. I know something of how she feels, though I have no doubt you have heard still more,’ Mrs Unwin said soberly. ‘But she will have to get used to the idea. You must help her, Ven. She will get a very good education at the Haven, you know. I do not say it is as good as the High School, but so far as the teaching goes, the Haven is quite good. Of course I understand that in the matter of games and numbers and extras of all kinds it leaves much to be desired, but those are not necessary things.’

‘They’re the things that make school worth while,’ Ven said brokenly. ‘If Gard’s got to do without them, and to know she can never have them, it’s—it’s simply awfully hard lines! It would knock me silly, I know. Hasn’t he got any saved-up money he could use? Most people have something to fall back on.’

‘He says he has had to meet a totally unexpected call, which has taken his capital to such an extent that he dare not draw on it further. He knows Gard’s longing for a bigger school, Ven, and would give her her wish if he possibly could.’

Ven could say no more. She stood by the window, regardless of the clock, playing with the blind-cord, and longing to help Gard, but not daring to offer.

Up in their room, Gard was crouching on her bed, reading her father’s letter feverishly. After telling of his regret at the necessary change of plans, and assuring her he understood her great disappointment, he went on to explain why it had been necessary. He told of his own disappointment in being passed over for another man; and on the other question of the unexpected call on his resources, wrote as fully as he had done to Mrs Unwin, and very much more fully than she had explained to Ven.

‘You will wonder, dear, if I could not have found the extra money somehow, and so have saved you this blow. A terrible thing has happened, Gard, and I am going to trust you, and tell you all about it. But you *must not* tell your cousin Ven. You will find it hard not to confide in her, and I have hesitated before trusting you with the story. But you will be happier if you know it all. I am sure you would not wish me to have acted in any other way; and if you care for Ven at all, you will not tell her what would grieve her so deeply. You are brave enough, Garda, to keep the story to yourself, and not wish her to suffer as well.

‘Dear, Ven’s mother has been taken very ill. Captain Morris brought her to London, fearing greatly there was more the matter than they knew, but hoping against hope that their suspicions were unfounded. A specialist has confirmed their worst fears, and a very dangerous operation will be necessary to save her life. It will also be very expensive, and Ven’s father, determined to give his wife and girl the

best of everything, has nothing to fall back upon. That will be enough for you, Gard dear. You know that after you children, your Auntie Ven comes next in my heart. When it is to save her life, you will forgive my putting her needs even before yours. I am glad I have just enough saved to see them through this trouble. But we, as a family, will have to go carefully for a time, and I cannot face any new expense. I am putting a hard burden on you, I know, child; but you would not wish me to take the boys away from school. We will try to keep them there; we shall not be worse off than we are at present. But I have to ask you to give up the dearest wish of your heart. Don't think I don't understand, Gard. I know I am taking away the hope on which all your life has been built for years. I know that in asking you to be content with your present school, and not waste your time and spoil your work by grieving for what is impossible, I am asking for the biggest effort you could make. But I do ask it, dear, and I believe you have the courage and the strength you will need to face these new conditions. It is more than ever necessary that you should do well at school. It will be more to your credit if you can do well without the help of the High School. I believe you will do well. But you will ruin your efforts if you allow yourself to keep thinking of all you would have liked to have.'

The letter slid to the ground, and Gard sat staring with unseeing eyes at the wall of Suzanne's house, beyond the passage and the back gate. Of course there was no more to be said; no need to think about it any more. Auntie Ven must be saved. The boys must not leave school. There was no more money. That was all about it.

But it was the end of everything. Nothing mattered now. The world would go on, she supposed, but it could never be the same again. There was nothing to look forward to. All her work, till now, had been a preparation for the wider school life to come. If there were to be no High School, even in a year or two, no High School *ever*, what did anything matter?

On the stair she heard Ven's step, not leaping up three stairs at a time, as usual, but coming slowly, sympathetically, as if she dreaded coming into the room, or as if there had been a death in the house. Well, thought Gard, in the stunned, blank way which seemed all that her brain was capable of now, Ven was right, there had been a death. She was dead herself, so far as real things went. If nothing mattered, surely you were not alive any more? not in any way that counted. Could one be alive with nothing to live for? The Gard who had lived until that morning was dead; she was very sure of that. And years afterwards she knew it had been true; she had been a new Gard from that moment. Looking back, also, she knew what a dangerous moment it had been, when the new Gard was being born, and might have been born good or bad, strong or weak, brave or cowardly, great or poor and unworthy.

But it was one of those crises when no effort or decision of the moment could be of any avail. She was too stunned and broken to choose; she could not even realise that there was a choice to be made, that it was a turning-point in her life, though she felt dully that it was an end, and therefore—hopeless though it might seem, since there was nothing to look forward to—a new beginning. She could not bring herself to decide what that new beginning should be. The balance for strength or weakness, good or evil, must be swung by instinct, and that instinct would be guided by what she had been all her life till now.

And Gard had always tried to live up to the boys' opinion of her, to be sporting over difficulties, to play the game, and do the decent thing. Svante helped her now, though he had gone off to school without hearing of the trouble.

It was too soon to pull herself together and face the old life again in these new conditions, taking it as a permanent thing and not as a stepping-stone. That would come later. Ven's rather hesitating knock, and her, 'Gard, dear, won't you come to school now? It's getting awfully

late. May I come in?' sent Gard flying to her feet, to pick up the letter and hide it in a drawer. It would be safe there. They never touched one another's drawers. In that, at least, she could please her father. Ven must never know. She clung desperately to that first hard thing he had asked; she would do that, at least. Very soon she was more than ever resolved on it for Ven's own sake; it would be so terribly miserable, so utterly rotten for her else. But at the first it was her instinctive response to her father's appeal, her courage answering his challenge, that made her able to keep the secret to herself. He had asked her not to tell. Ven must never know.

'All right, Ven, I'll be ready in two secs.:', and as Ven entered, in much relief, Gard was throwing her books into her case, hurrying into shoes and cap and coat, and was far too busy and breathless to be questioned.

Ven bided her time, but felt, in great relief, that matters might have been very much worse.

CHAPTER XIV.

VEN TO THE RESCUE.

There was no question of going by the lanes to-day. The tide had been low in the mornings all week, and the girls turned to the shore without thinking twice about it. Gard had kissed her grandmother with a brave attempt at a smile, but without venturing on words; had stuffed her lunch into her case and hurried out; and Mrs Unwin had not tried to delay her, but had looked appealingly at Ven, as if begging her to help in any way she could.

Ven, with a nod, ran after her cousin. 'We'll have to tear along, Garda. D'you want to talk?'

'No, there's nothing to say. But it was nice of you to wait. Let's race.'

'I'm not so sure that there's nothing to say!' thought Ven, but said nothing, and ran with Gard across the sands at a speed which made talking impossible.

She thought much about her cousin during the morning, and the moment school was over turned to Iris and Muriel. 'I have to meet Gard to-day. Sorry, but it can't be helped. She needs me, and I'm going. I'll be back in good time; I won't be late twice in one day. You'll have to let me off that cricket practice, Iris. I've got to go,' and she was off before they had recovered their breath.

'Bother Gard Svenssen, she hasn't any business to want Ven in school-time!' Iris said wrathfully.

'Perhaps there's something wrong at home. Ven's been different to-day. I couldn't get a word out of her.'

'I asked her what she'd got on her mind,' Lilian remarked. 'She's not usually quiet!'

'They all think I'm in love, or else have some awful crime on my conscience. That's what happens to talkative people when they're silent for a change. Their motives are always misunderstood.' Ven, flying down the street, had reached the gate of the Haven before Gard came out, as she learned from Netta; so, waiting, greeted her cousin when she appeared. 'And it was only that I was dying to come along to you. I'm going to have lunch with you, Gard.'

'Well, I'm glad to hear it. Perhaps you can cheer her up. We can't find out what's the matter with her,' Meg said, with a worried look. 'We've been trying all morning, but she won't say what's wrong.'

Gard was tired and white and strained. She looked at Ven in dismay. 'Ven, you shouldn't have come. We decided you'd better not. They'll be mad—'

'Let them. They will, too, for there's cricket before school. I don't care; I'm not going.' Ven had her by the arm. 'D'you want anybody else, Gard, or just us two?'

'I don't want anybody at all,' Gard spoke under her breath. 'I can't talk about it, Ven.'

That was what Ven had feared, and had come to prevent. If Gard had not told the girls, feeling unable to bear their sympathy yet, she would be equally unable to bear the usual chatter of those who did not know. She must not wander off by herself, but she must be rescued from the crowd.

'Right-o! I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me, though. I can't go trotting back to Iris and the Mule now, as if you wouldn't have me, with my tail between my legs; and I couldn't possibly have lunch *alone*! I'd be too bored to eat. So you'll have to take pity on me.'

The look Ven gave Meg and Nancy and Netta was enough to keep any one from following them. With her arm through Gard's, she led her down to the sands, and found a sun-warmed corner under a groyne, where they could sit on a beam with their feet dangling over a pool, and an upright post for each to lean against.

'This is gorgeous!' Ven said cheerfully, and spread sandwiches, buns, and apples between them on the groyne. 'I love to let my feet hang down; don't you? Particularly when there's water underneath. I got oranges and chocolate as I tore down to catch you. What a feast!'

'It's topping, unless the oranges roll——' Gard reached hastily to catch one. Her movement dislodged the apples; and Ven, with a shriek, grabbed wildly at her sandwiches, and pushed the packet of chocolate underneath her, and rocked with laughter as the apples went overboard one by one and ominous splashes came from the pool below.

'Gard, now you've done it! Couldn't you remember we were out at sea? Now you'll have to get down.'

'And we'll have to peel the apples, or eat them salty;' and Gard swung down to the sand to the rescue.

'I've got a knife; we can't spoil them by eating them salty. Can you reach them? It's as good as Hallowe'en. Better, with the sea for a tub. If I come down too, all the rest of the grub will follow,' and Ven leaned over dangerously to watch.

Gard was trying to reach the apples, which were bobbing just beyond her reach. She glanced up at Ven, perched high on the beam. 'Well, if you're coming down, jump off, don't fall off,' she advised. 'You'd make a worse splash than the apples. I'll have to go in after that chap;' and she pulled off one shoe and stocking, and planted one foot well in the pool, and picked out the apples.

'Cheers! You're the heroine of this picnic!' Ven leaned over to receive the apples. 'They shall stand in a row on the top ledge, and we'll get them down when we're ready for them,' and she twisted round with some difficulty to decorate the top of the groyne above their heads with the fruit. 'Now that's safe. Can you get up again? As I was saying, I'd be bored to tears if I hadn't somebody nice to have lunch with. It's easily the most important bit of the day. So I came along to you. Did your father tell you any more, Gard?'

Gard jumped. She had been hoping Ven would ignore the subject. But already the morning's thinking had carried her on a step. Ven must never know, because she would be so awfully upset; that was what Gard had seen as she thought alone. The resolve was driven home by Ven's thoughtfulness in seeking her out and in spreading a feast to cheer her up. It was awfully decent of her to care so much. Ven was jolly nice, and it would be utterly rotten for her if she ever understood. As she peeled an apple before replying, her face very grave, Gard was making up her mind that Ven should never know, not only because that had been her father's wish, but for Ven's own sake.

Unconsciously, she spoke in an older way as she answered sombrely, 'He told me a lot. But it was all family business, and he said I mustn't repeat it, so you can't ask me to, Ven.'

'No, of course not,' Ven agreed, looking troubled. 'But is it as bad as it seemed at first, Gard?'

'There isn't any money, so I can't go to the High.' Gard spoke shortly, because she could not trust her voice to keep steady. 'It's no use talking about it, is it? Father's awfully sorry; he knows how—I feel. But it can't be helped. There isn't any money. You can't alter things like that.' She bit her apple hard and said no more.

Ven, staring out to the distant blue point beyond The Stretch, felt that it was true. There was no use in talking of things which no one could alter, especially things which hurt so much. All Gard could do was to put up with them bravely. It might be possible to help her there. But she wondered if her help were needed, after all. 'She's only a kid, but she's being awfully sporting about it,' she said to herself, as she gazed at the wide bare sands. 'I believe she'll get along all right in spite of this. She isn't going to crumple up. I wonder if I would? I'm afraid I might. I've always had everything I wanted. She looks as if she's got plenty of fight in her yet. I believe she's grown up a lot since this morning. It's queer; it's only three

hours; but she doesn't talk just like a kid. She used to be a perfect infant, but she sounds as old as I am now. I guess she's done a lot of thinking this morning. Were you very late?' she asked aloud, and saw the relief in Gard's eyes as the subject was changed.

'Fearfully. I lost a mark; first this term. That can't be helped, either. What about you?'

'Same here, but I haven't any record to break. It's only my fourth day. The Duke said she hoped I wasn't going to be unpunctual, and I promised it shouldn't happen again, so I've got to keep an eye on the time. If it happens again this afternoon, she'll think I'm a very bad lot. I say, Gardy, you'll have to tell your crowd, you know. Couldn't I do that for you? They all knew you were—what you were planning, didn't they?'

Gard nodded. 'I've talked a lot about it. Meg's going next year; and Netta, and Nancy, and Agatha,' her voice trembled dangerously. 'Winifred's the only one who isn't going. She and I will be left behind. Ven!—oh, I can't bear it! There's nothing left. Oh, Ven, how can I go on?'

Ven swept the remains of the feast into her satchel and held out her arms, and Gard, who never cried, dived into them and hid her face in her cousin's lap. Perched three feet above a deep pool, it was an extremely difficult position; but Ven kept her balance and gripped Gard closely to her, though for a moment she feared lest they should follow the apples.

'Kiddy, it's rotten! It's awfully hard lines! I feel it's feeble to talk about it, when things are so utterly awful for you; but I'm sure it's better than keeping it inside. You'll feel better, too,' she said, as Gard broke down before the sympathy in her voice and touch, and shook with difficult sobbing. 'Gard, you know how badly I feel about it, too. If there's any mortal thing I can do to help, you've only got to ask me. I'll stand by you in every way I can. Look here, dear, you simply couldn't tell the rest of your crowd; I know that. You'd have collapsed and howled. I'd have done it myself. But they'll have to know. I'll tell them for you, shall I? I'll just say your father's decided against it. That's enough for them to know—'

'No!' Gard quivered and struggled to speak. 'No, I won't have that. They'll think he's unkind, or that he doesn't care about me. Tell them things have happened, but you can't say what. I'd rather they knew we can't afford it than have them think badly of father.'

'You *are* a sport!' Ven said warmly. 'I'll tell them I don't know what's happened, and they're not to tease you. It's true; I don't know all about it.'

'No; and you aren't going to, for—for he told me not to tell,' Gard sobbed.

Ven hugged her again. 'You want to tell me, don't you? We could talk it out together. But if he said that, of course we can't; and Gard, lying in her arms, agreed, and left it at that.

'Please do tell the rest, Ven,' she whispered at last. 'I simply couldn't. But they'll have to know. But you won't talk about it at the Castle, will you? It's the kind of thing they'd love to laugh over, and make a joke about; they knew I was going. I couldn't bear it; it's no business of theirs.'

'The decent ones wouldn't,' Ven said gravely. 'My crowd would understand. They're all quite nice. But it might get round to the younger ones, and they might not have the sense to take it properly. I won't tell Rita, anyway, Gard. Time enough for her to know later on, when you won't feel quite so bad about it. And I'll tell Netta and Meg.'

'Won't I go on feeling bad? I feel as if nothing mattered much now,' Gard said drearily; 'as if something or somebody were dead, and it's rather queer for the world to go on at all. Some one is dead, of course; the girl who was going to the High. I don't feel as if anybody else had come alive instead of her yet.'

'Oh, but you won't go on feeling like that! It's knocked you over, but you aren't going to lie down under it, Gard. You couldn't possibly. You've got too much in you,' Ven said warmly.

'I don't feel like it at present. I'm all tired, and nothing seems any good. Ven, there's nothing to look forward to now. What's the use of trying?'

‘Oh, but that’s talking like an infant! There’s every use! What about your father? Doesn’t he tell you to pull yourself together and buck up, and make the most of the Haven since you can’t have the High?’

‘Yes, he said all that,’ Gard whispered brokenly. ‘But I can’t, Ven! I can’t!’

‘Not yet, but you will,’ Ven said resolutely. Then she spoke in a new tone; it would do Gard no good to go on like this. ‘Gard, I want something awfully badly. I’ve been wanting it ever since Monday. I want to go into the Violet Tea Rooms, at the end of the pier, and have a cup of coffee. But it looks so fearfully swank that I’m terrified to go alone. Won’t you come with me now, and hold my hand? We’ve still an hour, and coffee would be ripping after lunch in this wind. My inside parts are all salty. Come on, won’t you?’

‘The Violet Rooms? Ven, that’s far too swanky a place!’ Gard raised her head in protest.

‘That’s why I want to go, just for once, for the fun of the thing. They won’t mind us being in school things, and I’m sure we’re quite tidy. I’ve seen our girls in there.’

‘Rita and Moll go for ices after school. I’ve never been in.’

‘We’ll have ices too, but after the coffee.’ Ven had her own private views as to Gard’s needs at the moment. ‘The coffee will buck her up, and the ices will be cheering,’ she thought, as she repacked her satchel. ‘Eat that orange on the way up, there’s a dear! I can’t lug him back to school. He’d make my desk smell, and the Duke wouldn’t like it. And the girls would turn up their noses, and say it was so *vulgah* to bring oranges to school. You simply must save me from that!’

Gard laughed a little, and Ven began to take heart.

Gard took the orange also. ‘We can’t have both coffee and ices, Ven!’

‘Can’t we? I can! I’m game for both, any day. I haven’t much loose cash, but I can afford a little bust-up now and then. Come along. It’s a jolly decent little place; if only you’ll hold my hand. I could never go in without somebody to back me up.’



He gave the little boat a strong shove.

The daintiness of the tea-rooms, the violets on the china, the violet hangings and curtains and softly-tinted amethyst walls, the violet dresses and hair-bows of the waitresses, were as soothing to Gard's troubled soul as the coffee was stimulating to her jangled nerves. Ven did

not look nervous, in spite of her professions of fright; and the ices were big and comforting. So were the faces of Rita and Moll when they called in for some chocolates.

Ven nodded briefly to them, then turned to Gard, to tell a thrilling story of that morning's happenings in school. Gard barely glanced at her enemies, and gave close attention to the story.

Rita and Moll withdrew to express outside their disgust that their particular haunt should be invaded by a Haven girl.

'It's all that Ven! Nothing's been the same since she came!' Rita said indignantly.

'There's not been so much ragging these last few days, has there?' Ven asked, at the little violet-covered table. 'I thought not. I knew I hadn't seen any. That's something, anyway. You see, Gard, I've managed to throw about the feeling that it would be considered bad form in a big school. And that counts for a lot with Iris and the Mule. They'll put it down heavily if they see any more of it now. Oh, haven't I referred to the Mule before? All Form A have titles. There's the Mule, and the Iris, and the Queen, and the Lily, and Lettuces. It sounds rather like a Camp Fire; they have names like those. They haven't found one for me yet. My name doesn't make anything very obvious. It seems to have stumped them. Now we'll toddle back to the Haven, and you'll go in and look up this afternoon's work. I'm sure you did badly this morning, so you may as well remove the bad impression. And you'll send Netta or Meg out to me on the beach for five minutes before I have to run back to satisfy the Duke.'

Gard obeyed, with a very grave face. But Ven knew the little treat had done her good, and did not grudge the shrinkage of her pocket-money.

CHAPTER XV. HELPING HANDS.

‘Do you know what Rita and the Bs are calling you?’ Muriel challenged Ven, as she came in with thirty seconds to spare.

‘No; what? I know they’ve been hunting a name for me. “The Nuisance”?’

‘No; “Vendela the Vandal.” They say you’ve come barging in among us, not caring twopence for any of our ways and feelings. You seem to have taken your cousin into their pet tea-shop.’

‘Gard’s rather in trouble to-day. I was trying to cheer her up,’ Ven said soberly. ‘Oh, nothing to do with any of us! Family matters. I saw Rita. I thought she’d be upset. I don’t mind being a Vandal in a good cause. That coffee did Gard heaps of good. Rita’s an idiot!’

Though nothing was said in Gard’s hearing to hurt her, the news Ven had given to Meg and Netta soon spread round the school. Many of the girls, who saw no prospect of the High School for themselves, rejoiced to hear they were not to lose her, though naturally sorry for her sake. Her closest friends—all the girls were her friends, but in varying degrees—were greatly distressed, knowing as well as Ven what this blow must mean to her; but, warned by Ven, they did not speak of it so soon. They tried to show their sympathy in other ways, and were very gentle towards her, giving her her way in every argument. In spite of herself, Gard had to laugh at last at Meg’s continual, ‘Oh, all right, if you’d rather, Gard dear!’

‘It’s awfully sweet of you, Meg, and you’re a dear; but if I didn’t know what’s the matter with you, I’d think you’d gone off altogether. Do for goodness’ sake say what you mean, and argue things as usual. You’ve agreed with every single thing I’ve said this afternoon. I’m getting fed-up with it. Do talk some sense, for a change!’

‘I’ll do any mortal thing you like, captain,’ said poor Meg fervently, and gasped and ducked as Gard hurled an atlas at her.

‘Well, if that’s all the thanks I get for trying to be kind and sympathetic, I’ll take a rest!’ she said indignantly.

‘All the same, it will be jolly decent to have you for always, Gard, if there’s really no help for it.’ Winifred had been waiting her chance, and now spoke eagerly. ‘We’ll be frantic with joy if we can really keep you altogether. You’ll be able to boss things when Christopher has to leave, won’t you?’

The same idea was spoken freely among the juniors, and in time reached Christine. She questioned the children closely, then caught Gard as she was hanging about the gate waiting for Ven to join her, almost reluctant to go home lest that should mean talking things over with granny and the boys.

‘I say, kid, you’re coming to tea with me! Yes, you are; I want you badly. I can’t spare very long, for I must get through my prep.; but we’ve both got to have tea, so we may as well have it together and have a chat. I want a talk with you. I won’t take “no”! You can send word home by your cousin that you’ve been kidnapped for an hour. Come on, I won’t let you get out of it.’

Gard gasped. But she had no desire to escape. To be invited by Christine was an unusual honour, and was always a great joy. She had been before, and had longed to be asked again.

She ran to meet Ven and explain. ‘Granny won’t mind. She knows all about old Christopher. But it feels mean to let you go all that way alone, Ven. And you were so jolly nice at lunch-time!’

‘I expect I’ll lose my way, or cry all through the lanes, for loneliness. But I’ll try to exist without you for once, Garda. It’s a jolly good plan. I’ll make it all right with granny. You fly along back to Christopher.’

‘Didn’t Gard say this Christine had wanted to go to the High, and had had to give up the idea?’ Ven pondered, as she walked away alone. ‘That’s all right. She’s been through it. She’ll do the kid heaps of good. I’m jolly glad she’s asked her. Awfully decent of her to think of it. I’ve got to get to know “Christopher.”’

Christine’s talk during tea was of school, the coming matches and exams.; and her questions were all of Ven. That was a subject on which Gard had much to say, and in which Christine was keenly interested; so much so, that they almost forgot the tragedy they were both avoiding. But when tea was over, Christine made Gard sit on the window-seat in her own room, and, sitting beside her, plunged headlong into the difficult matter. ‘Gard, I heard all about it at school.’

‘Yes.’ Gard bit her lips. ‘I knew you had. Christopher, it isn’t easy to talk about it. If you know, isn’t that all right? I know you’re sorry. There’s no help for it. There isn’t any more to say.’

‘There’s a lot more to say!’ Christine said, with energy. ‘If there’s no help for it, of course I’m awfully sorry; you know that, as you say. But *if* there’s no help for it, then I want to know what you’re going to make of things, Gard. I don’t think it’s too early to ask you. If you haven’t any plans, you’ll be inclined to go all to pieces just now. You knew what you hoped to do if you went to the High School. But if that’s all off, you’ve got to start again. You aren’t going to let everything go just because you can’t have the big thing you want, are you?’

Gard looked at her, her face quivering. ‘Christopher, don’t bully me too much. I don’t want you to think too badly of me. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I feel as if I can’t think. The bottom’s dropped out of everything, and I don’t seem to care. Nothing matters now. I’ve always been looking ahead to the High, and getting ready for it. If I’m not going there, what’s the good of trying? What’s the good of anything?’

Christine laid a hand on her knee. ‘Gard dear, don’t hate me. I’ve been through it. I know how you feel. But that’s talking like a slacker, Gard. I’m sure you aren’t one.’

Gard turned to the window, her head drooping against the frame. ‘Christopher, I think I am. I’ve never been one before. But I feel just flattened out, and as if I simply couldn’t begin again. How can I go on, with nothing to look forward to? I feel as if I’d died; I said so to Ven. The real me is dead, and nothing’s left. Call me slacker if you like. I can’t help it.’

‘You forget that I’ve been there myself,’ Christine said again. And then, very determinedly, ‘But you aren’t going to be a slacker, Gard. You couldn’t; you aren’t one. You’ll pull yourself together and do big things yet. Kid, I know how hard it is. I felt broken all to bits when it happened to me. I’d hoped for the High too, you know, but father died, and mother couldn’t manage to send me. I knew it was hopeless, and I’d got to put up with it somehow. And at first I felt, if I crawled through life at all, it would be the most any one could expect of me. But Miss Hedges was a dear, and she talked to me, and told me all she’d expect from me in the school, until I felt there was something left after all. It bucked me up tremendously. And mother looked to me for help, and that pulled me up too.’

‘But, Christopher, you’ve been just everything to the school for the last two years!’ Gard spoke swiftly. ‘We don’t talk about it, of course; you’d hate it if we did. But you’ve simply made the school for us juniors. You don’t know what a lot they all think of you. And you’ve always helped me heaps and heaps.’

Christine flushed. ‘Gard, I’ve tried to help the school. Miss Hedges said it was up to me, if I were staying on to finish here, to see that I left my mark on the school, and that it was a deep and good one.’

'You've written it all over the school, and everybody knows it, down to the kiddiest infant of the juniors!' Gard said vehemently. 'Your staying here was the best thing that ever happened for us and the Haven, and we jolly well know it, too.'

'And who's going to do it for the next lot of juniors when I leave?' Christine asked simply.

Gard gave her a startled look. Then, reddening, she sat gazing out of the window, twisting a yellow plait round her finger.

Christine went on quietly, 'I'm leaving in another year, probably; I'm over sixteen now. I'm to train for office-work. I hate the idea. I wanted to be a teacher, and be with girls all my life; but there's no help for it, I'm afraid.'

'You'd make an awfully jolly one!' Gard said longingly. 'Couldn't you get a scholarship, or something?'

'I tried for one, which would have meant two years at the High School, but I didn't get it,' Christine said quietly. 'Never mind about that. It was another knock-down blow, of course. But I've made up my mind to the business stunt now. I dare say it will be quite interesting.'

Gard glanced at her quickly. 'Christopher, what little pigs we've been! And I most of all, for you've been jolliest to me. We've let you be topping to all of us, and never dreamt you were having such a rotten time yourself! Some of us might at least have said we were sorry, if we'd understood. I think you've been awfully plucky!'

'It was awfully difficult now and then. So won't you believe that I know how difficult things are for you now, Gard? And won't you do what I want? It's only what I've tried to do myself.'

Gard sat with bent head. At last she spoke, without looking up. 'You want me to try to buck up too, and—and to go on as if things really mattered still, and do my best for the Haven, and not slack and feel crumpled up? I don't know that I can, Christopher. I'm afraid I haven't got the backbone for it. I could never be like you.'

'You might be a lot better. You lead the juniors already. I want you to lead the school when I leave. If you're to do that, you must throw yourself into it now with all your might, and put every bit of you, and everything you've got, into making the Haven the jolliest school there is. It won't be done by slanging the Castle girls. It will be done, Gard, if you'll work for the school for all you're worth. The trouble has always been that girls left and went to the High as soon as they were fit for anything—any responsibility, I mean, or any leadership. Now here are you, leading the younger girls already, and the Haven's going to be your school, your only school. I know it still hurts, dear,' as Gard looked at her, white and wincing, 'but it will hurt less and less the more you put into your work here. Honestly, Gard, even for your own sake, you mustn't go on thinking of things that can't ever be. That hurts most of all. I've tried it, and I know. You'll be far happier working for our school than dreaming of another one. If you'll only see the big chance there is before you, of being everything to this school in a year or two, I'm sure you'll rise to it. I never had such a chance. I wasn't Junior Captain, or even much of a favourite, at your age. Nobody would have cared much if I'd left. But you know how the rest look up to you already. You know how they're rejoicing to think they won't lose you after all. You can do anything with them, Gard, and that means you can do anything for the school. Aren't you going to rise to it? It means putting away thoughts of the High School, and not allowing yourself to grouse and whine over what can't be helped; and throwing yourself altogether into the Haven and working for it hard, with all you've got in you. But it also means a big new chance for the school; and—and if *I have* helped you at all, then you must know what it will mean to the younger girls. I'm sure you'll do it!'

There was a long silence, while Gard gazed out into the little garden, her lips tightly closed. Each of her hands gripped one of her plaits, as if she must hold on to something to keep herself from trembling. At last she relaxed, with a tired sigh, and turned to Christine. 'I

hadn't thought of it all round like that. Father asked me to buck up and work hard, and not spoil my chances by whining about the High; and I saw the sense of it, of course. But I didn't quite feel I could rise to it; not yet, anyway. But I hadn't thought about there being anything for me to do for the school. If—if I could do all that, and be like you, it might feel worth while. I could never be like you, of course, Christopher. But I'll do the best I can. I will play up, and not be a baby. But you'll help me, won't you?"

Christine took both her hands, and drew her close and kissed her. At any other time, or from almost any one else, Gard would have hated it; but to-day she was sorely in need of comfort, and she loved Christine. 'Gard, you'll do more than I've done,' said the elder girl. 'I'll help you all I can. You are plucky! I knew you would be, once you saw it. We'll start at once, by talking over everything from the school's point of view and acting together. We've always done it more or less, but now we'll be a little committee of captains, and I'll tell you all I think, and you'll consult me. Shall we do that?'

And then Gard, with a shock, remembered Christine's homework, and fled, with fervent apologies and thanks.

She was walking soberly down the lane towards the house, her mind busy with the new thoughts Christine had suggested, when Svante appeared at the gate. 'Saw you coming,' he said carelessly, in a tone which never hinted that he had been keeping watch for her. 'Say, old thing, how's your prep.? For I've got the dinghy down, and I'm off for an hour's fishing. Care to come?'

'Oh, Aunt, I'd love it more than anything! But have you time?' An evening's fishing was her greatest treat; but Svante rarely offered it, except in holidays.

'Going to make time. I've a craving for fish for breakfast, and so has granny. It's all right; she knows you're coming. Chuck your books in, and lug down a basket.'

Gard came joyfully, but paused at the gate. 'What about Ven? I'm rather a pig! Wouldn't she like to come?'

'Got too much prep. Says so, anyway.'

'Don't you believe her, then?' Gard asked soberly, as they carried the baskets down to the shore.

'No! She's dying to come. But she thinks it's all right to tell fibs in a good cause. She's a sport!'

'What's the good cause, Aunt?'

'Knows we want to talk, and doesn't want to be in the way. Jolly decent of her to understand.'

'But if she'd like to come!' and Gard paused irresolutely at the top of the shingle. 'Isn't it rather mean?'

'Not a bit. She'll have heaps of chances,' Svante said cheerfully, and went down to the boat. 'Come and lend a hand, old thing! This is your show, not Ven's.'

'If you think it isn't mean, I'd rather have just you, Aunt. Ven is jolly, though; she's been awfully kind to-day.'

'Good for her! I say, old Turkey asked me to give you those;' and as Gard clambered over the side, he threw a box of chocolates on to the seat, gave the little boat a strong shove, and leapt in beside her.

'Help! Turk? Where did he get them?'

'Nipped out and bought them for you at Blakey's—all on his own; never said a word to me. I know he'd got two bob he'd been saving for something,' Svante said carelessly.

Gard sat down, hugging the box. 'Aunt, do you mean Turkey went and spent all he'd saved up just to give me a present?'

'Said I was to shove it at you, and tell you to buck up,' Svante explained briefly.

‘Oh, he shouldn’t have done it! But how simply sweet of him! Funny chap!’ and Gard gave a shaky laugh. ‘As if a box of chocs. would make up for—and yet it does help. Not the chocolates, but the idea. It’s nice to know he cared enough. He must have cared a lot! Auntie, people have been so jolly kind to-day! And it does help!’

‘Glad they’ve been decent. Who, for instance?’ Svante was rowing vigorously out to sea.

‘Ven came to have lunch with me, just to cheer me up, and brought extra things, fruit and sweets, to make a feast of it. Then she took me to have coffee and ices in a lovely shop. And the girls all tried to be nice, and offered me apples and caramels and things, and let me say whatever I liked, and wouldn’t argue. Of course I got mad! But they were trying to be kind, you know. Then Christopher took me home to tea with her; and you take me out fishing; and Turkey buys me chocolates! It’s awfully sweet of everybody. Auntie!’

‘Yes’m?’

‘Christopher talked a lot of sense to me, and I’m going to try to do as she said.’

‘What did she say?’ Svante was busy with his line.

‘Father said it first, in his letter,’ Gard said thoughtfully. ‘You know, I felt knocked over altogether, and as if nothing in the world would ever matter again.’ Svante nodded briefly. Since hearing the news at tea-time he had known what she must have been feeling all day. ‘Father told me to buck up and do my best, and not waste time whining, and it would be all the more to my credit if I did well now.’ Svante nodded again. ‘I just felt I couldn’t, and that it would be no good trying any more. Then Ven came along at lunch-time, and she said I mustn’t crumple up, and she was sure I’d got too much in me to be flattened out by anything that happened. I felt all crumpled up, but I didn’t want her to know, or anybody. I wondered if I could pretend I’d got some—some spunk in me, even if I hadn’t.’

‘And then you found you had, after all. Of course you have—bags of it, old thing! You aren’t the kind of girl that lies down and lets a steam-roller go over her. It may have knocked you silly for a minute. Don’t blame you for that. But you’ll be up again, full of beans, in no time.’

‘Then Christopher grabbed me and took me home to tea, and she put it up to me to buck up and pull myself together for the sake of the school. She talked a lot about the school, and about what I could do for it; and about herself, and told me things I hadn’t known before. She’s awfully plucky, Auntie!’

‘So’re you. You’re as good as she is any day.’

‘Oh, I’m not! But I’m going to try to be. She’s expecting me to, and I can’t let her down.’

‘That’s the stuff!’ Svante said heartily. ‘You can’t let any of them down; not the dad, or Ven, either. They’ve all put it up to you to do the plucky thing, old chap, and you will. You’ll be sporting over it, or you wouldn’t be you. I’m as cut up about it as I can be, but I’d have felt a bit sick with you if you’d sat down and howled. You simply couldn’t. But, I say, I feel awfully mean. Turk and I are getting all the best, and you’re being left. Feels as if we oughtn’t to stick on at the Coll., when you can’t get to your school.’

‘Oh, that’s silly! Father particularly said you must stop at the Coll. It always matters more for boys.’

‘Well, naturally.’ It did not occur to Svante to argue such an obvious point. ‘But it is rotten. I feel hideously bad about it. Perhaps things will get better, old girl, and you’ll be able to go after all.’

‘Oh no,’ Gard said swiftly; ‘it’s no use thinking of that. Father sees no chance of it, so granny’s to take my name off the waiting-list. You know how long ago we had to put it down; wasn’t I excited about it?’ She caught her breath for a moment. ‘Well, if they take my name off, there’s no chance of getting it on again. They’ve heaps of girls waiting for vacancies. It means giving it up altogether.’

Svante could say nothing to this, for he knew it to be true. He baited his line in silence; and Gard went on hurriedly, 'Besides, that's what they all say—that I'm not to think any more about the High, but work for the Haven for all I'm worth. I'll never do any good there if I'm always thinking perhaps some day I may go to the other after all.'

'That's a dead cert.,' Svante said decisively. 'I say, old thing, you are a sport, you know!'

'I'm not,' Gard said in a low voice; 'but I am going to try to make the best of things now.'

'That's the stuff!' Svante said heartily again.

'I couldn't let you down either,' Gard said hurriedly. 'I knew what you'd want me to do, even before we'd talked it over. Now I won't babble any more. We're not likely to catch anything while I'm going on like this. It's been awfully decent of you to listen; but I was wanting to—to—'

'Unload it on to somebody. Well, I guess you know you can always count on me, old thing!' Svante said warmly.

CHAPTER XVI. THE FIRE-GIRL'S BUNGALOW.

In the teeth of a south-west gale Gard and Ven struggled along to keep their appointment with the Fire-Girl on Saturday afternoon. The wind had changed in the night, and Ven had been wakened about five by the roar of the sea on the shingle, and the shriek of the wind as it tore through the shielding trees and swept past the house and raced away inland to the Downs, with all the force of miles of open sea behind it.

'This is something like — ' and Ven sat up in delight, then snuggled down to lie listening. 'Garda's sleeping through it; but she's used to it. Won't we have a jolly walk to Barbara's this afternoon?'

'You'll go, then?' Gard queried, when this remark was repeated to her as they dressed. 'It'll be awfully rough.'

'Go? Of course I'll go! Won't you?'

'Oh, I like it; but I wasn't sure if you would.'

'Don't be an idiot! I'll love it! I'm not used to it, but I'll love it all the more for that. It will be a new experience.'

'The Stretch?' said Turkey at dinner-time. 'Rather you than me. You'll have to crawl.'

'I know Gard's mad on The Stretch, but I didn't know she was as mad as this; or that she'd infected Ven so badly,' Svante remarked. 'You'll be black-and-blue, you silly objects. What's the tearing hurry? Can't you stretch a point and wait a day?'

Ven threw a cushion at him. 'It's very important. We're going out to tea. Besides, we like the wind.'

'Tea on The Stretch? To-day? Don't envy you. I'll come along to-morrow and look for the fragments. You'll be blown into little pieces.'

'Oh, we're not going to have it outside! We're invited to tea in a bungalow; if it hasn't been blown away.'

Svante looked up quickly. 'How's that? Who is it? I hadn't heard.'

'My music-mistress lives out there,' Ven explained. 'Gard and I are invited to meet her sister. She's called Barbara, and she's about my age, and she's a morris-dancer.' And the girls retired to get ready.

'You stunned Auntie with all that information,' Gard remarked, as she hunted for her seldom-used boots. 'I suppose I must put these beastly things on, or granny won't let me go. Auntie hadn't heard a word about Barbara. He was gasping like a fish. The "morris-dancer" part was the last straw.'

'I meant it to be. He had to hear about her. We couldn't go on having friends he hadn't heard about. But we won't say anything about the fire-making part of her yet, Gard. She may want that to be a secret.'

'If we were sensible, we'd go by road, and then come back along the path, with the wind behind us,' Gard said, as they set out; 'but it's three miles, and awfully dull.'

'Oh, don't let's be sensible! The shore won't be tame, anyway. We'll fight our way along.'

It was a fight, and not by any means a tame one. They went down to the sands, as the tide was only coming up, and struggled along, as damp with the flying spray from the breakers as with the driving rain, every step a battle, till the great waves, sweeping up the sand, forced them to take to the shingle. That was impossible walking in such a gale, so they staggered up to the shelter of the hedge, beaten back one step in every two, and collapsed to gasp for breath in the first hollow, while the wind shrieked overhead and left them in peace. The bay was a

wild sight, white caps to the horizon, the distant point hidden in mist, sky and sea gray and bleak, no living thing in sight but screaming sea-gulls.

‘Oh, if I were only one of you, how I’d love to be out there in it all, playing with it! I’d scream for joy, too!’ Ven cried to the gulls, then continued: ‘There’s not a soul about but us, Gard. Sea-gulls haven’t any souls; you can see that by their eyes. The Fire-Girl won’t dance out-of-doors to-day.’

‘She won’t be expecting us, but we must go on now. If we went back, nothing would ever make the boys believe it wasn’t because we couldn’t get there.’

‘Oh, we’re going on! I can’t be done in by any kind of weather. Think how Auntie would jeer! If we couldn’t get as far as the bungalow, I’d go somewhere to have some tea rather than go home and confess.’

Gard laughed. ‘We’ll get there; but she may be surprised to see us. But she did ask us, so she can’t say anything. I say, Ven’—and as they rested behind a sandhill she put a question which had been on her mind for two days—‘you had a letter from your mother at the same time as mine came from father, didn’t you? It was horrid of me, but I never asked if you had good news. I’m afraid I only thought of myself that day.’

Ven looked worried. ‘Mother said she was fairly well, and they’d had a pleasant time so far. It was a very short letter, and there was something queer about it. It wasn’t anything she said, exactly; but it left me with a bothered feeling, as if she might not be as well as she was making out. I hardly felt it at first; but I read the letter again while you were out with Svante, and I don’t quite like it. I believe there’s something more, something they haven’t told me. It’s no use worrying, but I do wish another letter would come. I sha’n’t feel quite happy about her till I’ve heard again.’

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ was all Gard, with her fuller knowledge, dared to say.

‘I can’t see what they’re doing in London, anyway,’ Ven went on, her tone indignant. ‘They never said a word about London to me. I thought they were going south at once. And mother doesn’t say a word to explain.’

‘They must have changed their plans. Father often has to. Let’s go on, shall we?’ Gard felt they had said enough.

It was still hard work stumbling along in the soft sand of the pathway, the wind beating upon them, so that they were glad to take the shelter of a hillock whenever one offered. They were breathless and panting when they stood at last on the steps of the black-and-white bungalow, and read the name over the door, ‘Pro Tem.’

‘I like that better than most of them,’ Ven murmured. ‘Some of the names are silly. I never think things like “Stickitout,” and “Restawhyle,” and “Takeiteasy” are funny. They just make me cross. I wonder if there’s any family, Gard? Miss Holt never mentioned any one but Barbara.’

‘They can’t live quite alone. She couldn’t be left alone all day, every day of the week,’ Gard remarked, and hammered on the door with her knuckles.

‘I wonder if it will look like railway-carriages inside? I’m fearfully thrilled; aren’t you?’ Ven whispered.

‘I was in one once; it was very nice. They have awfully thick glass in the windows on the sea side; and sometimes shutters, too.’

‘They jolly well need them,’ Ven said fervently, as the wind howled past the corners of the house.

Then the door was thrown open, and Barbara Holt stood there. ‘You’ve never come in all this gale!’ she cried.

A gasp of satisfaction broke from Gard; and ‘Oh, how jolly nice of you!’ from Ven. For she wore all the signs of the Camp Fire—the long yellow gown, with brown hanging fringe of

soft leather under the arms and round the hem, and the band of brilliant beadwork across her forehead above the thick black plaits which fell upon her breast.

At sight of Ven's ecstatic face she laughed, as she closed the door. 'I'm only imitation. I'm not the real thing. But do come in. I thought you'd want to see my gown, so I just put it on.'

'I've been dying to see a real one!' Ven said fervently. 'It's awfully good of you. How pretty it makes you look!'

The Fire-Girl looked at her in astonishment; but the words had been spoken so naturally that she could only accept the compliment. 'I expect that's because you aren't used to it. I'm sorry our front-door opens right into the sitting-room. That's one disadvantage of a railway-carriage; there's no space for passages. The rooms all open out of one another. Of course, several of them have doors to the veranda as well, so that takes the place of a passage. But we don't use the veranda in this wind; it's beautifully sheltered most days. We have a tiny, cosy sitting-room as well. Audrey and I call this the Blue Hall.'

The door opened into a big central hall, all the seaward side being the glass windows of the railway-carriage, and opening on to a broad, wooden veranda with steps down to the shingle. The big furniture was all here—couch, and big easy-chairs, a table, piano, settee, and bookcases, and stands with ferns and plants. There were heavy curtains at the window, hanging to the floor and shutting out all draughts; and these were all of a soft, deep blue. The walls were blue-washed, the carpet was dull-blue felt, and the cushions and rugs were in shades of blue. Barbara, in her tawny robe, with brilliant beads around her head and hanging about her neck, and green and brown bulrushes reaching up from the hem of her gown, was a bright note of colour in the softly-tinted surroundings.

'Oh, what a pretty room!' Ven said happily. 'And all that side looks out at the sea! I'd love to live in a room like this!'

'What pretty things you have!' Gard said wistfully, for in her home full of boys everything was for use and hard wear. 'But where are your doors? You said the other rooms led out of this.'

Barbara laughed, and drew back one heavy curtain. 'Here are the kitchen and the bathroom and the scullery, and Mrs Batching's bedroom at the far end, all at right angles to this big room. Mrs Batching lives with us, and does all the useful things for Audrey and me. Her husband was a sailor, and her boys are all at sea. She loves it when it's stormy; she feels she's nearer them. You catch the wind at those corners, where the house stretches out its arms to the sea. I call the end rooms the finger-tips. I know what it's like, for I have the other one. Come and see the rest of our rooms; or will you be bored?'

'We're dying to see the rest,' Ven assured her fervently.

Barbara laughed, and led them across the Blue Hall and through another curtained doorway. 'This is the Brown Study. It's two yards square. Audrey and I live in it a good deal when we're not on the veranda; we're out there nine-tenths of the time. But when we have to come in at night, or on days like this, we use the study, except for meals, and it keeps the big room tidy. We can't mess about in there when the door opens right into it.'

'Oh, this is gorgeously cosy!' Ven cried eagerly.

'What a lovely little room!' Gard looked round in delight. 'But you've no chairs, and no table!'

'There isn't room. You sit on cushions on the floor, or on a stool. Table-work is done here;' and Barbara showed a drop-slab of wood under the window. 'You bring in a chair when you want it. The sewing-machine is here; with a cushion on it, it makes a good stool. Those square boxes,' she said, pointing to seats with cushioned tops, 'are all Audrey's music. There's a typewriter under that window-seat. This is the glory-hole, where we work and make all the mess we like. Then through here, in the wing opposite the kitchen, are our bedrooms. This is

Audrey's; and she led them into a pretty little white room, with curtains and hangings, rugs and quilt and china, of rosy-pink. 'I call this the Rose Garden. And I'm in the finger-tip;' and she passed on into the tiny end room.

The girls followed eagerly, longing to see her own domain. And here again they cried out in delight, for its colouring was that of her Camp Fire gown—soft yellow walls, brown wood, curtains of brown and green and fawn, pictures in brown wood frames, some in water-colour but more in brown tints, carpet of deep leaf-brown, ornaments in brown Dorset ware, or little wooden curios from Switzerland—bears and chalets and carved photo-frames.

'It's a Camp Fire room!' Ven breathed in delight.

'Audrey calls it the Beech Wood. But it is Camp Fire colours. They're autumn colours too, though. I love them.'

'Oh, so do I! Oh, is that the Law? I know it, of course. I think it's topping, but awfully hard to keep.—Come and look, Gard! I've told you about it;' and they went together to stand before an illuminated card of the Law of the Fire, decorated with Camp Fire symbols and framed in poker-work.

Gard read it aloud. "'Seek Beauty. Give Service. Pursue Knowledge. Be Trustworthy. Hold on to Health. Glorify Work. Be Happy!'" What a lot there is in it! It might have been made for me, just now. If I kept all that, I'd be doing pretty much what they all want me to do.'

'You are keeping it, old thing! Don't you worry!' Ven said cheerily.

Barbara looked at Gard curiously. 'Is it a story? Will you tell me?'

'Oh, but we came so that you could tell us things!' Ven said hastily, not at all sure that Gard would care to tell her troubles to a stranger, and Barbara had hardly yet become a friend. 'Won't you please tell us all about the Camp Fire? And why do you say you're only pretending? And I want to know about your dances, too. I suppose there isn't room for you to do one for us inside?'

'Well, not much of one!' the Fire-Girl laughed. 'Won't you take off your coats? I'm sure they're wet. I ought to have asked you before. That wasn't "Holding on to Health!" We'll take them to the kitchen. Are you damp underneath? Oh no, you're all right. Then come to the lounge and we'll have tea. You are like one another!' she said, looking at them intently, as they put their caps aside and tried to straighten their wind-blown hair and yellow plaits. 'You're cousins, aren't you? Which is the one with the funny name?'

'That depends on what you call a funny name!' Ven retorted. 'Vendela! Hildegard!' she said, pointing first to herself and then to her cousin. 'Which is the funny one?'

'I meant Gard. That's what you put in the letter. It sounds like a boy. I couldn't think what it could be short for.'

'Couldn't we have tea in the cosy room?' Gard begged. 'I'd love to sit on the floor.'

Barbara laughed. 'Will you? It would be better, of course, in case any one comes to the door. I'd have to crawl under the sofa; I don't usually receive visitors in my gown. But there's hardly room for three.'

'We'll sit close together,' Ven said happily. 'Oh, on the floor, please!' she begged, as Barbara went to raise the table by the wall. 'We'd heaps rather. And it will feel like a Camp Fire meeting. They always sit on the floor, don't they?'

'Mrs Batching will be shocked if I allow visitors to sit on the floor;' but Barbara lowered the table again, and threw down three cushions instead. 'I'd rather, of course. Audrey and I often do. Audrey chose the colour for this room; she said we must have a brown study, so that we could dream dreams and see visions in it. I'd already bagged brown for my room; but this is a different brown, and hasn't any yellow, so I let her have it. The blue cushions and things have overflowed from the hall.'

The tiny room had brown-paper walls, blue carpet and curtains, and the china, which presently appeared for tea, was blue-and-white. The cushions heaped about the room were of all colours, orange and emerald and gold, and made spots of colour as bright as the beads on the Camp Fire gown.

‘You do have pretty rooms!’ Gard said longingly.



‘You’ve never come in all this gale!’ she cried.

‘Well, don’t you?’ The Fire-Girl looked at her curiously. ‘You spoke like that before. Don’t you trouble to make your rooms as beautiful as you can?’

‘I’ve never thought about it,’ Gard confessed. ‘Granny only thinks of what will be useful and won’t spoil, and all that. We’ve three boys, you know.’

'I don't see why you shouldn't have pretty things because you have boys! There's your own room, anyway. You could start with that.'

'Barbara, isn't this just like a Camp Fire meeting?' Ven insisted, as they sat on the floor on blue and orange cushions, and Barbara, on a big green one, poured out tea from a big brown pot. 'I've only read about the meetings; I've never been to one.'

'Help yourselves,' said Barbara. 'You're nearer the food than I am. There's homemade jam and bramble-jelly. Never been to a meeting, did you say? Neither have I.'

'You? You've never been to a meeting?' exclaimed Vendela.

'I've never even seen one; except my own. I don't believe I know any more about Camp Fire than you do. I told you I'd be a disappointment. Don't say I didn't warn you!'

Ven gazed at her, a scone half-way to her lips. 'I don't understand,' she said at last. 'You've got a gown? And beads? You know all about it. I only know what I've read in two stories that had Camp Fires in them.'

'That's all I know. I've read more than two, though; four. What were yours called?'

Ven told the names of the books which had interested her. 'I wanted badly to know more, but I didn't know any way to find out. I loved all the ideas. But I was sure there was more.'

Barbara reached to the wall and took a booklet from a shelf. On its cover was a Camp Fire Girl in her gown. 'There are good points about living in a bandbox; you can reach everything without getting up. That's the handbook, the Manual of the Camp Fire. It tells you all you can know without having a guardian and being a proper member.'

Ven fell on the book rapturously. 'That's what I've been wanting! Oh! the whole list of what you do to get beads! And pictures! Look, Gard, the weirdest little things!'

'Pictures of all the honours you can work for, in symbols. There are some jolly good photos, too,' said the Fire-Girl. 'It tells you almost everything.'

'It's what I've been aching for for years! I didn't even know there was one. Where did you get it? Who told you? It wasn't in any of the books I read!'

'No; they only told enough to make me want more, so I wrote to her,' and Barbara, a touch of colour in her face, took a brown and yellow story-book from the shelf and gazed at it pensively.

'You wrote? To the author of those Camp Fire books?—authoress, I suppose I ought to say. Oh, what a topping idea! I never dreamed of doing anything so brainy!'

'Did she mind?' Gard asked curiously. 'I don't think I'd have dared, if I had thought of it.'

'I was awfully nervous about doing it. I felt it was frightful cheek, and I said so in my letter. But I said how much I'd enjoyed her books, and how I wanted to know more, and asked her, if she could spare a moment, to tell me how I could find out all about the Camp Fire.'

'And she answered the letter? I'd never have had the cheek to write to an author!'

'She didn't answer at once. When she did, she said she was very busy on a new story, and had hardly a minute, but if I'd write to an address she gave me, I'd get the Manual, and it would answer all my questions; and if I could find a guardian and five other girls, there was no reason why we shouldn't have a camp. She said she hoped we would, and she hoped we'd enjoy it.'

'And did you? Did you know other girls?'

'I knew plenty!' There was emphasis in Barbara's tone. 'I was going to a big day-school in London; it was two years ago. There were thirty girls in my form. But — —' and she stopped.

'What happened? Wouldn't they join? Or didn't you like any of them well enough?'

'Or couldn't you find a guardian?' Gard asked, with interest.

'I think perhaps Audrey would have done it if the girls had been keen. But they wouldn't go in for it. The whole school was very keen on the Guides, and had several companies, to which nearly everybody belonged. I'd never joined. The Guides are all right, and perhaps even

better than Camp Fire, for some girls; but the aunt we lived with had objections to them, so I wasn't allowed to join when I first went to school, and afterwards I felt I didn't want to. The girls couldn't do both; and those who weren't Guides were working for exams., and thought they wouldn't have time for anything more. I was swotting for an exam., too, but I thought it would make the work all the jollier to have a Camp Fire in the background. I tried to get enough girls among those I liked, but I couldn't, and one or two laughed and made fun of the Camp Fire ideas, so I gave it up.'

'What rotten luck!' Gard said sympathetically.

'You mean, you gave up the idea of forming a real camp? You didn't give up Camp Fire for yourself; we can see that,' Ven remarked. 'What did you do? Wasn't there one anywhere you could join?'

'I couldn't hear of one near enough. There aren't very many, even in London. I was still very keen,' the Fire-Girl said soberly, 'and I felt I wouldn't be done, so I decided I'd carry on by myself.'

'How topping!' Ven cried in delight. 'Tell us how you did it!'

'I just did everything by myself, exactly as it said in the books. I had the Manual, and the four books, and I read them all carefully, and then went ahead. I bought material, and made my gown exactly like those in the pictures; it's as near the colour as I could get; but as I've never seen a real one, I can't be sure it's right.'

'But where did you get the leather? Doesn't that have to come from the Camp Fire people? Would they sell it to you, if you weren't a member?'

'Oh, any one can get leather, for making bags and fancy things. I bought some strips and fringed it, and got some more for my collar and for decoration. I decorated the gown by degrees. It had to wait till holidays; but I had rather lonely holidays, and I used to do a lot to it then. I bought beads, in the right colours; I don't suppose they're the right shapes, but I got the prettiest I could; and I only gave them to myself when I'd really honestly done the things in the honours list.'

'You gave them to yourself?' Ven's eyes danced.

'I had to. There was no other way to get them,' the Fire-Girl said, with dignity, and lifted the long chain that hung from her neck. 'They were awfully pleased at school when I began to be keen on going to the baths, and playing tennis in the lunch-hour. I'd always said it was too much fag. But they never knew I was winning red honours for swimming and for outdoor games. We went to relations in Scotland for Easter, and no one but Audrey guessed why I was determined to climb any mountain I could reach that was over two thousand feet, or why I walked and cycled such a lot. But it all meant red honours for my chain. Auntie wanted me to be out taking exercise every minute I could, so she was awfully pleased about the way I did it. I didn't tell her the real reason, for I knew she'd say it was silly. The green ones I got for my gown, and for photography, and even for mending and a little dressmaking. It was a fearful fag, but I did it.'

'Darn all your own stockings?' Ven asked, twinkling.

'That's one honour. I've won most of my orange ones since we came here. There are more chances of doing cooking and housework here.'

'But what did you do about meetings?' Gard asked eagerly. 'You couldn't have them all by yourself!' And then she stopped suddenly, remembering how she and Netta and Meg and the rest had seen the lighting of the fire out on the shore. Had they unknowingly watched one of the Fire-Girl's lonely meetings?

'I have meetings regularly, all by myself.' Barbara's tone had a note of defiance, as if she feared they would laugh. 'I light my fire or the candles; didn't you see the three tall candles on the shelf under the Law in my room? I repeat the Law, and promise that I'll try harder to keep

it; and I take my new honours and string them on my chain, and write them in my record book; and I say the ceremonial verses; and then I read little bits out of the Manual about the Law, or I read the magazine. There's a Camp Fire magazine, and I get it once a month. I never open it till the meeting, but always read it sitting by my fire. It tells about Camp Fire Girls all over the world, and I feel almost as if I were really one. Then I put out the candles or the fire, saying the proper verses as I do it, and sing a good-night song; and I always close my meeting by opening the window and making the sign of Fire to all other Camp Fire Girls, wherever they are. You know the sign?" and she stood and crossed her hands, the fingers flat, then raised her right hand, sweeping upwards in a wide curve, till her arm was high above her head, the first finger pointing upward. "That's the greeting, the salute."

"Oh, how pretty!" Ven breathed, gazing up at her, as she stood, the brown fringe falling back and leaving her arm bare. "I think you do belong to the Camp Fire, whether you have a ring or not!"

"I love the way you've carried on by yourself. It's simply great! And I think you're awfully plucky!" Gard said warmly.

CHAPTER XVII. THE LONE STAR CAMP FIRE.

That picture of Barbara, in the long yellow gown, standing at her open window, with bare raised arm and finger pointed upwards, sending her greeting to all the girls who were enjoying the things she could not have herself, and then turning to 'carry on' bravely alone, working out honours and ceremonies without any of the help of companionship and rivalry, made a deeper impression on Gard than she realised at the time. Eager to hear more, she questioned, and listened, as Ven, less imaginative, poured out a stream of questions on every point; but again and again, as she tried to 'carry on' and fight her way through her own problems, Gard remembered the Fire-Girl, and found help and encouragement in the thought of her courage and strength.

'What about your morris-dancing?' Ven was asking eagerly. 'Is that a part of your Camp Fire? Or is it quite a different stunt?'

Barbara came to earth again. She laughed, and sat down, and went on with her tea. 'Yes and no. The Manual says Camp Fire Girls go in for folk-dancing; they often have dances round their Council Fire, so I sometimes do a morris-jig before my fire. But the Camp Fire people mean Indian dances really. I believe there are books of Indian dances. I didn't want to do those; I'm not an Indian, and I'm not pretending to be one. There seemed no sense in an English girl doing Indian songs and dances. We were well-trained in English folk-songs at school, and, of course, I love them. And a girl I knew there had a sister who was keen on English folk-dances, and went to classes in London to learn them. I asked more about it, for I thought that was a real bit of Camp Fire I could do. If they did folk-dances, I'd do them too, but English ones. I found out about the classes, and begged to be allowed to go. It all meant more Health honours, of course; that's why I have so many red ones. Audrey backed me up, and went with me at first, but she found the morris too tiring. She's jolly good at country-dances. We didn't have folk-dancing at school, only the ordinary kind. I loved the folk from the first class, and the music beats any other dance-music I ever heard. You simply can't sit still. A girl I met at classes used to work in one of the big gramophone factories, and she told me that when an orchestra went down to play our dances, so that they could be put on records, the clerks and people couldn't *walk* out in the passages; they all found themselves beginning to dance; and I can quite believe it. Listen! I'll make you want to dance, too!'

She reached out to the shelf again and took up a thin little pipe and put it to her lips.

'A penny whistle!' Ven cried rapturously. 'Can you play tunes on it? Oh! Oh, how simply topping!'

The Fire-Girl was piping, and watching their faces. "'Rodney,'" she said, and laughed. 'You were both beating time. I'll try again!—"Lads a Bunchun." You're holding yourselves in. Don't you wish you knew the movements? Here's another—"Bean Setting." Very easy, both to play and dance, once you've got your step. Hasn't it got a lilt about it?—"Ladies' Pleasure." Can you resist it? And they're real pipe tunes, almost all within one octave, or just outside it. Think of all those changes out of eight notes! Listen to this—"Laudnum Bunches." One of the most perfect, isn't it?'

'It's beautifully jiggy! But the dancing we saw you do was all jumpy!'

Barbara laughed. 'Then listen to this—"Lumps of Plum Pudding." That's a real jig, if you like. I owe my pipe to that tune. I saw the jig danced once at a demonstration, and instead of the piano or fiddle, a girl stood at the side and piped; the sweetest notes you ever heard. She was the daughter of the Director, to whom we owe all the dances. He collected them, and the

music, from old men all over the country. His daughter plays a real morris pipe, a wooden one, the real thing. When I heard her, I thought I'd have a shot at a tin whistle. It doesn't do so badly, though, of course, it isn't as sweet as the wooden one. The real pipe has only three holes. I'd like to have a try at one some day.'

She played tune after tune, and instinctively their hands and feet kept time to the rhythm. As she paused between each, she told the curious old name—'Bobby and Joan'—'Constant Billy'—'Trunkles'—'The Old Woman Tossed up in a Blanket'—'Glorishears'—'The Buffoon.'

'It's real pipe music, of course; that's why it fits so well. I play the piano, you know; but for morris music I'd rather have the pipe.'

'It's so awfully jolly to be able to play it anywhere!' Gard said longingly. 'I'm going home to have a try on Greg's whistle. But I don't know any pipey tunes like those.'

'Now hear some country dances!' and Barbara played 'Chelsea Reach,' 'The Old Mole,' 'Ruffy Tufty,' and many another, while they listened in rapt enjoyment; and Gard found another picture to take away, of the Fire-Girl sitting on the green cushion in the tawny gown, with drooping black plaits and hanging coloured beads, and eyes fixed on the thin white pipe about which her long fingers played so swiftly and deftly.

'You'll be bored stiff!' Barbara said suddenly, and laid down the whistle. 'I forgot the tunes didn't mean anything to you. To Audrey and me they're alive, with movements, and memories, and friends, you know. You should have shut me up long ago. I'd go on all night.'

'Oh, we weren't bored! Do, please, go on!' Gard begged.

'But we've more questions to ask,' Ven said prudently. 'And we shall have to go soon. You won't want us here all evening. Won't you tell us about your name? We can see the bulrushes on your dress. Why did you choose it?'

'I didn't know many Indian ones, so I had to take one out of "Hiawatha." I like the way a bulrush grows so straight, and holds up its head so steadily and so high.'

'And won't be crumpled up by anything. So you thought you'd be like your name!'

The Fire-Girl changed the subject. 'I like the way you can take your pipe anywhere,' she said to Gard, whose enjoyment of the music had been even deeper than Ven's delight. 'I often play in my bedroom, or out on the shore. A piano keeps you tied to one spot.'

'You could play sitting on a groyne,' Gard said wistfully. 'Could you teach me some of those tunes, do you think, if I learnt the scale? But are you staying here? You haven't been here long, have you?'

Barbara looked grave. 'Only a month. I worked too hard for that old exam., and had a bit of a breakdown during the spring. It was to please uncle. He's been very good to us since father and mother died, but he's awfully ambitious, and expects us to be brilliant, especially in school work. I'm not brainy, but I did work hard trying to get a good place in the exam., for I knew he'd expect it, and it was too much for me. I collapsed after the exam., and, of course, I'd failed altogether. He was frightfully cut up about it; he hadn't wanted me to hurt myself; nobody had thought it would be too much; and I never told that I had headaches, and wasn't sleeping—of course, it never occurred to me. It would have felt too much like grouching, and you can't if you're Camp Fire. So I kept on too long, and paid out for it afterwards. He wanted to do anything he could to get me strong again. The doctor said I was to live out-of-doors as much as possible, and not do school work, but just enjoy myself, and have all the exercise and fresh air I could for a few months, and I'd be all right again. We went off to Scotland for Easter, and then Audrey and I planned how we could be away from town for the whole summer. She was tired of town too, and said she'd like a summer by the sea. But she wanted something to do, something she could be keen on. She heard through a friend that Miss Duke, at the Castle school, was wanting a music-mistress, and she thought she'd like to try it. She'd

always wanted to be a teacher, but she'd never had the chance; she said it would feel like going back to school again. She got the post, and uncle agreed after a lot of coaxing, and bought this bungalow, and did it all up for us in the colours we wanted, and furnished it for us, and provided us with Mrs Batching as a cook and chaperone. And Nibbles to take care of us; you haven't seen him yet. He's only a little dog, but he makes row enough to be heard in the village if any one even goes across the shingle at night. We're perfectly safe with Nibbles. He's out with Audrey to-day; she's away spending the day with friends. I don't think we could have found a much airier spot to spend the summer in, do you?"

'Hardly!' Ven laughed. 'Oh, then you'll be here all the time! How topping! May we come and see you again? Couldn't you teach us a dance?'

'Couldn't you teach me those tunes?' Gard pleaded.

The Fire-Girl laughed, and sat gazing at them, a touch of colour in her face. 'I'm not supposed to do any work. I don't see how I could teach you two. I'm sure it would be *very* hard work!' she mocked.

'Not if we were keen enough!' Ven said quickly.

'I'm sure you're often lonely,' Gard suggested. 'Wouldn't you like to have somebody coming regularly for lessons? Aren't you dull?'

'Never dull, and never lonely,' Barbara said promptly. 'But if you get a whistle and learn to make the notes come clear and true, I'll give you some tunes. As for dances, that's a big order! You'd be far better to wait till you can go to a real teacher. But I'll do them for you now and then, if you like. The one thing I miss here is the class I used to go to every week.'

'Wouldn't it make up for it if you had a class for us instead?' Ven hinted. 'We'll soon find you some more girls, if two aren't enough.'

Gard's face clouded. 'You danced to Rita Tompkins and Moll Sanderson last week. Are you going to teach them, too?'

Barbara glanced at her quickly. 'I wasn't thinking of it. They never asked me to teach them. Why? Don't you like them?'

'Gard doesn't go to the Castle,' Ven said swiftly. 'I do. I wish I didn't. I'd rather have gone with her. But I wasn't given any choice. The Castle girls don't get on well with the Haven girls.'

Barbara looked interested. 'But isn't that very awkward for you?'

'Oh, I'm pulling through! They found they could put up with me.'

'Ven would make friends anywhere,' said Gard. 'Besides, her cricket's top-hole. They're glad to get her.'

'Barbara, may I ask you one thing?' Ven leaned forward eagerly. 'Did you tell Rita and Moll about the Camp Fire?'

'I never breathed the word. I don't go round talking about it. It's only for the right kind of people.'

'Oh!' Ven and Gard sighed in relief, and looked at one another.

Then Ven burst out, 'But you told us! Why were you so ripping about it to us?'

'Did you know we were the right kind?' Gard queried breathlessly. 'But how? You didn't know us! And why were Rita and Moll the wrong kind? Oh, Barbara, *do* explain!'

'They knew nothing about it,' Barbara said briefly. 'They might be right enough if they'd known; I don't know them well enough to say. You don't babble about a thing that means a lot to you to people you've never seen before and may never see again. I had no objection to telling those two; but I'd never have dreamed of beginning Camp Fire to them on their first visit. I'd much prefer to wait and see what kind they were. If they had asked, I'd have told them. You can't be mean about a thing you've enjoyed yourself. But they'd never heard of Camp Fire. I took them into my room, and they looked at the Law, and the Desires, that I have

framed, and said how funny the little pictures were. It was quite plain they'd never seen or heard of them before. They didn't even say they liked the Law; they just thought the symbols were funny and weird. I wasn't going to begin explaining to girls like that! You're different. You asked if you might come because you were keen on Camp Fire, so I've told you all I know.'

'It doesn't feel like our first visit,' Gard said gratefully. 'It feels impossible and silly to say we didn't know you two hours ago!'

'If I were talking Camp Fire language, I should say you came in the spirit of the Fire, and I welcomed you in the same spirit, and so we never felt strange at all.'

'Did you pipe for those other two?' Ven asked, looking at her with curious eyes. 'You danced for them.'

'No, I danced for Audrey—she asked me to—and for the sake of having her fiddle music to dance to. When I'm alone I have to do without music; I can't pipe and dance both at once! Audrey's very good about playing for me, so when she asked me to dance for those girls, I felt I must. But I wasn't happy in it; I didn't like doing it. It felt like showing off, just to amuse them. I hate that. They ask me to dance in town sometimes to amuse visitors, and I always loathe it. I didn't pipe to those girls! They'd have said that was funny, too! But you're different; you're really interested.'

'Interested! We simply love it! Won't you tell us more?' Ven opened the Camp Fire Manual. 'That's how you were dressed when I saw you dance on the sands!' and she pointed to a picture of a group of American girls, all in middies and short skirts.

'They dress like that for camping and tramping; so I made myself a middy for the shore, and it was just as easy to have a cream one, and a brown skirt, as any other colours. I knew I'd look like the real thing to any one who knew; but I guessed there wouldn't be any one who would know.'

She rose and lifted three tall candles from the mantel-piece and set them on the floor, while Gard and Ven watched her, bright-eyed and eager. Lighting a long taper, she touched one candle into flame and handed the taper to Ven.

Ven rose to the occasion, and knelt beside the candles. 'I, Vendela Morris, am frightfully keen to be a Camp Fire Girl! I light this light for Camp Fire!'

Barbara's lips were twitching. 'That's not right. You should say "For Wohelo!—Work, Health, Love!" And you should say, "I desire to be." "Frightfully keen" is most improper!'

'It doesn't matter.' Ven was very much in earnest. 'It all means the same. Oh, I forgot the Law! "And I will try awfully hard to keep the Law of the Fire!" Now, you do it properly, Garda!'

Gard, kneeling, soberly repeated the correct version. 'I, Hildegard Svenssen, desire to be a Camp Fire Girl, and I will try to keep the Law.'

'That's better, certainly.' Barbara put out the taper. 'I wasn't exactly inviting you to become Camp Fire Girls, not being one myself. But if you really mean it, there's no reason why you shouldn't be as much one as I am, anyway. It's helped me, and it may help you.'

'We'll have little meetings on our own!' Ven said enthusiastically. 'We'll barricade the door against the boys, and we'll stand at the window and make the sign to all the other girls who really belong, just as you do. Couldn't you lend us some of your old magazines to read at our meetings?'

'Right! You'd better read the Manual too. I can live without it for a day or two. We'd better have our meetings at the same time,' Barbara said, with laughing eyes. 'I've always wanted to feel there was really somebody making the sign at the same moment as I was. Some day we'll have a meeting together. I call my camp the Camp of the Lone Star, because there's only one of me. What shall you call yours?'

The cousins looked at one another. 'That will need some thinking about,' said Ven.

As they put on their coats before going home, she deliberately dropped her handbag and kicked it under the Fire-Girl's bed. About half-way home along the path she discovered her loss. 'My bag! I must have left it at the bungalow. I don't remember having it on the way home. I'll go back —'

'I'll come with you,' Gard said quickly. 'You may have dropped it on the path. We'll hunt together.'

'No, I don't believe I ever brought it away. It was a present from mother, and I'm awfully fond of it. I'll race back and ask Barbara if it's still lying on her bed. Don't you come. Greg will be calling for you to tell him his good-night story. You mustn't do him out of his Saturday treat. If you don't hurry, he'll be in bed before you get there.'

Gard hesitated between the two duties. 'It seems mean to let you go back all that way alone. I hate to do it.'

Ven settled the matter by flying off along the path with a wave of her hand, and Gard knew she would not be able to catch her.

'Silly thing! She isn't looking on the path at all, and she may quite well have dropped it. I'll go on and see Greg, and then if she isn't home I'll go back and help her search the path;' and Gard turned and hurried home to Greg.

'Under my bed?' The Fire-Girl, still in her gown, stared at Ven incredulously. She had been sitting on the floor by the three candles, dreaming and thinking about these new friends. She had meant to question Gard about something puzzling in her tone and face, but had found no opportunity; but she felt sure something lay behind Gard's troubled look. Perhaps she would hear about it at a later meeting.

'I think so. I'm nearly sure. Do you mind if I look?' Ven pleaded, standing on the top step. 'I'm awfully sorry to trouble you.'

'Oh, that's all right! Come in and look, but I don't believe it's there. I'm sure I'd have seen it if it had been on the bed. How could it get underneath?'

Ven, following her to the brown and yellow and green room, dived under the bed and produced the bag triumphantly. 'I kicked it there. I wanted to come back and speak to you without Gard, and I had to make an excuse. Do you mind?'

Barbara broke into an understanding laugh. 'What's the matter with Gard? I'm sure there's something. Are you going to tell me? How jolly nice of you!'

'I just want to thank you for giving her something new to think about, just at this moment when she's down on her luck. She's had a rotten thing happen to her. All her life she's been dying to go to the High School in Eldingham. Her friends have gone, or are going, and she'd been promised she should go too. Two days ago she was told they couldn't manage to send her, and she must give up all thoughts of it, and be content with the school she goes to now, an awfully rotten little place. She wouldn't let me say that if she heard me; and in some ways it's all right, but it's not a patch on the High. It's been a frightful blow to her. I thought at first it would knock her all silly. She's pulling herself together and being awfully plucky over it, but it's frightfully rough on her, and she's still feeling very bad about it. You, and your Camp Fire talk, and the music, are all new ideas, and have given her new things to talk and think about. It will help her a lot. I just wanted to say, thank you awfully.'

'Poor kid!' Barbara said pitifully. 'But if I've helped, it's been by accident, so you mustn't thank me for that. If you think of anything I can do that will really help her, Ven, you'll tell me, won't you? I'll be glad to do anything I can.'

'I know you will. I will tell you if I see any way; but you've helped her already. You came along—or, rather, we came to you—just at the right minute. She was trying to buck up and

make herself believe she really cared about things still; and then you happened, and she's honestly interested this time.'

'Oh, but don't you think that's the way things do happen?' Barbara said gravely; 'I mean, if you try to carry on, however bad things seem, something comes along to help you. I know I've found it so.'

'It's jolly to think perhaps it will, anyway. Thank you again for helping Gard to-day. Now I must fly, or she'll be coming after me. Don't tell her I told you. She doesn't want to be sympathised with, you know.'

'Just to be helped.' Barbara nodded. 'I understand.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE NEW GIRL AT THE HAVEN.

'I say, Gard, have you got a new girl at the Haven?' Ven met her cousin at the gate on the Monday after the visit to the Fire-Girl. 'Sorry I didn't wait for you to-day, but I was having a bit of an argument with Letty; she comes quite half-way, and we walked on together. I'd seen you with Christine.'

'She wanted to talk to me. I know your own lot want you sometimes, Ven. Yes, there is a new little kid in the First Form. She says her people have only just moved here. Why? How did you know?'

Ven looked at her curiously. 'What's her name?'

'Enid Bland. What's up with you, Ven?'

'Don't you know who she is? Didn't she tell you?'

'Who she is? What do you mean? Who is she?' Gard demanded, utterly mystified.

'She obviously didn't tell them who she is,' Ven remarked. 'Of course, if she's a little kid, she may not see how hopeless it is to try to keep it dark. But you may as well know. The horrid truth will come out in a day or two, considering that all our school know it already. Enid Bland, dear Gard, is Rita Tompkins's cousin. Now, what are you going to do about it?'

Gard sat down heavily on the garden-roller. 'Rita's—oh, this is the limit! Oh, Ven, how silly! Why? And—oh, how mad Rita will be!'

'So mad, that she can't lie low about it. She supposed Enid would come with her, and has been arranging friends for her among our juniors ever since she heard the kid's family was coming to live here. They only broke it to her yesterday that the poor infant was being sent to the Haven. Rita evidently nearly died.'

'I'm sure she did,' Gard said grimly. 'But why are they doing anything so mad? I thought all Rita's folk were utter swanks.'

'This seems to be a bit of the family that isn't. Rita's version is that Enid's father says he doesn't like the Castle (so he *must* be an idiot; that's the way she puts it), and prefers the more demmy-something feeling of the Haven, and that's all she knows about it. Of course what she's trying to say is democratic, but she doesn't know that, nor what it means. Evidently Enid's dad knows something, and would rather have his kid find her chums among your lot, if some of them *are* shopkeepers' daughters—awful crime, isn't it? Oh, I've heard our crowd on the subject! I'm afraid I told them if a shopkeeper's daughter could bowl straight I would rather play with her than with any of Rita's snobby crowd; and so they call me a Vandal. But Enid's father clearly thinks with me; shows his good sense, I say. Now, what are you going to do about it, Gard?'

Gard sat frowning at the grass. 'It's weird and worrying. The rest will find out, whether I tell them or not.'

'Oh, Rita's told plenty of people, in her wrath. She's fairly fuming. The obvious thing to do is to exchange me and Enid,' Ven said airily, 'then everybody would be happy. But I'm afraid it can't be done. How old is the infant?'

'Oh, about nine. I've hardly spoken to her yet. I heard there was a new kid, so I asked Winifred's small sister Joan, who's also in the First, to look after her. But I was thinking I'd have to do more than that. She looks the kind who might need some looking after for the first week or two—shy and scared. I've no doubt Rita's been giving her all sorts of rot about what a horrid lot we are. Even if she only had yesterday to do it in, she could say a good deal.'

‘Are you going to take it out of the kid because she’s Rita’s cousin, and Rita’s been a beast to you?’ Ven demanded.

Gard sat with downcast face. ‘No, I won’t do that,’ she said at last. ‘I believe I would have done so before you came. I almost think I’d have loved doing it; but I know the boys would say it was a low trick, and you look at things as they do. Besides, things all seem different. When real big things happen to you, sometimes things that seemed big before turn out to be little and soft. I can’t be bothered with Rita and her silly rot. I won’t bully the kid, Ven; it isn’t her fault. She can’t help it any more than you could help being my cousin. I don’t suppose I shall have anything to do with the infant, anyway; she’s too small. I expect the other kids will be decent to her, if none of us set them against her; and I don’t think the rest will, if I don’t. She’ll get on all right.’ She picked up her books and went into the house.

Ven followed slowly, thinking to herself. ‘Gard’s growing up. She was just an infant when I first came. That shock last week made a lot of change in her. She’s trying to be a decent captain to her juniors now, and really putting some work into it. She’d have been good to this new infant, if the poor kid hadn’t such unfortunate relations. Of course, Gard would soon have heard. It was just as well to warn her. I wonder if she’ll ignore Enid now, because of Rita? Or if she’ll rise to the occasion, and ignore the relationship? I believe Gard’s better than she knows herself;’ and she waited hopefully to see if she heard any more.

Ven had her own problems, and was meeting them in her own way. As she walked into the senior room next morning, Letty took up the argument of the afternoon before. ‘Ven, have you thought any better of it? I tell you, it isn’t playing the game!’

‘Rot!’ said Ven briefly. ‘Have you consulted the Mule, as I told you to?’

‘Not yet.—I say, Muley,’ said Letty as Muriel entered, ‘have you heard the Vandal’s latest? She swears she’s going to practise her newest bowling stunts on the Haven team! *Before* the match, mind you!’

‘It’s perfectly fair,’ Ven argued. ‘If they get used to my play, I’ll be getting used to theirs. But Lettices hasn’t put it properly. All I said was that it was perfectly natural for me to play cricket with my cousin on the sands on Saturdays, and if she chose to ask some of her school friends, no one could object to that. If I refused to play because her friends were there, it would look as if I didn’t like them; and I do. Sorry to hurt your feelings, but they’re a jolly crowd, and I’m quite willing to have a game with them. How you can expect me to cut all Gard’s friends because they happen to be Haven girls, I don’t know. I don’t intend to do it, anyway.’

‘But you belong to us,’ Muriel argued. ‘You might stick to us, Ven. I’m sure we’ve been jolly enough to you.’

‘You’ve been quite jolly. I’m trying hard to do the decent thing by your school, but you make it awfully difficult when you ask me to turn down Gard’s friends. I can’t do it.’

‘But you can’t coach those girls to play against us,’ Queenie remonstrated, joining in, and carrying the argument a step further.

Ven turned to her swiftly. ‘No, you’re right there. I’d got that length, too. I won’t coach the Haven girls, or give them advice, or criticise their style, now that I’m in the Castle team. But there’s no reason why I shouldn’t play with them. It will be practice for me as well as for them. If they happen to find out things, or get any hints from watching my play, I can’t help that. I shall try to pick up ideas from them, too.’

‘You must know your play’s a million times better than any of theirs!’ Letty grumbled.

‘If Iris would rather not play me in the match, I sha’n’t mind a scrap. I’m not a bit keen to play against Gard. But I do say I’ve the right to play with her and her friends when I want to!’ Ven delivered her ultimatum.

'That's rot! You know we've got to have you,' said Iris, who had come in, and had been listening from behind. 'What's all this about not playing? Who's being a silly ass?'

The matter was explained. Iris knit her brows. 'You are an idiot, Ven! Vandal's the only name for you! Why can't you be content to stick to us?'

Ven turned on her indignantly. 'If sticking to you means chucking my relations, is it likely? I mean,' she continued more quietly, 'if I can only be loyal to you by being disloyal to my own people, how can you ask me to do it? What would you feel I was worth if I dropped Gard for you? You'd feel that I might let you down at any moment if some one I cared more about came along.'

The logic of this made a deep impression on Form A, who were old enough and clear-sighted enough to recognise its truth.

'That's so,' Muriel admitted. 'If you stick to Gard so hard, we can count on your sticking to us too. Is that what you mean?'

'I should have thought so. If I say I'll play for you, I mean I'll do it as hard as ever I can. Isn't that enough?'

'Yes, I see now,' Iris acknowledged. 'Right-o, Ven! We won't rag you any more. If you want to play with Haven kids, I suppose you'll have to, though we'd love you better if you didn't.'

'If any of you care to come along and join in, I'm sure they'd be willing,' Ven suggested kindly; 'at least, I think they'd have you. I'd talk them round.'

'Thanks awfully! And eat our tea on the beach out of paper bags, I suppose!' The invitation was too much for Rita, who had been listening indignantly, convinced that she could have handled the matter better than Iris and Muriel were doing.

'Oh, don't you like a beach tea? I simply love it. It's better than in a shop, any day!' Ven said innocently. 'I can't get enough of the sea. I can't get near enough to it. Gard and I are going to start bathing before breakfast as soon as it gets a scrap warmer.'

Rita turned away wrathfully, followed by a laugh from Ven.

Iris took Ven by the arm. 'Don't trouble to ask the Haven crowd if they'll have us, old thing! We can get on without them. But don't go running after them *all* the time! We want you, and don't you forget it!'

Gard's problem was becoming acute at that very moment. Rita's fury over her cousin's extraordinary conduct in going to the Haven had been so great that silence on the sore point had been impossible, and she had relieved her feelings freely to any who would listen. But she had counted on the division between the two schools being deep enough to keep the truth from Enid's new schoolmates. In so doing, she had overlooked not only Ven's existence, but also the fact that there were Castle girls who, saying nothing about it, had private friendships with Haven girls; and in particular that Moll Sanderson's little sister Peggy was an unabashed and impenitent chum of Winifred's Joan, who was in the First Form with Enid; and that all attempts to make the children realise the enormity of the crime of their acquaintance had ended in ignominious failure. Moreover, Rita's own elder sister at the High School was one of a trio with Suzanne Thorne and Christine Haynes, and refused to allow any 'kids' nonsense' to interfere with the friendship, as she frankly informed Rita.

The news of Enid's astonishing and deplorable connection with the arch-enemy of the school filtered through to the Haven girls, as it was sure to do. It reached the parties most concerned first. Christine was too busy to have seen Suzanne; but Joan came to school primed with the facts, and overflowing with importance at being the one to carry the news.

'You're that pig Rita's cousin!' her shrill little voice rang out in the dressing-room, and she pointed an accusing finger at shrinking Enid.

Gard, entering five minutes later, knew in a moment what had happened; and knew, too, that the question which had been haunting her ever since she understood must be decided at once—the question of her own attitude to the little hostage from the other camp. Should she ignore her, or should she go to the rescue? Ten days ago she would have led the jeering crowd surrounding Enid, who had dissolved into tears. Backed up vigorously by Netta and Meg, she would have fallen on the unfortunate victim and made her life a burden. She could not do it now; but was it not enough to stand aside? Surely she was not called on to defend her enemy's cousin?

This argument, which had sounded reasonable enough at home, though leaving a vaguely unsatisfied feeling, vanished, however, at first sight of the crying child. Throwing every argument overboard, except the overwhelming one of instinct, which claimed that here was a case for interference, the captain of the juniors pushed her way through the crowd of First and Second and Third Formers. 'What's the row? Bullying a new girl? Look here, you silly infants, you know that simply isn't done! It's a thing we've never gone in for here, and we're not going to begin now. What has the kid done, anyway?'

'Gard, Joan says —'

'She's Rita Tompkins's cousin!' Joan, not to be done out of the joy of telling the news to the captain, proclaimed the awful fact at the top of her voice.

Enid quivered again. 'I can't help it!'

'Of course she can't! Don't be silly little idiots! What business is it of ours whose cousin she is?'

'But, Gard, she's *Rita's* cousin!' gasped Joan.

'My dear child, I'm not deaf! I heard you shriek that before. As it happens, I knew it last night, so don't think you're so fearfully wonderful! You forget I've a cousin at the Castle.'

Joan, crushed, was left with no response.

'I haven't done with you yet, infant!' said Gard forcibly. 'I thought I told you yesterday to look after Enid? Do you consider ragging her is the best way to do it? When you get a message from me, just buck up and do as I tell you. What's the use of having a captain if you don't play up? I expect you to back me up, every one of you. You certainly aren't doing it at present. I'm absolutely ashamed of you all. You're a set of little rotters!—As for you,' she said, turning to Enid, 'you mustn't howl for nothing, you know. Only kids who stay at home do that. You must buck up now you've come to school. Ever been to school before?'

'No,' Enid whimpered, struggling to control her sobs in the presence of this masterful captain who had come to her help. 'Rita said—she said —'

'That I was a horrid kind of girl, and would be a beast to you, I suppose?'

Enid's emphatic nod showed that this was correct.

'My dear kid, if you believe all that Rita says, I'm sorry for you. Judge for yourself, and don't be a little idiot. I haven't time to waste being beastly to you. But I haven't time to spare for running after you all the time either, so you'd better pull yourself together, and learn to laugh and answer back when you're teased. Anything's better than whining; just you remember that. Now, all the rest of you, and Joan particularly, I won't have you ragging her. She's a new girl, and you've got to be nice to her. They were nice to my cousin at the Castle, and we've got to be decent to their cousins if they come here. Enid didn't choose to come here any more than Ven chose to go there. She's got to put up with it; and you've got to show her the Haven's a heaps jollier place than Rita thinks. Suppose you get started at it at once. Joan, take her and help her to choose a book from your Form library. Find her that jolly one you were raving about last week.—Ella, you go too; you're librarian.—Daisy, see that she's in your rounders set at break.—Isobel, teach her to sharpen pencils properly; she's sure not to

know how.—Now fly, all of you, and see that you've made her say, before she goes home this afternoon, that the Haven's the most ripping school she's ever dreamt of!

'But, Gard!' Agatha remonstrated, as the children fled. '*Rita's* cousin, Gard!'

'Is it true, captain?' queried Meg, who had watched the scene with interest. 'How perfectly awful! Why is it?'

'Joan's been raving all night about having *Rita's* cousin in her form,' Winifred observed. 'Peggy Sanderson told her. I'm glad you sat on her, captain; it won't hurt her. I'd told her she mustn't bully the kid, but she'll take far more notice of you.'

'But, Gard, what on earth made you stand up for a relation of *Rita's*? There was strong disapproval in Netta's voice. 'Of course, we couldn't say anything before the infants, but I must say I was surprised at you. I agreed with every word Joan said.'

'*Rita* evidently expected us to make it hot for Enid, and I don't wonder,' Meg remarked. 'I do wonder you didn't jump at the chance, though, Gard. *Rita's* been hateful to you.'

'But Enid's only a kid! And in any case, what *Rita* does has nothing to do with her,' Winifred remonstrated.

'She's *Rita's* cousin. She's sure to be just like her,' Nancy argued, backing up Netta, as always. 'I don't blame the kids if they don't take to her, really. I don't see how they could. And I think it's awfully funny of you to stand up for her, captain.'

'Can't you see,' cried Gard, who had listened in growing exasperation, till at last her wrath flamed forth—'can't you see that it doesn't matter who a girl is? Any one's got the right to come here. That's where the Castle lot have always been so hateful, asking who a girl is before they'll be nice to her. What matters is that we can't have our kids ragging new girls and setting them howling on their second day. We've never been that kind of school, and we're not going to begin now; not while I'm one of the captains! And if you don't feel it would be awfully mean to make an infant miserable because she happens to be some one else's cousin, I'm sorry for you. I do; and I won't have it. If I see any more ragging, or hear any more about Enid being *Rita's* cousin, I'll put Christopher on the job. I'm positive certain she wouldn't stand it.'

'Well, I think it's hateful of you to be decent to anybody of *Rita's*!' Netta flung at her indignantly.

'I think Gard's right,' Winifred said sturdily.

'I think she's very weird,' said Meg.

'She's an idiot!' Nancy said calmly; 'and it's horrid of her. We all thought alike before.'

'We've always thought what Gard wanted us to think, till now,' Netta remarked, with more truth than she knew. 'But we aren't going to this time!'

'I should jolly well think not!' Edith said warmly.

'You can think whatever you like,' the captain informed them heatedly. 'What you do is all I care about. And if you bully Enid, or any other kid, I shall know, and I won't have it. It's bad for the school. I won't have those kids in the First turn into a horrid set of girls. You ought to back me up; but if you won't, I'll see the thing through alone. And if you won't listen to me, I'll get Christopher to help. I won't have that kind of thing going on. I won't let it start.' She picked up her books and went upstairs, while the others stared at each other in consternation.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAW OF THE FIRE.

'I've done enough,' said Gard, as she thrust her books into her satchel and looked across the table at Ven, busy with her prep. 'Ven, would you mind if I went out without you?'

Ven finished the problem she was working out. 'Got him! No, of course not, Garda. But don't you want company? How's the new kid getting on?'

'All right, I think.' Gard spoke lightly. 'She weeps now and then, but I've told her she must get out of it. It isn't that I don't want you, Ven, but — —'

'Do the others rag her about Rita?'

'I think they've stopped. They tried it on, of course. I'll tell you afterwards where I've been, but — —'

'Did you stop them?' Ven asked, eyeing her keenly, algebra forgotten in more human problems.

'I told them it wasn't done, and they'd got to stop. Ven, I want to talk to Barbara. I'll tell you about it afterwards, every word. Do you mind if I go alone?' Gard had not meant to say where she was going, but honesty forced the confession from her.

'Oh!' Ven forgot Enid. 'I'd love to come!' she said, but at sight of Gard's face went on: 'All right, old thing, I'll stick here and get on with my work! But tell me all about it in bed, won't you?'

'You're a sport, Ven!' Gard said gratefully. 'I simply must talk to somebody outside the family, and I thought perhaps the Fire-Girl would do. You and Auntie and I all seem to think alike, so you're no good. I want to talk to an outsider. Didn't you say,' she said hastily, because Ven's eyes were asking such searching questions—'didn't you say that they call you Vandal because you will go against all the Castle ideas?'

'Because I defy public opinion!' Ven answered solemnly. 'I did it again to-day, when I invited them to come and join us at cricket on Saturday. Don't get worried; they aren't coming! But they don't want me to go either. On some points they don't love me very much. Don't your crowd love you either?' She had no need to ask for the full story; it was obvious enough.

'We seem to be an unpopular family!' Gard said, with an uncertain laugh. 'I thought perhaps we might have a queer way of looking at things, and that might be why we do things they don't like, so I want to ask an outsider. Perhaps we're all wrong.'

'Oh no, my dear kid, we're not all wrong!' Ven murmured, as she reluctantly settled to work again. 'I'd love to go with her, but it's better not. I wonder just what happened to-day? I shall have to see somebody to-morrow. Winifred? She'd tell me. I'm not so sure of Netta or Meg. I shall look out for Winifred. Gard will tell me some of it in bed, but I'd like another version as well.'

Gard, nearing 'Pro Tem.' by the sandy path, stopped before she reached it at sound of clear, silvery notes. The music did not seem to come from the bungalow, but from the field side of the path. She looked about curiously, and then, following the sound, crept down a twisting path among the bushes into a little thicket of hawthorn and bramble.

A flutter of tiny wings, as a crowd of birds rose from the hedge, showed that she had not gone as silently as she had thought.

'I'm here,' said Barbara, from under a bush, 'and as you've scared away my audience, you may as well come instead.'

Gard peered among the leaves. 'Where are you? Oh, were you piping to the birds?'

Barbara was seated at the foot of a big tree, a wild rose-bush trailing over her head and almost hiding her. She drew the long branches apart, and the whistle gleamed in her hand. 'Come in! There's just room. Isn't Ven with you?'

'Not to-night. I asked her not to come. I wanted to consult you.'

'Nice of you. What's the row?'

'But were you whistling to the birds? Do they really listen?' Gard begged.

Barbara laughed, and put the whistle to her lips. 'Be very quiet! Just watch! This is the Tideswell Processional Morris.'

She began to pipe, and almost at once, with an excited flutter, a hedge-sparrow came to a twig a few feet away. His ecstatic little 'cheep' called up his friends, and they came by ones and twos in an eager flock, and perched, and twittered, and flicked their wings, and picked at their feathers, in fluttering delight that was plain to any one. With tiny, shrill calls they told one another all about it, and flew from twig to twig in excited little flights. Others came continually to join them—finches, thrushes, blue-tits, wrens, a robin, and some big noisy starlings, who screamed with joy.

Barbara paused. 'That's enough. You've had your treat for to-night. Now go away to bed. Good-night!' She waved the whistle and they scattered, to talk it over excitedly in every bush round about. 'It seems to thrill them,' she explained, laughing, while Gard watched and listened enthralled. 'I once came out here to practise, and I found they came to listen. I was sure of it by the excited way they went on, jumping and talking, and coming nearer, and flying about, trying to find the new bird, I suppose. They like the high notes best, though; I'm not at all sure that they hear the low ones. The shriller I get, the better they seem to like it. They're getting quite educated in morris tunes. Some day I expect to hear a starling whistling the "Helston Furry" or "Rodney"; they do mimic tunes, of course. Now, what's the row? Is it school?'

'Suppose you had an enemy,' Gard began—'a real enemy! Don't laugh; it is possible!—an enemy who'd always been horrid to you; and suppose her cousin came to your school, and the cousin was only a little kid, and hadn't had anything to do with the other one's horridness, the question is, would you take it out of the small infant?'

'Make her pay for her cousin's behaviour, do you mean? I should say not!' Barbara said emphatically. 'How can you even ask, Gard? How could you possibly?'

'That's what I say. I've been saying it hard all day. It's happened at our school. The kid's called Enid, and she's Rita's cousin. You knew Rita and Moll didn't like me?'

'I'd heard something of it,' the Fire-Girl assented. 'But what's the trouble? Who wants to bully Enid, if you don't?'

'Everybody. All the rest of our crowd. They think I'm mad. They've been saying that all day—very hard! I began to wonder at last if I could be wrong.'

Barbara looked at her curiously, guessing something of the defiance of public opinion which lay behind this evening visit. 'Why didn't you ask Ven?'

'Because I knew what she'd say. She'd say I'm right, and so would Aunty. Aunty?—oh, Svante, my brother! He's as old as Ven. He and Ven often think alike, and they're keen on being sporting, and all that. But they're all part of the family. I thought perhaps—just possibly—it was something queer about us that made us think the opposite of everybody else, so I thought I'd ask an outsider,' she ended simply.

Barbara laughed. But as Gard looked up quickly, almost hurt, she checked herself. 'Gard, I'm not anything to do with the family, but I think exactly as you do. It would be horribly unsporting to bully the kid because of what her cousin has done. Isn't there any one who feels as you do? Surely you aren't the only one?'

'Winifred backed me up,' Gard said eagerly. 'And I'm sure Christine would. She's our Senior Captain; I'm Junior Captain; that's why I had to butt in and put a stop to the ragging. You do think as Ven and Auntie do? I haven't even asked him, for I know what he'd say quite well.'

'Of course I do. You can't allow bullying. You're right to put it down. But I'd like to say one thing, if you'll listen, Gard.'

'Please tell me!' Gard begged. 'I came to you because of all that Camp Fire business, you know. We've been reading the book, and we're going to have a meeting, just Ven and me, if you'll fix a time and have one too. The book doesn't exactly say anything in words about being decently sporting and doing the proper thing by other girls, but it seemed to be all there, in the feeling of the whole thing.'

Barbara's eyes kindled in eager sympathy, and she knew her confidences of the week before had met with the right response. She quoted softly:

'I will cleave to these others, my sisters,
Wherever, whenever I find them!'

'Yes, we read that. Well, if it means only the girls in your own Camp Fire, it's not very much; but if it means all kinds of girls, and being decent to them everywhere, it's worth while.'

'You'd feel a kind of worm if you only kept it for your friends, and were horrid to others outside,' Barbara assented. 'And what about:

'For I will tend
The fire that is called
The love of man for man,
The love of man for God?'

Yes, Gard, it's all through Camp Fire, the idea of helping and friendliness. You know the verse of the third candle, "Love is comradeship"? You can't narrow that down just to your friends. I'm ever so pleased that you came to me. But what I want to say is Camp Fire too. You say you knew what Ven and your brother would want you to do. But you oughtn't to rely on them. You have to do what you know you ought; something tells you, and you have to follow that. You know the Desire:

'To be true to the truth that is in me,
And follow the Law of the Fire?

The truth that is in you; that's your inside voice telling you what to do. And you've got to follow it, even if Ven, and your brother, and your Senior Captain, all say differently. I don't mean that you must be pigheaded and refuse to take advice. But if you know a thing is right, that's all that matters to you. You mustn't depend on other people. You didn't run to Ven and consult her to-day, did you?"

Gard gave a little laugh. 'No; there wasn't time. She wasn't there. But I knew what she'd say; and the boys, too. A lot of funny things have happened lately,' she said slowly. 'I don't mean really funny, you know; they've mostly been horrid at first, and some have been rather awful, though some have turned out all right. I've had to decide what to do every time, and I've always tried to do what the boys would say was sporting. But I've always known inside me, as you say, what I ought to do. I've known every time.'

'And done it?' Barbara asked quietly.

Gard nodded. 'I've tried not to sometimes, but I've done it in the end.'

‘That’s “being true to the truth that is in you.” You can’t keep the Law of the Fire unless you are true, for the Law says, “Be Trustworthy.” You can’t, if you aren’t true to yourself.’

Gard was very thoughtful. ‘If Ven will too, I think I’ll promise to keep that Law. It would help.’

‘It does help. And Ven will. But you wouldn’t give it up if she refused, Gard?’

‘I’m not as flabby as that!’ Gard laughed a little. ‘But if Ven will too, we can have a much better meeting, don’t you see? I know you do it all alone, but it would be better with two.’

Barbara assented, with a laugh. ‘What about Friday evening? Shall we light the candles and say the Desires at eight o’clock, and close the meeting with the sign of the Fire at nine? You must put out the candles first, saying the verses, of course.’

Gard agreed joyfully. ‘I know Ven wants to. I’m to tell her all you said in bed to-night. There’s just one other thing, Barbara. A lot of our girls saw you do those dances for Rita and Moll, when we were under the other bungalow. May I tell them about you? We haven’t said a word to anybody yet. But they’d love to hear.’

Barbara looked thoughtful. Then she said gravely, ‘I haven’t any right to keep things to myself. It isn’t Camp Firey. Tell them what you like. But if Camp Fire doesn’t appeal to them, don’t shove it down their throats. Only tell them all about it if they seem really keen.’

‘We’re going to play cricket on the sands here on Saturday. Won’t you come down and let them see you?’ Gard begged.

‘I’ll think about it. I won’t promise.’

And Gard had to be content with that.

The following evening, Ven paid Garda out in her own coin. Suddenly thrusting her work aside, as they sat together over their prep., she said, ‘I’ve done enough. Would you mind if I went out without you?’

Gard looked up quickly. Then she laughed ruefully. ‘I can’t very well say “yes,” after last night. Where are you going?’

‘Out with Aunty in the little boat,’ Ven said promptly. ‘You had your go last week.’

‘Oh! Well, all right. It’s only fair,’ Gard admitted regretfully. ‘But has Aunty time?’

‘Said he’d take me. I asked him last night.’

‘Oh, all right!’ Gard turned resignedly to her work again.

‘Svante Svenssen, you’ve got an awfully sporting sister. Did you know?’ Ven asked, when they were safely out at sea in the dinghy.

‘Glad to hear you think so,’ he said briefly ‘I’ve often hoped I had. Why?’

‘I’ll tell you why. You know about Rita?’

‘I’ve heard enough about her,’ he grinned. ‘What’s the latest?’

‘The latest is that her cousin, a scared little kid of ten, has been sent to the Haven. Of course the other children started ragging her, and most of Gard’s crowd backed them up. But Gard, as captain, put her foot down very heavily and squashed them, and stood up for Rita’s cousin. According to one of the girls I saw to-day, Gard was simply furious, and raved about bullying, and raged at them no end, till they absolutely had to chuck it to get any peace.’ Svante laughed. ‘Yes, it does sound funny when you repeat it!’ she went on. ‘But that’s just what I was told. Can you imagine Gard furious and raving and swearing at everybody? I can’t, quite. But she evidently made an impression on them all, and they’ve had to accept the infant and treat her decently. Rita’s cousin, Aunty! It’s rather fine of Gard.’

Svante’s face had lit up. But he only said briefly, ‘She’s a decent kid. It was jolly rough on her.’

‘She’s awfully decent. She’s throwing herself into things at school as she never did before, and doing her best not to think about the High. She can’t forget it, but she isn’t letting it spoil her work; and she’s being a jolly good captain. I know from little things she’s said. She thinks a lot about those younger kids and what’s best for them and the school. And do you know the thing that bucks her up most often? It’s what you’ll think of her. The way she puts it is, “When you live with boys, they expect you to be decent, and you can’t let them down.” She knows you care what she does. She’d be awfully upset if she thought she’d failed you.’

‘She’s never done it yet. She’s an awfully jolly kid,’ Svante said abruptly.

‘So long as Gard knows you expect her to be sporting, she’ll be it,’ Ven said, with conviction.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PIPER OF THE SHINGLE BEACH.

Exactly at eight o'clock on Friday evening Ven drew down the blinds and pinned the curtains across the bedroom window, while Gard placed three unlighted candles on the floor. Ven, lighting a night-light, covered it with a red glass shade and set it in the middle, and Gard heaped logs of driftwood about it till the ruby glow shone through in a truly make-believe fire.

Kneeling, they gravely lit the candles and repeated the verses, Gard speaking for Work, Ven for Health, and Gard again for Love. Ven repeated a Fire poem found in Barbara's book, and they took hands and stretched their arms in a ring around their ceremonial fire, and repeated the Camp Fire Law together. Each separately repeated the vow she had made in the bungalow, promising to keep the Law, and signed her name in a book Ven had prepared, with the seven clauses inscribed on the first page.

Then they sat on pillows in the half darkness, ate chocolates and cakes, read a story from the magazine, discussed the list of honours in the Manual, and talked over names for themselves and their camp.

'We'll consult The Bulrush. We must use that name for her now, of course,' said Ven. 'We'll only take beads for things that are in the official list; we won't change it or make honours for ourselves. Isn't that how you feel?'

'Yes, I'd far rather do it properly. There are lots we can do. And we won't buy beads till we've saved up and can do it with our own money. We won't let Barbara or any one help us,' Gard said sturdily. 'We'll get the money somehow.'

'And if I go home soon, we'll each carry on alone, and have our meetings at the same time. I love the mystery, the feeling of having a secret.'

But the other half of the meeting demurred. 'I'm not sure if we can. Barbara—well, The Bulrush, then—says we've got to be Camp Firey, and we sha'n't be if we keep nice things to ourselves. Suppose the girls want to have a camp here. Or suppose your girls do, when you get back to your own school. We'd be pigs if we wouldn't join.'

'That's so,' Ven admitted. 'We'll have to think about that. We'll ask The Bulrush. Now we'll read one of these bits about the Law out of the Manual. I suppose we'd better begin at the beginning, with "Seek Beauty"?''

'No. Read "Be Trustworthy" first. I want to hear what they say about it,' said Gard, a touch of colour in her face.

'Oh, all right! The rest will do later.' Ven only vaguely understood the reason for the choice.

Just before nine they knelt again, and Gard, repeating another verse, put out her first candle. Ven, reciting, snuffed hers, and the room grew darker. Gard put out the Love candle, saying the ritual verse, and could only dimly see Ven as she bent and lifted the red shade and put out the fire, with a low-spoken word of benediction and farewell. Then, thrilled both by their own earnestness and by the sudden darkness, they drew the curtains and blinds, and, standing before the open window, made the Fire sign to Barbara, and to all the other unknown Camp Fire Girls, into whose company they felt they had just entered.

For several seconds they stood staring out into the dusk, though only the wall and window of Suzanne Thorne's house faced them. Then Ven roused herself with a forced laugh. 'Gard, we've been bewitched! Or have we been asleep? Weren't we solemn about it? I really believe we did it properly.'

'I know we did. I feel as if I'd been miles away.' Gard came to earth with difficulty, her eyes dazed. 'But I liked it. We'll do it again. Now let's go to bed. I want to think about it.'

'We'll tell Barbara about it to-morrow, if she turns up,' Ven said exuberantly. 'I hope she remembered to have her meeting, too!'

'I'm sure she'd remember. I hope she'll come. The girls are wild to see her.'

Among the Haven girls into whose lives no devastating changes of outlook had come, and into whose interests no absorbing new ideas had been introduced, all the talk and excitement were centring round the cricket match to be played very soon now against the Castle girls. Practices had become more urgent as the event approached. In the official games played on the sands in front of the school, Christine was watching the form shown by her possible 'men,' but would not finally select her team till the last minute. Half-a-dozen girls, mostly among Gard's inner circle of intimates, had been complimented by her on the improvement in their play, and knew themselves certainties for the team; but others were aware that their places in it were still doubtful, and were working strenuously.

Gard expected a full muster to her unofficial practice on Saturday, and the girls justified her by all turning up punctually. The tide was low in the afternoon, as it had been a fortnight before on Ven's first Saturday. They fetched their stumps from the old fisherman, piled their coats and caps and tea-baskets on the shingle where they could keep one eye on them, and set to work.

'Christopher's agitated over my bowling,' Gard said to Ven; 'not because it's bad, though that's what you might expect, but because it's improved so tremendously. Wants to know if the boys have been coaching me. Somehow she's never thought of you.'

'She's excited about mine, too,' Nancy said proudly. 'Says it's tons better than it used to be. And she says our fielding's all smarter, and we're shaping awfully well.'

'She laughed when I asked if I might be wicket-keeper always, and wanted to know what had made me think of it,' Winifred added. 'I said it was a job I thought I'd like. She didn't mind; she said it was a good idea, and she thought I'd make a good one.'

'Well, that's all right,' Ven stopped the confidences. 'I'm glad you paid such attention to my words of wisdom. But you mustn't expect any more, you know. I can't go on coaching you now. I promised faithfully I wouldn't. We're all going to play as hard as we can, and pick up any ideas we can; but I'm not going to tell you things that would help you against my school. It can't be done!'

Netta made a grimace at the reference to 'my school.' 'Horrid lot of girls at the Castle!' said she.

Ven laughed. 'You're not going to drag me into an argument, my child. You and Nancy pick sides, and we'll get started.'

'I'll have you,' said Netta promptly.

'Greedy!' said her twin. 'Then I'll have Gard. She's jolly good!'

'Come on, Meggy!' cried Netta.

'Winifred!' Nancy beckoned.

'Suppose I'll have to have Agatha, then. Do hit out now, Aggie. You still pat at the ball, as Ven told you before.'

Edith ranged herself with Nancy's crew. 'Nobody seems to love me very much, but I'm going to play. You'll have to put up with me, Nancy dear.'

The game was in one way a trial to Ven, for she saw much she would have liked to correct, and had hard work to keep herself from shouting advice. Once or twice she failed to check the criticism which had burst from her before she was fully aware.

'Meg, you idiot! Oh, if you don't know why, don't ask me! Go into a corner and think about it.—Netta, you utter ass! You had your chance then. You ought to be playing hunt the thimble.—Edith, a soft ball would be the thing for you.—Gard, my *dear* infant!'

'I know,' said Gard abjectly, in reply to Ven's tone of frantic remonstrance. 'I don't need to go up on the shingle to think it over. Sometimes I shy the ball all over the place.'

'You're getting better, though,' Ven condescended to admit, as they retired to the shingle for tea. 'But you won't get anybody out with balls like that last one. And not only that, but you'll simply give runs to the other side, and your captain won't be friends with you.'

'I do hope you won't bowl all through the match, Ven,' Netta said apprehensively. 'I'm terrified of your balls.'

'If I see I've got to stand up to Ven, I shall die of fright on the spot,' Meg said gloomily.

'Don't be idiots! We'll wink at one another, and pretend we're out here on The Stretch. You'll be used — —'

'I say, listen! Is that the Fire-Girl coming?' Winifred raised her head, and dropped her sandwich in the shingle.

The circle of eight sat listening, and Gard thought of Barbara's sparrows, and laughed at the eager, expectant attitudes of her companions. From the other side of the shingle bank at whose foot they sat came the clear, sweet piping of the whistle, an exultant tune, and Gard's foot began to tap. It was the processional march from Derbyshire which Barbara had piped to call the birds.

The music drew nearer, and Barbara came striding over the brow of the shingle hill and stood on the crest, her head bare, her long black plaits whirling in the wind, her creamy middie and short brown skirt and loose brown tie blown back. While they all sat gazing up at her, and Ven and Gard exchanged satisfied glances, she changed her tune to a merry morris-jig; then, reverting to her processional, came marching down the crunching side of the hillock. A small dog, which had been racing madly along the banks, came barking at her heels. She piped her way into the circle.

'The Pied Piper!' she announced. 'Nibbles rather spoiled the effect, I'm afraid. How do you like my pipe? Want to hear some more?'

'We'd like to see you dance too,' Nancy said hopefully. 'Would you do one of those queer jigs for us?'

'Ven and Gard have been telling us. Oh, please, do!' Winifred begged.

'You danced for Rita and Moll,' Netta pointed out.

'And that's reason enough, I suppose. But that was because the music made me. Of course, if Audrey happened to come along here with her fiddle, there's no saying what might happen. There are some things I can't resist.'

Ven rose. 'Is she in? Will she mind?'

Barbara laughed. 'She's in, but — —'

Ven raced up the shingle to the black-and-white bungalow. The windows on the seaward side were all wide, for what little wind there was came from the north-east.

Audrey Holt sat in a basket-chair on the veranda, knitting an emerald-green jumper.

Ven paused at the foot of the veranda steps. 'Miss Holt! Oh, *dear* Miss Holt!'

Audrey laughed down at her. 'Dear me, Vendela, this is very sudden affection!'

'It isn't affection at all; it's cupboard love. I'm asking for something we all want most frightfully. And please, don't call me Vendela. It isn't school.'

'What can you possibly want to make you love me so much, so very suddenly?' Audrey asked gravely. 'I'm afraid you don't love me for myself alone, Ven.'

'Oh, I will, if you'll call me that. I just want you to give eight girls the hugest treat. Nine girls. I believe Barbara wants it too. We're all simply dying for it.'

'Oh, if it's as bad as all that!' And Audrey laughed and rose, dropping her knitting into her chair. 'Really and truly, I suppose you want the fiddle?'

'Oh, we want you too!' Ven assured her delightedly.

As they appeared over the crest of the shingle bank, Barbara put down the whistle, on which she had piped tune after tune to the enthralled circle of girls, took the big handkerchiefs which Audrey handed to her, and slipped rings of bells up below her knees. Laughing at the storm of questions these aroused, she went down to the sandy flat stretch, followed by all the girls and Audrey.

Gard sank down at the edge of the shingle and clasped the excited dog in her arms. Audrey, her bobbed black hair blowing in the wind, tuned the fiddle, and looked at her sister inquiringly.

'Oh, "Princess Royal" first, please!'

'It's what I saw that first day, when I was alone,' Ven whispered, crouching by Gard, both tense and eager as they watched. 'You wait. It has some simply ripping bits in it.'

The other girls thought so too, and clamoured for more so eagerly that Barbara, flushed and laughing, and more breathless with excited enjoyment than with the strenuous exercise, gave them 'Ladies' Pleasure' and 'Lumps of Plum Pudding,' and then demanded a rest. There was an outcry for 'the funny clapping dance,' so presently she stood up to show them 'None-so-Pretty' and 'Jockie'; then positively refused to do any other, and bade them go back to their cricket practice while she watched and rested.

'Won't you come and play?' Ven begged. 'I'm sure you do. Oh, but you're tired! I'm an idiot!'

'I've not played this season. I think I'll look on to-day. I did play once upon a time, but not a great deal. I won't mess up your game;' and Barbara resolutely sat on the shingle, and piped an occasional dance or folk-song, and refused to be drawn into the play.

Audrey had returned to 'Pro Tem.' The girls on the sand gathered into an excited crowd round Gard and Ven, and Barbara wondered what was the matter. They were discussing something heatedly. 'Is somebody out, or isn't she? Practice games generally end like that,' the Fire-Girl murmured, and struck up 'Lads a Bunchun.' 'Goodness, they're coming to ask *me*! It's no good; I wasn't watching. I can't possibly umpire for them!'

'Barbara!' An excited crowd of girls surrounded her, all talking at once. 'We've heard all about it from Gard and Ven —'

'And we want to have a Camp Fire! We're all awfully keen!'

'We don't know much about it, but you do!'

'You know everything, so will you be our guardian?'

'My dear infants' — the Fire-Girl looked down at them from the height of sixteen years and a mound of shingle — 'you don't know much, that's certain. I'm only sixteen.'

'But that's almost grown-up! We're only thirteen and twelve. Four years older is enough. We'd be awfully good, and do all you told us.'

'We'd be lambs. You'd be the boss.'

'That's all very well; but there are so many of you that if you had a guardian you could be a real Camp Fire, and have rings, and the real honour beads, and gowns. Since there are enough of you for a camp, it would be silly only to pretend.'

'We want to have a real camp. We never meant a pretence one. Why couldn't you be our guardian?'

'Because a qualified guardian has to be eighteen.'

'Oh!' Their faces fell. 'Oh, how silly! You'd do it beautifully!'

'Then let's have a pretending camp!' Nancy cried shrilly. — 'Barbara, will you be guardian of our pretending Camp Fire?'

'No, I will not; but if you can find a guardian, I'll help her all I can. I do think you ought to do the thing properly while you're about it, and join up and be official,' Barbara urged. 'You'd get far more fun out of it.'

'But we want to have you. Nobody else knows anything.'

'You'll have to wait two years for me,' Barbara said grimly. 'By that time I may be anywhere. But I will help, if you can find anybody.'

Gard pushed her way between Ven and Winifred. 'D'you mean that—that if we find a guardian you'll help her?'

'Of course I will. I should be a pig if I wouldn't.'

'Well then, girls'—and the Junior Captain spoke out excitedly—'I vote we ask Miss Holt. She looks ripping, and Ven says she's awfully jolly at school, and—'

'Audrey! Now I've done it! I'm in for it now!' the Fire-Girl murmured, and bit her lips in amused dismay. 'Gard's too quick, by a long way.'

'And she must know all about it; she must have heard it all from Barbara. And Barbara could help her; she could do all the work if she liked, and Miss Holt could be called the guardian, just to satisfy people,' Gard ended triumphantly.

'Cheers! Three cheers for the captain's brilliant idea!' Netta shouted excitedly.

'You told us you thought she'd have been willing to be your guardian in London, if you could have found the girls,' Ven reminded Barbara. 'Couldn't you be her assistant, Bulrush? Would she do it for us, do you think?'

'Assistant guardian!' Barbara said slowly. 'I don't know. I never meant to bring that on myself. Well, you'll have to ask her. I don't know what she'll say.'

'We'll send a deputation,' Netta said eagerly; 'unless you'd like to ask her for us?'

'Oh, Barbara, do ask her! She'd do it if you promised to help. It all depends on you.'

'I'm quite aware of that,' the Fire-Girl said grimly. 'If I'm going to do the work, Audrey may agree. The trouble is, I don't know if I want to.'

'Oh, but you won't say no! You couldn't!' Gard's tone was one of shocked dismay. 'What about being Camp Firey?'

Barbara bit her lips again; then she laughed. 'See here, infants, I'll have to talk it over with Audrey. I don't know what she'll say; and I don't know what I want.—As for you, Junior Captain,' she said to Gard, 'you've heard too much. It's like your cheek to turn my own words against me like that. Anyway, you needn't any of you try to talk me into it, for Gard's said the one reason that would have any weight with me. There's no more to be said. You'd better leave it to us now. I'll tell Audrey what you want. Whether she'll do it or not depends chiefly on me, and I haven't made up my mind about it yet. You can't do any good by going to her; she won't do it without my help. We'll think it over and let you know. Bye-bye!' She called Nibbles, took up her pipe and handkerchiefs, and went off up the shingle bank.

'Shall you join our camp, if we get it started, Ven?' Gard asked, as they walked home along the sands.

'I don't think so. There wouldn't be much sense in it. I don't suppose I'll be here very long,' Ven said soberly. 'I think I'll wait till I get home again. A lot of our girls would love it. We might have another camp, and have meetings at the same time as yours, and send the Fire greeting, as we did last night. And we can still do it, you and I, just for one another. On a certain night—Sunday night would be a good time; we'd be sure to be at home on Sunday night—at a definite time, we'll make the Fire sign to one another, wherever we are, and quite apart from the camp we may have joined. Shall we?'

'I'd like to. But perhaps you'll stay here a long while,' said Gard, her private knowledge of Ven's mother's illness coming suddenly to her mind. 'I hope you won't go away for ages, Ven. It would feel awfully funny and horrid without you now.'

‘Depends on mother. And apparently they *won't* write to me.’ Ven sounded injured and hurt.

CHAPTER XXI. VEN'S DARK HOUR.

Gard sat up in bed very early on Saturday morning a week later, and hurled her pillow across at Ven. 'Wake up, lazy! It's the morning of the great day!'

Ven yawned. 'Oh, that silly old match! Oh, well, let's get it over! How's the weather?'

'Dry at present, but very gray, and thick over the sea. It won't be excitingly fine.'

'And that's being kind to it, I suppose. You really think it's rather likely to be wet. Cheerful person!'

'Or misty.' Gard turned back from the window. 'Ven, you aren't half excited enough about the match. Don't you want the Castle to win?'

Ven chuckled at that. 'Sporting of you, Garda!'

'Oh, I don't! I'm going to do everything I can to beat you. But you ought to want your school to win.'

'I do, and I don't,' Ven said blandly. 'I want a good game, and the best side to win. But I'm not sure that we are the best team. My feelings aren't very deeply moved on behalf of the Castle as a school. And our team's too cocksure. I rather think it would be better for them not to win. *And* I don't want to play against you and your crowd. So my sentiments are slightly mixed.'

'But you will play up this afternoon?' Gard asked in alarm. 'Our girls will be as mad as your own lot if you slack. And I'd feel simply sick.'

'My dear infant, what do you take me for? I'm not a soft. If I'm put into a team, I play my jolly hardest for that team; and anything I can do to give your lot a good old whacking will be done. My private feelings I shall keep to myself.'

'That's all right!' Gard sighed in relief. 'I am an idiot, of course; but you did scare me stiff!'

'You are!' Ven agreed cordially. 'Perhaps you're expecting me to go out and sprain my wrist or turn my ankle this morning, so that I won't be able to play? My dear kid, Iris is *depending* on me. Told me so last thing last night, in a most pathetic tone; nearly in tears, in fact. D'you think I'd let her down?'

'No, of course you wouldn't,' Gard apologised abjectly. 'They are awfully lucky to get you, Ven!'

'They seem to think so, anyway!' Ven laughed. 'There's Posty! Going down? See if there's anything for me, there's a dear. I don't like this continued silence on the part of my dear parents. They've forgotten my existence, I think; or else they're neglecting their little Vendy disgracefully.'

But Gard knew that there was real anxiety behind her light tone. There had been no letter from Captain or Mrs Morris since the first from London a fortnight before, and though Ven had not said much, she had watched for the postman eagerly every day. Gard, with her fuller knowledge, knew the deep reason there might be for the long silence, and was anxious also, though not daring to say anything.

The waiting time was over, however. A letter for Ven lay on the mat, and once more it was from London.

Gard picked it up with a shout. 'Ven! Cheers! Is it from your father?'

But behind her outward delight there was a touch of fear. If the letter brought bad news, how would it affect Ven? Would she still be able to play in the afternoon? To Gard, the match overwhelmed everything else in importance.

She ran up with the letter, and met Ven half-dressed, hair-brush in hand, at the door. 'From London, Ven.'

'London? They're stopping there a very long time. I didn't know they were going there at all.' Ven pursed her lips, and dropped on her bed to read the letter.

Gard hung about, folding her nightdress, shaking her pillows, watching her cousin anxiously. But Ven was shrouded in a cloud of unbrushed yellow hair, and her face was hidden.

Suddenly she looked up, tossing back her hair. 'Gard, did you know?' Her voice was strained and frightened.

Gard, turning quickly, saw that she was as white as the paper. She dropped the pillow she held and ran to her. 'Ven dear, what is it?'

'Mother. She's awfully ill.' Ven choked and gasped with the shock. 'She's had to have a fearful operation—they haven't known if she'd get better—it was about a fortnight ago—they didn't tell me. She's been almost dying ever since. Oh, mother, mother! And I knew nothing about it!'

Gard's arms tightened round her. 'Ven, is she better now? Can they tell yet?'

Ven brushed away the blinding tears. 'Silly idiot! Me, I mean! She is better; but father says'—she rubbed her eyes fiercely and tried to read the words—'she's now out of danger for this time, but the doctors can't say yet whether she'll have more trouble later on. We never dreamt it was anything like that; we just thought she wasn't very fit; we didn't know it was serious. He says she's had a lot of pain, but that's going off now. Oh, why couldn't I have been with her? I'm sure she's been wanting me. He sees her every day, and—and'—she was reading feverishly—'I'm to go for a day or two soon, just to see her; but we'll have to be away from home much longer than any of us thought, for she'll be sent to a convalescent home as soon as she can be moved, and perhaps I can be there with her in the holidays. But as soon as she's fit she's to go for a long voyage with father, to see if she gets really strong again. If she doesn't, I suppose'—but that was too terrible to contemplate. Ven quivered, and turned to the nearer future, choking back a sob. 'You'll have to keep me a good deal longer than we thought, I'm afraid, Gard. Will you? Father wants me to stop with you. There's a lot more of the letter. I haven't read it all yet. But he hopes I'm happy here, because, he says, if your father and granny are willing, he may have to leave me here for quite a long while.'

'Ven, you know we love having you. None of us want you to go away, ever.'

'I must finish the letter. Father says it's business—things I ought to understand.'

'I'll go and help granny. If you're a bit late, I'll tell her you've had bad news about your mother;' and Gard fled, in some dread of what the letter might contain.

She hoped her fears were groundless. But it was difficult to know what grown-up men would do. What were the things Ven ought to understand?

Gard knew very definitely what the things were that she did not want Ven to understand, nor to know anything whatever about. Things were bad enough for Ven as it was. What need could there be for her to understand things that were all over and done with?

As she set the table, and stirred the porridge, and prepared Greg's bread and marmalade, she kept glancing up at the bedroom door. But it remained closed; an ominous silence reigned above. Gard pressed her lips together and looked worried. 'Ven's late,' she said briefly, as granny brought in the breakfast. 'She's had a letter from her father, telling all about her mother. She's awfully ill,' she went on swiftly, addressing herself to the boys; 'had a big operation, and almost died. She's getting better now; but Ven hadn't been told anything about it, so, of course, she was fearfully upset. I think she'll come down presently. Don't plague her with questions, Turk. You'll hear all about it in time.'

Ven only appeared when the rest had nearly finished. Her eyes were very bright, and to Gard's restless conscience they seemed to hold a secret, a new knowledge, rather, which was as yet unspoken. She looked straight at Gard as she entered the room, and her eyes asked a question, wistful, imploring.

Gard's eyes fell. She turned away quickly. 'I'll fetch your porridge, Ven; it's still in the pan. I've kept your bacon hot, too.'

'Thanks, old thing!' Ven said briefly, and to Gard's great relief she sat down and did not follow her out to the kitchen.

Bringing back the porridge, Gard shrank from her cousin's eyes. Ven, however, did not look at her again, but, silent and obviously burdened, gave her attention to breakfast. The bad news she had received was enough to account for that, of course, and no one teased her with questions. She was grateful, and sat and ate in silence, a troubled frown upon her face.

The boys went off to school, for Saturday was only a half-holiday for them. Gard brought Ven everything she could possibly want, and waited on her eagerly. But all the time there was an underlying dread in her mind, and she jumped guiltily when Ven spoke once or twice. Though nothing had been said, she could not forget that urgent question in her cousin's eyes. Would it have to be answered sooner or later?

'I'm going into town, to buy a new block. I must write reams to mother, and my old one's almost done,' Ven said suddenly. 'If you'll come, Gard, we'll go across the sands; the tide will be low. Will you?'

'I'd like to. Perhaps I could do some shopping for granny. Ven!' Gard had begun to clear the table, but paused, and leaned on the back of a chair and eyed the elder girl anxiously. 'Ven, you won't let it spoil you for the match, will you? It's awfully rough on you; but you will buck up and carry on as if you hadn't heard, won't you? I wish that letter hadn't come just this morning!'

'It won't make things any easier,' Ven said grimly, 'but I'll try. I mean, I will buck up and carry on, Gard. I won't think about mother during the match. After all, she's through the worst of it now. It was all last week I ought to have been worrying.'

'Yes, it won't do any good now, will it?' Gard said eagerly. 'She's getting better, so you mustn't worry, Ven. Of course it was an awful shock hearing about it, but you'll have had time to get over that before the match.'

Ven gave a little laugh. 'Gard, don't be nervy about the match. I'll play up all right. I won't disgrace you. As a matter of fact, I'm not worrying about mother. As you said, she's better now. It's something quite different that's on my mind.'

If her eyes held that questioning challenge again, Gard did not see it, for she had fled to the kitchen with a pile of porridge-plates.

'I wonder—' Ven said doubtfully to herself.

It was more than an hour before they could get away, as granny claimed their help on Saturdays. But they set out at last, Gard remarking, as they went down the lane to the sea, 'We mustn't go and get fagged before the afternoon. I had a lecture a mile long from Christopher about not doing too much this morning. I suppose you had one from Iris too?'

'Oh, reams of it!' Ven had been very quiet all morning. Evidently the 'something quite different' was still troubling her.

She stopped at the foot of the lane with a cry of surprise, however, everything else forgotten for the moment at sight of the shore. 'Look at the rocks! Where did they come from? They've never been there before!'

'Oh, they've been there!' Gard remonstrated, glancing at the line of brown seaweed-covered rocks which had appeared between the sands and the sea. 'But you haven't seen them before. It's full moon to-night.'

'Full moon! What has that got to do with it?'

'Extra low tide. When it comes up it will be very high. You've done about the tides in geography, I suppose?' Gard said reproachfully.

'Yes, but I'd never believed it meant anything before. I hadn't seen it for myself. Help! Hasn't it gone a long way out? What are the rocks like? Can't we go and climb over them?'

'We will one day. There'll be plenty more low tides. They don't show every time, of course. But we'd better not to-day,' Gard said prudently. 'Suppose one of us slipped and sprained an ankle?'

Ven laughed. 'Then we shouldn't have to play against one another, old thing! And I'd be jolly glad. Right-o! We'll give up the rocks for the sake of the match. But they do look jolly tempting. I thought all the rocks were up there under the wall.'

Below the high gray wall of the gardens which came down to the edge of the beach, was a belt of brown rocks, flat and good for climbing, with fascinating pools in the hollows, and water left by the tide in the shallows between them and the sands. The girls had often climbed and paddled here, and now Ven turned aside from her quest of shops and writing-blocks, and went towards the rocks. 'Come over here for a sec., Gard!'

'Oh, but we ought to go on!' Gard began doubtfully.

But Ven went steadily towards the rocks and took no notice of her, so Gard had to follow. Ven hurried on, and was climbing up the rocks before Gard reached them.

'You are in a hurry!' Gard cried, and climbed up after her.

Ven was standing staring down into a brown pool, poking the anemones with her stick. At sight of her face Gard cried sharply, 'Ven, what's the matter? Oh, Ven, she's better! *Do* remember she's better!'

'It's not mother; it's you.' Ven swung round to face her, and her lips were trembling, her eyes full of the distress she had been holding at bay all morning. 'Gard, how much do you know? Father told me things I'd never dreamt of, things that hurt. I oughtn't to tell you if—but you do know! Gard, have you known all the time?' for Gard's honest eyes had betrayed her. 'You've known it was for me you had to give up the High School? You've known, and you haven't hated me? You've been just as jolly and nice as ever. Oh, I can't bear it! I—I oughtn't to allow it! It oughtn't to be! Oh, Gard, I never dreamt of it!' She broke down, sobs almost choking her.

Gard caught her by the arm and pushed her down on a flat rock. 'Ven, you're shaking all over. Oh, don't be silly; I'm not worth it! Sit down there; not in the pool!—there; that's right! Ven, I didn't want you ever to know. I wish he hadn't told you. I can't think why he did it. There wasn't any need in the world for you ever to know.' She slipped down on the sun-warmed rock at Ven's feet, and leaned eagerly across her knee. 'Ven, you mustn't feel so bad. I'd forgotten all about it. Really and truly, I've never thought of it again since the day father's letter came. I saw it had to be, and there was no help for it, so it wasn't any use grouching.'

'It was that day you heard about the High School?' Ven asked brokenly; 'the day Barbara's letter came? He told you it all at once?'

'Yes, of course. I'm jolly glad he did. It would have been awful if I hadn't known the reason. But when I knew it was to save your mother—*your mother*, Ven; not just Auntie Ven, but *your* mother—of course I was glad father had been able to help; just awfully glad. It would have been ghastly if nobody had had the money. I'm just thankful father had it.'

'You are topping, Gard!' Ven burst out. 'I think you're just awfully brave. But it's spoiled your life—this bit of it, anyway. It isn't fair. If it had been mine, it would have been quite all right, and I'd have been glad and thankful. But it isn't just that you should have to do with second-best things for my mother's sake. It oughtn't to be. Father ought not to have taken money from your father when it was needed for you.'

‘But it was to save your mother’s life, Ven!’ Gard reminded her sharply. ‘If your father hadn’t taken it—well, how would things be now?’

Ven caught her breath. For a long moment she stared at the distant rocks and misty sea. Then her arms went round Gard, and she bent and kissed her hair, for Gard’s eyes had fallen quickly and shyly before the look in Ven’s face, and she had bent her head.

‘Gard, I can’t say any more. It saved mother’s life. But I’ll never forget that it was you who saved her.’

‘I’m glad! I’m glad! I was glad, too, as soon as I could think of it properly.’ Gard broke down suddenly, and sobbed and clung to the elder girl. ‘But oh, Ven, I did so want to tell you! That was the hardest thing—not having anybody who understood. Father said over and over again that I wasn’t to tell you. At first I kept quiet about it to please him. But when I’d thought it over, I didn’t want you to know, because I knew how bad you’d feel. I was frightened lest you should find out somehow; I never thought of your own father telling you. But all the time I was dying for you to know. It would have been so much easier if we could have talked about it.’

‘You poor kid!’ Ven said remorsefully. ‘It was awfully rough on you to have to keep it all bottled up inside you. Gard, you have been downright sporting over it! And you haven’t hated me? I think that’s the biggest thing; that, and the sporting way you took it, and the way you’ve bucked up and gone ahead and made the best of things. I do wonder that you didn’t hate the very sight of me. And I don’t think you even snapped at me once!’

‘I don’t remember ever wanting to.’ Gard gave a shaky laugh. ‘How would it have helped for me to be snappy to you?’

‘But you must have felt—well, you must have hated me, I should think.’

‘I never did! How could I? But I might have done if I hadn’t known you. I was awfully glad you were here, and that I knew it was for you, and not for some girl I’d only just heard of. Ven, I’ve been glad—honestly I have—that father was able to help.’

Ven drew a long breath. ‘Some day I hope I’ll be able to make it up to you. And if mother’s illness goes on, and I can’t go home, there’s nowhere in the world I’d like to be as much as here, if you’ll have me. Gard, do the rest know? Does Svante know?’

‘About the money business? I told them about your mother.’

‘I saw they knew that. No, I mean why you couldn’t go to the High School.’ Ven’s lips quivered with the pain of it.

‘Of course not. Granny knows—we talked about it—but no one else. I begged and prayed her not to tell the boys. I knew you’d hate them to know.’

‘You are jolly decent!’ Ven burst out fervently. Then, ‘And you’ve known about mother all along?’

‘I knew there was something serious, and that you weren’t to know, and that she was very bad, and there might have to be an operation; that was all I knew, Ven. It wouldn’t have been any use telling you.’

‘No; I’d only have felt worse,’ Ven admitted.

She sat silent for a time, then roused herself. ‘There’s one thing, I’m glad he told me. It hurts awfully to think of it, but it’s better to know. I wouldn’t have liked it if I’d found it out long afterwards; if I’d lived with you and never known. I guess we’ll both feel differently to one another now that we know. I know I’ll never forget. And—and if I *have* to bowl you out this afternoon, Garda, you’ll forgive me, won’t you?’

Gard’s laugh pealed out, though she had almost cried again. ‘Ven dear, *don’t* be an idiot! If you’re put on to bowl when I’m in and *don’t* get me out, I’ll be absolutely ashamed of you!’

‘Oh, but I might not! You’re jolly good sometimes, and you’re used to my balls.’

‘All the same, everybody, on both sides, would say you were slacking, and that would make me feel sicker than coming out first ball. Ven, if we’re going to talk cricket, don’t you think we could go on?’ she hinted.

Ven laughed. ‘We’d better. We’ll be late, and have to rush. But don’t ever think I’ve forgotten, Gard.’

‘Well, don’t keep talking about it,’ Gard said sharply. ‘I don’t want another soul to know.’

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MORNING OF THE MATCH.

'Would you mind if I ran round for a word with Iris?' Ven asked, when the shopping was done. 'I'll catch you up. You'll go by the sands, of course.'

'We'll go part of the way with her,' said Netta and Nancy, whom they had met outside a sweet-shop, carrying coco-nut ice and nougat to be handed round as consolation for defeat or congratulation for victory, as the afternoon might decide.

Ven went in search of Iris, prepared to demand urgently that she should not be required to bowl against Gard unless every one else had failed to get her out. She knew herself in a strong position, since the Castle team considered her indispensable, and thought she might be able to get her way in this.

The younger girls set out across the shingle to the sands, meeting Muriel, of the Castle, as they went, and nodding to her distantly.

'I wish the match could have been on the sands,' Nancy grumbled. 'I always feel awkward on that Castle field.'

'I feel more at home here, too,' Gard agreed. 'But think of Rita playing on sand! Can't be done, Nancy! How they'd loathe it! Oh, if we could *only* beat them again! Two years on end! Ven says it would be awfully good for them.'

'No chance of that. They've got Ven,' Netta said gloomily. 'If you will have brilliant cousins like that, captain, what can you expect? The size of the score against us is all that's worrying me.'

'Have you heard anything from Barbara, Gard?' Nancy asked anxiously.

'Not a word. Perhaps she'll come to the match and tell us then. The boys are coming. They're frightfully interested.'

'I say, there's somebody on the rocks over there! Is she waving to us? It's a girl!' Netta exclaimed.

'We'd better go and see,' and Gard led them in a wild race through pools and across damp sand towards the rocks, for the girl out there was waving wildly, and as they came nearer they heard her shout.

'Help! It's Iris; the Castle captain! What on earth is she doing?' cried Gard. 'Choosing a pitch out on the rocks?'

The other two laughed, and came to a stand. They were not going to exert themselves for the sake of the captain of the rival team.

'Silly idiot!' said Netta. 'What is she playing at, I wonder?'

'Why doesn't she buck up and come off the rocks?' asked Nancy. 'Can't she see the tide's coming in? There!' she cried, as a ripple swelled across the pool surrounding the patch of weed-covered rock, 'it will be deep in no time. What's she saying?'

'If you'd stop babbling we might be able to hear,' Gard pointed out.

Netta and Nancy, crushed, strained their ears to hear Iris's words.

'Help! Come and help me!' she cried. 'Oh, do come! I can't'—they could not catch it all—'the tide's coming! Oh, do come, somebody!'

'We can see the tide's coming!' Netta said indignantly. 'Why doesn't the idiot run?'

'Idiot yourself! How can she run on that seaweed?' Gard cried sharply.—'Iris, have you hurt yourself?'

But the wind, bringing in the sea-mist, which was growing thicker every moment, carried her words back to the shore. Iris shouted frantically, 'I can't hear! Oh, can't you come?' and

began to stumble towards them over the slippery weed, with a terrified look back at the sea, already washing over the outer edge of the rocks.

‘She’s all right. She isn’t hurt anywhere,’ Nancy cried reassuringly.

‘But she’ll never do it at that rate. She’s simply crawling. How on earth did she get out there?’ Netta gasped. ‘Why, Gard —’

‘Keep those safely,’ Gard said curtly, in her most captain-like tone, and thrust her shopping-basket into Netta’s dismayed hands; ‘they’re important; granny wants them. I’m going to help her. Some one’s got to, if she can’t get along quicker than that. Look at the sea; it’s simply racing! We’ll have to run, and you know what seaweedy rocks are like to run on.’

‘But what’s the good of you going too?’ cried Netta, suddenly grasping the fact that there might be real danger here. Danger, on a Saturday morning, going home from doing the shopping? But what else could Gard’s decision, and the look on Gard’s face, mean? She would never go out there to Iris unless there were real need.

‘Take that basket away up to the groyne where the tide won’t reach it,’ cried Gard, giving orders swiftly. ‘Then you come flying back and stand by, just in case you can help us anyhow. I’ll shout if you can do anything. — Nancy, fly for your life and find some one, boys or men, in case we don’t get off in time and have to be rescued. I don’t really think there’s much fear of that,’ she said deliberately, ‘but I do think there’s danger of one of us falling and being hurt. Iris will go a lot quicker than that when I get to her. I’m much more used to those rocks than she is. She’s like a cat on hot bricks. I’ll soon make her move a bit, and I guess I’ll get her off in time; but if either of us should fall, we might need help; so fly, Nancy.’

‘But if you sprain your ankle, what about the match?’ Netta cried shrilly. ‘Why should you risk it for the sake of their captain, Gard?’

Gard gave her a straight, angry look. ‘If I don’t go and haul Iris off those rocks, she’ll be caught by the tide long before anybody can come; and if a Castle girl’s drowned this morning, there won’t be any match, that’s certain. Don’t be too silly for words, Netta!’

‘But what about you?’ Netta cried indignantly; but Gard, barefoot, was splashing through the widening pool to the rocks.

She strongly suspected that she knew what had happened, and later inquiry proved her to be right. Iris, tempted by the unusually low tide, had gone to explore the rock pools, and had reached them from the side, not many feet from the spot where the girls had discovered her. The tide, sweeping in, had cut off her retreat by the easy way, and had left her a long patch of rocks to cross, covered with slippery brown weed. She had started off at a run, had slipped once or twice and bruised her ankles, and had been forced to go more carefully. The sight of the rising sea and the deepening pool between her and safety had terrified her. She could not hurry, but dared not go slowly. She had completely lost her nerve; and without some one to help her, to hold her hand, in fact, she would never be able to cross the rocks in time.

Gard, as she had said, was used to the rocks. She had often scrambled on them with Turkey, and she was not one to lose her head. Using her hands occasionally, and placing her bare feet carefully, she went quickly and steadily towards the frightened girl, and knew better than to look at the sea.

‘Come on, Iris!’ she said briefly; ‘we’ve got to get out of this. Now, don’t grab me; you’ll only fling me over. You aren’t hurt anywhere? Splendid! Oh, I’ll hold your hand!’ and she gripped Iris’s shaking hand to steady her. ‘Now, don’t be an idiot! You’ve got to buck up and stop shaking like that, or we may as well sit down where we are. Hold on to me, and step out quickly. Oh, well, lean right on me, if you’ll go more quickly that way! Now watch where you put your feet.’

‘Will we get off in time?’ Iris whimpered, thoroughly unnerved.

'Don't know. Hope so. We'll have a shot at it. If not, Nancy's gone for help. They'd haul us out. We could stand on these rocks till the water got deep enough to swim in. Can you swim?'

'I've never tried with my clothes on,' Iris gasped, terrified anew by this prospect.

'Oh, well, you won't have to, if you'll only walk fast. Don't look at the sea, silly! You won't stop it by looking at it. But you stop yourself when you turn round and stare. It doesn't make you feel any better, either. Can't you go a little faster? Look here, Iris, you've simply *got* to!'

'But I shall fall! I've fallen three times already.'

'I'm holding you now. Steady!' as Iris slipped and shivered. 'Now, have another shot at it. What on earth made you come out here all alone?' she asked severely, chiefly to keep Iris talking rather than thinking.

'I didn't. Muriel was with me, but she went back to get on with her prep.' Iris struggled to speak steadily, but the last fall had shaken her more than ever. 'We came on to the rocks from that other side. I hadn't really come very far, but the tide came up, and I couldn't get back. It seemed an awful long way across, and I couldn't keep my feet. I don't know how you do it. It —it's awfully jolly to have some one to hold on to! It was jolly decent of you to come, Gard.'

'Well, let's hurry just a little bit more,' Gard urged impatiently. 'Only do try not to fall again, Iris. I'm scared you'll turn your ankle, and then we shall be in a hole.' She allowed herself one glance at the sea. 'I say, Iris, you'd better buck up!'

It never occurred to Iris to suggest that her rescuer should leave her, though it was obvious Gard could go twice as quickly alone. She knew all too well that only the support of the steady shoulder made it possible for her to proceed at all. How Gard managed to keep her balance she could not imagine. To tell the truth, it was none too easy to walk with such an extremely unsteady companion clinging to her so desperately.

Then came the catastrophe. Iris glanced round fearfully at the sea. 'It's getting awfully deep between us and the sand,' she panted, and made a desperate attempt to run.

Gard, who knew all about the depth, and was already reconciled to wading up to her waist, tried to hold her back.

'Go on steadily, you donkey! It will be quicker in the end. Oh, help!'

Iris fell with a splash into a pool, clutched at Gard, and dragged her down too. Gard, trying desperately to right herself, fell heavily, and a gasping cry broke from her.

Iris, wet from head to foot, struggled up, a new terror in her eyes. 'You haven't hurt yourself? Oh, Gard, it was my fault! I dragged you down!'

'It's only my wrist.' Gard's lips were white, and she clasped her right wrist fiercely with her other hand. 'We must go on. I can walk. It—it makes me feel sick, but we must go on. You'll have to help me up, though.'

She staggered as Iris helped her to her feet. Then, Iris clinging to her and trying to help her now, she stumbled on towards the shore.

On the edge of the deep pool, in it, in fact, Netta was dancing in helpless terror and impatience, as she frantically pointed at the two small figures almost invisible in the mist, and tried to explain to the man Nancy had sent.

'There! On the rocks! Can't you see them? Gard fell—they both did. I'm sure she's hurt. Oh, can't you go and carry her?'

The young man understood at last, and plunging into the pool, which was fast becoming an arm of the sea, he waded across and climbed over the rocks to the girls.

'Oh, it's a man! We're safe!' gasped Iris, and collapsed in a faint at his feet.

Gard, white and sick with the pain in her sprained wrist, looked up at him wearily. 'Oh, I'm so glad! Will you carry her? I can manage; I'm all right. I was helping her.'

'You look about done up yourself. I'll get her off in a second, and come back for you,' and he picked Iris up and carried her carefully across the last few feet of seaweed.

He carried her through the water also, and laid her on the sand, and was greeted by the indignant Netta with an angry, 'Well, I like that! She's the one that made all the trouble, and then to go and faint like a baby! Gard went to rescue her, and I believe she hurt herself when they fell that time. Now, if you'd carried her! She's worth it!'

'There's nothing like gratitude!' their rescuer said, laughing, and plunged into the pool again to fetch the other girl.

Gard had reached the edge of the rocks, and was waiting for him there. 'I didn't dare to swim. My wrist's crocked somehow.' Her lips were quivering, but she tried to speak steadily. 'It's awfully good of you. I couldn't have got across alone; it's too deep. I couldn't have kept my feet.'

'Now, which of you shall I carry up to the promenade?' he demanded, as he put her down by Iris. 'What's this about a wrist? Is the other kiddy hurt, too?'

'I don't think so. She was only tired and frightened.—Netta, don't!' cried Gard, as Netta hurled herself upon her.

Gard drew back hurriedly. 'Netta, I hurt my wrist. Don't go flinging yourself on me.—Please, could you carry Iris?' she begged of their rescuer. 'She ought to go home. I think I'd better come too, and go to the doctor's. I can walk; I'm all right. But there's something gone wrong with my wrist. I fell on it, and it's—a bit sore.' She looked up at him with white lips, and eyes bright with tears. 'You see, we've a big match this afternoon, and I'm playing. He may be able to put it right for me.'

'I don't think you're playing in any match this afternoon. But you're a jolly plucky kid,' he said warmly. 'That other girl's coming round; she'll be all right. You keep an eye on her!' he ordered Netta, who was almost in tears. 'Here come some other folks; they'll see to her. I'm going to see you through,' he said to Gard. 'Which doc. do you prefer? Baker? Right-o! We'll be there in two secs. No, you aren't going to walk. I couldn't allow it for a moment. Just let me see to that wrist for the time being. H'm! Yes, all right!'

The wrist was swelling rapidly. He bathed it, and bound it very tightly with a damp handkerchief and Netta's girdle.

The girls watched him with frightened eyes. 'Won't she be able to play?' Netta whispered, the full extent of the calamity dawning on her. 'She's our best bowler!—Oh, Gard!'

The young man was about to say something emphatic, but a glance at Gard's frightened face checked him. 'We'll ask the doctor,' he said cheerfully. 'He'll know whether it would be safe. I think it's a sprain, but, of course, one can't be sure. Now come along, old lady!' and Gard's lips quivered as she guessed the truth. 'Oh yes, I'm going to carry you! You're all done in! You're not going to walk all that way!'

'She's the best man on our side!' Netta wailed. 'And that other girl's the captain of the other side! And Gard went to save her! Oh, it isn't fair!'

'Seems a complicated situation!' He laughed, and asked a few questions of his patient as he carried her up the shingle. 'Oh, well, kiddy, if you've lost your game, you've saved your friend's life! Isn't it worth it? Of course you won't play to-day, nor for a few weeks, I guess. You know that. I saw you did, but I didn't want to send that other kid into hysterics by saying so. But you're a good sporting sort; you won't howl over what can't be helped. The captain of the other side!' he chuckled. 'Say, did you know? But you bet you did. Didn't make any difference, did it? Perhaps they'll scratch. It would be only decent.'

'Christopher won't let them—our captain, you know.' Gard, utterly weary with the pain of the last few minutes and the strain that had gone before, was wondering dully if she could have played, even if her wrist had been all right. 'It's the match of the year.' Her voice broke a

little. 'It's hard lines; but Iris couldn't walk on the seaweed. And she'd lost her nerve. I saw that. And the tide was coming up awfully fast. I simply had to go. Netta talked about the match, and being careful, and we'd all promised we wouldn't do anything this morning. Christopher will be awfully upset. She'll be mad, too, till she understands— —'

'Hang the match of the year!' he began, and then laughed, as she looked at him eyes wide with dismay. 'I beg your pardon. I didn't mean it. But you seem to forget you're the heroine of an adventure which might have ended seriously, and that you saved your friend's life at the risk of your own.'

'Oh, silly rot!' Gard told him wearily. 'I had to help Iris.'

'The other girl didn't have to, apparently. I don't think your captain will row you very badly for that sprained wrist, my dear girl. When the doctor's seen to it, I'll send you home in a taxi, and you'll go and lie down— —'

'Lie down?' Gard gave a little cry of horror. 'I'll go and watch the match, at any rate.'

'I've no doubt whatever that you will.' Her new friend laughed, with a touch of admiration.

CHAPTER XXIII. CHRISTINE'S VERDICT.

Ven, flying down the High Street after a fruitless search for Iris, who was 'out on the shore with Muriel,' stopped aghast, then hurled herself on the tall, wet man with the small and equally wet girl in his arms. Gard had splashed heavily into the pool when she fell, and even her yellow plaits hung damply.

'What's the matter? Has there been an accident? Oh, is she hurt?' she begged piteously.

The rescuer looked from the tall, frightened girl to the little limp one in his arms. 'Are you her sister? No, no, she's all right. She had a fall on the rocks, and she's got to see the doctor, but it won't take more than a minute or two, and then perhaps you'll see her home.'

'Ven!' cried Gard.—'Oh, please, it's my cousin! Let me speak to her. Won't you put me down?—I'm all right, really, Ven.'

'Not till I've got you to the doctor's,' he told her firmly. 'But speak to your cousin, by all means,' and he waited in amused anticipation for her account of the disaster.

It was even shorter than he had expected. 'Ven, do be a sport, and see if Netta's remembered the basket,' Gard said anxiously. 'It's ten to one she'll have left it on the groyne, and the tide's coming up awfully fast. And then'—her voice broke—'then will you go and tell Christopher I won't be able to play this afternoon? I've hurt my wrist. Ven, I didn't do it on purpose. But you won't have to bowl me out, after all.'

'Gard! Oh, how could you?' Ven wailed. 'What did you do? Oh, you are an idiot! Why, it was you said we mustn't go on the rocks for fear we'd slip and crock ourselves before the match. What were you playing at?'

The young man looked down at his limp burden with amused respect. 'Gard, is it? Is that Hildegard? A good name. You won't tell her what you were doing on the rocks, I suppose?'

'Doesn't matter.' Gard was brief from weariness.—'Do go to Christopher, Ven. Say I'm awfully cut up about it. But she ought to know at once. She'll have to put in some one else.'

'And while you're about it, you might tell "Christopher"—who seems to be a lady—that Hildegard sprained her wrist out on the rocks while going to the help of another girl who was in difficulties. In all probability she saved her life. It may interest you to hear the other girl is called Iris, and I gather she is the captain of the opposing team in this great match. Of course, anything—the match, or even the basket of shopping—matters more than a little thing like saving another girl from drowning!' and he strode on with his indignant burden.

'You'll have stunned Ven. It's mean to tease her. She'll be awfully upset,' Gard whispered reproachfully.

'She'll get over it,' he assured her cheerfully.

Ven had indeed stood staring, breathless and incredulous, for a moment. But now she came racing after them. 'Is it true? Iris? Gard? Oh, do tell me!'

'They'll tell you. The rest of them are coming,' and he jerked his head towards the shore. 'The Iris kid fainted, but she's all right now. This one didn't, though she had something to faint about. I say, send one of them to "Christopher," and you come back with a taxi and take Hildegard home, will you?'

'Right-o!' Ven left them at the doctor's gate and flew down the High Street like the wind, to find Netta and Nancy on the shingle still telling Iris very vigorously what they thought of her.

Ven added a few pointed words of her own, took the shopping-basket, sent Netta to Christine's, with orders to tell the whole story, and then to go to the Haven and repeat it to

Miss Hedges; and advised Nancy to see Iris safely home.

'If we asked Gard, she'd say don't tell a soul, so you tell Miss Hedges all about it before Gard can stop you,' Ven insisted, as she turned to run for a taxi.

Netta needed no urging. She burst in on Christine with an excited story, which at first left the Senior Captain bewildered and dismayed.

'Gard sprained her wrist? To-day? Oh, I say, that's more than bad luck! How absolutely rotten of her!' she cried indignantly. 'I wouldn't have believed she'd be so careless! Doesn't she care?' And then, in the next breath, 'She does care! She cares tremendously! It must have been an accident. She'd never let us down like that! Netta, what has happened?'

'Oh, well, that was like Gard, of course!' was all she could say when she understood. 'She'd always go to help anybody! But was there really any danger, Netta? What an idiot Iris is!'

'She'd never have got off in time without Gard,' Netta said, with conviction. 'She was scared stiff. She'd lost her head altogether. Gard simply had to haul her along. The man would have had miles of rocks to cross if we'd waited for him.'

'And you couldn't tell there would be a man—I mean, that any one would come in time. No, Gard had to go. I jolly well wish you'd gone instead!' Christine said gloomily. 'You aren't half as valuable as Gard! Now, if it had been Ven, the schools could have played it out on equal terms; but with Ven playing for them, and Gard not playing for us, it's rather a waste of time going on with it, isn't it? Who had better go in, in her place? Agatha, I suppose. Isn't it hopeless?'

'All the same, Christopher,' Netta ventured, 'it was awfully fine of Gard to go to Iris. She might have been drowned herself, for she'd never have come away and left her, and Iris simply wouldn't hurry.'

'My dear infant, I know that,' Christine said irritably. 'And I know, too, what doesn't seem to have occurred to you, that Gard has done a bigger thing for the school than if she'd played to-day, and had made top score and taken all the wickets. Now, don't you be an idiot and go swanking about it to the Castle girls. Let it come from them; and if they don't see it, don't you dare to say a word. But don't you see? No Castle girl ever did a thing like that. No Castle girl ever saved a Haven girl. No Castle girl ever saved anybody, in fact. It's a jolly lot better than winning a match. But, all the same, I'm not looking forward to being beaten to-day.'

An hour later, when Agatha had arrived, breathless, dismayed, excited by turns, and had been given instructions, and sent off to break the news to any others of the team she could find, Iris came hurrying to Christine's door. She could not have taken any action on her own responsibility; but her first thought, when she had changed into dry clothes and satisfied her anxious mother that there were no ill-effects from her adventure, had been to see Miss Duke, her second, to interview the captain of the opposing team.

'Christine, I've come on behalf of the Castle to ask if you'd like us to give up the match,' she said, hurriedly and nervously.

'Why? Aren't you feeling fit to play?' Christine's first thought found utterance. She regretted it in an instant, and apologised hastily. 'I'm sorry. I'm a beast! I had no right to say that. But it's been an upsetting morning, and I'm all turned upside down. I spoke without thinking. I know you didn't mean to scratch for your own sakes, but for ours. Are you all right, Iris? I hope you'll be fit to play?'

'Oh, I'm going to play, if there's a match at all! Mother doesn't want me to, but I've told her I must. There's nothing the matter with me now, though I'm sore all over with tumbling about on those awful rocks. But I can play all right. But wouldn't you like us to give it up, Christine? I know Gard was one of your best men, and she's out of it, and it's my fault. The

least we can do is to offer to give up the match. It won't be a real game between the schools without Gard playing for the Haven.'

But Christine would not allow it. 'You'd probably have licked us, anyway, with Vendela Morris to play for you,' she owned generously. 'It will only be a bigger score against us. I'll confess I hadn't much hope. But we'd rather play it out. Perhaps you'll let us challenge you again at the end of the term, if Gard can play by then. I haven't seen her yet, so I don't know how long it will be before she's fit. A sprain takes some weeks, as a rule.'

Iris looked at her gravely. 'Gard saved me from being drowned this morning.'

'She couldn't do anything else.' Christine tried to speak casually.

'Oh yes, she could! I can't imagine Netta coming out on to those rocks to help me. She'd simply have stood and stared till it was too late; then she'd have screamed for help. She wouldn't have come herself; not for me! I couldn't have got off alone,' Iris said, in no uncertain tone. 'When I looked round, Christine, and saw the tide racing across the sand the way I'd come, and knew I'd got to cross all those slippery rocks, and that the sea was racing round the other side too, and getting deeper and deeper every minute between me and the shore, I went cold all over; I seemed to feel it washing over me already. Then I started to run, and it felt perfectly awful being alone, away out there! I fell into a pool and hurt my leg; the skin's all off my ankles. I knew I must hurry, but I simply daren't run. Then I saw three girls, and I thought if only somebody would come who would help me to keep steady, I might still do it. I knew if I had to go all that way alone, I should go crazy with fright. Then Gard came to me, and she was as steady as the post of a groyne. You know how you cling to them when you're bathing. I just hung on to her. But it made it much harder for her. We went awfully slowly, and I knew she was watching the sea. It came dreadfully fast; but she never once said a word about leaving me. Christine, she might quite well have been drowned too. If that man hadn't come, I don't believe we'd have got off before the sea came over the rocks. By that time it would have been yards wide between us and the shore. We couldn't have swum it. I couldn't, and I don't believe she'd have been willing to try it without me. She risked everything to save me, Christine.'

'Good old groyne-post!' Christine said, with an unsteady laugh. 'No, she'd never have left you, Iris. I'm not the least surprised it's happened. I'm only sorry it had to be to-day. I always knew Gard was the kind who could be depended on to the utmost.'

'And won't you let us give up the match?' Iris pleaded. 'I'm sure Gard will feel awfully bad if she can't play.'

'I'm afraid she will. But we can't put it off now, if there's any possible chance of playing,' the Haven captain said decidedly. 'It would be awful to turn everybody away. We've plenty of others we can put in the team. We can't have you saying we hadn't a single other girl who could play. I'll admit none of them can take Gard's place, but that's our business. I'll just suggest that, when you win, your Rita crowd should try to hold themselves in rather more than usual. If they crow too loudly, I won't answer for what some of our lot may say; and in the circumstances it might not be too jolly for you. Some of ours might forget themselves if they were too much worked up, so for your own sake you'd better sit on Rita and Co.'

Iris could well imagine the things which might be said, and had no desire to hear them. 'I'll talk to our girls, though I don't really think there's any need. Will you tell yours that we offered to scratch, and that it was your wish that the match should go on? I wouldn't like them to think that I insisted on playing, when I'm all right and Gard's out of it because she got hurt helping me. They'd think me an awful beast. She only fell because I fell on her, you know.'

'I'll make that all right,' Christine said cordially. 'Thanks for the offer, but I'm sure it's better to go ahead.'

CHAPTER XXIV. THE BEST MATCH.

Gard, her wrist in a sling, sat watching the match with wistful eyes. But she was not as unhappy as she had expected to be. At first it had seemed that not to play in the match was the greatest blow that could possibly fall on her; but there had been compensations.

There had been a strange moment when, as she lay resting in the tiny front garden and Ven kept the excited boys at bay, a big car had driven down the lane, and Iris and her mother had come and thanked her for the thing she had done that morning. It was only then that she had really begun to realise what she had done. It was very jolly to think that she had saved another girl. She was glad, even as she watched the Castle team going out to field, and Netta and Nancy walking to the wickets, that she had happened to go home across the sands that morning. What if she had gone the other way, or stayed longer at the shops? She looked at Iris placing her team, and wondered.

It was only by a chance that Gard was there to watch at all. Granny had at first forbidden it, and the decree that she must spend the afternoon at home had been the final blow. But Mrs Forbes and Iris had asked if she would be able to come. Hearing that she felt fit and was longing to go, but that her grandmother would not permit it, they had promptly interviewed Mrs Unwin, and had insisted on being allowed to send the car to fetch Gard and Ven, and the boys too, if they cared to use it, and had promised to send Gard home in it also. That had won the day, and Gard had travelled to town in unusual luxury, feeling, as she said, 'very swish,' as she lay back on the cushions. Granny's only condition was that she must come home with the boys in the car as soon as the match was over, and not wait for tea at school with the rest of the team. That would be a noisy and exciting occasion, Mrs Unwin knew, and felt it would be too much for a semi-invalid. Gard did not consider herself an invalid at all, and regretted the school tea, the rowdiness of which appealed to her. But she was so much relieved that she was to see the match after all, that she had given way on the smaller point.

The match was exciting enough without the tea to follow, for her appearance was the signal for congratulations and condolences from every one. Gard, who had overlooked the likelihood of this, was ready to take flight.

'If you don't chuck it, all of you, I'll go right home, and then I sha'n't even be able to see the match!' she cried. 'Do stop talking about this morning! There's nothing to make a fuss about. That's my car over there,' she said haughtily, 'and it's waiting to take me home. If you talk any more rot I'll go at once.—Netta, Christopher wants you.—Good luck to you, Agatha! You'll do heaps better—no, not than I should have done; I'm not that kind of an idiot—heaps better than nobody. You can be good when you like, you know;' and Agatha, who had begun a polite protest, withheld it, but resolved anew to justify Christine's choice, lest Gard should be ashamed of her.

But though Gard was very crushing to those who would have made her a heroine, she treasured other words, and other wordless looks, as well as Mrs Forbes's. Ven's exuberant delight moved her deeply; as did Christine's quieter but very heartfelt, 'That was something like Garda. Kid, I am so glad you're safe!' The boys at home had asked a thousand questions, of course, and it was obvious to everybody that they were trying not to burst with pride.

On the field it was not only the Haven girls who crowded round. A group of Iris's classmates came, with Muriel to speak for them, with an elaborate speech of gratitude, which dwindled when the moment came, into an awkward but deeply sincere, 'Awfully sporting of you! We're no end grateful. We all think a thumping lot of Iris. It would have been ghastly if

anything had happened to her. It was frightfully decent of you to go and lug her along. She declares she wouldn't be here now, if you hadn't.'

Gard's horrible embarrassment, which almost made her take to flight, except that she would never have forgiven herself if she had run away from a Castle crowd, even a friendly one, was cut short by the appearance of Miss Duke to add her words of commendation, and the bunch of girls melted before her.

Miss Hedges had been one of the first to discover Gard as she descended from the big car, and had come to voice the thought Christine had uttered to Netta. 'I'm sorry you can't play for us, Gard dear, but you have done a bigger thing to-day than if you had won the match single-handed. I would rather the Haven had lost all its matches than that one of our girls had hesitated when she heard a call for help.'

After that, added to Christine's greeting, Gard could watch the match with no sorer feeling than a certain inevitable wistfulness. With it, however, there was a great gladness that she had been able to help, and that everybody was pleased.

She was thinking it all over very soberly when Netta's wicket fell for nine, and Gard came suddenly to attention. 'First wicket to Ven. She's bowling awfully well. I believe she'll take all the wickets.'

Ven, however, knew that she was not playing as well as usual, and it was some time before she scored another success. It had been a very upsetting day for her. The shock of hearing of her mother's dangerous condition had been great. On top of it had come the understanding of Gard's tragedy, and the strain of those few minutes of explanation. Ven had felt it all very deeply, and it would be long before she would cease to grieve for her cousin's disappointment. The accident, and all the excitement and delight of finding Gard a heroine, had been very wearing, and Ven felt she would very much rather not have finished off the day with a critical match and a team tea-party. There was no help for it; but she knew she was tired, and said so emphatically to Iris, lest any one should accuse her of slacking.

'I'm doing all I can, Iris. I'm sorry. I know I've done better at practices. I had bad news about my mother this morning, and it rather upset me; then all the rest of this finished me off.'

'That's all right! We're none of us up to our usual form. I'm simply crawling round, myself,' Iris agreed, 'but we've got to play it out. The Haven set wouldn't hear of giving it up. I tried, but they wouldn't have it. They're game. I say, Ven'—they were standing together waiting for Agatha to come out, fourth wicket down—'we've never been able to wind up with tea for the teams all together, because of—well, the feeling between the schools, you know. We all knew we'd be horribly stiff and awkward, so we never attempted tea together; but I think our girls would like it if the Haven team would come to-day. Would we dare to ask them?'

'I think it would be an awfully jolly thing to do!' Ven said warmly. 'I don't say they'll come, for their own tea will be waiting at the Haven, but I think they'd like to feel our girls had asked them. It would be friendly, and that would be an improvement. Of course, I think you've all been awfully soft. But the invitation would have to come from you.'

'Yes, I see that. I'll talk to ours in the interval. But I say, Ven, do play up all you can! If they should beat us without Gard—'

'It would be rather awful,' Ven agreed, laughing. 'It would show Gard they could do without her, of course. But she doesn't think too much of herself. She doesn't need a squashing like that.'

Christine, holding herself in readiness to go in and try to save the situation at the end, went round to where Netta and Nancy, their chances over, were sitting by Gard, discussing every ball with her.

'Gard, these kids are doing better than I expected.—Nancy, your seventeen was jolly good. I never thought you'd get more than two. You've all bucked up enormously. Look at Agatha! You'd have thought she'd be scared of Ven, but she looks quite calm. And she's hitting out far better than she used to do. What's come over her?'

'She's pretending she's Gard,' said Nancy. 'Long may it last!'

'If you all field and bowl up to your batting standard of to-day, we sha'n't do so badly.' The Senior Captain was looking less worried than at first; Agatha's new air of confidence was having a soothing effect; she had made three in her first over, and was hitting more vigorously than usual, and she certainly did not look terrified of Ven's balls. 'Your play's quite different from what it used to be. You've all improved no end lately. Have you been practising on the quiet?'

A look passed between the two juniors and their captain. Gard flushed. Netta burst out eagerly, 'On The Stretch! On Saturday afternoons all term, and in the hols., too! It was Gard's idea; she got us to come, seven of us. And we've played with Ven, so, of course, we don't crumple up when she bowls to us, as they were so sure we'd do.'

'She coached us. She told Agatha to hit out, and she was quite fierce about our fielding, and yelled at us when we dropped catches,' Nancy added.

'It was only on Saturdays, when we knew you couldn't come, Christopher,' Gard explained apologetically. 'We didn't think you'd mind if we put in some extra practice. And Ven never coached us after she'd been asked to play for the Castle. She practised with us, and we got used to her; but, as she said, she got used to us too, so it was quite fair. She invited Iris and the rest to come too, but of course they wouldn't. She only coached us the first day, before she'd begun going to the Castle.'

'That explains it!' Christine laughed. 'I'll confess I've been wondering at the all-round improvement in your play!'

'Do you mind?' Gard asked anxiously. 'Ven never meant to butt in and do your job. She knew we wanted to swot at it to please you, and to help the school, so she helped us a bit, that was all.'

'Mind! I'm frightfully pleased that you all fagged so much, both for me and the school. I'll thank Ven when she's finished slaughtering our side. Not much slaughter about it at the moment, though. Aren't Agatha and Winifred making a decent stand? They're pulling up our score jolly well.'

'Winifred's always dependable. She looks stuck there, like the post of a groyne,' said Gard.

Christine chuckled. 'That's what Iris said you were like this morning, dear old chap! She said you were as steady as a groyne-post. I said I'd always thought so.'

Gard crimsoned. 'I'm not, then. You don't know me very well, Christopher, and I thought you did.'

'I stick to my own opinion. I say, I hope we're able to play the match out. I don't like this mist. It's awfully damping.' Christine shivered.

'We don't mind!'

'No; but the Duke and our Head may step in and stop the game. That would be rotten luck, when our girls are putting up a decent fight after all.'

'Oh, we don't want a beastly draw!' Netta wailed. 'A draw's rotten! Anything's better than that!'

Christine kept one eye on the interesting partnership at the wickets, but the other on the steadily thickening mist which came creeping in from the sea in ever-increasing density. 'It will turn to fine, heavy rain at high tide,' she said gloomily.

‘No, it’s past high tide,’ Gard corrected her. ‘This beastly mist only began to get thick in earnest then. It was playing at it all the morning; now it’s going on getting steadily worse till it turns to real rain. I do hope the game gets over first!’

Very soon the mist was serious enough to become a third factor in the contest. Both sides were playing against the weather. Agatha hit out more freely than she could do safely, and the partnership ended, but not till it had added thirty-five to the Haven score.

‘Jolly good!’ Netta cried, as Christine went to congratulate Agatha on being one of the surprises of the match. ‘Seventeen! Who’d have thought it? Send her here, captain! Gard wants to pat her on the back!’

‘Fifty up! We’re running up a decent score. Oh, I wish I could help!’ the Junior Captain said wistfully.

‘So do we all, old thing! But don’t grouse about it. Christopher says you’ve done something far bigger for the school,’ and to comfort her Netta repeated Christine’s verdict of the morning.

‘If we get to seventy in the next half-hour I’m going to declare.’ Christine, burdened with the responsibility of the decision, returned to Gard and her friends. ‘Yes, I know. It’s a risk. I hate having to decide. If the mist clears off, we’ll have given them more than half the time for their innings, and we’ve no bowler to come anywhere up to Ven. You were our most promising man, Garda. They’ll run up a huge score, and we shall be crushed. But if the mist doesn’t clear and we stick in, they’ll get no innings at all, and the game will be drawn. Don’t you think we ought to put them in?’

‘It gives us a chance of getting them out,’ Gard said eagerly.

‘That’s the point. We have to decide; they can’t do anything. What do you think? I hate to feel it’s left to me. If I decide wrongly, our girls will be mad because I’ll have lost them the match; and the Castle will be mad because they’ll say we thought they couldn’t beat our total. It always looks like swanking to declare.’

‘Not on a day like this,’ Gard said quickly. ‘It’s the only chance of getting any decent end to the match.’

‘It’s a sporting chance for one side or the other. If we stick in, we spoil the chance for everybody. It’s getting worse every second. Help me to decide, Gard. What ought I to do?’

Gard sat silent for a moment. Then she said definitely, ‘Declare. It’s not swank; it’s only sporting. It gives them a chance; they’ll see that. Declare at three-thirty, Christopher.’

‘But what if the mist clears, and we have to go on till six?’

‘Second innings. They’ll make a huge score, and then put us in again in the hope of squashing us for ever with an innings’ defeat,’ Gard said briefly. ‘But the mist won’t, Christopher. It never does. Not on this tide, anyway. You’ve lived here long enough to know that. It will last for hours. I say declare.’

‘Right-o!’ Christine felt happier that the responsibility had been shared, and that Gard’s decision had agreed with her own.

The Haven captain, in declaring the innings closed, suggested that play should continue without any interval, in view of the state of the weather; and the proposal met with approval from the head-mistresses, who were already considering seriously a stoppage of play. The pleading of both teams postponed this for a time, however, and the Haven girls went out to field.

‘The visitors can go home to tea, if they’re getting too wet,’ Moll Sanderson remarked. ‘We don’t care about them.’

‘But we want to see the match through. Just fancy the Haven declaring!’ Rita had not yet got over the shock of finding herself comfortably sheltered in the pavilion instead of fielding out in the clammy mist. ‘I’d never have believed they’d have the sense to do it!’

'It's jolly sporting of Christine Haynes,' Queenie remarked. 'It's only fair they should have some fielding. It's a beastly job to-day!'

'It's awfully plucky of her, for she risks losing the match. They've no good bowlers, so far as I know,' Iris said warmly.

'She doesn't want a draw,' Ven said wisely.

'It's decent of her, then. I didn't know they cared so much for the game,' Iris admitted. 'You'd have thought a draw would be just what they'd like to-day. Wasn't your cousin one of their best bowlers, Ven? I do wonder they had the courage to put us in!' It was evident Christine and the Haven team had gone up considerably in Iris's estimation.

'Christine's lost her own innings, too,' Ven remarked. 'She's a sporting captain!'

The rest of the match was a race against the weather. Christine bowled herself, and put Netta on at the other end; and Netta rose to the occasion, and took Moll's wicket for five, and then Letty's for seven. A good catch by Meg brought cheers from both sides, and sent Queenie gloomily away for three; and the Haven girls began to feel happier, and the Castle crowd more serious.

'The mist is worse. The Duke is becoming restive. And we've lost three wickets for twenty. Do go and do something brilliant, Ven!' Iris begged.

Ven laughed. 'I'm used to Netta, but not to Christine. Anything may happen, so look out. I'll probably be out first ball.'

'If you dare!' Iris hissed after her. 'Remember their seventy! We've simply got to beat that!'

'Seventy's written on my heart! I see nothing but seventy wherever I look!' Ven assured her, and went out to punish Netta's bowling for a few busy moments, and then to play Christine's balls more warily.

She smiled grimly as she noted the smart fielding of the Haven team, knowing herself largely responsible for it. Ball after ball came swiftly back which had been meant for the boundary; two fine tries nearly resulted in sensational catches. Ven held her breath more than once, and laughed ruefully at the way the girls had taken her advice to heart. 'They're playing awfully well! Christine must be frightfully pleased! They do deserve to win!' she said to herself, as she watched to see what Rita at the other end would do about a twisty ball from Christine.

Rita played it, shouted 'No!' started to run, hesitated, called 'Come on!' and ran madly.

Ven, with a desperate 'Silly ass!' had to run also, but knew her fate was settled.

Winifred stumped her neatly, and she walked away, furiously indignant for a second, but merely amused long before she reached the pavilion.

'Silly, silly, silly idiot!' Iris raged. 'Ven, it's an awful shame! We were counting on you! I thought you'd make a century! I could eat Rita!'

'Ten's all you'll get, I'm afraid,' Ven said, laughing, and left the pavilion to go and sit under an umbrella with Gard.

'Run out by Rita!' Gard had cried, as she saw it happen. 'How—how thrilling! Won't Iris be mad? I wouldn't like to be in Rita's shoes when they get hold of her! To run Ven out, of all people!—Hard lines, old dear!' she sympathised, as Ven came up. 'You can grin about it, anyway!'

'Room for a little extra one under that brolly?' and Ven laughed and squeezed herself in. 'Oh, I'm not worrying! I was mad for a sec., of course, but, truth and honour, I'd rather your crowd won; they're playing such a jolly good game, and it was so frightfully decent of Christine to declare. I thought we weren't going to get a look-in at all.'

'Rita will have a hot time when Iris gets hold of her.'

‘Yes; I guess they’ll all rag her a bit. Iris is simply furious. It serves Rita right, though. She did it herself.’

‘Oh, look! She’s out! Caught and bowled! Good for old Christopher!’ Gard cried excitedly.

‘Jolly fine! That was brilliant! I guess Rita was feeling a bit fed up with herself, and that’s the result. Now, how many is the Mule good for? Games aren’t her strong point, but Iris would put her in, as she’s head of the school. I’d sooner have put in a keen junior. I guess she’ll make four.’

Muriel made six, then fell to Christine’s bowling; and the next wicket also fell to Christine. Then Iris went in, with nineteen needed to draw and twenty to win, three more wickets to fall, and the mist so thick that she could only just see the ball, and the end was a matter of minutes.

When Lilian, who had been scoring heavily, was dismissed by another fine catch by Meg, and Winifred had stumped the middle school girl who followed her, and the score stood at sixty-seven, every girl on the field held her breath, and Iris was almost pale as she faced Christine with desperately resolute eyes.

A groan went up from the whole field as Miss Hedges called to Christine.

‘Five minutes more! Oh, please, just five! Well, *four* minutes, then! Just one more chance!’ Iris implored. ‘I want those four runs! Oh, please, Miss Hedges!’

‘And I want her wicket! Just one more over, please! We can see, really!’ Christine begged. ‘And we can’t be much wetter!’

Miss Hedges withdrew reluctantly, and the girls breathed again, then waited in tense silence for the end. The one over must decide it. Would the third party win, and the weather force a draw? Christine had six balls, and Iris as many chances of her four runs.

She took one—two—in singles. The girls were hardly breathing.

‘Now a two!’ Ven whispered imploringly. ‘Two, or nothing! Not one, Iris darling!’

Iris had no intention of being bowled. She played two more balls carefully without scoring, and the painful tension increased as the over drew to its close. Could the authorities be prevailed on to grant another?

‘I can’t look!’ Ven groaned.

‘Don’t be an idiot!’ Gard was gazing wide-eyed. ‘You know you want to see! Oh, cheers! Middle stump! Oh, cheers for Christopher!’

The cheers that rang round the field almost swept the mist away. The Haven had won for the second time, and Gard’s mind was at rest. Her accident had not lost the match for the school.

On the pitch, the winning team ran to crowd round their captain. Ven sprang up. ‘We must go and offer congrats, too. I think Iris is doing it, but I want to have my say. You’d better get along home in—er—your car, old girl. You’re sopping, and there’s nothing more to wait for.’

‘Cept I want to give Christopher congrats, too,’ Gard retorted.

Iris and Christine had had the first word, Iris racing down the pitch to get her turn before any one else.

‘Christine—oh, well played! It’s been a topping game! We all think it was awfully sporting of you to declare, and I’m jolly glad you’ve won! And without Garda Svenssen, too! It’s jolly fine! I say, we want your team to come to tea with us. Will you? I haven’t had time to talk it over with all our lot, as you cut out the interval, but do try and get yours to come! It would be a ripping wind-up to the best match we’ve ever had!’

‘I don’t know if we can.’ Christine’s breath was taken away altogether by the suddenness of the invitation. ‘I say, though, we only won by an accident. If Rita hadn’t run Ven Morris out, you’d have done it easily.’

‘I’m going to have a few words with Rita. I don’t think we’ll talk about accidents, considering why you hadn’t Gard to play for you!’ Iris said grimly. ‘You were one short, though your substitute did jolly well. You all played an awfully fine game; we all say so! I’m sure the best side won. And it was ripping of you to declare and take the risk.’

‘I felt awfully bad when I had to decide,’ Christine confessed. ‘I knew we were taking a big risk, but we didn’t want a draw.’

‘Neither did we. It was awfully sporting of you! It’s been the best match we’ve ever had, thanks to you!’ Iris insisted warmly.

CHAPTER XXV. THE LAST MATCH.

Gard lay resting by the window, waiting eagerly for Ven's return. Whether the teams had had tea together or not she did not know, for Mrs Forbes had carried her off in the car before the matter had been decided; but she knew that the invitation had been given, and that in itself was a big thing.

Suddenly she sat up listening. The mist out here was not so thick as it had been in town, and the rain she had expected had not come yet.

Down the lane from the sea came clear, high piping notes, a lilting tune she had never heard before, but one she never forgot. 'One—two—three! One—two—three!'

'Barbara!' She went flying to the door.

The Fire-Girl, in mackintosh and sou'wester, her hair tucked out of sight, stood at the gate. 'Will you let a wet person come in? I want to see you. I'll leave these damp rags in the hall,' and she dropped her coat and hat on the floor, and stepped out of them in her brown skirt and cream middy blouse.

'I'll do that, kid,' and she interposed as Gard picked up the coat with her left hand. 'What have you done to yourself? Got knocked about in the match?' and she looked at Gard quizzically.

Gard reddened. 'No, I tumbled out on the rocks this morning, and hurt my wrist. But they won without me, so it didn't matter. I was sorry not to play, but Agatha did awfully well, so it may have been a good thing for our side.'

'Can't you walk on seaweed yet?' the Fire-Girl teased. 'What were you doing on the rocks, on the morning of a match, anyway?'

Gard's colour deepened. 'It was silly. What was that you were playing as you came along?'

Barbara laughed, and put the whistle to her lips, and played the tune again. '"Shepherd's Hey." Isn't it perfect? Now listen to this; just a tiny bit different, but the same old tune.'

'It's topping. But that one's got a curl on the tune that the first one hadn't. Why is it different?'

'It's from another village, another tradition. Different tune, different dance—*very* different! Extremely so, in fact; the limit in difference! The curly one's from Bampton in the Bush. Now here's the newest new one, just dug up by our dear Director. Yes, isn't it priceless? We all love him for that tune.—Gard, you silly, don't you tell people when you do jolly fine things? Weren't you going to tell me at all? Oh, I know all about it! Audrey was in town this morning and met Netta, and then came home and told me. We didn't think they'd play the match, considering the weather and the accident. I think it was simply topping of you to forget everything and go to help that girl. Their captain, wasn't she? What happened at the match? Do tell me! I think you're a jolly sporting kid. Now I won't go on about it, for I know you hate it,' she continued, perceiving Gard's great embarrassment. 'Tell me about the match. Did Agatha take your place? Then Ven didn't have to bowl you out, after all. Was the other girl, their captain, fit to play?'

Gard told the story of the match. 'It was really played against time. The mist got worse every minute. We were sure Miss Duke and Miss Hedges would interfere and stop us. It was fearfully thrilling. But I want to know about the Camp Fire, Bulrush. Ven and I had a meeting last night, and sent you the greeting. Are you going to be our guardian?'

'Audrey and I have talked reams about it. We've been thinking about it all week,' the Fire-Girl said gravely. 'It comes to this, Audrey will do it if I'll be her assistant-guardian. And I'll feel mean if I refuse. I've got used to my own little Lone Star Camp now, and it will change everything if I go in for a big official one. But if Camp Fire has meant anything to me these last two years, then I've got to do it. To refuse wouldn't be Camp Firey. And it has meant a lot. I can't keep it to myself if you girls are asking for it. It wouldn't be sporting. So we'll do it. Audrey and I will be the guardian between us, but I guess I'll have to do a good deal of the work. We'll do it for as long as we live here. You'll have to take the risk of our going back to town, but it won't be just yet.'

'Cheers! Oh, I'm so glad! What do we do now?' Gard cried rapturously. 'We're dying to begin! How soon can we get started?'

'Before we can apply for a charter we've got to earn, or find somehow, the money for our dues to headquarters. That will take some doing. We'll call a meeting and talk over ways to get the money. We ought to earn it all together somehow.'

'We'd all like to. But you'll have to help us with ideas. Here comes Ven at last.—Ven, they're going to be the guardian! We're going to have a camp!'

'Oh, cheers!' Ven cried, in the doorway. 'But, I say, I'm just bursting with news! Gard, it's happened! The teams have had tea together, and it went off quite well. Some of the girls were stiff and silly, but others, and especially Iris, were jolly nice. Things won't ever be so bad again, and it's thanks to you. But the biggest bit of news! You'll never guess! They all say this was the best match they've ever had. It's going to be the *last* match too, the last between the Haven and the Castle!'

'Oh, Ven, why?' There was utter dismay in Gard's tone.

'Because both the schools are giving up. Don't swoon! The Duke and Miss Hedges came to tea, and the Duke made a speech. They'd agreed to tell the teams at tea after the match, so the Duke did it for both lots. She's going to retire and live abroad. And Miss Hedges has been wanting to do the same for some time, as her health is failing; you've told me how poorly she's been. She's going to live with her sister in the country.'

Gard nodded, breathless and wide-eyed, the Fire-Girl and her camp forgotten in the urgency of the crisis. 'But what's to become of us? Lots of us can't go to the High School!'

'You know that big new mystery building?' Ven asked dramatically. 'We've all been wondering what it was?'

'Yes, rather! Oh, Ven, a new school?'

'A new, big, topping school, a huge place, to take all the town girls who care to go. Probably lots from the High School will come to it, too, for they're fearfully overcrowded there. It's being built by a lady who lived here as a girl, and has had a little fortune left her, and, instead of settling down with it, she's doing the thing that's been the dream of her life, the Duke says, and building a big beautiful school for girls, here in her old home. She consulted Miss Duke and Miss Hedges before she began, and found they were both willing to give up, and even keen, I believe. I suppose she's buying them out, and making it possible for them to take a rest. And they both hope *all* their girls will go to the new school. Now, Garda Svenssen, how do you like that for an idea?'

'All of us? The Castle crowd too? Oh, I *say*!' Gard had no words to express what she thought of the situation. 'Rita and all? Oh, Ven, how on earth will it work out? How simply awfully weird it will be!'

'It won't be yet, of course. You can see that by the state of the new building,' Ven said, laughing. 'But it may be ready by Christmas. That's why they say this was the last match. You may all be in the team together next year. Everybody's stunned, of course. I hope I'm here to see the fun.'

‘Suppose I can’t go?’ Gard ventured.

‘My dear kid, you’ll have to go. There’ll be nowhere else. You don’t think you’ve finished your education? Very well, then; they won’t have such high fees that you’ll be cut out. They want all the Haven crowd; they’ll see to that. Oh, you’ll go right enough! And it’s going to be just as good as the High School in every way. The Duke was most emphatic about that. “A perfectly equipped and fully staffed modern school,” she said. The sort of thing neither she nor your Miss Hedges could ever claim for theirs; the kind of school I’ve always gone to. Oh, Gard, how you’ll love it! I am so awfully glad!’ And Gard knew the meaning of that deep note in her cousin’s voice.

‘It seems to me’—the Fire-Girl had been watching them closely, and thought she understood, though it was only afterwards, and under pledge of strictest secrecy, that she heard the whole story from Ven—‘that you, Gard Svenssen, are the kind of person who doesn’t get what she wants, but always gets something better. It’s worth while being sporting when you’re disappointed, if you can feel sure there’s something better coming along.’

‘I don’t see it.’ Gard stared at her. ‘I’ve never felt sure. How could I?’

‘No, you’ve been sporting without feeling sure, and that’s miles better. But I should feel hopeful after this, if I were you.’

‘How have I got something better?’ Gard demanded incredulously.

‘You wanted to play in the match, and you saved a girl’s life instead. Wasn’t that better? You wanted to go to the High School, and you’re going to this big new school instead. That will be better.’

‘We don’t know yet if it will. It may be better. I didn’t want Ven to come,’ Gard said suddenly, ‘but she came, and that was far better. I don’t think I could get along without her now.’

‘You didn’t want me to go to the Castle, anyway,’ Ven remarked, ‘but I went, and, thanks to you, the schools are going to be more friendly than they’ve ever been before. That’s better; but it’s your own doing. I think Barbara’s right; you do get better things than the ones you wanted. But it’s because you’re so awfully sporting when you have to go without. Anyway, my dear infant, this new school is going to be simply gorgeous; the Duke says so—gym., and baths, and playing-fields, and labs., and things you’ve never dreamt of. You’re in for a jolly good time, and I’m awfully glad. The Haven wasn’t good enough for you, though I wouldn’t have said so before.’

‘It’s been a jolly good school, and I’ve loved it,’ Gard said stoutly, ‘but it will be thrilling to go to a new one. What a wind-up to an exciting day! Play us something joyful, Fire-Girl!’

And Barbara laughed, and took up her whistle, and began once more to pipe her merry ‘Shepherd’s Hey.’

THE END.

[End of The Junior Captain, by Elsie J. Oxenham [Elsie Jeanette Dunkerly]]