

The
CONQUEST
OF
CHRISTINA

ELSIE J.
KENHAM

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OF
CHRISTINA

COLLINS

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THE CONQUEST OF CHRISTINA

BY
ELSIE J. OXENHAM

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TO
MY FATHER

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CHAPTER I. CHRISTINA IN CHARGE.

Christina was in charge of the house, the Jackanories, and everything. Therefore, Christina was enjoying herself.

She had never been quite so much in charge before. But now that she was fourteen, and the Jackanories were four, the parents had thought it possible to take a long week-end holiday with friends in Conway, and had expressly told Christina that she must consider herself responsible for the safety of all at home, and especially for the well-being of the Jackanories.

The Jackanories were dark-eyed, white-faced little bits of anxiety to their young father and mother, in spite of constant care, sunny winters, and strong sweet mountain air. They spent the winter months in a continual progress from one attack of bronchitis to another, so that when Jack was not wheezing, Nora was sneezing, and both had to pass weeks at a time in the nursery, with mother and nurse keeping steam kettles going and struggling to guard against fresh chills.

But that was during winter and spring. When June came, every bush in the Land of Golden Gorse was alight and every hill aflame. Every window in the Dolls' House was thrown wide to the sun as it shone from a cloudless sky and flashed back again from the sparkling sea, and the Jackanories lived out of doors all day long. Of course, there *were* days—but the less said of them the better. But behind the Dolls' House, just across the hills, stood gray old Father Snowdon, and beyond the blue estuary, which twice a day turned to golden sand, rose mighty Cader; and these two had their say in the matter of the weather, as also had the great half-moon of lesser heights around the blue bay, from Barmouth Bridge to Bardsey.

The Dolls' House looked like a dolls' house, perched on the side of a low green hill. It was red, and a good decided red, too; not just gray stone washed over with pink, as was common enough, but the warm red of real bricks, and so was a conspicuous landmark in that country of whitewash and gray stone. It was a little house, for it held a little family at present, but it had plenty of room to grow. It had square windows with little white curtains, all just alike, at equal distances from a dark green door, which had a yellow knocker and a white porch.

It had been built with no upper storey, but two attics with gable windows had been added when the Jackanories came, and the Dolls' House looked more like a dolls' house than ever. The postman and the milkman and the butcher's boy very properly knew it as Ty Coch—the Red House,—but to its friends it was always the Dolls' House, and Marion had been known, when ordering a leg of mutton one day, to add, “Mrs. Clevelly—the Dolls' House, you know,” to Christina's intense delight.

Marion was the Jackanories' mother, and it was only five years since she and Harry Clevelly had set up housekeeping in the Dolls' House on the side of the hill, with the golden gorse just outside their garden fence—and inside, too, for that matter—and the Lonely Sands at the foot of the hill, and all the blue stretch of the bay beyond. The windows of the Dolls' House were always open to look out upon the bay, with its fringe of blue hills, and nearly every day, on the square lawn under the windows, were rugs and basket chairs, so that Marion could darn socks and make pinafores, Christina could pretend to do her lessons, and the Jackanories could play wonderful games of their own invention, while all the time they could

smell the sea and gorse and heather, and enjoy fresh-air treatment and sun baths while busy about their everyday labours.

Except, of course, when the south-wester blew, and came screaming across the bay from the open sea and racing over the Lonely Sands, to hurl itself upon the little Dolls' House and fill all the chinks and cracks with gritty driving sand. Then the windows were closed, and the Jackanories were safe indoors. As for Christina, she loved the Sands at any time, but perhaps most of all in the south-west gale.

But who was Christina? If the Dolls' House with its little family was only five years old, what was her place in it?

Christina was step-sister, though younger by sixteen years, to the Jackanories' father, Harry Clevelly, and was therefore "Auntie Chris" to the twins. Before her brother's marriage, she and he had lived in Criccieth with old Mr. Clevelly, their uncle. Their father had been a sailor, of a restless adventurous disposition, and on the death of his first wife, had gone off to sea again for many years, leaving his two children, Joan and Harry, in his brother's care. Then one day he had returned, bringing with him a pretty Norwegian girl, whom he had met and married in Christiania.

Her death within a year had sent him off to sea once more, leaving baby Christina at home, and from that last voyage he never returned. Christina remained at Bryntirion, the big house just outside Criccieth on the Pwllheli road, till Harry married Marion Davies of Glan Conway, and removed to the Dolls' House near Treflys. Then he and Marion invited Christina to make her home with them, and as she found Bryntirion lonely and dull, and Mr. Clevelly found her presence in the quiet house disturbing, she accepted the suggestion with great relief, and found life in the Dolls' House very much to her mind.

She found there a home such as she had never yet known, for life at the big house, Bryntirion, had lacked much. Mrs. Lewis, the housekeeper, had done what she could, but, as Christina's only feminine companion, had proved somewhat inadequate. Mr. Clevelly had been very kind to her, and Harry had always spoiled her completely, but she had wanted mother, sisters, or something, she scarcely knew what.

For her step-sister, Joan, the eldest of the family, had left home shortly after Christina's birth and the final departure of their father. In charge of one part of the quarries at Festiniog, which Mr. Clevelly owned and Harry now managed for him, had been a young Scottish engineer, Charlie Orr. He had met Joan Clevelly at Bryntirion, and their friendship had grown rapidly into something deeper. Mr. Clevelly had forbidden Orr the house. Joan had insisted on her right to order her life as she pleased, and had openly continued to correspond with him. Finally, being of age, she had left home, since she could not meet her lover there, and had shortly afterwards married him from the house of a sympathetic friend with whom she had been staying.

Since then, even her brother had heard nothing of her, beyond the facts that she was living in Scotland, had several children, and was very happy. She wrote occasionally to Bryntirion, to inform her uncle of her doings and whereabouts, and would have been glad to revisit her home and know herself fully forgiven. But he had always refused to see her, though for her father's sake he had continued to communicate with her. So she never came to Criccieth, and Christina had never known her.

She had unconsciously missed the womanly atmosphere which Joan's presence at the head of the household would have given, but she found this and more at the Dolls' House, where Marion tried to be mother and sister in one, entering into all her interests, and at the same time

caring for her as no one had ever done before. With her, and the Jackanories, and the brother who had always been good to her to the point almost of foolishness, Christina was so absolutely happy that she sometimes said to herself that any change or event in her life must be for the worse.

It was on Thursday that Harry and Marion went off for a few days' holiday in Conway. Friday was wet, so Christina, much enjoying her unusual authority, ordered the Jackanories to be kept indoors all day unless the weather changed, and told cook to make pastry. Both these suggestions were so very obvious that they would have been carried out in any case, but Lizzie of the nursery and Annie of the kitchen only grinned at one another when Christina's back was turned, and said nothing to interfere with her conviction that she was ordering household affairs carefully and well.

But Saturday was another matter. Saturday brought freedom from school, and so held possibilities. Christina had her own ideas as to how the day should be spent, and there was only the weather to interfere with them. So, when she woke, her first thought was to spring to the window.

Brilliant sunshine on the golden hillside, brilliant sun on the dancing waves, the long blue line of mountains to the left very clear against a bright sky, the fringe of hills and islands to the right all lit up by the strong light upon them,—Christina did not stop to look again, nor to think. She threw on her dressing-gown and ran out, barefoot, and with her thick, chestnut hair tousled, leaned over the stairs.

"Cook! Annie! Please take threepennyworth extra milk from the boy when he comes, and don't get anything from the butcher, except what you'll want for Lizzie and yourself. We're going for a picnic——"

"And will you not be wanting anything for to-morrow's dinner, Miss Christina?" called back Annie from below, and winked at the cats.

"Oh, bother! Yes, of course, mutton for to-morrow, as usual—unless he has any decent beef. And boil some eggs for sandwiches, Annie, and please cut some of that ham nice and thin. And don't have breakfast a minute before eight, for I'm going over to Llanystumdwy first. Lizzie! Lizzie! Get the children all ready to start the minute breakfast's done, and see they eat a good one, for they won't get any lunch till we're up at Aberglaslyn——"

"Miss Christina, you're never going to take them babies away up among the mountains!" remonstrated Lizzie.

"Why not, I'd like to know? What's wrong with the mountains?"

"There's the mist comes on so quick, and if it should rain——"

"Rain! Mist! Fiddle! It's clearer than clear. Don't talk nonsense, Lizzie."

She ran to a back window to look up the valleys towards the Snowdon mountains, and drew a quick breath of delight at sight of all the familiar peaks and heads, some sharp, some rounded, all very clear against that deep blue sky, with dark velvety shadows sweeping across their gray slopes from a few light clouds driving before the breeze. Then she ran back to the head of the stairs once more.

"Annie, tell Dick to have the trap ready for the babies at half-past eight,—no, nine! And I want Shenkin in ten minutes, please. I'm almost ready."

She sped back to her room, and began hastily to bring this somewhat exaggerated statement nearer to the truth. Within half an hour she was down, dressed in neat brown riding-breeches, a white knitted jersey, and with a white ribbon holding back her streaming brown

hair. The pony was waiting, so she mounted and rode off through the garden, down the lane with its walls of gorse, and out into the white Portmadoc road.

It was barely seven o'clock. The sun was warm already, but the mountain breeze was sharp. The larks overhead were celebrating the fine day after the rain in ringing, throbbing chorus. Up and down the broad white road no one was in sight.

Christina urged Shenkin on to do his best, and called a merry greeting to a rabbit as he scuttled away out of the road at sound of her. She loved the early morning, and felt like singing as she rode, from sheer delight in the fresh sweet wind and sun, the scent of the gorse, and the sight of the great gray mountains.

Round a shoulder of the hill, and Criccieth lay before her, the round towers of its old Castle high on their rock, the sea sweeping into the bay at its foot. At this early hour the little town was quiet enough. No trade vans or private cars were about. She rode up the long street, past shuttered shops, quiet station, and sleeping library, and lost sight of the sea as the road became once more a country lane, with hedges and great trees on each side, but still white and firm and hard, all traces of the rain of the day before having vanished under the strong wind of the night.

At a turn of the road, a river rushed down to the sea, brawling among boulders, with deep pools for lurking trout, and an arched tunnel of shadowy trees. To stand on the old stone bridge and gaze down stream after the hurrying water was endless delight. To stand and look up as it came rushing down from the hills was even more fascinating. Christina and Davy Jones had sat there on the broad parapet many a time, looking up and down, but to-day she had only time for a brief glance of enjoyment, first down, then up, before she rode on.

This was Llanystumdwy, the very small village of the very long name. Beside the old bridge on one side were two or three shops, two or three rows of gray cottages, and the big Methodist chapel. On the other side were a few more gray cottages, the little parish church, and the graveyard. During August, there was generally an artist somewhere about. Then the road led away on and up among the trees, with the sea half a mile away down the river, and went wandering on towards the far lonely west.

Christina rode across the bridge and up the slope of the road. Then she turned into a shady lane, through a white gate, and drew up in the garden of Rhianfa.

"Myfanwy! Good-morning to you, Myfanwy!" she cried, and Myfanwy turned to meet her.

She was a tall graceful girl of twenty, with great dark eyes and a cloud of soft dark hair framing her face. She had been wandering up and down a long row of sweet peas, selecting her colours for the day with great deliberation, hesitating long between mauve and white, maroon and white, deep blue and cream, or pure pale pink.

Myfanwy had a way of her own with sweet peas, and for her they would do more than for any one else. She seemed to have a secret understanding with them, for they always flowered in her garden earlier than in any other,—but perhaps the sheltered situation of Llanystumdwy had something to do with that. So now, when every one else had only drooping green buds, she had long rows of every colour and shade, and as she turned to meet Christina her hands were full of pure white fragrant flowers.

Following her as she went, stalking slowly up and down between the rows of peas, was a peacock, his tail folded demurely and trailing on the grass. As Myfanwy turned, he spread it wide in all its splendour. Then, at sight of Shenkin, he disappeared among the bushes with an angry screech.

"Christina! Indeed, you're early this morning! What shall I mix with these, Christina, do you think? These pale pink, now, or these darkest of all? Look at one of each I have here! Aren't they magnificent? Just look at that!"

"Myfanwy, I do believe they're finer than ever this year! How do you manage it?"

"I don't do anything. They just come. But I really think they are—they're delightful. Come and see these new ones. They only opened yesterday——"

"Cut the pinky ones for the house, Myfanwy, and wear some of them yourself. Then cut me a big bunch of mauve and very dark ones to take home. Mine aren't nearly ready yet. Did you know you were going for a picnic to Beddgelert to-day, Myfanwy fach?"

"No, indeed, I didn't know," Myfanwy said, smiling. "Is it with you I am going? And Davy too?"

"Of course. Where is the lazy boy? Not up yet? Really? On a morning like this? Oh, how disgraceful! Myfanwy, you should bring him up better, you really should. You must talk to him like a mother,—or I'll do it for you, if you like."

"Davy's fifteen," Myfanwy reminded her, smiling. "I really think you had better take him in hand yourself, Christina. You're an aunt, you know. I haven't had your experience. What about the picnic?"

"You must meet me at the corner of the Tremadoc road about nine, and of course you must ride Sally. And tell Davy to come to our house just before nine, as I want him there before we start. I want a real good picnic, and, you see, I was telling the Jackanories the story of Gelert the other day, so I want to show them his grave. It's disgraceful to think they've never seen it yet."

"Do you really think the Jackanories are old enough to be interested in graves?" Myfanwy asked, smiling again.

"Well—no, perhaps not! But it makes a good excuse to go up to Beddgelert, and I do so love a day among the mountains."

Myfanwy nodded. "And did they enjoy the story? Don't you think perhaps they are rather young for tragedies?"

"I didn't, till I'd told them the story. I do now," Christina admitted crestfallenly. "I was so disappointed in them. Jack jumped with delight when I described how the sword was plunged in poor Gelert's heart, and Nora burst out crying when she heard that the baby was found safe and sound after all! They were quite disappointed! Wasn't it hateful of them? Still, I do think they ought to see the grave."

"And it makes a good excuse for a picnic," Myfanwy laughed. "Very well. I'll meet you at the Tremadoc road, and Davy shall go on to the house, if you prefer it."

"We'll have a perfectly gorgeous day. The mountains are looking heavenly. That's the only thing against living down here. You can't see them," Christina said, as they wandered between the rows of peas, she now holding out eager hands for the flowers which Myfanwy was selecting and cutting here and there, while the peacock watched Shenkin from among the bushes.

"Well, Master Davy Jones is the laziest boy I've ever met, and you can tell him so from me, with best wishes for a happy Christmas if he's up by then. I shall evidently lose my breakfast if I wait to see him, so I'd best get along home. You go in and hurry him up, Myfanwy fach. Tell him the best bit of the day's gone already, and he ought to be ashamed of himself. Are all those for me? Myfanwy, you're an angel! Can you really spare them? I couldn't give away so many, even if I *had* oceans of them. Thanks ever so much! *Diolch*

mawr! And good-bye till nine o'clock, this side of Tremadoc! My love to Davy, if he's up in time for breakfast!"

CHAPTER II.

CHRISTINA HAS HER OWN WAY.

Davy Jones rode up to the Dolls' House about half-past nine, comfortably conscious that he was late and that Christina would be cross. One of her names for him was "Davy Jones—Lazy Bones," but a great part of his laziness was assumed to tease her, and her excessive energy always had the effect of increasing his deliberate ways.

He was her chief friend and companion, and they spent most of their time out of school together. Both were good walkers and riders, and they shared a common contempt for cyclists and a common hatred of motors. Their ponies were great friends also, as Christina sometimes explained, and were always pleased to have an outing together. Davy's was named Jenkin, and Christina's Shenkin, and they were brothers, their mother being the great white mare, Sally, which Myfanwy always rode. So it was quite a family party when they all went out together.

When Davy rode up to the Dolls' House, neither Christina nor the Jackanories were to be seen. But dear Bill was sitting in the white porch, and dainty Mary was crouching beside him, lashing furiously, with gibbering underjaw, at a great thrush on the lawn.

No one could know anything of the Dolls' House without being introduced to dear Bill and dainty Mary. They were so distinctly part of the family, and so very human in many of their ways, that they were known to all friends of the household.

Dear Bill had been presented to Christina as a very small kitten eight years ago, and had been teased till his temper was ruined, and he developed into a furious warrior. He had fought all the cats of Criccieth during his residence at Bryntirion, with varying success, and with visible result to his ears. Apparently all his enemies had seized him by these danger points and hung on to them, for now he had only three quarters of an ear left at one side, and one quarter at the other. Now he had assumed a profound contempt for all the world, and as he sat on the step, his tail curled neatly round his toes, the dark stripes on his legs meeting with beautiful regularity, and his eyes narrowed to mere slits in the sunshine, he looked the embodiment of stony indifference to everything and everybody.

He had at first been christened Mark Antony, with obvious reference to this haughty expression, which suggested nothing so much as the proud and stoical Roman patrician. But his name had been changed one day to Willie, which, in its absolute incongruity, took Christina's fancy by storm. It was so unlike him, she explained, and that was why she liked it. It made her laugh every time she looked at him and called him Willie.

Willie had in course of time become Bill;—"dear Bill," to the Jackanories;—"that old Bill," to Marion;—"that brute Bill," to Harry, who had deservedly felt Bill's claws;—and "dear old Billy Doodle," to Christina. Just when and why the surname had come into existence, no one could have explained, but "Billy Doodle" he seemed likely to remain.

In return for his undignified nickname, he treated them all, Christina and the others alike, with indifference and contempt, and held himself severely aloof from any attempt at petting. Christina lavished all her affection for any animal—except a little reserved for Shenkin—on dear Bill, and consulted his wishes in every respect. In fact, when the attics were to be added to the Dolls' House, she had protested loudly against any alterations, since dear Bill did not like workmen about the house. But he repaid her attentions with cold indifference, and made a grab at her hand whenever she offered to stroke him.

When a dainty little stray cat was chased in one night and adopted into the family, she had to be christened at once, and, with William in the household already, she could of course be called nothing but Mary—dainty Mary, as a rule, because of her gentle ways and lady-like appearance by the side of dear Bill. He was big and strong, long-legged and very thin, and beautifully marked, with regular black stripes, like a zebra, from ears to tip of tail and down each leg. She was small and plump, and had just the same stripes, but with touches of yellow, which added greatly to her beauty, and white feet and breast, which she failed to keep as clean as she might have done. A white tip to her tail, which she always waved proudly upright, and an ingratiating habit of purring and rubbing herself affectionately against every new friend, won for dainty Mary the attention which Bill the warrior failed to attract. To coax dear Bill to purr was an achievement, and when it happened the Jackanories came running to hear. Dainty Mary purred all day long, for anything and everything.

William and Mary—"1688, you know," as Christina would say, in introducing them to strangers—were good friends on the whole, though Bill soon learned an objectionable habit of flying at Mary's handsome ears if she happened to annoy him. By and by George the First appeared on the scene, and old Bill enjoyed brief spells of kittendom with his diminutive descendant. But more often he watched Mary and the little one at their games, with lashing angry tail and disapproving expression, only showing by the bright eyes which followed their every movement, as they raced round the kitchen table on which he sat, that he would have liked to join in the fun, but felt it beneath his dignity.

In time little George was presented to Myfanwy, and George the Second appeared. He went to the milkman. George the Third was carried off by the butcher's boy, and for a time Christina looked anxiously at the sausages as she passed, and wondered if they would know her voice if she called "*Kitty dear!*" George the Fourth went to the green-grocer, and William, who followed him, to the postman. And now, as Christina had recently remarked, "We expect the next to be Victoria."

Davy Jones was an old enemy of dear Bill's. He tapped him gently with his whip as he entered the porch, and Bill swore softly and stalked out on to the lawn, muttering imprecations at Jenkin the pony as he passed his hoofs. Mary began to rub her neck against Davy's boots, being always and everywhere in search of sympathy, and the Jackanories came running down the hall.

"Jenkin's to stay at home, an' you're to go in the trap with us an' the baskets——"

"'Cause you're to drive us. Auntie Chris says so."

They were as like as two pins, with little round faces, still rather white and thin, dark close-cropped heads, and bright black eyes. They wore dark blue coats belted at the back, and thick woollen gloves to keep their little hands warm and cosy, smart woollen bérêts to match, and strong sandals. The only difference was that Jack was very proud of two inches of pale blue trousers, while Nora objected strongly to her tiny pleated skirt and wanted to wear "chowsies" too. It was Nora, now as always, who was foremost in the conversation, while Jack supplied the explanations which she in her haste often forgot, the most general being, "Auntie Chris says so."

"Oh, I say!" Davy began to remonstrate, when Christina came running downstairs.

"I want you to drive the Jackanories, Davy! You will, won't you? I'm quite sure you will. We don't want any one else with us, and I do so want to ride! So be a decent chap, Davy, and let Jenkin stay at home! He won't mind for once."

It was not only Jenkin who minded missing the ride, and Davy hesitated before consenting. But he shared with Myfanwy, besides the dark hair and thoughtful dark eyes in which they were so much alike, a disposition which prompted them to yield in trifles like this, and a strong affection for Christina. Moreover, Christina was a girl, and younger, and Davy, without clearly analysing his thoughts, yielded her a certain chivalrous deference in consequence.

It was the outcome, in reality, of his companionship with his sister. Their orphaned condition, and Myfanwy's added five years, had given her an almost motherly position towards him. He had repaid her with all the love and gentleness and loyalty he would have given to his mother, and her wishes were law to him. It had been easy for Christina to suggest tacitly, by an assumption of authority, that the same treatment was due to all girls, and now she boasted that she could make Davy do anything she liked. In small matters he always gave in, and she imagined he would do the same in greater ones.

So after a moment's natural hesitation, and a glance at Christina in her riding-breeches and jersey, so evidently determined not to drive with the babies, he gave up his ride, and said good-naturedly:

"All right! Anything to please you, Chris, my child!" and her anxious face cleared.

"You're a brick, Davy! I knew you would."

"Here, Dick!" cried Davy to the stable-boy, as he brought up the trap, drawn by a sleepy old pony, "be good to Jenkin! He's had a severe disappointment. Now, kiddies, in with you! We'd better get away. Myfanwy's waiting at the cross-roads."

Christina was already in the saddle, her face radiant. It was very much better fun riding Shenkin beside Myfanwy, than driving behind the old pony! Of course, some one had to drive, but she was not prepared to do it herself. She was in the highest spirits once more, and so were the children, and Davy, who never did things by halves, was as merry as any of them.

At the corner where the Tremadoc road turns to cross the plain of the Glaslyn towards Snowdon, Myfanwy met them, mounted on her big white mare. She smiled at sight of Davy in the trap, fully understanding what had passed, and Davy smiled back. But Myfanwy was saying, as she joined them:

"I thought perhaps Mrs. Clevelly would be with you, Christina. Isn't she coming to-day?"

Christina turned in surprise. "Why, she's away to Conway! You knew she was going, Myfanwy! I told you myself."

"I thought it was next week——"

"Oh, no, they went on Thursday. It's such a joke! I'm in charge, you know, and I have to think about what we'll have for Sunday's dinner, and everything! I forgot to order anything for breakfast to-day," she laughed ruefully, "and Annie had to run out to the henhouse and look for eggs. Fortunately there were some, or we'd have gone hungry. I never thought about breakfast till I was sitting down to it, simply starving, after riding over to you."

Davy chuckled. "I'll come and stay with you, Chris, and keep you up to the mark."

But Myfanwy was thinking, a wrinkle in her brow.

"I suppose Mrs. Clevelly was willing you should take Jack and Nora for this picnic?"

"Never asked her," said Christina, flicking her whip at a chaffinch on a gorse bush. "Couldn't, you know. Didn't know myself till I saw the gorgeous heavenly morning."

"But, Christina—! You know she has never allowed it before."

"Davy and I took them over Black Rock and nearly to Criccieth last week."

“Oh—Black Rock! But that’s nothing. Beddgelert is quite another matter. They have never been so far before.”

“Well, they’re bigger than they ever were before,” Christina argued.

“Do you think we ought to take them so far when their mother is away, Christina?”

“Now, Myfanwy! You know I couldn’t go without them, when I’m in charge, and I couldn’t waste such a perfect morning. So what could I do but take them with me? And what’s the harm? With me, and you, and Davy, to look after them——”

“If we should have rain or mist, and they should get wet, you know the danger to them, Christina.”

“Rain! Mist! Fiddle!” said Christina again. “See how fine and clear it is!”

“Yes! I was just wondering if it wasn’t perhaps a little too clear.”

“Oh, don’t croak, Myfanwy! It isn’t one of *those* mornings at all. It’s one of the mornings that begins clear and ends clear too.”

“But perhaps doesn’t keep clear all the time in between!”

“Well, I’m not going home, anyway. It would be ridiculous, and see how the children are enjoying themselves! Myfanwy, you couldn’t be so hard-hearted as to suggest such a thing!”

Nora, at the top of her high-pitched voice, was relating the story of Gelert to Davy, in the evident belief that it would be new to him as it had been to her. Jack was trying to hasten her on to the murderous episodes, and jumping with excitement as she approached these thrilling parts, and kept up all the time his usual explanatory chorus,—“ ‘Cause there was wolves here then!” “ ‘Cause he was to take care of the baby!” “ ‘Cause he thought he’d *killed* it!” “ ‘Cause it was under the bed all the time, ‘cause Gelert had jumped on the wolf and killed *it*, ‘cause it was trying to find the baby, ‘cause it wanted to eat it, ‘cause it was very starving hungry, ‘cause it hadn’t had any dinner, ‘cause——”

“Hope we don’t meet any wolves to-day,” said Davy, stopping him in this final effort, and the Jackanories cast anxious glances over their shoulders at the great cliffs above them.

They had crossed the plain of the Glaslyn by the straight white road, and had passed through the little square town of Tremadoc, at the foot of a mighty wall of rock. Turning the shoulder of this hill, the road ran right up among the mountains, by the side of the river as it came dancing among its boulders swiftly down from Snowdon. The bare rock wall became a green cliff, its precipitous slope clothed with a rich garment of firs, and feathery larches, and pines all pointing heavenward. Here and there the trees were broken by the flashing white of a waterfall tumbling from the heights, and the sleepy pony insisted on stopping to drink at every pool. On the other side of the road, beyond the meadows, was the silver river flashing back the sunlight, and beyond the farther hills rose the round head of Moelwyn and the familiar peak of Cynicht, gray-blue against the deeper sky.

“Look, Jackanories! There’s old Father Snowdon!” said Davy.

The Jackanories cast one glance at the gray point rising above the ridge, then turned again to look for wolves in the shadowy darkness under the pines.

Christina and Myfanwy had cantered on ahead, and Davy began to find his part of the picnic rather slow. His hint as to wolves had been a new idea to the Jackanories, and at any movement among the trees they became petrified with fear. They would not talk, would not look round nor take their eyes off those mysterious gloomy trees, and Davy regretted his thoughtless words several times before the girls came riding back to keep them company once more.

“You are a rotter, Christina!” he grumbled.

"Davy Jones—Lazy Bones!" she sang. "Did he find it dull and slow, then? Serves him right for being such a sleepy-head! Davy Jones—Lazy Bones! 'Tis so nice riding to-day, Davy!"

But Davy only laughed. "Who forgot the breakfast?"

"Auntie Chris didn't remember to-morrow's dinner neither," said Nora, forgetting the wolves.

"'Cause Annie said so to Lizzie, an' they laughed," Jack explained.

Davy chuckled, and Christina changed the subject.

The Jackanories had never been so far from home before. With Christina riding on one side and Myfanwy on the other, they forgot those wolves and were full of excited questions and exclamations.

"When do we have something to eat, Auntie Chris?" asked Nora at last.

"'Cause we had breakfast ever so long ago——"

The valley had narrowed till the road ran through a deep glen, with pine-clad rock walls towering high above, and the river brawling in a cutting below. It was all very silent, save for the constant murmur from the trees, and the noise of the water, which formed a series of tiny falls.

Here was the old gray bridge among the trees, beloved of painters, where the white road from Maentwrog joins the road to Snowdon—Pont Aberglaslyn. Then on through the glen again, the pines nearly meeting overhead, and the trees casting deep shadows on the road. The path went up and up, and Christina and Myfanwy dismounted, and Davy sprang down to lead the pony, while the Jackanories ran on ahead and tried to climb the parapet to look over into the river.

Then, at a warning cry from Davy, they all drew in close to the cliff, while the Criccieth bus crept slowly past, its crowd of tourists hanging out of windows shouting to them. And presently they came on a silent motor, whose engine had collapsed under the strain of the climb, and Davy and Christina made sarcastic remarks as they passed it, on the superiority of horses, and Shenkin winked at Sally—at least, Christina said he did.

"We'll have lunch when we get to the very top," said Christina.

The walls of trees parted to show the winding Pass and the break in the cliff, beyond which lay the meadows of Beddgelert. She chose the first spot which offered room to sit, and they all sank down on the grass, feeling that they had done a good morning's work.

"We'll have lunch here," said Christina. "Then later on we'll have dinner at 'The Goat,' and get home in time for tea."

The trees made their resting-place very dark. The noisy water, churning among boulders at the bottom of a rocky chasm, and the murmuring trees all around, only seemed to deepen the silence and loneliness. The Jackanories remembered the wolves, and began to look fearfully over their shoulders once more, but were coaxed into forgetfulness with sandwiches and cakes. Davy scrambled down to the river to fill a flask with cold mountain water, and made the journey again and again till all were satisfied. And they were all so busy that no one noticed that the darkness around was not due only to the trees and the walls of the Pass, and no one saw the clouds which had veiled the mountain peaks and spread across the sky.

A drop of rain made them start up. The meadows of Beddgelert lay under a white pall, sweeping down from Snowdon. With Christina's cry of dismay came the whistle of the wind, and the storm was on them.

"What shall we do? Oh, what *shall* we do?" she cried, losing her head completely.

Davy led up the horses.

"Jump on!" he said briefly, and gave her his hand to help her. "We're only a few minutes from the hotel," and he bundled the shivering Jackanories into the trap and whipped up the pony.

When they had gone a little way through the driving rain and wind, he dropped the reins suddenly and paused to wrap Nora in the heavy rug, for he had seen her shiver. Jack's teeth were chattering, and Davy hastily stripped off his own coat and bundled him into it.

"That's better, kiddies, isn't it? We'll be there in two minutes now."

They fought their way along the road towards the doors of "The Goat," heads down to meet the storm. The struggle was so hard that the short distance took them considerably longer than Davy had foretold. But they reached the hotel at last, all very wet and tired out with the battle with the wind.

Davy sprang out, ran indoors with Nora, wrapped in the rug, and then with Jack.

"I don't think they can be very wet. We didn't lose much time. If they have something hot to drink at once, I guess they'll be all right," he said encouragingly.

"They don't need to be *very* wet! If they're just damp that's quite enough," Christina groaned. "And I never thought of bringing mackintoshes!"

"Coming to Beddgelert you might have known that much at least, Chris. You're not a summer tourist," he said severely.

"Yes, I should have known. Why, Davy, you're dripping! Where's your coat?"—at sight of his soaked sports shirt.

"He putted it on Jack, and he did look a funny sight in it," piped Nora.

"'Cause she had all the rug to herself, like a greedy, and she looked like two funny sights all at once, she did," cried Jack, in self-defence.

"The less you have on, the quicker you dry," Davy said easily. "Here's the sun coming out again. It's all over. I'm going to get dry by standing in the puddles. What about you girls?"

But when Christina had taken off her jersey, and Myfanwy her wet jacket, they both declared themselves none the worse. The Jackanories did not really seem very damp, thanks to Davy, but they were shivering still and looked pinched and blue. Myfanwy, eyeing them anxiously, begged for drinks of hot milk from the landlady, in the hope of warding off possible ill effects, and then urged that they should carry out their first intention, and, leaving the horses, have a walk about the village.

"And you little ones must run, so that you'll get thoroughly warm again," she said.

She and Christina, picking their way among the pools of water, while Davy ran races with the Jackanories—raced them to the old bridge, and then up the Llanberis road, piloted them safely through the crowd of buses, motors, and tourists in the village, and raced them up the Carnarvon road beside the river.

Then they all crossed the meadows once more, with the giant shoulder of Snowdon behind, and the long bare flank of Moel Hebog rising sheer out of the level plain on their right. In the middle of a meadow stood a low tree, with two upright stones at its foot, and they all leaned against the railing of the little enclosure, while Christina once more recited the story of Gelert to the Jackanories.

But the Jackanories had turned cross. They would not listen to the story, and refused to be interested in graves. Jack protested that he wanted to sit down, and Nora began to whimper. Myfanwy, looking worried, suggested that they should return to the hotel and see if dinner was

ready, so they took the short cut through the shrubbery and came out close to the door of "The Goat."

The children seemed suddenly to have lost all energy. Both wanted to sit in Myfanwy's lap, and Nora whimpered incessantly that she wanted her mother.

"You made them run too much, Davy, and now they're tired out. You are a stupid," said Christina.

She left the room to ask if dinner could be hurried up, and Myfanwy, with a Jackanory on each knee, spoke a word of Welsh to Davy.

"She's frightened, Davy bach. Don't be cross with her. She doesn't mean it."

"Oh, I don't mind! But are they going to be bad, Myfanwy, do you think?"

"I'm afraid, too. But they may be only tired. We can't tell yet."

During dinner Davy drew Christina into a discussion as to the truth of the legend of Gelert, for the sake of taking up her thoughts, and, if possible, of interesting the Jackanories also. To rouse her wrath, he denied all belief in the existence of Gelert at any time, and when she indignantly reminded him of his many expressions of faith in every word of the story, explained airily that he had changed his mind since then. But the Jackanories showed no interest in the argument, and could not be coaxed to eat even pudding. Nora sobbed at last that her "froat was bad," and Jack, looking flushed and heavy-eyed, pressed both hands on his chest, and said huskily, "So's my tummy."

Christina looked woefully at Myfanwy.

"It always begins in Nora's throat, and Jack's chest——"

"No, my tummy——!"

"What shall we do, Myfanwy? Oh, I'll do anything, if you'll only tell me what! It's all my fault."

"We must get them home at once," Myfanwy said, with quiet decision. "We'll hire a cosy car, and drive down as quickly as we can. We can't risk another wetting. I think I had better drive with them. One of you must ride on as fast as ever you can, and tell Lizzie to have their beds warm and everything ready. Then go and fetch Dr. Jones, and have him there when they get home, if possible. And then, Christina, you had better telegraph to their mother."

Christina nodded, her face white. The sending of that telegram would be her punishment.

"I'll go. I'll go just like lightning," she said, feverishly anxious to help in some way. "Davy can bring the trap——"

"I'm coming with you. You can't go all that way by yourself on those lonely roads," and Davy would not listen to her indignant protests. "I'm coming. Don't waste time talking. I'll go for the doctor while you go straight home. Some one must ride Sally for Myfanwy. Fetch your things quick, and we'll get along."

His jacket was still too damp to be worn, however, so, leaving it to follow in the carriage, Davy was content with his cricket shirt. Christina wriggled into her jersey, warm from the kitchen fire, hurriedly kissed the Jackanories, and they set out for home.

"We'll be just behind you, so don't lose any time," said Myfanwy, and the Daimler was at the door before they had turned the corner.

"We won't lose any time," said Christina, setting her teeth. "I'm going to have their beds waiting for them when they arrive," and she urged Shenkin on to do his utmost.

"Be careful! Mind Shenk doesn't fall!"

"Fall! You can come on slowly, if you like," she said scornfully, and Davy laughed.

But, at her pace, it was a wild mad ride from the mountains to the sea. As they turned into the Pass and took the steep slope down to the bridge, Davy once more urged her to caution, but she would not listen to his suggestion that if she broke her neck it would not help the Jackanories. So they went down the Pass at full speed, holding in their horses carefully and sitting very straight, Christina's chestnut hair streaming, her face very set and anxious, and Davy determinedly blundering on behind.

"My goodness! You can ride, Chris!" he said, as they raced past the old bridge. But she was thinking of the Jackanories and scarcely heard him, though at another time his admiration would have gratified her greatly.

Shenkin and Sally did nobly. They reached Tremadoc, and clattered across the square, all the Saturday afternoon loafers and all the small boys staring after them. Then, the little gray town left behind, they crossed the plain to the sea, and parted on the Portmadoc road.

"Get the doctor as quick as you can, Davy."

"Yes. And, Christina fach, I'll send that telegram, so you needn't come into town."

"You're a brick, Davy," and as she turned towards the Dolls' House her eyes filled with tears, and she bit her lips to steady them, touched by his thoughtfulness and a trifle shaky with fear and remorse.

"And Myfanwy never once said, 'I told you so!' Lizzie will, though! Well, it's true, so I can't say anything. Oh, dear! I *wish* it had been a wet morning!"

CHAPTER III. THE CRIME OF CHRISTINA.

The Jackanories were safe in bed, warm and comfortable, and very much happier than they had been up at Gelert's Grave. The doctor had been, and had expressed the hope that, as the trouble had been dealt with so promptly, it might not prove very serious. The chill would in hardy children only have caused a slight cold, but with the Jackanories was sure to mean at least a touch of bronchitis.

"And Marion was hoping they'd get through the summer without an attack," Christina said mournfully to herself.

Myfanwy, after begging to be allowed to do something to help, had gone home, since she could do no more than had already been done, and her presence would only have entailed more work in the Dolls' House. She had pressed Christina to ride back to Llanystumdwy for tea, but she would not leave the house again. The telegram to Mrs. Clevelly had been sent, and a reply received. Harry and Marion were returning at once, but could not arrive till late at night. They would either come by the mountain railways by way of Bettws-y-coed, or round the coast through Bangor and Carnarvon. Christina could not be sure which route they would take, so could give no definite time for their arrival.

She sat gloomily on the front steps when Myfanwy had gone, without going upstairs to take off her riding-breeches and jersey. There might be something wanted for the Jackanories, some errand to the town, and she would be ready to go.

The sun was pouring down on the front of the house, as it did all day long. So the steps under the porch were a favourite seat with dear Bill and dainty Mary, who would sit there for hours, he with half-closed eyes in the sunshine, paying no attention to anything but his own lazy comfort, she with lashing tail and eager quivering underjaw, as she watched the birds just beyond her reach.

So they were beside Christina now, as she sat on the step, elbows on knees and chin in hands, gloomily considering her own shortcomings, and more than half inclined to put the blame on the treacherous weather, the mountain climate, or the frailty of the Jackanories, forgetting that she should have been familiar with all these by this time. Dainty Mary, in want of petting as usual, rubbed her neck coaxingly up and down her long legs, but found herself unnoticed. Dear Bill, on whose head Christina laid her hand now and then in search of sympathy, jerked away impatiently every time, and at last turned his back upon her, and twitched and wriggled in angry protest whenever Christina absent-mindedly came across to fondle his smooth body. There was no sympathy to be gained from dear Bill, and dainty Mary had none to give, being perpetually in search of it herself. Christina felt lonely, and guilty, and miserable.

Annie, the cook, in the hope of rousing her from her gloomy thoughts, came out of the kitchen.

"Post came while you was out, Miss Christina, and there's a letter for you."

Christina turned, without much interest. Probably the letter was from Harry, and his messages to the Jackanories would seem to reproach her.

She looked at the letters spread on the hall table. Several for Harry—there would be no need to forward them now. One for herself, in unfamiliar handwriting. She looked at it, then

glanced from it to one of Harry's, in deepening surprise.

One of his letters was from the same unknown source. That was surely strange. Why should some stranger write both to Harry and herself by the same post?

She knit her brows and puzzled over the problem. Then she took her own letter out to the steps, and sat down again in the sunshine between the cats.

The letter itself proved even more surprising than the envelope. Her eyes grew wider as she read, and the line in her brow deepened.

“GLASGOW, *June 15.*

“MY DEAR CHRISTINA,—

“You will be surprised to have a letter from me, and perhaps even more surprised when you hear who I am. I am Joan Orr, your sister and Harry's, and I think you will have heard of me. I saw you when you were a very tiny baby, just before I was married, and now that I am writing to Harry I must write to you too, for you can help me very much, if you will.

“I have five children, Christina. I will not tell you about them, for you might think their mother's description prejudiced, but they are good children, and you will like them when you know them. Winifred is nearly thirteen, not much younger than you. Wilfred is ten, and Joan is eight. Then the little ones are David, who is nearly seven, and my baby Margaret, only three.

“Now, Christina, we are in trouble. My husband has had a very severe illness, and the doctor has ordered him to take a sea voyage. It will be difficult to arrange, but we must manage it. I must go with him, as I cannot let him go alone in his present condition. Our difficulty is the children. We cannot, of course, take them with us. We cannot afford boarding-school for all five, and would much prefer not to send them to school, in any case. Charlie, my husband, has no relations to whom we can send them, and yet we must make some arrangements for them very quickly.

“I am writing by this same post to Harry, to ask him to give my children a home for the three or four months we shall be away. I know he has a home of his own now, and I am hoping he and my sister-in-law will find it possible to be kind to my bairns.

“I cannot bear the thought of a refusal from him. I think, also, it would pain him to put such refusal into words. So I have asked him, if he cannot, or will not, take my children, to let my letter remain unanswered. If I do not hear from him within a few days, I shall understand that he still has bitter thoughts of me. Perhaps, if he should be away, or unable for any reason to write at once, you could send me a note explaining this, Christina, and I will wait till I hear from him. But if I hear nothing from him or you within a few days, I shall write to our uncle at Bryntirion. I think—I am sure—he would not refuse to take my children, but I am writing first to Harry, as I would rather they went to him. I think they would be happier in a house with other young people. Probably, also, it would be more of an effort to uncle to take them than to Harry. I can imagine that Bryntirion has grown used to its own quiet ways, and they will not be children's ways. I know of no other possibility, however, so if Harry will not have them they must go to Bryntirion.

“Now, Christina, if my children come to you, will you be good to them? It is your home, and you can make it homelike to them. You can give them welcome and

make them happy. Will you do it, Christina? For our father's sake, will you be kind to them? They are younger than you, and they may be lonely just at first. Every one has been good to you, Christina, and you have never been allowed to be lonely, although you have neither mother nor father. I am sure you will be good to them. And perhaps, when we come home again, it may be possible for me to come to Criccieth to fetch them, and then we may learn to know one another.

"From your big sister,
"JOAN."

Christina dropped the letter.

It fell on dear Bill's head, and he woke out of a doze, and swore softly in his own peculiar style. Then he twitched the remnants of his ears viciously to get rid of it, but it still tickled him as it lay across his face. So he rose in offended dignity, and, shaking himself, sat down with his back to her, his tail waving angrily.

Christina had not even looked at him. She was staring down at the gravel path. Dear Bill was very much offended, and looked scornfully through his sleepy slits of eyes at Mary, rubbing up and down against the sleeve of the white jersey, in the hope of attracting attention.

Christina did not seem to know Mary was there. She was facing the possibilities suggested by that letter.

Five strange children in the Dolls' House! Five children to come between her and Harry and Marion, between her and the Jackanories! Five children interfering with everything!—to be considered in everything!—to share in everything!—in everything that until now had been hers alone!

That was the difficulty. She had no ill-will towards the strange children. No doubt they were all right in their way—and in their proper place. But in the Dolls' House! The thought was more than objectionable. To Christina it was intolerable.

She had forgotten the Jackanories and that earlier trouble. She had even forgotten the thought which had so troubled her—of that night's meeting with Marion and Harry, and the necessary explanation and confession. After all, that would soon be over, and the Jackanories well again. But this other was a different matter. These children were to be endured for three or four months!

They would come between her and Davy, too, and interfere in all their plans. They would have to share in every game and excursion. They would want to ride Shenkin. They would want to drive, or be driven, in the trap. They would tease dear Bill, and pet that stupid little Mary.

It was unbearable, she said to herself. All through the summer, the best time of the year, must she be tied to five children younger than herself, forced to take them everywhere, to amuse them, and see that they did not lose themselves or come to any harm? For she saw clearly that the task of entertaining the visitors must certainly fall to her share. It would spoil the summer for her.

That it might add to her enjoyment of the summer never occurred to her. She had always been the only one to be considered in the Dolls' House, for although the Jackanories were all-important, it was in a different way. They were still so small that they could not interfere greatly with any of her wishes. But now her reign would be at an end. Her undisputed sway over Davy, and over certain portions of the household arrangements, would be over. She had always had her own way. Now she could look for that no longer.

Everything would certainly be very different. She saw it clearly, and if there was anything she could do to prevent the catastrophe, any influence she could exert to keep matters as they were and to hinder the coming of the strangers, she was prepared to do her utmost to that end.

“Why can’t they go to Bryntirion? They’ll interfere with nobody there. There’s plenty of room for them—and we have none to spare,” and she faced that possibility hopefully. “If we absolutely couldn’t make room for them, they’d simply have to go to Bryntirion. I wonder——? Five all at once is dreadful. Of course, there’s the spare room—but they couldn’t all go in there——”

Then her face fell. “But we *could* manage it! How—oh, how simply frightful! It’s even worse than I thought. We’d have to do as we did when Marion’s brother and sisters came. We made room for three then, and some of these will be very small. I’d have to sleep with the girls in the spare room, because there’s room for another bed in there, and the boys would have to have my room! The *boys*! Two boys sleeping in *my* room! Oh, it’s too hideous! And I shut up in a room with all those girls! Oh, I can’t, I can’t! It’s too dreadful! And we were so happy and comfortable, and all so jolly together! Oh, why do they need to come interfering, and upsetting us all? Why can’t they go to Bryntirion? Oh, Bill, dear Bill, do you think there’s any chance Harry will say no?”

She laid her hand on dear Bill’s torn ears, but he twitched them away angrily, and his tail began to wave. She absent-mindedly pulled his largest bit of ear, and he turned and spat, and walked away, and sat down again just beyond her reach.

It was while she sat gloomily contemplating the angry tail that the ugly idea was born in Christina’s mind. She afterwards said that it was all dear Bill’s fault, as if he had been more sympathetic she would have petted him, and the idea might not have come.

If Harry did not answer that letter, the children would have to go to Bryntirion.

Suppose Harry never got the letter?

It would be so easy. There it lay on the table. No one but herself knew of the suggestion it contained.

In their anxiety over the Jackanories, Harry and Marion would care nothing for the waiting letters. They would not arrive till midnight, and would probably not look at the letters till the morning. No one would notice if one was missing.

Of course, it was an ugly thing to do. But the alternative was ugly, also, to Christina’s mind. For she did not believe that Harry and Marion would refuse the request made to them.

No one would ever know. It seemed as if everything had happened to make the way easy for her. And it would not really hurt any one. It was not as though the children had nowhere else to go. They would go to Bryntirion, and would no doubt be very happy there.

Christina’s conscience pricked her at this point. She remembered her own relief when she left gloomy old Bryntirion for the cheerful Dolls’ House out on the hills. She knew how she would hate the thought of returning there now. But these children might be different. No doubt they would be happy enough. There were five of them, too, so they would cheer up one another.

The more she played with the thought, the more it grew upon her. And as the possibility of Bryntirion for the strange children charmed her more and more, so the thought of their presence in the Dolls’ House grew steadily more objectionable. It was impossible. It was too much. She could not endure it. She would not! And it would be so very easy to keep everything as it had been, with no interference and upsetting.

Of course, no really nice girl would think twice of doing such a thing. Probably she would not have thought of it at all.

“Then I can’t be a nice girl, so I’d better do it at once, and be all comfortable again,” she murmured to dear Bill’s unresponsive back. “Of course, if Davy ever knew—if anybody ever knew, for that matter! But they won’t. They can’t. They’ll never know, and—and—oh, Bill, you beast, you might be sympathetic! If I had any one to help me decide—but they’d say don’t, of course! All the same, I’m going to do it.”

She sprang up, and dear Bill jumped and swore again. “I can’t stand those children here. I know I should be horrid to them, anyway, if they were here in everybody’s way. But if they’re at Bryntirion, I shall be so glad they’re not here that I’m sure I shall want to be quite nice to them. I will try and be decent to them, to make up for this. I’ll be real good—afterwards. But for this once—just this once——! I’ll never do such a thing again. And no one will ever know. And it won’t really matter, for they’ll be quite all right at Bryntirion.”

Annie was singing in the pantry. Lizzie was moving about the room where the Jackanories lay. There was no one else in the house.

Dear Bill yawned, stretched his long legs, and stalked off across the lawn. Dainty Mary was asleep in the sun.

Christina crept into the hall. She had felt guilty before, but never quite so guilty as now. There was an excitement in the secrecy and need for stealthy action which intoxicated her. She no longer stopped to think what she was doing.

The letter lay among the others on the table. She took it up, and glanced nervously over her shoulder.

There were matches in the dining-room. With these and the letter thrust inside her jersey, she snatched up her hat, and, taking one last look round, fled through the garden towards the shore.

In the house there would be tell-tale ashes, but the shore was very lonely. No one went there, at this time of the year, but herself, or some one else from the Dolls’ House, or Davy. And Davy was safe at home.

She ran down the hill through the bushes of flaming gorse, and out on to the Lonely Sands.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GUILT OF CHRISTINA.

The Lonely Sands lay at the foot of the gorse-clad hills, a solitary yellow strip rarely visited by the townsfolk. In the middle of the summer, picnic parties sometimes came for the afternoon, but this was in June and there were few visitors yet.

On the one hand, the cliffs of Black Rock, with their caves below and windy heathery heights above, shut out all sign of the houses of Criccieth, and even the old gray Castle, standing out in the sea on its bold head, lay behind the rocky point on which the waves were breaking. On the other side lay the sandy point which sheltered Borth village and guarded the entrance to the estuary. Between, was the wide yellow stretch, where Christina and Davy raced Shenkin and Jenkin, where they played tennis on the firm sand, and had their home-made nine-hole golf course on the sandhills, where they picnicked and bathed and rowed, and carried out a hundred and one wild fancies of hers, while Marion sat outside the tent, watching over the Jackanories as they turned themselves into sand-babies, and rolled, and kicked, and tried to bury one another, and only stopped to cry when they happened to swallow a mouthful of sand.

"And those children would have had to come here! They'd have been all over the place! They'll be *much* better at Bryntirion!" Christina said to herself, as she ran down across the sand.

In the shelter of the tent, at the edge of the wire-grass of the sandhills, she sat down. The wind was stronger than she had expected, and blew round the corners of the tent, laden with sand. She turned up the collar of her jersey to stop it blowing down her neck, and drew out the letters and the matches.

The first match blew out. So did the second. With an impatient exclamation, she sprang up and went inside the tent.

That was sheltered enough. The flame burnt steadily, but her hand shook a little with excitement as she held it.

"They *shall* go to Bryntirion!" and she held the envelope above the light. Then, as the flame leapt up, she dropped it hastily on the sand. Kneeling beside it, she held her own letter close till it caught fire also. If both were burnt, no one could ever know.

"For even if she tells uncle she wrote to Harry first, he'll say he never had the letter, and I'll have to say so too. Of course, I'd rather not need to. I'd rather not have had to do this. But there was no help for it. I simply had to. I really couldn't have put up with them here, and there was no other way."

The burnt shreds of paper lay on the sand before her. She sat looking at them doubtfully. They would be better scattered outside—or better still, buried. But not in here. The Jackanories might grub up the sand inside the tent at any time. There was nothing left but ashes, to be sure, and ashes could not betray her secret, but they might give rise to questioning and suspicion. She felt so very guilty that the vague possibility seemed probable, if not certain. She gathered up every fragment carefully, and went outside.

Without a glance along the sands, she ran down towards the sea, holding the ashes tightly in her hand. Dropping suddenly upon the dry sand near the water's edge, where in a very few minutes the incoming tide would wash over the spot, she hurriedly dug as deeply as she could

with her hands, thrust in the scraps of burnt paper, filled the hole again, and, rising, stamped upon the place, her cheeks flaming with excitement and nervous triumph.

"They'll *have* to go to Bryntirion! And I'm glad—I'm glad I've done it! Now *that's* all safe!"

She retreated higher up the beach, and, sitting down to rest, and panting a little with excitement, she clasped her hands round her knees and watched the tide sweep over the place.

Then a dreadful thought struck her. Out here, alone on the sands, she could be seen and recognised from afar,—from the house, from the hills. She sprang up and stood, looking anxiously all around.

But no one was to be seen, and she drew a breath of relief and sat down again. No one ever came here. And even if she had been watched from a distance, no one could possibly have seen what she was doing.

"I *am* a silly! I suppose I'm nervous,—or feeling guilty, perhaps! I do hope this won't go on! I *won't* be silly! I *won't* feel guilty! It's done now, and I'm not going to think any more about it."

She did think about it, however, and about the children she had shut out from the happy life of the Dolls' House and doomed to the gloomy loneliness of Bryntirion. Thinking of them, she fell into a dream, and sat staring out to sea, so still that the seagulls took her for a rock on the shore, and paddled about in the lip of the tide as if she had not been there.

"Christina fach! Chris, you silly, if you want to bathe, why don't you put on your bathing suit?"

Davy had felt it his duty to give Jenkin a run to console him for his disappointment of the morning. Christina's reverie had been so deep that she had not heard him coming, but he had seen her from the hills as she stood, and had recognised the white jersey and the towseled, waving chestnut hair, and trim breeches which made her look so tall. Then she had sat down again, hands clasped round knees, hair blown about her face, and he had wondered what she was thinking about and how long she would sit there. The tide was just reaching out to the toes of her boots as he called her, and she sprang up, looking foolish.

"I wasn't thinking. I mean, I was thinking too hard to notice," she stammered, and the colour rushed into her face as she wondered how much he had seen. "I thought you'd gone home, Davy," she said, in confusion.

"I was giving Jenkin a run." He looked at her keenly. "What's up. Chris? Are they bad?"

"No, no! Going on all right, really."

"You're worrying over something," he persisted. "And you haven't changed your clothes. When a girl even forgets to change, it's certain there's something on her mind. What's the matter? Is it just the Jackanories, or is there something else?"

"Oh, I suppose I *was* worrying a bit about them! But Marion will be home to-night, and they're really all right, so it's silly. I'll try not to think about them any more."

"You couldn't help it, you know. No one could have guessed the weather would behave so shabbily," he said, anxious to comfort her.

"And look at it now! As fine as fine, and as hot as hot."

She was talking for the sake of talking, and because she felt so uncomfortable. This feeling of secrecy, of guilt, of something hidden from Davy, was very disagreeable. She did not think he had seen anything. Her secret was safe enough. But it was the fact that she had, and must have, a secret, which was making her so uncomfortable.

"Yes, 'tis hot," he agreed. "Suppose you wouldn't like a swim, would you?"

As a rule he could not tempt her to bathe in the afternoon, but now she felt suddenly eager for anything which would mean action and banish thought.

"I rather think I would. Yes, I don't mind if I do. Our things are in the tent. I think we might as well."

"And you'll make tea afterwards, and I'll run up to the house for some cakes," he said eagerly, adding to himself, "It will keep her from moping, anyway. I know she'd been worrying, and there's no need."

"Got my towels in there?" he asked, as they reached the tent, after turning Jenkin loose among the sandhills.

"Yes. I'll get your things," and she went inside to rummage for them.

"Hello! Someone's dropped their matches! Must have been you, Chris, after making tea for Myfanwy on Wednesday. Gracious me! You needn't look so guilty!" as Christina turned, her face scarlet, her eyes startled. "But you shouldn't leave things lying about, you know, and especially matches. If a tramp happened to wander this way, it would be too tempting. He'd step inside and build a little fire, and make a little blaze, and have a little smoke, and then perhaps a little snooze beside it, and we should find a little heap of ashes in the morning."

Christina laughed confusedly. "I'll be more careful next time. There are your things. Now hurry, or I'll be in before you."

"I *must* be more careful! This is awful!" she said to herself, as Davy vanished behind the tent and she wriggled out of her jersey. "What a silly I am! And fancy leaving the matches there! Now I'm not going to think of it once more."

She heard the pad of Davy's bare feet on the sand as he raced past, while she was just fastening her cap. But she was after him in a moment, flying down to the water, splashing out to join him, and eagerly challenging him to a race, side-stroke, back, or straightforward, which he liked.

As they splashed about and shouted to one another, the thought came to her again.

"Those children! They'd have interfered with everything! They're *much* better at Bryntirion!" and returned again and again, as they enjoyed their picnic tea outside the tent, the kettle boiling in the shelter inside—bareheaded and barefoot both, Christina's feet tucked into a towel to keep them warm, her hair blowing about her face, that sun and wind might dry it—"Yes, indeed! They're *much* better at Bryntirion!"

"Now don't worry any more," said Davy, as they climbed the hill to the Dolls' House, he leading Jenkin, she carrying her hat and book, and picking her way very carefully through the gorse.

"I won't! I'm not going to worry any more—about anything whatever."

"That's right! It never does any good. *Nos da!* Good-night! My love to the Jackanories!"

"He's a real good sort," said Christina, as she turned in at the white gate after waving farewell. "If he only knew—! But I promised not to worry," she said, with a shaky laugh. "And I won't!—Bill, dear Bill, have you had any tea? What, not any at all? Come on then, Billy Doodle darling, and your old friend'll give you some at once. Get away, Mary, you silly! Can't you see I haven't any stockings on? I don't like you rubbing against me all the time, and most of all under the circumstances. It's only cupboard love with you, anyway. Now dear Bill has some brains, if he hasn't much ears, and brains are better than ears any day, so there, Mary, silly! Bill loves his old friend, that he does. Come on for tea, then, Billy Doodle darling!"

CHAPTER V. THE SECOND SATURDAY.

A week later, Christina once more rode over to see Myfanwy in the early morning. She had spent most of her spare time with Davy, and had succeeded very thoroughly in banishing unpleasant subjects from her mind while with him. Occasionally an ugly thought would obtrude, chiefly at night after she was in bed, but for the most part she managed to avoid such very successfully, and was even beginning to wonder when they would hear of the arrival of “those children” at Bryntirion.

She rode into Criccieth before breakfast, but, turning aside before she came to “The George,” crossed the railway line at the level-crossing, and rode round and up through the old market square under the gray Castle walls. It was still so very early that she doubted if even Myfanwy would be ready for visitors, and Davy certainly would not.

Leaving Shenkin to wait patiently on the road, she climbed the footpath to the top of Dinas, the little hill beside the Castle. It was a favourite spot in which to waste a few moments on the way to school or after church. The climb only took three minutes, but the breeze on the top was always fresh and the outlook superb.

She took a long look round, drinking in the sweet early air and the beauty together, then sank down on the bench for another longer look. From Barmouth Bridge to Bardsey, high blue hills and wavy ridges against the sky;—Cader topping the eastern range, Snowdon, king to the north;—and away in the lonely west, the land of scattered villages and farms, with lonely Madryn rising out of the fields;—and nearer, Bodvean, a low round crest, and Yr Eifl, “The Rivals,” crowned in morning mist;—the trees of Llanystumdwy close at hand, and the green head of Ednyfed Hill, with its flagstaff, behind the Criccieth houses;—and then, as she turned on the bench, the sea sweeping into the bay at her feet, the mighty Castle rock with its round gray towers, and the second bay beyond, and the stretch of blue water reaching out to meet the sky.

She looked all round, and drank it all in, as she had so often done before. Then she went back to Shenkin, and rode along the cliffs and in by the tennis courts to the high road, past the iron gates of Bryntirion, hidden among great trees, and so to Llanystumdwy.

Davy was sitting on the parapet of the old bridge, bare-headed, a rod in his hand. He called a greeting, and Christina pretended to fall off Shenkin’s back in her surprise at sight of him.

“Davy Jones—Lazy Bones—up and out before breakfast! Well, indeed! I never heard of such a thing! Say, Davy, you’ll need an afternoon nap to-day.”

“I feel a bit sleepy already,” Davy smiled.

“Don’t fall asleep there, or you’ll tumble in. You shouldn’t work so hard, Davy. You’ll be worn out by twelve o’clock.”

“Oh, it’s not the first time!” he assured her. “I’ve *really*, and *truly*, got up *quite* early, *several* times lately, and not felt a bit the worse for it. Fact!”

“You don’t say! I didn’t give you credit for it. I hope nothing’s the matter? Myfanwy isn’t ill? Or the house hasn’t been burnt down in the night?”

“Both all right ten minutes ago.”

“Then I shall go on and ask Myfanwy the meaning of this—this—unparalleled energeticness on your part.”

"Gracious me! That's a good word, Chris! I'll make a note of it. Where did you pick it up? It isn't Welsh, *or* English," he called after her, as she rode past the church, her chin in the air.

Myfanwy, in a graceful morning dress of pale green linen, and big gardening gloves and a shady hat, was at work among her peas, followed by the peacock, as usual. Her prime favourite, the delicate pale pink, was showing a tendency to straggle away from its supports, and the plant with the giant white blooms was already six feet high and wanting longer sticks.

"I believe you spend three-quarters of your time with those peas, Myfanwy," Christina said, in greeting her. "Do you sit up at night with them?"

"Well no, not quite!" Myfanwy laughed. "But I *have* gone round at midnight with a lantern to look for slugs."

"They do pay you for it. My buds are still only standing up."

"They're rather late, surely! Do you want some to take home to Mrs. Clevelly? And how are the Jackanories?"

"She'd be very pleased to have some. They're getting on all right. But it's you we want to-day, as well as peas. Will you come over to tea this afternoon?—and Lazy Bones, of course?"

"He's out fishing, so I think you must withdraw this time," smiled Myfanwy.

"I know. I met him, and told him he'd be wanting a nap after dinner, if he worked so hard. You will come, won't you?"

"Indeed, we will be very pleased."

"Marion wants to tell you all about their time in Conway. They seem to have made the most of the three days they had. And you shall see the Jackanories, though they're still in bed. But they're ever so much better now. Oh, and I'll let you see Elizabeth too."

"Oh?" Myfanwy sat on the grass and taking off her hat she looked up, smiling. "Elizabeth?" she queried.

"Three days old, and the very image of Bill——"

"What—ears and all?"

"Just sweet," Christina said enthusiastically, ignoring this thrust at her favourite. "Dear little black stripes like velvet, and sweet little black rings up and down all his legs, and right to the end of his tail——"

"Christina! If he's only three days old, you can't see stripes on his legs yet. They'll only be half an inch long, and no thicker than bits of string."

"But I can. He's a regular little Bill all over."

"I thought you said he was Elizabeth?" said Myfanwy, smiling.

"Oh, well, he had to be, you know. But he might turn out to be George yet."

"Yes," Myfanwy said, reminiscently. "George the First, that you so kindly gave to me, was actually Georgina, and presented me with two little Georges yesterday."

Christina's excitement was intense. "Then our Mary's a grandmother! I *must* tell her! She *will* be pleased! Where are they, Myfanwy? Let me see them quick!"

"Tell me first what colours you would like."

"Kittens? Oh—peas! Marion would like white ones, I know, if you can spare them. I like the very dark ones, like black pansies. Or—oh, Myfanwy! What a lovely blue!"

"That's 'Flora Norton.' Yes, she's a great find, isn't she? The flowers are always rather small, but a lovely colour. I'll bring over a big bunch of mixed kinds this afternoon, and show Mrs. Clevelly all this year's new ones."

"You're in love with them, you know. I suppose that's why they flower so well for you."

Tea was laid out in the sunshine on the lawn that afternoon, and when Myfanwy had visited the Jackanories, in company with their mother, and Mary and Elizabeth, under Christina's eager escort, she was conducted to a low basket chair beside the table, and made comfortable under a large umbrella, lest she should get sunstroke. Marion Clevelly sat down beside her, and they fell to admiration of the flowers Myfanwy had brought, while Christina, stretched on the grass, criticised the new tints and forms, and compared "Frank Dolby" with "Lady Grizel Hamilton," and "Countess Spencer" with "Gladys Unwin," and Davy listened and laughed and mocked.

"Such names to give flowers! And Myfanwy talks about them as if they were alive. In fact, I've heard her talking *to* them. 'Gladys, my dear, you aren't doing your duty! Frank, this won't do at all! Dorothy darling, what's the meaning of this? Evelyn, you really must try to do better!'" and he assumed a high falsetto, supposed to resemble Myfanwy's voice.

She reddened and laughed. "Davy, what nonsense!"

"Oh, indeed, but you do, I assure you!" and the falsetto came into play again. "'Flora, you're doing very well this year! Nora, I'm quite ashamed of you!' Sometimes it's Welsh,—as if they could understand Welsh! 'Othello bach, when are you going to begin? Lady Nina fach, be a darling now, and give me lots of flowers to-morrow!' And sometimes it's the Royal Family—cheek, I call it! 'Prince of Wales bach——'"

"Davy, I never did! What nonsense! And you're horribly out of date. I haven't grown Prince of Wales for ages. I didn't like the colour. You're behind the times altogether."

"Tell you what I heard one morning, as I was getting up," Davy persisted. "'King Edward bach, you're a beauty, you are! Indeed, I just love you! And Queen Alexandra fach, you're another. But you don't go well together, not at all well. I'll have to separate you as far as I can, or you'll fight.' Now how's that for disrespect?"

Myfanwy laughed and reddened again. "I'm sure I never said anything of the kind, but if I did I was quite right. Whoever named them was singularly wanting in imagination," and she laid a spray of immense crimson flowers beside one of fiery glowing scarlet. "You see? They don't agree at all. You can't mix them."

"Let the Queen go with 'Frank Dolby,'" said Christina, picking out a giant mauve and laying it beside the scarlet. "Then the King can take 'Dorothy' in to dinner," laying the pure white beside the crimson.

"Or King Edward might take Queen Victoria. That would be highly appropriate," laughed Marion, handing them a beautiful pale yellow.

"And one day it was 'America fach!' Why it wasn't 'America bach' I don't know——"

"Countries are always feminine. I was quite right," Myfanwy insisted.

"Do you save your seed, Myfanwy? You must have far more than you can use," said Marion Clevelly. "Could you spare me a little for next year?"

"Indeed, I'll be delighted. Remind me in September, Christina. I save some to give away," she explained. "I like to buy fresh for myself, and try new kinds, but I always give away a lot. There's an old servant of ours up at Tan-y-bwlch, old Nansi Jones, who has handfuls of seed from me every year, so when I go over to see her in the summer I can always find last year's favourites in her garden. I had been going to suggest we should call on her on our way home last Saturday, Christina, and see how hers have done this year, but the storm and the Jackanories made it impossible."

"She'd have given us gingerbeer and bulls'-eyes," said Davy regretfully. "She's an old treat, is Nansi Jones."

"Nansi Jones? Is she—er—any relation of yours?" inquired Christina, with such innocence of manner as she could assume in the presence of such a very threadbare joke.

"First cousin. That's stale, Chris. It died of old age before you were born."

"Well, I'm glad I don't have to share my name with ninety-nine people out of every hundred, anyway."

"Oh, it's not quite so bad as all that! And if your name was half as old or half as fine, you might be very proud of it, Christina fach."

"Dear Bill thinks it's a horrid ugly name," Christina volunteered, as dear Bill stalked softly into their midst, and sat down and began to attend to his toilet.

"Hello, Ears! What a grim, gaunt, grizzly spectre you are, dear Bill! I wonder she's not ashamed to have you about the house. If you lived at Rhianfa, Myfanwy would lock you up when visitors were coming."

"He's coming to visit you one day, to see his grandsons."

"I was reading poetry the other day," said Davy, tickling dear Bill's ear with a blade of grass, "and I came across——"

"You—reading poetry——?"

"Fact! Could understand it, too. It was ripping. Well, I came across a line that described dear Bill exactly. Indeed, I saw him before my eyes the moment I read it. This was it!—'This grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous'—now, how's that, Umpire? Isn't that dear Bill to the life?"

"It's a shame! Dear Bill doesn't like you, Davy Jones!—Hello! Who's this?"

A large car had drawn up outside the white paling and little gate of the Dolls' House.

"It's uncle from Bryntirion!" gasped Christina, and knew in a moment why he had come.

"Well, indeed! Aren't you pleased to see him? You look as if you'd been stealing his apples, and he'd come to tell Harry," said Davy, as Marion went forward to welcome the old man.

"The apples aren't nearly ripe yet," said Christina in confusion, and wondered afterwards what could have led her to make such an inane remark.

Her heart was thumping in an unusual way with sudden excitement. Had Mrs. Orr, in writing to Bryntirion, mentioned her letters to the Dolls' House?

She slipped her hand under dear Bill's chest, and lifted him so that he hung over her arm, to his great discomfort. He swore and struggled, but she held him tight against her jumping heart as she kissed her uncle dutifully, and then left the conversation to the elders.

"Where is Harry? I particularly wish to speak to Harry. I have a very serious matter to communicate to him," said the old gentleman, in his deliberate way.

He was bent and gray, and looked worried. He seemed more shaky than usual, Christina thought, as he sat down in one of the basket chairs. He emphatically did not look likely to enjoy the invasion of his peaceful house by five strange children.

"Harry's out on the shore. The tent was blown down in the gale on Wednesday night, and he's getting it right again. Christina, will you call him? Or Davy bach?"

"A very serious matter—a very serious matter indeed," said the old gentleman gloomily, and waited impatiently for his nephew's appearance.

"I'll go," and Davy jumped the paling and ran off through the gorse.

Mr. Clevelly made no effort to explain his serious business, so Marion began to tell him of the improvement in the condition of the Jackanories. Myfanwy sat down again and began to

arrange her flowers in the dishes waiting on the table. And Christina, and dear Bill, and Christina's Conscience, retired to the front door-step and sat there together.

"Now you'll have a chance to be honest and confess," said Conscience.

"Yes, but I'm not going to," said Christina.

"When he tells them he's heard from those children's mother, that will be a good time," suggested Conscience.

"I tell you I won't," said Christina.

"I think you'd better. Think how horribly dishonest you're being!"

"I don't care. I'm not going to tell."

"Think of that poor old man with five noisy children in his house!"

"There's plenty of room. He need never be bothered with them."

"And think of them, in that gloomy old house, with an old man like that!"

"I don't care a bit about them."

"No, but you ought to. How would you like it yourself?" asked Conscience.

"That has nothing whatever to do with it," said Christina.

"I think it has. You ought to care about them."

"Well, I don't, then. You're a nuisance, and I wish you'd leave me alone."

Then Another Voice tried what it could do.

"You'll be found out sooner or later, you know. Much better confess at once."

"I tell you, I'll never be found out. No one will ever know. It's perfectly safe."

"You can't be sure of that. You may never have such a good chance again."

"I don't want any good chances, thank you. I'm never going to tell anybody anything whatever about it."

"But suppose you have to?"

"I won't. Nothing could ever make me tell."

"You don't know that. Now take my advice, and be sensible, and don't miss such a good chance."

"I *am* being sensible. It would be awfully stupid to tell."

"It would be the wisest thing you ever did."

"Fiddle!" said Christina.

"It would be honest, anyway," said Conscience.

"*I tell you I won't!*" said Christina, and hugged dear Bill till he swore again, and struggled out of her arms, and stalked away across the grass.

"A most extraordinary thing has happened, Harry," Mr. Clevelly was saying, in his slow weighty manner. "I have had a letter from Joan—this morning. Have you heard from her lately?"

"He's got the tent up just ripping. Far better than it was before," said Davy, dropping on the step beside Christina.

"Shut up! I want to hear," and she rested her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, and stared gloomily at old Mr. Clevelly.

"From Joan? I? I never hear from her, sir."

"Why does she never write to you as she does to me?"

"I offended her, and I suppose she hasn't forgiven me. I said something about Orr—I found out afterwards I was wrong, but I never apologised to her as I should have done. I meant to write, but I let it slide, and then it seemed too late. I suppose she can't forgive me, for I've never had a line from her since."

Christina knit her brows and frowned, as she listened.

"She *did* write, you know!" murmured Conscience. "And you burnt the letter! She must have forgiven him and wanted him to know, and you burnt the letter. Now he may never know."

"Oh, shut up! I want to listen!" said Christina irritably again.

"It's worse than you thought. Don't you think you'd better explain while you have the chance?"

"No!"

"This letter, which I had this morning," Mr. Clevelly was saying slowly, "tells me that her husband is ordered abroad after severe illness, and they may be away for several months. She is in trouble over the children, and asks me to take them at Bryntirion."

Harry Clevelly whistled. "How many is it there are? Four? Are you thinking of it?"

"Five. I was wondering—hoping that you would help me. I can't refuse entirely, Harry. Your father asked me to take care of you all, and I can't fail her when she asks my help. But—five children at Bryntirion! It's really a terrible thought!" and the old man laughed ruefully. "Could you not take them here?" and he looked appealingly at Marion. "You are used to children's ways, and their noise, and everything. It would not cause such an upsetting as it will to us. I dread the very thought of it. And you have Christina! She is older than any of them. She would help to keep them within bounds."

"If he says he'll take them, after all my trouble, it *will* be mean!" Christina was thinking, as she sat frowning down at the gravel path.

"It would be an easier way out of the difficulty than you deserve. And it would still be your duty to confess the truth about the letters," urged Conscience.

"Fiddle!" said Christina again. "I'll never do anything of the kind."

Marion had looked at her husband. He said at once, and very definitely:

"No, we couldn't do that, uncle. If she had asked us to take the children, we'd have made an effort to do it, for the sake of old times and of ending the quarrel, but she didn't. She didn't ask us, so she evidently didn't want them to come here. Under the circumstances, we couldn't think of taking them. You must see yourself it would be impossible. I'm very sorry, sir, and I hope, if they come to you, they won't give you much trouble, but I couldn't take Joan's children here when Joan herself won't have anything to do with me. It wouldn't be right. If the children come to Bryntirion, I hope we may see something of them, and no doubt Christina will be glad to make friends with them. We'll help you in that way, if we can. But we can't take them here when their mother never even proposed it."

"You see?" said Conscience, very clearly. "You're sure you quite see what you're doing?—how you're standing in the way, and keeping them from making friends, and causing the old quarrel to go on? It's much more serious than you thought. You never meant to do anything like this. Hadn't you better explain at once? Won't you speak up, and be done with it?"

"No!" said Christina. "I tell you I won't."

"You'll be sorry some day," said Conscience, as Mr. Clevelly rose disappointedly to return to his car, saying he must go home and write to Joan before post-time.

"I'm glad now, anyway. I couldn't have done with those children here."

"It's not worth while being glad now, if it means being sorry some day."

"But I don't mean ever to be sorry! And they'll be *much* better at Bryntirion!"

Then the carriage drove away, and the whole party fell to discussion of the news and the coming of the little strangers.

“You haven’t much to say about it, Chris,” said Davy. “What’s your candid opinion on the subject, now? And what does dear Bill think about it?”

“Dear Bill agrees with me that it’s a nuisance, and he doesn’t want to see them a bit,” Christina answered, in a low tone.

“That’s how you feel about it, eh?”

“Yes, and I’m glad they’re not coming here to live. It will be bad enough as it is, but it would have been dreadful if they had come here. They’ll be very much better at Bryntirion.”

CHAPTER VI. THE SCREECHY IN THE IVY PATCH.

"Davy Jones—Lazy Bones! Are you game for a game?" called Christina.

It was ten o'clock on Saturday morning, a fortnight later, and she and Shenkin had come over to Rhianfa to look for Davy and Jenkin.

During the week, the children from Scotland had arrived at Bryntirion. Mr. Clevelly had suggested that Christina should be at his house when they arrived, to welcome them. But she had begged to be excused, having arranged to ride over to Tan-y-bwlch with Myfanwy and Davy that afternoon to visit old Nansi Jones. Then there had been two whole days of rain, so she had not yet made the acquaintance of the visitors.

Davy was always game for a game. He left Myfanwy among her peas, and strolled out to meet Christina, in the deliberate way which usually irritated her so greatly.

"I'm on. What's the game to-day? Wait a bit, and I'll fetch Jenk——"

"I don't want to wait, and you won't want Jenk. I'm going to leave Shenk in the paddock. Come on, and I'll tell you as we go."

"It's those children at Bryntirion," she explained, as they crossed the bridge together. "Have you seen them yet?"

"No? What have they been up to? Have they made themselves objectionable already?"

"No. Don't be silly. I haven't seen them either, but it's about time I did. They're all in the garden at Bryntirion. I heard them as I passed. We'll get in by the side gate, through the meadow, and down the narrow paths among the ivy, and look at them when they don't know we're there. Then we'll see what they're really like. They won't be on their good behaviour."

Davy chuckled. "Don't give yourself away, Chris! So you keep your company manners in one box, with your best hat, and your everyday ones in another, do you?"

"My everyday manners hang on a peg in the hall, where I can get them whenever I want them," Christina retorted. "My very, very best ones are put away in tissue-paper in a very particular box, of course, and only come out on very great occasions."

"Guess they don't get many airings, do they? They won't wear out at your present rate, Chris. Have I ever seen them, now, I wonder?"

"You aren't likely to! Great occasions, I said! Great occasions call for good manners. There's nothing in Davy Jones, Lazy Bones, to demand anything out of the way."

"I keep only *one* set, which are for use on *all* occasions," said Davy primly.

"Fiddle! I know you better than that!"

"How did the objectionable children get here?" asked Davy. "Don't they live in Scotland? Well, did they come all that way by themselves?"

"No, a man brought them. Not their father, he's not well enough, but a friend, who lives near them at home. He just stayed a day or two, and went away yesterday. It was raining all the time he was here, except the first evening, and raining when he went away, so he wouldn't see much of Criccieth."

"Poor beggar!" said Davy. "He'll come back presently to see what it's really like, you see if he doesn't."

They carried out Christina's programme to the letter. They reined up at the large house, and dismounting, left their horses feeding on the grass by the gate, and they entered the

shrubby stealthily.

"It feels like being burglars, and yet we're quite at home and nobody can say anything to us," Christina said in an undertone. "Be very quiet, Davy! Don't make a sound! We mustn't let them hear or see us. That would spoil all the fun."

On one side of the lawn in the Bryntirion garden, shaded by gloomy trees, was the Ivy Patch. The trunks were clothed in close dark ivy, the ground was carpeted with it, and everywhere were stumps and bushes and rocks and banks, all overgrown and buried in ivy. Nothing would grow there but the trees which rose above it, and many of these were being slowly killed by the clinging growth. Every corner was dark and gloomy and shadowy.

There were winding paths among the clumps and walls of ivy, making a maze through which it was difficult for the uninitiated to find their way. Christina and Davy knew them all, for the Bryntirion garden had always been open to them, both before and after Christina's removal to the Dolls' House. But Myfanwy invariably lost her way, and had to wait till they chose to fetch her out, wherefore, of course, they were always eager to coax her in, "to try just once more!"

So they made their way easily through the dark nooks and shadowy turnings, and, climbing an ivy bank, lay looking down on the lawn.

The children were not in sight, but their voices came shrilly from the summer-house close at hand.

"I don't see why we shouldn't, Polly-Joan,"—a sweet, clear, elder girl's voice.

"Come on then! Come on! You *are* slow, Winifred! Dimity, you run into the house for my kite, an' we'll fly it where there aren't so many trees,"—an impatient small boy, this.

"What name did he say? Something crazy mad," commented Christina.

"We don't want to, Taffy! We don't know *ve* way, an' we're 'fraid we'll get lost. We're only free——"

"That's the baby. Sounds about the size of Nora. But why does she say 'we'? Are there two of her? And she calls him Taffy!"

"A namesake for me," Davy laughed.

"No, Taffy, you mustn't send her. She's too small," said Winifred, the elder sister. "Where's Billy, Polly-Joan? Come here, Billy! We're going for a walk."

"Billy!" and the two in the ivy looked at one another.

"Wonder if dear Bill's ears are all right," grinned Davy.

"Ears? Oh, you silly! And why has the girl got two names? Wasn't one enough?"

"Billy! Billy! Where are you, Billy?" cried Winifred.

"Come on, Bill! *Do* buck up! You *are* slow!"

"That young man seems to think everybody's slow but himself," commented Christina.

"Billy!" cried another girl's voice, clear and shrill. "Billi-am!—He's practising leg-breaks on the other lawn," she explained. "He's bowling at a stump with a wasp's nest in it. He wanted me to keep wicket behind it, and field all the balls that didn't break on, but I didn't see it. He'll hit it some time, and the wasps would have turned on *me*.—Billy! Billi-am! Bill!"

"I say, one of you lazy girls might come and field for me! Polly-Joan, you'll do. Dimity, you come too and be long-stop——"

"We don't want to, Billy! We're 'fraid we'll get hit, an' we're only free——"

"Timmy-Dimmy! Come on, Polly-Joan!"

"Billy, we're going for a walk, to see what the place is like and look for the sea. Do you want to come too? Stay and bowl at the stump, if you'd rather," said Winifred.

"You are a rotter, Win——!"

"I'm sorry you think so. But the rest of us don't care about leg-breaks, you see, so it's rather dull for us."

"You stop, Polly-Joan, and we'll have a ripping game," begged Billy.

"Not me, Billi-am! I've been bowling to you ever since breakfast, and I've had enough. I'm going out. You bring the bat, and if we find the sands, I'll bowl a bit more there. Mother said there were sands."

"Sands! Sands for cricket! Ugh! You sink in at every step! What's the good of that?"

"Oh well, don't, then! But it may not be that kind of sand——"

Christina looked at Davy. "Make a noise and scare them! Make them jump!"

"No, it's mean. They're only kids, and mostly girls."

"Fiddle!" said Christina. "I will, then. I'm going to screech like Myfanwy's peacock."

Davy pulled a face and stopped his ears. She put her fingers to her lips and gave a piercing yell, and another, and another, then listened breathlessly.

The younger boy, Taffy, had been urging them to haste again. "Come on, Winifred! Polly-Joan, you *are* slow! Come on, Dimity, we'll start without them——" Then he stopped short, and Christina's unearthly scream was followed by silence, and she could imagine how the children looked at one another in consternation.

She was chuckling at the thought, when the voices broke out again.

"Oh, Winnie, what was that? Did you ever hear such a noise?" this from Polly-Joan.

"Winifred! We're 'fraid! We don't like noises. Guess we'll keep close to you, Winifred," in a terrified baby voice.

"D'you think it was something *real*? It sounded to me like a—a ghost, or a bogey, or something," shivered Taffy.

"It's only some kind of bird. Don't be silly, you children! Don't you know lots of birds screech like that? Turkeys, and geese, and—and other things, you know," Billy explained.

"Oh, of course you know all about it! You always do!" said Polly-Joan. "It came from over there, where all that ivy is——"

"Yes, it was a bird, up in a tree."

"Well, you go and look, then, if you're so sure about it."

"I think it was a ghost, or a—a screechy," said Taffy.

"It was certainly a screechy," Polly-Joan agreed.

"Go an' kill it, Billy! We don't like screechies in our garden. It's—it's horrid, an' we're 'fraid, an' we're only free——"

"Nonsense! Don't be so timmy-dimmy, Dimity! I shouldn't think of killing it just because it screeched. It wouldn't be kind. It was only—only calling to its mate, you know," Billy explained airily.

Polly-Joan and Taffy sniffed audibly. "Oh, yes, we *quite* understand——!"

"What d'you mean, you two? What are you making that noise for?" Billy began stormily, when Winifred broke in, to avert the rising trouble.

"I expect it was only a bird. Come along, Dimity! Take my hand, then you won't be frightened."

"We don't like screechies in our garden!" timid Dimity's shrill little voice was repeating, as they went down the path, the others following.

"Come on, Polly-Joan! You and Billy *are* slow!"

"Oh, yes, Billi-am! I *quite* understand!"

"You *are* a rotter, Polly-Joan! What d'you think you mean by that?"

Christina scrambled down out of the ivy.

"I'm going to meet them in the road. We must see what they're like. They're only voices so far, and it's unsatisfactory."

Brushing the earth from their clothes as they crossed the field, they were soon strolling down the road where they met the owners of the voices. With their knowledge of names and characteristics, it was easy to identify each one.

Winifred had an arm round Dimity, and was trying to reassure her as to the "screechy." Polly-Joan and the boys were behind, Billy laden with bat and stumps, Taffy, with the cricket ball, throwing catches to his sister across the road.

The girls were all dressed alike, from Winifred to tiny Dimity, in scarlet dresses with deep embroidered collars and belts to match. The dresses falling well above the knee, suited the girls' striking fairness to perfection, and they were indeed a very merry and bright looking party to the curious onlookers.

Dimity was a mere baby, fat and round-faced, with bare knees and chubby little legs in short white socks. She clasped to her breast a very dilapidated fur monkey, his ragged tail hanging down under her arm. She and the monkey, always inseparables, formed the "we" of her conversation, and were completely identified in her mind. If Monkey was hurt—dropped, tickled, or pulled about—it hurt Dimity also, and her complaint was always of "our" troubles. If anything befell Dimity, Monkey presumably suffered also, though he said less about it.

Polly-Joan was a larger edition of Dimity, but had attained the added dignity of her years. Winifred was considerably the tallest of them all, and had a certain motherly air of responsibility which never left her, even when she was playing cricket or putting Dimity's monkey to bed—either of which she was ready to do at a moment's notice. She and Polly-Joan had long fair hair, and wore it caught back with red ribbons, at which Christina scoffed as babyish, she herself having discarded ribbons and not even substituted kirbigrips in her thick chestnut hair, which curled and waved around her face. Dimity had the red ribbons in her curls also, but her hair was very short, of baby whiteness, and falling about her face and neck in tiny rings and twists. Instead of hats, each of the girls wore a small scarlet béret on the back of her head, and these, and the scarlet tunics and long fair hair, made them easily recognisable anywhere.

The boys were fair, also, with brown faces which took on a fresh crop of freckles after every sunny day. Their cricket shirts and gray trousers looked easy and business-like—at an age when business meant cricket—and their striped caps and blazers, of scarlet and white, matched the girls' dresses.

"It makes me hot to look at them," Christina murmured, as they drew near.

"Not at all. It's the artist's spot of colour in the landscape, that's all. They supply it—take it with them, in fact."

"They look like lobsters."

"More like golfers," said Davy, more generously. "The girls' faces are white enough, and with all that white hair they don't look a bit hot."

The five had a good look at them also as they approached—at the tall girl in the white jersey, with a smart béret set well back on her broad, intelligent forehead, her long, slim legs encased in riding boots, and a wild rose in her hand, which she was apparently discussing with her companion, the dark-haired, brown-faced boy in flannels, with merry dark eyes and frank open face. He was looking down at the flower, and listening carefully as she spoke. Winifred

and Billy caught a word or two—"Stamens—polycotyledons—monocephalous"—for Christina was recklessly stringing her longest botanical terms together in the effort to appear unconcerned in spite of qualms of guilty conscience.

As soon as their backs were turned, Christina heard little Dimity begin:

"Why does vat girl wear these breeches, Winifred?"

"It's for riding. She must have a horse somewhere about," Billy volunteered promptly, and was explaining the necessity for the costume, with many imaginary details, as they passed out of hearing.

"Now we'll fetch Shenk and Jenk, and ride down into town and see where they get to," said Christina.

Some time later they came upon the group of scarlet dresses and blazers at the corner of the road to the station. An animated discussion was in progress as to the next step to be taken. Billy, Taffy, and Polly-Joan were insisting on crossing the railway line by the swing gates and the footpath. Winifred was hesitating, and Dimity, clinging to her hand, was shrilly refusing to go near the rails.

"I never saw a station before that didn't say, 'Passengers are requested not to cross the line except by the bridge,'" Winifred said doubtfully. "But people *are* going over. Of course, if it's the only way——"

"It is! It is! Of course it is! Oh, *don't* be so slow, Winifred!" and Taffy hopped about impatiently.

"You can see ever so far each way if there's a train coming," urged Polly-Joan. "See that old woman with the basket! If she can waddle across in time, surely we can!"

"Of course it's the proper way, Winifred!" said the ever-ready Billy. "Anybody could see that! Look at the gates and steps all ready! There isn't any bridge at all. It's the only way to get to the sea, and the Castle, and those rows of houses——"

"Why, there's that girl again!" cried Polly-Joan shrilly, and Christina rode up to them.

"The *proper* way to cross the line," she said, looking severely at Billy, "is where the carts go, over there, by the level-crossing and the high bridge. But people cross at the station all the time—only be sure you look both ways first. Go through the swing gate, and hold it open for the girls so that it won't bang on them, then cross the line and go through that other gate, and down the steps. Then the path through the fields will lead you right to the Castle, and you turn either way for the sea. Don't be afraid of the cows in the field. They won't look at you."

"Though if they were bulls, they might, considering what a lot of red they've got about them," she said, as she rejoined Davy.

"Winifred, d'you fink she comed after us jus' to tell us ve way?" Dimity's shrill little voice began as she turned away. "If she did, dear Monk an' me do like her jus' awful much."

Winifred and Polly-Joan called their thanks after her, then raced after the boys down to the crossing, Polly-Joan anxious not to be left behind, Winifred to look for stray engines or goods trains.

As Christina and Davy rode past "The George," they saw the scarlet troop in the middle of the line, Dimity clinging to Winifred, and both trying to look both ways at once, Taffy practising a long jump between the rails, and Polly-Joan and Billy inspecting an empty saloon carriage waiting for the afternoon train to Manchester.

They met them again, as they rode down the East Bay parade, sitting easily on their ponies and watching all the fun of the beach. Winifred and Dimity were sitting on the broad stone parapet above the bathing tents, watching the boys, who were down on the wet sand near the

water. Polly-Joan, standing by her sisters, was wistfully watching the canoeing and expressing her longing to try what it was like, and her conviction that she could do it as well as any of them.

At Christina's suggestion, Shenkin and Jenkin were led down over the shingle to the firm sand. Then she and Davy mounted, and rode into the water and out again, and among the parties of paddling children and embarking canoeists, conscious that the "red children" were watching them.

"They'll know us next time they meet us, I think," Christina chuckled, as they finally cantered off towards Black Rock. "We shall have to get acquainted with them soon, I suppose."

"They don't seem in any way objectionable, Chris."

"Oh, no! They're just a bit of a bother, that's all. As they're my nephews and nieces, I suppose I shall have to look after them a little——"

"Your *what*?"

"My nephews and nieces. I'm their Aunt Christina."

Davy began to laugh.

"Yes, I suppose you are! Quite a maiden aunt!"

"Oh, I shan't let them forget it! You may be sure of that!" Christina nodded. "I'll speak to them in a day or two. They seem all right, but I'm *very* glad they're stopping at Bryntirion!"

CHAPTER VII.

FATHER BEAR, MOTHER BEAR, AND BABY BEAR.

Christina's conscience had been behaving very nicely. She had almost been able to forget a certain troublesome letter which had never been answered, and a quarrel which might by this time have been ended. But these things troubled her again that night before she slept, and in her dreams she saw a grown-up Winifred, fair-haired, with grave sweet face and thoughtful motherly eyes, who looked at her wistfully and asked, "Will you be good to my children, Christina? They are younger than you, and you can make it seem homelike to them. Will you be kind to them?"

"I suppose I have been rather hateful about it," she thought contritely, as she dressed for church next morning. "It's a bit mean to leave them to find their way about alone like that. I suppose uncle will want me to speak to them this morning! Well, I will be decent to them now. I suppose I must do something to make up for It, then perhaps It won't plague me as It did last night. I thought I'd forgotten all about It."

In her thoughts she always called that ugly little matter It, to avoid the disagreeable necessity of giving It a name, which must be ugly too—when she had to think about It. Whenever she could she avoided the thought, but It had an ugly way of obtruding Itself into matters with which It had nothing to do, and she was annoyed to find that she could never consider herself safe from Its intrusion.

"I'll make friends with those children, and be nice to them. Then It won't bother me any more," she said to herself, on the way to church.

But old Mr. Clevelly came to church alone. Christina stared and waited, but the "red children" did not appear, and she wondered much, until, after service, her uncle explained that Winifred had asked if they might not go to the Scottish Church in which they had been brought up, and he had therefore sent them to the one which had an English service coming nearest to her ideas.

"Miss Winifred is, I judge, a young lady who knows her own mind," he said, smiling. "She was very decided about it. In fact, I did not venture to oppose her on the point."

He suggested that Christina should come in to tea, but she begged to be excused.

"I will make friends with them, really and truly I will. But not a stiff tea-party, please! I couldn't stand that. We'd all sit and look at one another, and talk about the weather, and I'd have to ask how they like Criccieth, and if they had a pleasant journey, and hope they'd enjoy their time here very much! Please let me off that, uncle! I'll come round and see them, but let me make friends my own way."

He laughed and consented, and she hurried off with the Jackanories to climb Dinas Hill before setting out for home.

"Want to go in the Castle!" cried Nora, as they stood on the top of the little hill.

"'Cause it's ever so long since we've been, 'cause we've been in bed for weeks an' weeks, 'cause you tooked us to the Gelert place, Auntie Chris, 'cause you wanted a picnic, and it rained," supplemented Jack.

"An' mother said you shouldn't have done it, Auntie Chris, so *can't* we go in the Castle?"

"'Cause she hadn't given leave for us to go, an' you didn't take mackintoshes, Auntie Chris, an' you didn't keep looking if it was still a fine day——"

“So *can't* we go in the Castle?”

“ ’Cause it’s fun climbing up the walls——”

“No, certainly not! Not on Sunday. You know that very well. And I think you’re very ungrateful children,” said Christina indignantly. “You know how you wanted to go to Beddgelert, and how you teased and begged me to take you, and how pleased you were, and now——”

“ ’Cause we didn’t know it was going to rain——”

“Well, neither did I, so say no more about it, either of you,” and she lifted them both on to the seat on the hill-top, and stood to take a long look round to soothe her ruffled feelings.

It was a hot hazy morning, the blue waters of the bay fading into the paler blue of the sky, the ring of mountains all misty gray, the islands and headlands in the west very faint and quivering in the heat, all the peaks clear, but not too clear. The sea, always without large ships, held one or two yachts like big white birds, and close inshore were a few canoes, at which the Jackanories pointed the finger of condemnation for breaking the Sabbath.

As they strolled along the esplanade of the East Bay on their way home, they met the five visitors face to face, but only Christina knew them to be the visitors, and though she looked, and they looked, none of them made any effort to stop and speak.

They were not “red children” to-day. The girls wore pretty dresses of soft white, and over them, hanging open, loose light coats of delicate leaf green. Polly-Joan and Dimity had tight-fitting hats like little Dutch bonnets, Winifred a grown-up hat shading her fair hair and serious face. Christina remembered her dream, and wondered if Winifred was really very like her mother, or if the dream had made a mistake, as dreams so often did. Certainly all the children had a distinct touch of likeness to Harry, which could only be accounted for by supposing they were like their mother. Billy, in a neat tailored suit, and Taffy, in white flannel suit, with spotless socks and neat white shoes, did not look nearly so comfortable as they had done the day before.

They looked at Christina, who was walking behind with the Jackanories, as hard as their ten eyes could look, obviously wondering where her boy companion was and who the Jackanories could be. As they passed, Dimity, hugging her fur monkey as usual—having astonished the congregation and minister by taking him to church and setting him up on the back of the next seat—asked audibly:

“What’s she done wiv ve horse an’ ve boy, d’you fink, Winifred?”

And Winifred, proposing a rest on the broad parapet, proceeded to lecture her on the advisability of letting a little longer space elapse before making personal remarks about passers-by.

Directly after tea that evening, Christina changed her afternoon dress for riding breeches, and she and Shenkin went in search of Davy Jones. But when she reached Rhianfa, Myfanwy, sitting in the garden, called to her that Davy was out and she did not know when he would be back, so Christina did not dismount.

“What are you doing over there, now, Myfanwy? Surely not gardening on Sunday?”

“Indeed, no, I’m reading,” and Myfanwy held up her book in proof of the statement.

“Reading! You’re sitting looking at those peas, and thinking how clever you’ve been, and how clever they’ve been, to flower like that. I believe you’ve been talking to them, as Davy said you did.”

“Indeed, I haven’t! But I may surely look at them now and then.”

“I wish you’d give me a bunch, Myfanwy fach.”

Myfanwy rose eagerly. "Indeed, I'll be delighted!" and she fetched her scissors. "What colours would you like to-day?"

"Let me see! I want five different kinds—no, six, I think! just three or four of each——"

"Dear me! This is very mysterious!" Myfanwy laughed.

"I want to give them away. Some very dark ones, please——"

"Maroon!" corrected Myfanwy.

"All right! And scarlet!—and white!—and pale pink, the prettiest you have——"

"'Gladys Unwin,' my pet beauty!" murmured Myfanwy. "Yes, madam? Next, please?"

"Lavender, please. But that's only five. Yellow, I think—or no! Those funny pink and white things with little sunbonnets on—I'd like to have them, if I may."

"As many as you like. I don't care for them. I shan't grow them next year. The open flowers are very much prettier. I'll give you some yellow ones as well."

"But these are very quaint and funny! 'Red Riding Hood,' did you say? They just look it! Thanks ever so much, Myfanwy! You're really an angel, you know."

"Indeed, I am very pleased to hear it!" Myfanwy laughed.

"Oh, and I want you and Lazy Bones to come to tea to-morrow afternoon! I'm going to have a party."

"Oh?" queried Myfanwy.

"You'll see when you come. You will come, won't you?"

"Indeed, we shall be very pleased," said Myfanwy again, and waved farewell as Christina rode away.

On the old bridge, above the rushing water, she dismounted, and telling Shenkin to stand still, like a good boy, she sat down on the wall of the bridge. Then, pulling out a note-book and pencil, she tore out some pages and printed something on each in big letters. Replacing these pages in the book, and slipping it up inside her jersey, she mounted again and rode off towards Bryntirion.

The "red children" had been in the garden as she passed before. Now all was quiet, and she wondered if they could have gone to evening service. Entering by the meadow and the side gate, she crept through the Ivy Patch, and looked down on the lawn. Then she smiled, and lay watching.

Taffy, still wearing his white flannels, was sitting on a stump, fixing the sails of a boat. Dimity, in her white frock and hat and loose green coat, was walking up and down, her face very earnest and serious as she hushed Monkey to sleep. The bundle in her fat little arms was wrapped in a doll's quilt, and Monkey's tail, which was almost as dilapidated as dear Bill's ears, hung disconsolately down behind. She was crooning to him in motherly fashion, and no doubt Monkey and she believed that she was singing very sweetly, but to a listener her lullaby—"Baby, baby, go to sleep! Baby, baby, go to sleep!"—was without time or tune, being merely a repetition of two notes over and over again.

Baby apparently went to sleep. She gave Taffy a warning look, and he nodded with understanding. She stooped, and very cautiously laid her burden in a prepared bed among the ivy leaves. Then she straightened her little back with a sigh of relief, and began to gather together and fold up various garments strewn about the lawn—petticoats, a dress, a shawl and bonnet, which were apparently Monkey's Sunday clothes.

They were both very quiet and very busy. Taffy evidently understood the seriousness of the occasion and the necessity for silence.

A spirit of mischief seized Christina. She sometimes tried to tease the Jackanories, but could not venture too far with them because they always collapsed in tears. She was curious to see what these two would do.

So she put her fingers to her lips and gave another wild screech, then watched with interest.

Taffy dropped his boat and sprang up.

"It's the—the ghost up there again! Come on, Dimity! I—I think—we'd better go into the house!"

She had fled to him with a scream—"Ve screechy! Oh, Taffy, Taffy! Oh, where's Winifred? Why did she go 'way? Taffy, we're 'fraid!" He caught her hand, and they fled across the lawn.

Christina laughed. Then she looked startled.

Dimity had suddenly wrenched her hand away from Taffy's, and stopped. He ran on alone, calling to her to hurry. But she stood, her hands clasped, at a sudden terrible thought.

Then she came flying back across the lawn, face white, hands clenched, fat little legs quite unable to carry her fast enough. In her haste she stumbled and fell on the grass, but was up and on again in a moment.

Christina watched in amazement. The child was terrified. But she was coming back, straight towards the "screechy."

Dimity came on without hesitation. She reached the neat little pile of dolls' clothes, bent, snatched up the beloved Monkey from his bed in the ivy leaves, and raced away again as if the "screechy" were at her heels—but triumphant. Monkey was safe!

Christina laughed, but with a touch of shame.

"Davy was right. It is a mean trick! And I meant to be nice to them! But I had to get them away somehow, and this is just the chance I was wanting."

She ran down to the lawn. Near Monkey's bed was a wooden bench, and on this she laid the sweet peas, each colour in a bunch by itself. Then she took the loose pages out of her notebook, and, sitting down on the bench, began hastily to scribble a note on each, under the name she had already printed in big letters.

The lavender peas, delicate in colour and perfume, were for Winifred, with this message:

"MY DEAR WINIFRED,—

"Will you please come to tea with me at the Dolls' House to-morrow afternoon? Then we can get to know one another. I only get out of school at four o'clock, so don't come before five.

"I remain,

"Your loving

"AUNT CHRISTINA."

Billy's peas were the very dark maroon, and his note was severely business-like.

"Master Billy Doodle requests the pleasure of Master Billy Orr's company to tea on Monday afternoon at five o'clock, but Master Billy Orr must not touch Master Billy Doodle's ears, or he will get his fingers bitten.

"AUNT CHRISTINA."

The pale pink peas, four on a stem, and all with curiously wavy standards, their peculiar beauty, were for Polly-Joan.

“DEAR POLLY-JOAN,—

“(Though I can’t see why you should be both Polly and Joan at once, you know!) Please come to tea to-morrow, and I’ll let you see Queen Mary and the Princess Elizabeth. She’s three weeks old, so her eyes are open at last, and she’s just sweet. I know you’ll love her.—From your loving

AUNT CHRISTINA.”

Taffy received the scarlet peas, with the following note:—

“DEAR TAFFY,—

“If you come to tea to-morrow you shall see my Taffy. He’s a Welshman, but he’s not a thief. Bring the boat, and my Taffy will show you where to sail it.

“Yours affectionately,

“AUNT CHRISTINA.”

The curious hooded peas, “Red Riding Hood,” with their curved back petals curling over the rest, were for Dimity.

“DEAR DIMITY,—

“The screechy won’t screech any more, really he won’t! And the Jackanories want you and Monkey to come to tea to-morrow. The screechy is very sorry he frightened you, and will never do it again. He told me so.

“With best love from

“AUNTIE CHRIS.”

These notes were slipped under the bunches of flowers, in order of ages, Winifred’s first and Dimity’s last. Next to Dimity’s came the pure white peas, with a note for Monkey.

“DEAR MONKEY,—

“Please bring Mummy to tea with me to-morrow.

“From your loving

“AUNT CHRISTINA.”

And the yellow peas were laid beside Winifred’s bunch, with a note “For Uncle John.”

The writing of all these epistles took time. She was arranging the last in its place when a shrill little voice startled her.

“Girl, what are you doing in *my* garden?”

Christina turned quickly, and laughed.

“It’s rather like the Three Bears, isn’t it? Father Bear!” and she pointed at Taffy. “Mother Bear!—Baby Bear!” at Dimity and Monkey.

They had failed to find any one to come to the rescue, so had crept back for a distant peep at the lawn to see if the “screechy” was visible. The sight of the familiar white jersey and brown trousers and cheeky béret sitting on *their* seat on *their* lawn had brought them up on tiptoe to see what she was doing. No screechy being in sight, Taffy the valiant was quite ready

to challenge her right to be there, and Dimity stood behind him, half afraid, and peeped at her over Monkey, lying close against her breast.

At Christina's reference she smiled, however, and murmured:

"We a'n't bears, we're only a dear Monkey, an' he's only Taffy——"

"What are you doing in our garden, girl?" demanded seven-year-old Taffy again, his voice full of righteous indignation. "You're—you're trespassing, that's what you are, an' we'll pros'cute you for it——"

Christina laughed again. The thought of being ordered out of Bryntirion garden by Taffy and Dimity Orr was very funny.

"My dear Taffy, don't be a little donkey! Why, child, I'm your Aunt Christina."

"Don't know enthing 'bout aunts, but you haven't any business here. I'm going for Uncle John."

"Do, dear! He'll be so pleased to see me. He asked me to come. And anyway, he'll have started for church by this time. Have Billy and your sisters gone with him?"

"No—gone to our own church," piped Dimity, while Taffy eyed Christina doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, of course! Well, I must go home now. Look at these flowers, Dimity! There are some for each of you, and a letter. There are some for Monkey too. Don't you want to read your letter? I brought all those flowers for you from the Queen of the Sweet Peas. Now good-bye, and mind you do what those letters tell you!"

She waved her hand and turned to go up the ivy bank. Taffy still stood staring irresolutely, but Dimity took a step forward.

"Is a screechy up in vere!" she said in solemn warning.

Christina laughed. "I don't mind screechies. I know how to manage them. I'll drive him out for you, so that he'll never bother you again, shall I? Good-night!"

She looked back from the top of the bank. They had turned to see if her words about the letters were true. Taffy had found his, and was struggling to decipher the hasty scribble. Dimity was staring blankly at her own and Monkey's.

"Taffy! Read it to us, Taffy! We can't read vem at all, me an' Monk, for we're only free ——"

"I'll read it to you later on, Dimity, when—when you're in bed, you know. It's past your bedtime, and you promised Winifred you wouldn't be late. You'd better run in quick. We mustn't stop to read them just now," said Taffy virtuously, quite determined not to confess that he could not make out a word even of his own letter except his name.

"That's worthy of Master Billy! I should have printed them for those two. But he'll find someone to read it to him," and Christina went back to Shenkin, full of plans for the morrow.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SAND TEA-PARTY.

Monday was as hot as Sunday had been. Christina's plans for the afternoon included a meeting with Davy outside "The George" immediately after school—for he rode in from Llanystumdwy every day, as she did from the Dolls' House—a hasty journey home as fast as Shenkin and Jenkin could gallop, and, if possible, a hurried bathe on the Lonely Sands before the visitors arrived. It would mean quick work and no loss of time, but the bathe had now become part of her daily programme, before breakfast or after school, and on unusually hot days both, and she was unwilling to give it up for the sake of the "red children." Moreover, it was a good opportunity for a bathe with Davy, and his presence always added to the fun and doubled her enjoyment.

She was prepared to show kindness to the visitors, to entertain them when it suited her own convenience, to invite them to the Dolls' House when she wanted them there, and to visit them at Bryntirion when she chose, but she had no intention of giving up her own way or her own freedom of action in any particular, and did not intend that her plans or arrangements should be interfered with in the slightest.

But so long as she could keep the "red children" at their proper distance, she was willing to be very good to them, and she really felt very much obliged to them, as she said to herself many a time, for being at Bryntirion and not at the Dolls' House. So she took a considerable amount of trouble with her preparations for the tea-party, and explained her wishes very thoroughly to Marion, the Jackanories, and the servants, before starting for school in the morning.

She met Davy outside the big hotel in good time, and they cantered home together, she explaining her intentions for the afternoon as they went.

"Can we manage a swim?" she asked, as they reached the Dolls' House.

"I can, if you can. You take longer."

"Not much. Guess I can do it. We'll try, anyway. It's such a perfect afternoon. I'm hotter than hot."

She threw her hat at dear Bill, and ran upstairs. He had been sunning himself on the step, and now fled out on to the lawn, spitting angrily in his sudden fright. Christina came flying down again, carrying on her arm a short-skirted dress to wear presently, and found dainty Mary sitting on her hat and clawing it patiently with her front paws, while baby Elizabeth crouched ready to spring upon dear Bill's tail. Mary was promptly sent to join them on the lawn, and Christina, picking up her hat, ran off down the hill among the gorse bushes, and out through the sandhills and wire-grass to the shore.

Beside the little tent, on the Lonely Sands, now stood another larger one, with wide-spreading walls, able to shelter a large party. The whole family from the Dolls' House often came down here for tea, and the small tent was given up to the bathers.

Davy was waiting for her, barefoot already, his towels round his neck, talking to Myfanwy and the Jackanories, who were all three building castles in front of the tent. He was instructing them in the more fascinating and scientific work of tunnelling when Christina appeared, and, calling that she would be ready in a moment, went into the little tent.

"You'll dig some more tunnels after tea, Uncle Davy, won't you?" cried Nora.

For when the Jackanories learned to speak, Davy had insisted that, if Christina was an aunt, he was quite old enough to be an uncle. The babies had accepted this reasoning as sound and logical, and looked upon every grown-up person except their parents as an uncle or aunt in consequence. Old Mr. Clevelly was of course an uncle, and Myfanwy was necessarily another aunt, so it was not unnatural that to them the grown-up world should seem to be composed of aunts and uncles. Except, of course, Lizzie and Cook, and Dick who looked after the ponies, and the Jackanories understood that they were somehow quite different.

“ ‘Cause Auntie Chris says there’s a girl an’ a monkey coming to tea, an’ we don’t want to play with the monkey,” cried Jack.

“An’ we won’t. Don’t like monkeys.”

“ ‘Cause they’re horrid hairy,” Jack explained.

Christina was fastening her bathing dress, but had not yet put on her cap, when Davy called her from outside.

“Chris, something to show you! Buck up! You can do your hair out here. Come on!”

She shook her mane of hair which hung loose about her face and tucked it underneath her cap, then caught up a big towel and went out to join him.

Then, “O-o-oh! Oh, you mean thing! Davy, you—you wretch!” she gasped, on finding herself face to face with her five visitors.

Dimity, half out of sight behind Winifred, was hugging her monkey as she always did when puzzled or shy, and was staring with wide round eyes. Polly-Joan and the boys began to grin.

Davy was already skipping across the sands.

“I haven’t been introduced, you know!” he cried, and plunged into the water, and sat in the edge of the tide to watch the picture he had brought about.

Christina had ordered that when the visitors arrived at the Dolls’ House they should be sent down to the shore for tea in the tent. They had come through the sandhills unnoticed, and had taken the whole party by surprise.

As much taken aback as Christina herself, they could only stand and stare for a moment. Then Winifred began to smile, and Polly-Joan to giggle delightedly, and Christina, recovering from her confusion, laughed out also.

“That’s my Taffy! Isn’t he a rascal? Don’t you think it was a mean trick?” and she threw her big towel across her shoulders and drew it over her bare feet. “I’m very pleased to see you! You’ll think we aren’t ready for you, but we are really, only Davy and I thought we could squeeze in a bathe before you came, as it’s so hot. School was dreadful this afternoon. But I’ll get dressed again at once, if you’ll just excuse me for two minutes——”

“Oh, please have your bathe all the same!” cried Winifred quickly. “We’ll sit here and watch you. We’d be so sorry if we made you miss it.”

“I don’t think I ought to, with visitors waiting——”

“But you’re our aunt,” said Polly-Joan demurely. “We must wait till auntie’s ready.”

Christina laughed. “Oh, well, if you don’t mind!—and as I’m all ready!” and she began to fasten her cap.

“Won’t you sit down? But first come and be introduced to the others,” and she led the way to the big tent, where the Jackanories were hiding shyly and Myfanwy had been watching her predicament with a smile.

“Marion—Mrs. Clevelly, these babies’ mother, you know!—was so sorry, but she had promised to go out before she knew you were coming. So we’ll have tea all by ourselves.

These are the Jackanories—Jack!—and Nora! Children, these are your cousins—Winifred, Billy, Polly-Joan, Taffy, Dimity, and Monkey!”

But the Jackanories looked doubtful, and preferred to keep in the background till they saw how the cousins behaved. “Cousins” were new to them, and they did not feel quite sure what they were. If they had been uncles or aunts, now, the case would have been different. And there were so many of them! And one of them was a monkey with a ragged tail! So they kept behind Myfanwy and watched to see what the “cousins” would do.

Christina, wearing the big towel and feeling rather at a disadvantage in this dress, proceeded with the introductions with as much dignity as she could muster under the circumstances.

“This is Myfanwy, the Lady of the Sweet Peas. She’s that bad boy’s sister, and as you can see she hasn’t brought him up at all well. But he’ll be getting fine and cold waiting for me out there. I can almost hear his teeth chattering. Now, if you’ll sit down and make yourselves at home, I’ll go and splash him for that nasty trick he played me! Boys!” and she turned to Billy and Taffy, with the air of authority which she thought proper for an aunt, “the tide’s going down, so we’ll have time for cricket after tea. Suppose you go and choose a pitch. You’ll find the stumps behind the bathing tent. And, boys, if you *should* happen to steal Master Davy’s clothes and hide them in the sandhills, I wouldn’t tell who did it!” and Billy and Taffy chuckled appreciatively. “Now I’m going to catch Lazy Bones.”

She threw off her towel and raced away down to the water. Davy saw her coming, and sprang up and began hurriedly wading out to sea. In his haste he stumbled and fell, and she gave a mocking shout and splashed in after him. Then she, too, was at a disadvantage, and unable to hurry with safety, and he, reaching swimming depth first, plunged in and went off at a fine rate, crying derisive invitations to her to catch him.

She chased him away along by the shore, and he kept just beyond her reach and encouraged her to think she was always on the point of catching him. Then he made for shore, and raced away along the shining wet sand, she just at his heels, both shouting till the sands echoed with the noise, and the “red children” by the tents watched them enviously. He tripped at last in the seaweed, and she was on him with a shout, bombarding him with sand. Davy, who had stumbled purposely, retaliated with seaweed, till they both thought it best to return to the water for a splashing match,—a game of water polo with an india-rubber ball,—and a fine exhibition of floating, and of all their various strokes, for the benefit of those on shore.

They stumbled up the sands together at last, exhausted and very ready for tea. Christina caught up her towel, and blinked the water from her eyelashes and pushed the wet hair out of her eyes, as she panted, “Glorious! Don’t you wish you’d been in too?” and then disappeared into the tent, with the happy consciousness that Davy would have to hunt for his clothes before he could get dressed.

He discovered his loss in a moment, and shouted indignant questions through the canvas, but she maintained a discreet silence. He descended to angry scorn, declaring that this was playing it low on a fellow, a caddish trick, real like a girl, and if she didn’t tell him where to find his things he’d come in and make her in another moment. She heard his teeth chatter, and laughed mockingly.

“’Tis so nice to get dressed, Davy! ’Tis so warm and cosy, you can’t think! Who’ll be dressed first to-day, Davy, eh? You’d best begin searching for your things at once, Lazy Bones. They got tired of waiting and started home without you, I guess. Perhaps they’re riding

Jenkin into Criccieth by this time. Oh, poor Davy *is* so cold! Poor dear boy! Did they do it to him, then? Did they steal his things? It was a shame, then, that it was!”

Billy and Taffy chuckled again, but Polly-Joan, moved with pity for shivering Davy, cried shrilly from the top of a sandhill:

“They’re round here, in the grass! Oh, it’s prickles! Never mind, I’ll get them for you!” and she dashed through the prickly sea-holly which covered the sand at the spot chosen by Billy and Taffy, and threw the garments down beside Davy.

“Now get dressed quick, or you’ll catch cold!” she commanded, and retreated to the sand before the big tent again.

Presently Christina came out, dressed in a blue linen beach dress, her damp hair blowing about her face, a towel across her shoulders.

“Now we’ll have tea! Are you all good friends by this time? Forgive me for receiving you in that very improper fashion. I wouldn’t have believed Davy would play me such a trick.”

“Won’t he be cross with you for hiding his clothes?”

“Davy cross with *me*? I’d like to see him! Besides, it was Billy and Taffy did it, not me.”

“But auntie told them to!” cried Polly-Joan, in quick defence of her brothers.

“Did you find a good pitch, boys?”

“Yes, jolly ripping!” cried Billy enthusiastically.

“The sands are quite good for cricket, aren’t they, Billy?”

“Yes!” said Billy, staring.

“*Do* you sink in at every step?”

“No!” he admitted, and stared at her doubtfully.

“He said we would, but he was quite wrong, as usual. How did you know he’d said it?” demanded Polly-Joan.

Christina laughed, and turned to Dimity.

“How is Monkey to-day? Did he like his letter?”

Dimity nodded solemnly over her tea-cup.

“We liked it jus’ awful much,” she murmured shyly.

“Where is he now? And don’t the Jackanories want any tea? What are you working so hard about, children?”

They were digging vigorously a few yards away, occasionally sending a shower of fine sand towards the tea-party.

“Makin’ a bed for Monk,” explained Nora breathlessly.

“‘Cause he’s tired ’n’ wants to go to sleep,—she said so,” added Jack, and Dimity smiled like a fat baby cherub. She had found two devoted slaves and she was quite happy. As for the Jackanories, they had made up their minds that cousins were not very different from uncles and aunts, and had very quickly fallen in love with Monkey.

“We did like ve flowers wiv little wee bonnets on, Monk an’ me,” Dimity murmured, in her shy little voice.

“Bonnets? Oh, ‘Red Riding Hood’! Yes, I thought you’d like them. Aren’t they pretty?”

“Wee baby flowers in bonnets! Monk an’ me liked vem jus’ awful much,” Dimity repeated, into her tea-cup.

Each of the “red children” was wearing the bunch of sweet peas presented to him or her the day before, as a compliment to the giver. Myfanwy had smiled at sight of a big bunch of her finest white flowers pinned on to Monkey’s bare chest, and had quietly rescued them before he was handed over to the Jackanories to be put to bed in the sand. She had explained

to Winifred the reason for the title Christina had given her, and had invited them all to come over to Rhianfa one morning to see the garden which was her pride.

They were all busy with tea before Davy appeared, barefoot, with rough damp hair, and mock indignation in his eyes when he looked at Christina.

“Lazy Bones! These are my nephews and nieces! Winifred!—Polly-Joan!—Dimity!—Billy!—Taffy!—and Monkey! My dears!” to the nephews and nieces, “this is ‘Taffy was a Welshman,’ Master Davy Jones, Lazy Bones—that’s his full name, and a very good name for him too.”

“Yes, auntie!” in a meekly dutiful tone, and Davy sat down on the sand at her feet. “Some tea, please, auntie.”

The boys began to giggle, and Polly-Joan laughed. Christina frowned.

“Be quiet, you silly boy! If I was your auntie, I’d have brought you up better.”

“Yes, auntie.—I say, you’d better look out!” he said, addressing the nephews and nieces. “If she’s going to bring you up, you’ll have a nice time of it! I’m glad I’m not in your shoes.—Don’t pull my ears, please, auntie! It hurts. They’ll soon be as bad as dear Bill’s, at this rate.”

“You’re a great silly boy, Davy Jones——”

“Yes, auntie! I know. It’s with being so much with you, auntie. Children always catch things from their elders. Another scone, please, auntie.”

“If you won’t be sensible, you shan’t have another bite.”

“Then I’ll go home, auntie, and never come to tea with you again. Or I’ll ask Polly-Joan. I know she’d give me one. She’s a good sort. Oh, auntie, don’t! She’s punching me in the back,” he explained.

“You deserve it, you goose.”

“Do I, auntie? Very sorry, auntie!”

“Oh, don’t be a donkey! Go and talk to Dimity. Or Polly-Joan! She found your clothes for you. I’d have left them in the holly and made you fetch them yourself.”

“Yes, auntie, I know you would. It’s the kind of thing you would do. But I must say it’s not what you’d expect of any really nice auntie,” and he rolled over in the sand, and addressed Polly-Joan and Dimity—the one giggling, the other staring at him round-eyed and solemn.

“D’you remember that screechy in your garden?”

Christina turned and looked at him doubtfully.

“Yes?” asked Polly-Joan, and the boys edged nearer, and Dimity’s eyes grew rounder still.

“We heard it las’ night, too, Taffy an’ dear Monk an’ me, an’ we were ’fraid, ’cause——”

“’Cause you’re only free, aren’t you?” Davy asked sympathetically, and the elders giggled.

But Dimity was pleased.

“Yes, we’re only free, my dear Monk an’ me, an’—an’ we di’n’t like screechies in our garden.”

“No, indeed, I should think not! Well, that screechy——”

“Davy!”

“Yes, auntie?”

“Get me some more tea, please!”

“In a minute, auntie. We’re talking——”

“Well, don’t talk, then. I want some more tea.”

“Please, you told me to talk, auntie. Didn’t she, now?” and he appealed to Polly-Joan, who nodded.

"I'll give you your tea, Christina," said Myfanwy, and Davy turned to Dimity again.

"That screechy, you know! It's—yes, auntie? How you do interrupt to-day, auntie!"

"Here's your gardener coming down the hill," said Christina, devoutly thankful for the interruption. "He must have some message for you. I guess Rhianfa's been burnt down, or Sally's run away, or a black cow has got in and eaten Myfanwy's peas, or something."

Davy sprang up and went to meet the man, and the "red children" looked at him with deep respect as they heard his questions in the Welsh which was to them so new and bewildering.

He turned to Myfanwy.

"Mr. Lloyd, from Portmadoc, has come and wants to see you, Myfanwy—at once, if possible. It's business, I suppose."

"Business!" said Christina. "I don't like business. It always gives me shivers down my back. It generally means something horrid."

"Oh, not always!" Myfanwy laughed. "Davy and I are quite used to business. You can't have had much experience of business matters to frighten you, Christina. But I think, since Mr. Lloyd has come from Portmadoc to see me, I must go home to see him, if you'll excuse me. I'm sorry to run away so soon, but I really think I ought to. But there's no need for Davy to come. Indeed, he must stay——"

"Indeed, he'll do nothing of the kind! What nonsense! I'm coming to keep you company. Wait till I get my boots on! Good-bye, auntie! As for that screechy, Dimity, you ask me about him another time."

"And mind you all come along to Rhianfa some time soon to see my garden!" Myfanwy called back to Winifred, as she went up the hill.

Christina took her place at the teapot.

"I don't like business," she said again. "You read of all kinds of things going wrong in business. Davy was worried, I'm quite sure, though he was pretending not to be. I believe that old man said more than he told us. I don't like it when they talk Welsh."

"Don't you understand Welsh, then?"

"Only a word or two. But it's different for Davy and Myfanwy, of course. They knew Welsh before they knew English. They always talk Welsh together."

"What a strange name she has!"

"Myfanwy? Have you heard the whole of it?" Christina asked, smiling.

"No? Is there any more?"

"Surely that's enough for any one!" cried Polly-Joan. "It's a dreadful name to say!"

"Her name is Myfanwy Gwenllian Olwen Eluned," said Christina solemnly. "They're all pretty, but not one of them is as pretty as she is."

The "red children" gasped, and she laughed.

"Talking of names, I want to ask some questions. Do you mind?"

"What are the questions?" asked Winifred cautiously.

"Well, for one thing, how do you say your last name? Davy and I were arguing about it. Is it 'Oar,' like the oar of a boat, or 'Or'? Which is right?"

Winifred laughed. "'Oar' is right. The other way is very English. It's a Scotch name."

"Then I was right. I must tell Davy! Now about some of your own names! Why do you have two?" to Polly-Joan.

Billy and Taffy had been up the hill with Davy for a look at Jenkin. They came racing down through the sandhills again, and dropped panting on the sand, ready for a second tea.

"Ripping pony!" said Billy. "Can I have a second cup?"

"We saw your cat—" panted Taffy.

"Dear Bill?"

"Yes. What a sight his ears are! Who's bitten 'em?"

"Billy—our Billy—chased him, and he swore something awful," said Taffy.

"Of course. He always does when he's teased. But what about your name?" she asked again of Polly-Joan. "Which is it, really?"

"Mary Joan Orr, please, auntie."

"Oh! But why do they call you both at once?"

"'Cause we always have done——"

"Oh, shut up, Taff! That's no reason. It's because she is both at once," Billy explained. "Sometimes she's Polly and sometimes she's Joan, and we never know which she's going to be next. Sometimes one comes out, sometimes t'other. Joan when she's goody-goody, you know, and Polly when she's bad. So we call her both to be on the safe side."

"I'm never goody-goody!" cried Polly-Joan, in righteous indignation.

"She had a spasm of Joan just now when she told him where to find his things," Billy went on, ignoring her, "but she'd been Polly when she helped to hide 'em, you know."

"I was sorry for him. He was cold, and you were all laughing, and you wouldn't any of you have liked it yourselves."

"She's generally Joan on Sundays, but she never stays Joan very long——"

"And Taffy?" asked Christina. "Your mother wasn't Welsh. Why did she call him Taffy?"

"She wanted to remember she'd lived in Wales," Winifred explained. "She has always been very fond of Wales, and keeps saying she hopes to come back here sometime. She was so pleased for us to get to know this place. She'd often told us about it. So she made Taffy a Welshman to remind us."

Christina changed the subject hurriedly, her face suddenly hot.

"And Dimity? That's surely a very odd name for a girl? I thought dimity was a thing you made curtains of."

This raised a general laugh, the meaning of which she did not yet understand. Dimity, who had trotted away to rescue Monk from the attentions of the well-meaning Jackanories, on the plea that "We're hungry, an' we want our tea now, please!" returned in time to hear the reference to her name, and smiled at Christina over Monkey's furry body as all the others laughed.

"Dimity—curtains! That's us, me an' my dear Monk, an' we're only free——"

"There's a tale about her name——" began Winifred.

"Oh, she doesn't want to hear all that old stuff!" said Taffy hurriedly.

"Yes, I do. 'Thereby hangs a tale'!" quoted Christina.

"There it is hanging down under her arm!" giggled Polly-Joan.

"And an ugly old rag of a tail too——"

"Isn't ugly! Billy, you're an ugly boy y'self! Our dear tail isn't ugly——"

"*Our* tail!" jeered Billy. "Oh, I say! Just listen to that! *Our* tail! You goose, Dimity! Which is your tail, eh?"

"Is all mine, an' all Monk's, an' all both of ours together," said poor Dimity, struggling to express herself with the limited vocabulary of "only free."

Winifred interposed quickly. "I want to tell you why we call her Dimity. You see, she's so much younger than any of us that when she was born we had grown used to thinking of Taffy

as the baby. He was four, but we still called him Baby, and, though he doesn't like to remember it now, he objected to have her called Baby instead of him——”

Taffy had been awaiting this point in the recital.

“I didn't! I never did! I was pleased! I wasn't a baby! Oh, Winifred, you *are* horrid!”

“You're being a baby now, anyway,” said Polly-Joan unsympathetically.

“He didn't like to have her take his place, and when we called her ‘Dear, sweet, little baby!’ and all that kind of thing, he used to stamp and roar and cry, and get quite angry——”

“I didn't! I never did! I tell you I didn't, Winifred! You're mean, the whole lot of you!” cried poor Taffy, nearly in tears.

“Dear, sweet, little baby!” mocked Billy.

“Taffy, don't be silly,” said Winifred quietly, as Taffy, fuming with rage, threatened to kick his brother. “I'm talking about what used to be long ago, and everybody knows that quite well. It doesn't matter what you were like when you were four, if only you're a proper boy now. But, of course, if you're still a cry-baby——”

“Don't like you tellin' ole stories 'bout me,” muttered Taffy sulkily, but raised no more protests.

Winifred turned to Christina again.

“When Dimity was a month or two old, mother said one day, ‘I'm going to put fresh curtains on that cot. I thought those old blue ones would do, but I don't like the look of them now. I'm going to have white dimity curtains. I've always thought white dimity curtains must be pretty and just the thing for a baby, so I'm going to put them on the cradle.’ The word was new to us, and took our fancy. Taffy first, and then all the rest of us, began calling her ‘The Dimity-Baby.’ We would say, ‘I'm going to kiss the Dimity-Baby,’ or ‘Come and look at Dimity,’ and so it came to be her name. Margaret seemed too long for her when she was so tiny, and you know how a nickname sticks once you've begun it.”

“You'll have to call her something else when she goes to school.”

“We'll call her Maggie, I guess,” said Billy.

To Christina's surprise, Dimity broke into a wail of distress.

“Won't be Maggie! We won't have vat ugly name! Maggies is horrid, an' we don't like vem——”

“Our servant at home was called Maggie, and we didn't like her,” Winifred said, laughing. “Never mind, Dimity! We don't need to decide it yet. I expect you'll be Peg or Meg. Are there any more questions?” she asked, looking at Christina.

“Well—if you won't think me rude, I *was* wondering why you all dressed so much alike.”

Winifred laughed. “Oh, that's school! These were our gym. dresses last winter, and mother said we'd better wear them out in the garden, as we're going to live in Edinburgh when they come home, and that will mean changing schools. Of course, Dimity didn't go to school, but mother thought she'd like her to have a tunic too——”

“My dear Monk's got one too, but we don't wear it only some days,” explained Dimity.

“And the boys' school was the same as ours, only a different part, so of course their colours were the same.”

“And now may we see Queen Mary?” asked Polly-Joan, growing impatient of conversation since tea was finished.

“Said you'd let me sail my boat,” said Taffy.

“No, she said we'd have a game, and we chose the pitch, so don't you be slackers and go off and do something else! Come on, Polly-Joan!”

“We’re goin’ to play wiv ve Jacksynories, Monk an’ me,” said Dimity, making a valiant attempt at the name. “We don’t like cricket, for ve ball’s so hard, an’ you frow so quick. Monk an’ me we’re ’fraid we’ll get hit, for we’re only free. But we like ve Jacksynories jus’ awful much.”

“Come on, you girls! I’ll show you something first-class in the way of leg-breaks,” he said to Christina. “Like to go in first?” for when cricket was in question Billy spoke with authority and looked for no contradiction.

“Oh, you *are* slow! You are a slow lot, you are,” groaned Taffy, as the girls hesitated.

“I want to see Queen Mary,” urged Polly-Joan.

Christina laughed. “It’s Princess Elizabeth and Queen Mary, and those yellow peas were Queen Mary too. She’s up at the house, so perhaps we’d better see her when you’re going home. But I’m not very eager for cricket——”

“Don’t you think we might have a game? It’s really very good fun, and the sand is just splendid here,” Winifred suggested.

“I must hang up my bathing things first. Will you help me wring, Polly-Joan? Thanks! Then they all go on this line.—Now I’m ready. What on earth are leg-breaks?”

CHAPTER IX.

THE CONSCIENCE OF CHRISTINA.

When dainty Mary, the infant Princess, and dear Bill's ears had been duly displayed and commented upon, "Auntie" dismissed her guests, on the plea of home lessons.

"I'll call for you one evening, and we'll go to Llanystumdwy together——"

"To where?" cried Polly-Joan.

"It's one of those dreadful names on the signposts," laughed Winifred. "I remember it! And there are two others just as bad."

"Rhydybenllig and Rhydygroesau. They're all bridges on the rivers close at hand. Llanystumdwy is where Myfanwy and Davy live, you know. She asked you to go and see her garden, and you ought to go, for it's really worth seeing. She's got a peacock too. Let me see, it had better be—not to-morrow! I can't possibly. It's German, and it takes me every minute, and sometimes more. Wednesday I could manage it. I'll ride over after tea and call for you."

"Thank you so much for asking us," Winifred said earnestly. "It's been very jolly. I think your Dolls' House is lovely. It's all so pretty and sunny and cosy. I just wish we were living here instead of at Bryntirion. Of course, it's very nice, but—well, kind of gloomy, don't you think?"

"An' a screechy in ve garden!" said Dimity. "We don't like ve garden, my dear Monk an' me. It's dark, an'—an' ve screechy's in ve trees, an' we're 'fraid——"

"And you're only free!" mocked Billy.

But Dimity was not troubled by sarcasm.

"Yes, we're only free!" she nodded, with big round eyes fixed on him thoughtfully.

"And you do have jolly times down there on the sands with the tents!" Polly-Joan's voice was very envious.

"Ripping game we had," was Billy's farewell. "Didn't the balls break something like! I'll teach you to bowl, if you like."

As Christina was under the impression that she had been bowling for the last ten minutes of the game, this was rather crushing. She thanked him meekly, and added, in explanation of her want of skill:

"Davy and I generally play tennis or golf. There are only two of us, you see."

"Tennis! Tennis is stodgy, and golf's worse," said Billy scornfully.

"Billy! You know you've never tried either of them. You've never even touched a racquet."

"Well, you needn't give a fellow away like that!" grumbled Billy. "Come on, Taff! I'll race you down the lane. Take the stumps, will you, Polly-Joan? Hold my coat, Win!" and the boys were off down the lane between the walls of gorse.

"Well, I like that! And it means carrying them all the way home!" grumbled Polly-Joan.

"I wouldn't do it. I'd leave them all there in the hedge."

"Oh, it's only Billy's way!" Winifred said lightly. "We're used to Billy. Give me the stumps, Polly-Joan, and you take his blazer. That's a fairer arrangement, since I'm bigger than you. That's all right. Good-bye, Auntie!"

Christina laughed, and leant over the little white gate with the Jackanories to wave farewell.

“Good-bye till the next time!”

“Me an’ Monk have ’joyed it! We liked it jus’ awful much! Good-bye, Jacksynories! Good-bye, Auntie Chris!”

Christina’s lessons did not take her long that night. Perhaps they were not very well done, for her mind was full of other things.

She sat on the front steps, waiting for Marion to come home, after the Jackanories were in bed, and tried to run to earth some of the thoughts which were troubling her. The sun went down in the far north-west behind the Nevin hills, and left the evening sky golden. The southern sea grew grey and cold, and the mountains in the east slipped away into mist. Dear Bill had been in hiding since the invasion of his peace by Billy and Taffy and Polly-Joan, but he appeared now that all seemed quiet, and, creeping stealthily across the lawn, sat down beside Christina.

He was in an unusually good mood, grateful perhaps to find that the invasion was not to be permanent, for he began to purr, and Christina, quite startled by this extraordinary condescension, laid her hand affectionately on his back.

“Billy Doodle! He does love his old friend, then, doesn’t he! Better’n any nasty horrid red children! Yes, darling, your old missus loves you too, and won’t let anybody touch you, dear Bill!—oh, you beast!”

She had unconsciously touched his ears, and he had made a grab at her hand, but missed it.

“You needn’t have done that, Billy Doodle darling! It wasn’t either kind or polite, when your old friend was loving you so nicely. She won’t love you any more if you do that kind of thing,” she said severely, and left dear Bill to himself, which was what he wanted.

She felt as if she knew her nephews and nieces now. During the tea party and the evening game of cricket, they had all revealed their characteristics pretty thoroughly.

Masterful Billy; Taffy, the cheeky and rather spoilt baby; timid Dimity, so devoted to her dilapidated “Monk”; changeable Polly-Joan, sometimes a tomboy, sometimes taking part with Winifred against her brothers—she seemed to know them all well now.

About Winifred she felt less sure. She had less to say for herself than the others, and was less self-assertive, though ready enough to answer questions, and yet Christina had a feeling that in every conversation, behind every difficulty, ready for every quarrel between the boys and Polly-Joan, had been Winifred, always knowing how to smooth matters over and keep the peace. She was quiet, and had less initiative than the others. They made suggestions, and she was quite willing to fall into line. But she was in everything that went on, sharing in every game and conversation—with one eye on Dimity mothering “Monk,” while she was supposed to be fielding for Billy, and getting into hot water in consequence. And just how many times Christina had heard from one or other—“Shall we, Win?” or “What d’you think, Win?” she did not know, but it was certainly a great many.

As she sat on the step beside dear Bill, she staring at the yellow sunset with worried eyes, he apparently contemplating it thoughtfully through narrowed lids, Christina gave a few moments to the “red children”—a few moments to Davy and Myfanwy, wondering briefly as to the nature of their “business”—and then resigned herself to the thoughts which were pursuing her, since she could no longer hold them at bay.

But why should It begin to worry her now? She did not understand, and was annoyed and resentful.

“I’m sure I’ve done what I could to make up for It to-day! I’ve been very good to them. I’ve given them a real good time. They all said how jolly it had been. Then why should I feel

extra bad about It now? It's done with, and can't be altered, and any way, It's no different from what It was yesterday. Why should It begin to plague me now?"

"Because you've learned to know them now," said a Voice, so clearly in her ear that she jumped and looked at dear Bill. But Bill had not heard it, and she said slowly to herself, answering the Voice:

"What does that matter? What difference does it make?"

"It does make a difference, doesn't it? You feel sorrier about it now?"

"I suppose I do, but it's not a bit fair. I've done what I could to make up for It. You can't say I didn't give them a jolly good time."

"Making up for it is no use. You can never undo it that way."

"*What?* Do you mean to say It will go on worrying me?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But that's mean!" she said to her Conscience, in deep dismay. "I want to make up for It. Why shouldn't I?"

"You're not doing it the right way."

"Isn't being nice to them right?"

"It's right, but it's not nearly enough. Think of the wrong you did. Are you going to make up for that by asking them out to tea?"

Christina stirred uneasily. "What more can I do?"

"Confess, and say you're sorry."

"Confess? Tell everybody what I did? It's not likely! I never will! What a ridiculous idea! As if anybody could expect it!"

"It's the only honest thing to do."

"I don't care about being honest."

"Then how can you hope to forget?"

Christina frowned as she yielded point after point. Each thought crept out from its hiding-place and demanded attention—either surrender or defiance. She yielded at first, but grew frightened when she saw to what she was being led, and retreated hurriedly.

"I don't believe it! I'm just making it all up! It's nonsense. Nobody could want me to do any such thing. I will make it up to those children, but I'll do it in my own way. I'll be good to them, and give them a jolly time, and surely that will be enough. It's what their mother asked me to do."

"Yes, but not all she asked. The quarrel between her and Harry might be ended, as she hoped, and she might have gone away feeling happy about it. It's still a quarrel, and she's disappointed and thinks badly of Harry, and he thinks badly of her, and it's all you—you!"

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" said Christina. "What do I care about old quarrels? But I'll be good to those kiddies, and then surely I'll be able to forget all about It. And I don't quite see why I should feel so bad about It to-night, just because they've been here to tea! I was forgetting It so nicely! I don't understand. It isn't fair!—Bill, dear Bill! Are you thinking how much you love your old missus? Just a little bit, do you, darling? She *knows* you love her, pretty! And she loves you just as much as ever she can!"

And "Pretty" flicked his torn ears contemptuously, and began to attend to his evening toilet.

CHAPTER X.

“BUSINESS!”

“Me an’ Monk like it jus’ awful much,” said Dimity blissfully.

“But you’re so slow, Timmy-Dimmy! Wish *I* could have a turn!” cried Taffy.

“If *I* was up there, now, I’d show you! That’s not the way to ride a bit, Dimity! You should rise in your saddle—rise up on your stirrups, you know——”

“Her feet aren’t anywhere near the stirrups! I do wish, Billy, when you know so much about everything, you’d sometimes try and tell us something really useful! You’ve always plenty to say, but it’s never any of it right. You’re far too sure about things,” said Polly-Joan severely.

“And you’re far too ready to correct your elders and betters, miss.”

“Isn’t it funny how all the cows about here are black? Look at them in that field!” said Winifred,—“not a brown one among them!”

“They’re just exactly like Highland cattle——” began Billy.

“They’re not a bit like Highland cattle! What nonsense!” cried Polly-Joan. “Billy, how can you say such a thing? Highland cattle are shaggy all over, quite different from these.”

“You contradict just for the fun of it, Polly-Joan——”

“And look at those white pigs!” said Winifred. “Can you see them, Dimity? There are some wee baby ones, pinky-white, with black spots. Aren’t they sweet?”

The boys and Polly-Joan ran to look over the hedge, and Winifred turned to Christina.

“If you could manage *not* to let the boys ride, unless there’s some one else about, it would be just as well, if you don’t mind,” she said, in a low voice. “I wouldn’t trust them once they were up on Shenkin’s back. They wouldn’t listen to us.”

“Me an’ Monk like wee baby pigs jus’ awful much,” murmured Dimity, craning her little neck to see.

“Monk” was propped before her on the saddle, and Christina’s right arm held her steady, while her left hand held the reins. The position was tiring, however, and she said suddenly:

“I’d better get up beside you and hold you on properly, Dimity. It will be easier, and Shenkin can quite well carry us both.”

“But can he carry all free?” inquired Dimity anxiously. “My dear Monk is here, you know, an’ we don’t want Monk to walk, ’cause he’s ’joying it jus’ awful much.”

“I think Shenk can manage Monk,” Christina said smiling.

But, catching a momentary wistful look in Winifred’s eyes, she hesitated, and then said cordially:

“Would you like to get up beside her? I’ll help you, and I’m sure you’d enjoy it.”

“Oh, I would! I’d love to! But are you sure you don’t mind? Don’t you want to ride yourself?”

“Oh, any time will do for me! Climb on this wall, and I’ll help you up. Dimity must come down for a moment till you’re settled.”

She arranged them both on Shenkin’s back, Dimity holding the reins, Winifred with her arm round her, and Monkey propped up in front. The boys and Polly-Joan were tickling the pigs with branches put through the hedge, and did not turn round till the girls were riding in

state, quite at ease. Then, with a shout of surprise, they came running back, and crowded round Christina, all begging for a turn, and all criticising Winifred and offering advice.

“Monk an’ me like it jus’ awful much. You can’t b’lieve how nice it is, Taffy,” cried Dimity.

Then she gave a scream, and Winifred clasped her tight and clutched at the reins with a cry of dismay, and Christina sprang to Shenkin’s head, as a sports car came roaring round the corner in a cloud of dust.

But Shenkin, usually quiet enough, was in a nervous condition to-day. He did not like carrying two—or three—and was fully conscious that the hand on his reins was a very slack and unaccustomed hand compared with his mistress’s. He shied, and pawed at the hedge, and then, as the noisy terror passed, leaving them all bewildered, blinded with the dust and deafened by the horn, he jerked away from Christina’s out-stretched hands, and fled up the road and round the corner.

She gave a little scream and turned to the boys, her face the colour of her jersey.

“Come on! Run! If—if Winifred can hold Dimity and keep her own seat, they may be safe enough. Come on quick!”

“And if not?” panted Taffy.

It was a terribly silly question at such a moment, and showed his utter failure to grasp the danger.

“You little donkey!” and Christina ran on, leaving even Billy well behind.

Her heart seemed standing still. What would she find round that corner? Dimity lying in the road?—or both? She scarcely dared to hope that Winifred would manage to keep her seat.

But Winifred had kept it. Clinging to the saddle, so that she was bruised and sore for hours afterwards, she had managed to keep her place and to hold Dimity tight against her. The sudden jerk had nearly thrown her off her balance, but, recovering just in time, she had realised the danger, and the fact that she must keep her head and that it would be no use to scream. Instead, she had gripped Dimity and the saddle, and had succeeded in keeping upright.

Shenkin had come to a stand, trembling, and very much ashamed of himself. Winifred was shakily trying to soothe him and keep him still till the others came up, and was at the same time keeping an anxious look-out for another motor. If she had heard or seen the slightest sign of one, she was prepared to get Dimity down somehow, and follow herself if there were time. But the road ran down into Llanystumdwy, and the village was very quiet again.

Christina came up, panting.

“You—you’re a brick! How did you do it? I thought you’d both be thrown!” she gasped.

“My dear Monk!” and Dimity broke into a wail of distress. “We’ve dropped my dear Monk! Oh, Auntie Chris, we don’t like your horse awful much! Where *is* my Monk?”

Christina, shaking from head to foot, leant against Shenkin, her head pressed on his smooth brown flank, and he looked round at her shamefacedly, as if to apologise.

“I never knew Shenk shy before. Of course, he hates those horrid things, as everybody does, but he’s passed plenty of them quite quietly. We’ll go home by the high road. It’s safe enough. Oh, I’m *glad* you held on!” She was almost crying at thought of what might have been.

Winifred was trembling too, now that the danger was over.

“I think I’d better get down! I’m a wee bit shaky,” she said, with a queer laugh. “I knew we had to hold on somehow, so I just did it. What’s the matter, Timmy-Dimmy?”

“My Monk!” wailed Dimity, to whose plaint they had not listened. “My Monk’s lying in all ve dust!”—and Christina shuddered, and was unspeakably grateful that it was only Monk who was lying in the dust.

Then the others came up, Polly-Joan carrying Monkey, and none of them clearly realising what the danger had been.

“Did he bolt with you, Win? The stupid beast, to be frightened of a motor,” cried Billy.

“And when there were two of you on his back!” said Polly-Joan.

“Free! My dear, dear Monk!” and Dimity hugged her dusty darling. “We di’n’t awful much like falling off ve horse, an’ lying in ve dust, did we, dear? We were ’fraid, we were, an’ we’re only free——”

“Good thing you stuck on, Win. *I* thought we’d find you both sitting in the road. Why am I a little donkey?” Taffy demanded of Christina.

“You should ride astride, like Auntie Chris,” suggested Billy. “It’s much easier to stick on that way. Besides, it’s the proper way to ride.”

“’Tisn’t the proper way for Win!” cried Polly-Joan instantly.

“There! She’s at it again! She’s contradicted every single thing I’ve said to-day!”

“Well, look at the things you’ve been saying!”

Winifred looked at Christina. “Will you help me down? They don’t understand,” she said, under her breath. “Say no more about it, please. I wouldn’t like them to be nervous of either horses or motors.”

The boys and Polly-Joan clamoured for a ride, but Winifred said quickly:

“I’m sure Christina wants to ride herself now, and it’s her horse, you know.”

So Christina, with Dimity and her monkey held firmly before her, rode in state down into Llanystumdwy and across the bridge.

The boys were fascinated by the river, and anxious to climb down the bank. With some difficulty they were coaxed on and up the lane to Rhianfa.

“How jolly!” said Polly-Joan, as they entered.

“What a lovely house!” said Winifred.

“Monk an’ me like it jus’ awful much,” murmured Dimity.

“Jolly ripping! I say, where’s the peacock?” cried Billy.

“We’ll look for him! Come on, Billy!”

The gray stone house was hung with bright green creepers and covered with ivy. The lower windows opened on to the lawn, and all around were shady old trees, with noisy rooks among their branches. A stream from the hill behind ran along the side of the lawn, in haste to find the river, and from among the trees came the steady splash of a hidden waterfall.

Myfanwy was not in the garden, and Davy was nowhere to be seen, so Christina told Billy to ring the bell.

“I haven’t seen Lazy Bones since Monday night. I don’t believe he’s been at school. I waited ever so long for him yesterday, but he never turned up. Of course, he’s often late, but I don’t really think he was there at all. I do wonder what their ‘business’ was! But that’s the kind of question you mayn’t ask.”

“Why not?” asked Taffy.

Then the maid opened the door, and told them that Miss Myfanwy was engaged on business—Master Davy also—and that she therefore begged them to excuse her, but hoped that they would wait awhile in the garden and cut themselves some flowers before they went.

"Some flowers wiv little wee bonnets on for Monk an' me?" asked Dimity, from her place on Shenkin's back.

"Perhaps if we wait awhile they'll finish their business," Christina said, frowning in puzzled surprise.

"I do wonder what it means!" she said, as she led them through the garden. "I hope nothing's wrong. I don't like business, especially when it's mysterious, like this."

She led them out on to the lawn. Here were Myfanwy's sweet peas, in long sunny beds, arranged in great clumps according to colour, the white, and cream, and dark varieties placed carefully between the various pinks and reds and blues. Winifred cried out in delight, and Polly-Joan in wonder. The boys, after a glance, slipped away to look for fish in the stream, but Dimity cried eagerly:

"Me and Monk would like some more flowers in wee little pink bonnets!" and they found "Red Riding Hood" to satisfy her.

Christina introduced them to "King George" and "Queen Mary," all the Countesses and a Duke or two, Lady This and Lady That.

"Some day Myfanwy will discover a new kind, a deep golden yellow, or perhaps a green, and it will be called after her," she said.

"I hope they won't give it the whole of her dreadful name."

"Myfanwy Gwenllian Olwen Eluned! It would need something very very fine for a name like that. A giant white, perhaps, bigger than has ever been seen yet. But I do wish I knew if anything's the matter!" she said anxiously, as they wandered up and down, choosing and cutting a flower here and there. "Perhaps if we wait a while——"

A piercing screech from among the trees cut her short. Winifred and Polly-Joan turned to her in startled dismay, and Dimity fled to get behind her sisters.

"Ve screechy! It's in vis garden too! Oh, Winifred, we don't like screechies in gardens! We're 'fraid, Winifred, Monk an' me, an' we're only——"

"It's only the peacock," Christina said hastily. "I expect the boys are teasing him."

The bird came running out of the bushes, with Billy and Taffy in close pursuit, and she sprang to check them.

"Boys! You really mustn't! Myfanwy would be very angry. She's as fond of him as—as I am of dear Bill. Taffy, leave him alone! Billy, come back!"

"Make him put out his tail, then!" panted Billy, but the bird had made good his escape in among the trees again, and she managed to keep them from following.

"Now, look here!" said Billy, struggling with a problem. "It was a peacock screeched in our garden the other day. I told you it was some kind of bird, and you all laughed at me, so now perhaps you're sorry! It was the very same noise as that beast made when Taff scared it just now and made it squawk. So there must be a peacock in our garden too. But we've never seen one. Is there one?" he asked, turning to Christina.

"Not that I know of. I've never seen or heard one there."

"We all heard it," Billy persisted, "and they heard it on Sunday night too."

"Yes! My dear Monk did hear it, an' was 'fraid, an' me an' Taffy too——"

"We'll have a hunt for it to-morrow," Billy said decidedly. "It would be ripping to have a peacock of our own, and we all heard it, so it must be there."

"Let me know if you find it. Now come and see Davy's Jenkin and Myfanwy's Sally," said Christina, to change the subject. "And then, if Davy is still busy, we had better go home. I wish I knew what's up!"

"P'raps their rich uncle in Australia's died and left them a fortune," suggested Polly-Joan.

"We'll hope so. But they don't want a fortune. They've got one already. I *wish* I knew!" and she delayed the start for home as long as Dimity's presence and the approach of sunset made advisable, hoping all the time that Davy would appear with some explanation to ease her anxiety.

"I think it's time Monkey went home to bed," said Winifred at last, and Christina sighed.

"Yes, we'd better go. I was hoping Davy would come out. But most likely he'll come over to see me soon. If he doesn't, I shall *know* there's something wrong."

She was anxious and silent as she led them down to the village and across the bridge. There she insisted on turning off to the left and leading Shenkin up the steep lane to the higher road, so that there should be no more danger from motors.

The high road from Llanystumdwy was narrow and stony, with ruts and ridges, and thick hedges of bramble and rose, heather and gorse. Everywhere, in every crack and cranny, were ferns of many kinds, and over the hedges were glimpses of the western heads and islands and the blue eastern heights, or, to the north, Yr Eifl and the Nevin crags, and the hills beyond the Pennant valley.

"I like this! We're so high up!" said Polly-Joan.

"And safe from motors!" smiled Winifred.

"I don't! It's so slack. The low road's more exciting. There are more people, and the buses passing, and—and runaway ponies to be stopped, and heaps of fun," cried Billy.

"A lot of stopping you did!" scoffed Polly-Joan.

"I say, just look at the rooks in that field! They're holding a Mothers' Meeting, I do believe!" cried Winifred, and Taffy rushed to climb a gate and disturb the party.

"I like it up here much better than on the low road," said Winifred, pausing to look round. "It's beautiful. Fancy having lived here all your life! I should think it's easy to be good, living away in a lovely place like this, where it's all so quiet and everything is so wonderful," and she gazed at the long shadows on the fields, the golden evening light, and the wide blue sky and sea.

"Me an' dear Monk like it jus' awful much," murmured Dimity sleepily, from her perch on Shenkin's back, and nestled cosily against Christina's arm.

Christina had reddened consciously.

"I don't think being good depends on the place you're in. It's just what you are in yourself," she said awkwardly, realising that in the words she condemned herself.

"But I think it ought to be easier in a place like this, with so much sky and sea, and the hills all round! I don't know why. I can't explain it. But they make me feel good, somehow."

"I felt like that one summer. When the Jackanories were only two, we all went over to Porthdynlleyn, away out there," with a nod towards Madryn and Bodvean behind, "and we lived in a cottage right on the sand, with the cliff behind and the sea coming close to the door, and the Rivals—those hills over there—standing in the sea straight in front across the bay, and not a sound anywhere but the waves on the sands and rocks. And when I first saw it all, I remember saying to myself, 'Now I will be really good here. I simply must.' But"—she shrugged her shoulders—"it wasn't enough. I remember I slapped the Jackanories the very next morning. Beautiful places aren't enough to make you good. You want something more, though I don't know just what it is. But it's something inside, not outside."

She reddened uneasily again, and would have said no more, but Winifred was eager to justify her position.

“But outside things may surely help! Those mountains make me think. I can’t help it, they’re so wonderful. So does the sea.”

“Oh, well, we’re used to them. Perhaps you aren’t. Don’t you have sea and hills at home?”

“The hills are away in the distance, and there’s no sea. Of course, we have been down to the coast for holidays, but not to live. I’ve always wanted to live with the mountains for a time! It’s so different, you see. We have railways everywhere, and smoke, and dirt, and streets, and shops, and electric trams——”

“You should see our trams!” cried Taffy, racing after them from the gate. “Up every street, and scooting round every corner, and going every way at once, all ringing their bells—they’re ripping! The finest cars in the world! You have to keep a jolly good look-out or they’ll run you down. Haven’t you any here at all?”

“There’s a tramway out at Pwllheli,” Christina said doubtfully.

“Let’s go one day! It would be like home.”

“We’ll see. In the meantime, Dimity’s fast asleep, and this is where we turn down for Bryntirion.”

CHAPTER XI.

WINIFRED CALLS A COUNCIL.

"I don't understand!" said Christina resentfully. "I don't see why! It's mean!"

It was very early the next morning. The Dolls' House was still asleep, but Christina had crept out for an early bathe. In dressing-gown and slippers, she had made her way down to the sands by the well-trodden path through the gorse and sandhills, and had climbed the hill some time later dressed for school, with damp hair and rather disappointed face, having found bathing alone an unsatisfactory business. Davy had not turned up for several mornings now, and she missed him every time.

But it was not Davy's mysterious behaviour which she did not understand, as she sat on the front steps waiting for the family to wake. That had puzzled her, certainly, but she was not thinking of him at the moment.

She had gone quietly into the kitchen to find the cats, but they had looked up at her with such sleepy, reproachful eyes, so evidently considering it still the middle of the night, that she had kissed all three, dear Bill, dainty Mary, and the baby Princess Elizabeth, and had left them to sleep in peace till Cook came down. However, dear Bill, having been thus disturbed, had followed her presently, and had sat down beside her for his morning toilet.

"I don't understand!" Christina said again, in the same injured tone. "It's very mean! I don't see why! It isn't fair!"

She had remembered, as she sat there thinking, that she had been kept awake ever so long last night by that same troublesome It which had annoyed her before. Why could she not forget that silly letter? Why should she worry over that affair of so many weeks ago? Why would It not consent to be buried and forgotten?

"Is it because I'm getting to know them better? But what has that to do with It? What does it matter whether I know them or not? Is It going to worry me more and more the better I know them? In that case I won't go to see them again in a hurry. But I don't see why It should. Won't I be able to forget It all the time they're here? But that's mean! I've tried to make up for It. I've let them ride Shenkin. I've taken them out with me. I've done my best. Is it all no good? Can't I make up for It in any way?"

"I told you the way," a far-off Voice seemed to answer, but she would not listen.

But she was greatly puzzled. Because she had been more friendly with the "red children"—because Dimity had fallen asleep in her arms on Shenkin's back, and had felt so cosy and so much at home there—because of that terrible moment when she had feared to find Winifred or Dimity lying in the road—because of these things was she to lie awake at night, tormented by the thought of the wrong she had done them, that ugly It?

She half decided to see less of them in the future, but the resolution was soon broken, for on Saturday morning she, and the white jersey and the brown breeches, and Shenkin, turned up at Bryntirion, and found the "red children" in the garden.

Winifred, Taffy, Dimity, and Monk were on the lawn near the Ivy Patch. Winifred was conducting a school, and the three scholars were seated in order before her on the bench. Her questions had a severely moral tone, and evidently referred to lectures already given.

"Taffy, describe the correct way to treat peacocks and other tame animals, such as cats, instead of pulling their tails!"

"Pull their ears!" giggled Taffy. "Or their feet! Pull something anyway!"

"Disgraceful! Go bottom, sir, at once!" and Taffy chuckled, and seated himself by Monkey.

"Dimity, define the proper distance which should elapse when a person has passed you in the street, before it is safe to make personal remarks!"

Dimity, very solemn-faced and earnest, opened her fat little arms to their widest, and, with eyes fixed seriously on Winifred, answered anxiously:

"As long as me—all vat much—free, five times over. Or"—in the tone of one reciting a lesson learned by rote—"it is ev-en bet-ter, and much more po-lite, not to make personal remarks at all!"

"Very good! Very good indeed——"

"O-o-oh! Oh, Taffy, you horrid! Winifred, we don't like Taff one bit, Monk an' me! He's pulled our tail! Our poor tail!" as Taffy, by a dexterous tug at Monkey's ragged tail, brought her darling to the ground.

"Was only pract'sing my lesson," he argued.

Then he saw Christina crossing the lawn, and ran to her eagerly.

"I say, you are a brick! Come an' tell us what to do now! Uncle John's gone out for all day, so we can't ask him anything, and Winifred won't——"

"And where are the others?"

"Oh, Polly-Joan's bowling leg-breaks to Bill behind the summer-house. They wanted me to field, but it was too slow, so I came to find the girls," said Taffy, rather ashamed of being caught at such a feminine game as "school."

"I want to consult you," said Christina to Winifred, and sat down on the bench and lifted Dimity on her knee. "Well, Timmy-Dimmy, do you and Monk like your old Auntie Chris jus' awful much? Do you, now?"

"Yes, jus' awful much," murmured Dimity, with a recurring touch of shyness, and Winifred sat down on the grass.

"What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"It's Davy," said Christina, knitting her brows in distress. "He's always been my best friend, and told me everything, and now something's happened to him."

"Oh? I'm very sorry."

"I don't know what it is, and that's the worst of it," Christina said, her forehead wrinkling up still more. "You remember how they had to go home on Monday night because of 'business!' And how on Wednesday they were engaged with 'business,' and couldn't come out to speak to us? Well, it's getting worse and worse. I haven't seen Davy all week! He hadn't been at school, or else he's raced home before I could catch him. He hasn't come to bathe, or anything. I haven't heard a word from him. But—and this is the worst thing of all!—yesterday afternoon while I was away at school, he and Myfanwy rode over to the Dolls' House to see Marion, and to talk 'business' with her! She won't tell me what it's all about, and they wouldn't wait to tea, so I never saw them! Isn't it too bad? I can't make it out at all. So directly after breakfast this morning, I rode over to Rhianfa to ask Davy straight out what he meant by it, and he was out, and so was Myfanwy! *Out!* They'd gone out on purpose, because they knew I'd come. They hadn't said where they were going, or when they'd be back, but the maid thought they might have gone into Portmadoc on 'business,' as they have had to do two or three times this week! Always 'business,' and they don't want me to know what it means,

although they can talk it over with Marion! Don't you think it's a shame? I'm dreadfully bothered about it. I'm sure there's something wrong."

"Perhaps it's something pleasant, and they want to be sure about it before they tell people."

"But I'm not 'people'! They ought to tell me! I don't believe it's anything good. Davy would have told me. It's something dreadful, and I want to know, and don't want to know, both at once."

"I do hope it's nothing bad! I liked Davy. We all did, though we only saw him for about half-an-hour. Dimity keeps talking about him——"

"Me an' dear Monk liked your Taffy-boy jus' awful much," murmured Dimity shyly. "Wish he'd come to see us 'gain."

"Till you know if there's anything wrong, it doesn't seem any good worrying about it, does it? Won't you stay and play with us, then you won't be thinking about it all the time?" Winifred suggested.

"That's what I thought myself, and that's why I came," Christina said candidly. "It's a holiday, and I've done my home work. Couldn't we have a good time somehow? I've a plan,"—and she looked at Taffy, who turned eagerly.

She laughed. "Let's all go over to Pwllheli. It's the next station—the next that counts, anyway—the end of the railway, you know. I've plenty of money. You're mostly half tickets, anyway. We'll walk through the town, and then go down to the tram I told you about, and have a ride. Lunch at Llanbedrog, and a game in the gardens there, and home in time for tea. It's beautiful," she said, turning to Winifred. "You'll like it. The little bay is lovely—such trees, and such quiet water, and such a pretty lane! And the view from the cliffs, across the fields to Madryn, and towards Nevin, and down on Abersoch, and away out over the sea and the islands, is grand. You'll come, won't you?"

"I'd love to," Winifred said doubtfully, "but——"

"Winifred! Oh, Win, don't be mean! Just think how ripping it would be! And it's so slow here!" begged Taffy. Then, in sudden dismay, "Oh, Winifred, you surely don't mean——"

"Call the others, and we'll have a Council," Winifred said sharply, and Christina listened in amazement, but soon learned to understand. She did not yet know all about her nephews and nieces, it appeared.

Taffy ran off, calling, "Billy! Polly-Joan! Win wants you. Council! Buck up, do. *She's* here!"

Billy and Polly-Joan came hurrying up, leg-breaks forgotten at once, bat and ball in hand. They nodded to "Auntie"—then, with Taffy, seated themselves on the grass in a ring. Dimity and Monk slipped down from Christina's lap and took their places in the circle, wide-eyed and expectant.

"Go it, Win!" said Billy, "We're ready."

"What's up, Win?" asked Polly-Joan curiously.

"Someth'n jolly ripping—someth'n dreadfully awful," said Taffy, with a wriggle of excitement.

Winifred, standing in her place, explained.

"Aunt Christina has given us a very kind invitation! She wants us to go with her by train to—to a place I can't pronounce," and she turned apologetically to Christina, who supplied the name, while the others laughed. "Then we'd go into the town, and——"

“An’ go in the tram, an’ see if it’s like ours at home, an’ have a ride to some gardens, an’ have lunch an’ games!” cried Taffy eagerly, unable to keep silence any longer. “It would be just ripping, and—and——”

“But I’m thinking about Uncle John,” Winifred explained. “I want you all to help me think. I’d like to go just dreadfully, and I don’t want to say we can’t. I know you’d all like to go too, and I don’t want to stop you. But I don’t know what to say.”

“I’ll go and ask him!” cried the ever-ready Billy, and Polly-Joan turned upon him instantly.

“You know he’s out, and won’t be back till late! You are a stupid, Billy! You’ve always something to say before any one else, but it’s never any good. Why don’t you *sometimes* think before you speak?”

“I forgot,” Billy admitted limply.

“You always do forget. D’you really think he’d mind, Winifred? If we went with *her*? She’s older——”

“You know what he said at breakfast this morning. You’d better tell me what you think, and we’ll all help to decide. I don’t like to say no for us all.”

Christina leant forward.

“But if he’s away for the day, that means he’s gone up to the mines at Blaenau, and won’t be back till night. Why not come with me, and say nothing about it? I don’t really think he’d mind, you know, but in any case he won’t need to know anything about it. You’ll be home long before he will, and no one will tell. If I say to the servants not to mention that you weren’t in for lunch, it will be all right, and he’ll be none the wiser. We’ll have a jolly time, and I know you’ll all enjoy it.”

They looked at her, and then at one another, but no one spoke. Polly-Joan and Taffy looked startled. Dimity did not understand, so hugged Monk and gazed at her across his body. Billy frowned and looked at Winifred, and at last Winifred spoke:

“We couldn’t do that. Thank you very much, but we really couldn’t.”

“Why not? He’d never know.”

“That’s why.”

“I don’t understand,” said Christina, puzzled.

“It wouldn’t be honest. It wouldn’t be straight. We don’t do things we’d want to hide.”

“Oh!” To Christina, who had always cheerfully kept her own counsel about doubtful matters, this was something new. “But I don’t think he’d really mind, you know,” she argued. “He knows I always go to places alone.”

“Yes, but he talked to us yesterday, and again this morning. He said he felt responsible for us, because Mother and Father had trusted him, and they’re so far away, and so he couldn’t let us do some things because he’d be anxious about us all the time. I don’t believe he’d let us go with you. That’s why I couldn’t say yes at once. What do you think, Billy? Polly-Joan?”

“Billy will go, I’m sure. I know he wants to. And I’m quite certain Taffy will,” Christina said to herself.

But Billy, and even Taffy, had a very distinct code of honour, and honesty in a matter such as this was its first principle. While Polly-Joan stared gloomily down at the grass, Billy said very definitely:

“He’d say no. It would be jolly fine to go, but—I know he’d say no. If I said anything else, I’d be a—a—a jolly bad lot.”

“You’d be a rotter, and I’d be another,” said Polly-Joan. “We won’t either of us be rotters, Bill. He’d say no, Winifred.”

"You wouldn't be Billy Orr if you said no when you meant yes," Winifred said gravely. "I feel just that way too, Polly-Joan. It would be very jolly, and we'll ask if we may go another day, but we can't go to-day, after what he said this morning, and we can't go and then try to keep it secret."

"Oh, we're not going to begin *that*!" Billy's tone of contempt was very enlightening to Christina. "We can't do what isn't straight. Hiding things is a caddish trick."

"Shabby mean!" said Polly-Joan, a deep note of regret in her voice, however.

"Awfully horrid! But—but—I did want to see if the trams were like ours at home!" wailed Taffy, keenly disappointed.

Christina, disappointed also, seized her chance.

"You don't know how jolly it would be! The gardens at Glynweddw are beautiful"—and in their disappointment they let the extraordinary name pass without comment—"and the house is simply lovely. There's a curious organ-musical-box in the hall, and a cage of live monkeys in the garden——"

"Monks? Real live monks?" cried Dimity, awaking suddenly to an interest in the conversation. "We would like to see real live monks jus' awful much, my dear Monk an' me——"

"But you wouldn't like to go without me and Billy and Taffy and Polly-Joan, would you, Dimity?"

"N-no, not awful much," and she hugged her darling and gazed at Winifred doubtfully.

"There's a dogs' cemetery in the gardens," Christina went on, "and the tram is such fun, Taffy! I know you'd like it. It runs right along the sand at the top of the shore, through the sandhills, and close to the sea nearly all the way. You could sit in the front seat, just behind the pony——"

"Pony?" There was unutterable scorn in Taffy's tone. "D'you mean to say it's a *horse* tram?"

"Why, of course! What did you expect?"

"Have you never seen an electric tram?" gasped Taffy, staring incredulously.

"Well, you are a country cousin!" jeered Billy. "Pony! Does the pony pull the tram, or does it push behind? Or perhaps it rides inside?"

Christina laughed. "Well, they're very nice trams, and very convenient. We'd grumble if we had to walk all the way. It's a good four miles."

The boys went off into a peal of laughter at thought of a tramway system only four miles long, but Christina, knowing nothing of the magnificent network of lines to which they were accustomed, went on sturdily:

"I've seen electric cars in Liverpool, of course, but there's something about this dear little tram along the beach that I like better than any of your noisy rattling things. The pony just jogs along, and if you want to pick a sea-poppy or some blackberries, you can easily catch up again."

The boys shouted, and the girls laughed out, but she continued:

"You have plenty of time to look about you, and if it rains they put a cover on——"

"Not really?" asked Winifred, for the others were speechless.

"Certainly! And I've been on that tram with several boys, and every one of them enjoyed it, and wanted to jump down when we came to the double line and put the rails right, so that we'd run off into the side track safely."

This was the finishing touch.

"D'you honestly mean to say they change the points *by hand*?" Billy managed to ask, while Taffy rolled on the grass at the thought.

"Of course. The conductor jumps down and runs along. And I hope they'll never change it either. Once when I was there we saw some mushrooms in a field, and they stopped to let us pick them! It's the sweetest little tramway in the world, and I believe you'll all fall in love with it when you see it. Now, aren't you coming with me to-day?"

They grew sober again. The thought of such an unique tram was very alluring, and the temptation was strong. Taffy looked imploringly at the others, but knew better than to go against their decision.

"It's very very good of you, but we really can't. It would seem like doing it behind Uncle John's back, and none of us could stand that," Winifred said decisively. "But it sounds very jolly, and another time we'd love to go, if he says yes and if you'll ask us again."

"But I do want to see that tram, with the lid to put on when it rains! It would be awfully ripping!" wailed Taffy, and it seemed to the others that he was wavering.

"Taffy Orr, if you ever dream of doing anything we've decided in Council not to do, I'll— I'll—jump out on you in the dark and make you scream!"

"I won't! Really, I won't! I won't even dream it! Oh, Billy, please don't!"

Judging from Taffy's tone of distress, the apparently simple threat held for him memories of past terrors which had considerable influence with him. Winifred comforted him quickly.

"He won't need to, if you're always honest about things, and do nothing you'd be ashamed to have everybody know, Taffy. But you must be very careful always to do what's straight. You aren't offended, are you?" she asked anxiously of Christina.

"Oh no, I don't think so! But I wish you would come. We could have such a jolly day."

"Me an' Monk would like to see real live monks jus' awful much!" said Dimity wistfully. "An' ve baby tram, too."

"But we can't be shabby rotters. We never have been, and we're not going to begin now," said Polly-Joan. "Come on, Billy! I go in now, and we'll see if your balls break as well as mine did," and Christina went thoughtfully homewards, considering the new doctrines she had heard that day, and reluctantly applying them to her own past conduct.

She was thinking so deeply that she let Shenkin take his own way, and paid no attention to him. But by this time he knew well enough that he must turn off the main road by the tennis courts, and take the lane down to the cliffs, to lessen the danger of possible encounters with the hated motors.

"One thing's quite certain!" she said to herself, as he carried her through the sleepy gray square of the old town, just below the Castle walls, and so out to the broad road round the East Bay. "They must never on any account know anything about that letter—*It*! I can just imagine—well, I can't quite imagine what they'd say! But I'd rather not try. I hope they'll never know anything at all about it. I'll take very good care they don't. Did something tell me I ought to confess it to them? *Confess*? And tell everybody? It would be too dreadful for words! I never will! How they'd hate me! They'd—they'd call me a rotter, and a bad lot, and all kinds of horrible things."

It was not pleasant to think of. She remembered Billy's frank scorn of deceit—"Oh, we're not going to begin *that*!"—and could only hope that they would never know.

"I'll take very good care they don't!" she said again, but felt restless and uneasy, and set Shenkin to a gallop as soon as they reached the quiet road.

But she could not ride fast enough to escape from It.

CHAPTER XII.

CHRISTINA IS CROSS.

"Davy! Oh, I am so glad to see you!" cried Christina. "Now sit down and tell me all about it!"

She had resigned herself to a lonely Sunday afternoon on the sands, with a book and a basket of gooseberries—little yellow sweet ones, freshly gathered from the garden. It had been Davy's custom to bring his book and join her there on Sundays, unless she happened to be spending the afternoon with him and Myfanwy at Rhianfa. But she had not expected to see him to-day.

He sat down beside her, in front of the little tent, and she glanced at him anxiously, and in his face, graver than usual and rather troubled, found instant confirmation of her fears. He said nothing, and she cried sharply:

"Davy, what's wrong? What is it? Davy, it's just mean of you to have kept it secret from me like this. Now I want to know everything, and you're to tell me quick. I've been dreadfully worried about you all week."

Davy helped himself to a handful of gooseberries, and ate them slowly before answering. She grew impatient.

"Buck up, Lazy Bones! I'm aching to hear all about it."

He threw away the stalk of the last berry, and said slowly:

"Don't be mad, Chris, but I can't tell you what's up. Myfanwy says——"

"Can't tell me? But you must! I'll make you! Davy, I want to know just dreadfully, and I won't speak of it to a single soul, if you don't want me to, but I simply must know what's the matter——"

"Well, I can't tell you. I promised Myfanwy. She said, 'Wait a day or two longer,' so you'll just have to have patience, Chris. I don't want to talk about it, anyway. I'm sick of the whole business. Let's have a jolly afternoon like we used to——"

But Christina would not be put off so.

"You *shall* tell me all about it! I've been wanting to get hold of you all week to ask what's wrong, and you've been avoiding me purposely, you know you have, and I think it's been very mean of you. Now that you're here, you shan't go till you've told me everything."

"I tell you, Chris, I promised Myfanwy——"

"Bother Myfanwy! She had no right to make you promise. Besides, she needn't know——"

Davy gave her such a quick wounded look that she stopped. She had never said such a thing to him before. He looked at her as she knew Billy Orr would have looked, and Billy's words came back to her in that frankly scornful tone—"Oh, we aren't going to begin *that*! We can't do what isn't straight! Hiding things is a caddish trick."

Her eyes fell before Davy's hurt look of surprise, and she grew angry with herself, and vented it on him.

"Well, you can tell Myfanwy I made you break your promise, if you like," she said crossly; "but you're going to tell me about it, that's all! I won't give you any peace till you do, so there! I *will* know what's the matter! I *won't* be treated like a baby and kept in the dark. You've told Marion! Why can't you tell me too?"

"Myfanwy had to consult Mr. and Mrs. Clevelly, because we have no one else to go to," Davy explained. "But we haven't spoken about it to any one except them, and I can't tell you without Myfanwy's leave, Chris, though I'd like to. But Myfanwy and I must stick together —" he stopped abruptly, thinking more than he could at present say. "I can't break my word to Myfanwy."

"Then you can just go away home again. I'm not going to talk about other things, if you won't tell me the one thing I want to know."

"Don't be shabby, Chris. You know I can't help it——"

"Will you tell me, then?"

"Certainly not!" said Davy proudly, growing angry also.

"Then you'd better go away."

"I think perhaps I had. . . . Look here, Chris, I'd be awfully sorry to quarrel just now. We've had a hateful week of worry. I came hoping for a chat like old times."

It seemed to Christina that he was going to yield after all. Davy had always given in to her. A little show of firmness now and she would have her own way, as she had always done before.

"Well, you know how to get it," she said obstinately. "I don't want you here if there has to be a secret between us."

To her dismay he took her at her word.

"Then I'd better go home. I'm sorry. I'd tell you if I could, Chris, but I can't break my word to Myfanwy. Good-bye!" and he lifted his cap very politely, and walked away through the sandhills.

Christina gasped. But Davy never turned, and she was too proud to call him back and surrender. He disappeared over the brow of the hill, and she said to herself that she hoped he would be sorry for this, and turned to her book and her gooseberries again.

But the book no longer interested her. The story was stupid. The people in it were no longer alive, but were only "people in a book." The gooseberries were tasteless. She left them lying in the tent, and went restlessly outside to walk along the sands, or wander down to the sea, or scramble over the rocks, aimless, discontented, and at last repentant.

If Davy had come back now, she would have modified her demands considerably. She would even have said she was glad to see him. But Davy did not come back, and at last she went up the hill to the Dolls' House, feeling that the afternoon had been spoiled, fully conscious that it had been her own fault, and wondering uneasily how soon Davy would forget and be friends again. They had never quarrelled before, so she did not know whether it would be serious or not.

After some anxious thought, and a severe struggle with her pride, she carried ink and pen and writing-pad out to the sunny front steps, and, sitting there, began to write a letter of apology, telling Davy she was sorry and asking him to come again to see her soon.

Dear Bill came to keep her company, but she feared his tail might endanger the inkpot, and a blue-black stain on the white step would not have looked nice. So she slapped him gently across the ears, which was the thing he most objected to, and he spat and swore and retreated to the window-sill, the picture of offended dignity. Dainty Mary came also to rub herself against the writing-pad by way of asking for sympathy, or perhaps to show affection, but this was disturbing, so Christina provided her with an old garden hat to sit on, and she sat clawing it patiently in blissful satisfaction, eyes half shut in the sunshine. Christina lectured her

severely on the duties of a mother and the sufferings of a deserted infant in the back kitchen, but Mary had forgotten Elizabeth and wanted only sunshine and human companionship.

The letter was difficult to write. Christina sat biting her pen and wondering what to say.

Suddenly there appeared outside the little white gate one of the grooms from Bryntirion, bringing a letter from old Mr. Clevelly. She rose and went to take it, supposing it to be some message for Harry. But the letter was for herself, so in some surprise she sat down on the step to read it.

Her eyes grew wide in dismay.

“What—a ridiculous—idea!” she said slowly at last. “I won’t! Of course I won’t! It would be horrid! But—what a dreadful idea!”

CHAPTER XIII. DAVY EXPLAINS.

The idea might not have seemed so very dreadful to any one else. It might not even have seemed ridiculous. But to Christina it was both.

The letter told of Mr. Clevelly's nervous anxiety over the children in his care, and his fear for them whenever they were out of his sight or outside the Bryntirion garden. He had heard, it appeared, of the incident on the Llanystumdwy road, and had seen as clearly as Christina what might have been the result of Shenkin's fright. He was an old man, and over-nervous, but the Criccieth roads were always busy with motorists on their way to Snowdon, and he had taken alarm. Yet he could not confine the children altogether to the garden. Already Billy and Taffy were grumbling that it was "slow" and "slack" to play there all the time. And so he made his suggestion. Would Christina come and live at Bryntirion while the visitors remained there, and help to keep them happy and amused, and, when they went out for walks, see that they came home again safely?

Only to go and live at Bryntirion! Only to leave her loved Dolls' House—and the Jackanories, and Marion, and Harry—and dear Bill, and Mary, and baby Elizabeth, and perhaps even Shenkin! Only to live in that gloomy old house, "that horrid, hateful house," she said to herself, quite unnecessarily. Only to be with those children all day and every day, and never be able to get away from them! Of course, she liked them well enough, but she did not want to be tied to them all the time. To go and play nursemaid for three months! To give up doing just whatever she liked, as she always did in the Dolls' House! To have to think, always and in everything, of five children younger than herself!

"It's just exactly and precisely what I tried to get out of, when I first heard they were coming," she thought gloomily. "Only now it's worse, for I'm to go there, instead of them coming here. That's the only difference. It doesn't seem to me I did much good! It's a horrid house to go to,—after living here!" she added quickly, remembering that she herself had sent her nephews and nieces to the horrid house. "I should miss all this dreadfully," with a glance at the sunny garden, and the open, breezy hillside beyond, with sheets of glowing gold on the bushes, and the larks chorusing joyously overhead, and the yellow sands and breaking sea away below. "The sun never gets in to Bryntirion, because of all those great trees round it, and it's always dark and gloomy. There's no air—not like this, anyway," sniffing the gorse-laden mountain wind, "and you can't even see the hills! And I should miss every one so dreadfully. Dear Billy Doodle, you don't want your old friend to go away and leave you, do you, darling? I'm sure you don't, pretty! Nor Miss Mary, neither. They'd miss me, too. Oh, I couldn't stand it—I really couldn't! I'll just say no, I can't possibly! Uncle John's very good. I know he'll say no more about it. I'd better write and say no at once."

But somehow she did not write to Mr. Clevelly that night, and when she posted her letter of apology to Davy, it went in to Criccieth alone. And somehow, when she showed her uncle's letter to Marion, it was not with the decisive answer she had intended, but with the remark, "I don't want to go one bit, but I'll take a day or two to think it over."

And somehow, when Marion remarked that the idea was a very good one, and would be a great help to the old man if it could be carried out, and probably also a great pleasure to the children, but that of course Christina must please herself in the matter, Christina, instead of

uttering some of those strong opinions on the subject, only said meekly, "I don't think I should like it, but I won't say no till I've thought about it a little."

She thought about it much. In fact, she could not stop thinking about it. Unwillingly she yielded several points, and found herself facing a problem.

The "red children" would certainly be pleased if she went to Bryntirion. She knew they liked her, and would like to have her with them all the time. That was one point. And another was that, in spite of all her efforts, she had been quite unable to stifle the memory of the wrong she had done to them and their mother before she had ever seen them. The thought of It came upon her continually. It tormented her at night. She could forget It during the day, while she was busy, but It pursued her all the time, and came upon her and caught her when she was alone. She had had many ugly encounters with her conscience, and so far had found it true that, in spite of all her efforts to show kindness to the "red children," in spite of her attempts to "make up for" the wrong she had done, she was still unable to forget.

She wanted to forget. She would have liked to undo the wrong. As that was impossible, she would have liked to atone for it somehow, and so had done her best to "make it up" to her nephews and nieces.

There lay the problem. Why had she failed? Why could she not atone for the wrong and forget it?

Perhaps she had not done enough. After all, she had only shown them some slight kindness. It was only very little things she had done, and things which had really cost her nothing.

Perhaps what was wanted was some big thing, something she would really care about, something which would mean some sacrifice—"like penance, like they used to wear hair shirts, and peas in their boots—something like that," she thought ruefully. "I don't want to wear sackcloth and ashes! But—but—perhaps I ought to go and live at Bryntirion!"

That was the thought which had occurred to her. Perhaps it was her duty to go. Perhaps it was her punishment. Perhaps, if she gave up her own way in this one big thing, when it would really cost her something, then perhaps It would be satisfied and would allow her to forget.

She did not go near Bryntirion while she was puzzling it out, and as she had heard nothing from Davy, she spent several very lonely days. She rode Shenkin out towards the Pennant valley or up towards Beddgelert or Maentwrog or Tan-y-bwlch, or built castles for the Jackanories on the Lonely Sands, or went for solitary bathes, which were more like solemn functions than the frolics they had once been. She was very lonely, and very puzzled, and very undecided what to do.

She was reluctant to face the "red children." She was not even very eager to see Davy, for she had a new fear that she would be shy in his presence. She felt uncomfortably as if she had lowered herself in their eyes by her suggestion of deceit, and could not forget Billy's scornful tone and Davy's look of surprise. She hoped they would have forgotten, but did not feel at all sure of it, and rather dreaded her next meeting with them.

She was still keenly curious as to the nature of the "business" which was occupying Davy so completely, and even keeping him away from school. He had admitted that they were in trouble, and she was deeply anxious. But Marion and Harry would tell her nothing without Myfanwy's leave, and though twice during the week a man rode over from Rhianfa with a note for Harry and a great bunch of sweet peas for Marion, there was no message for Christina and no explanation of the mystery.

All that week she kept away from Bryntirion, and avoided any meeting with the “red children.” Once or twice she saw the scarlet dresses and blazers on the sands or esplanade. Once she saw the little hill of Dinas dotted with red, as they played touch among its rocks, all shouting at once, till the fields and square below rang with the noise, and the girls’ faces were the colour of their tunics, and they sank down on the grass and ran their hands through their streaming fair hair to cool themselves, while the boys lay flat on the rocks and wished themselves in the sea away below. But she did not go near them, and by Saturday had not spoken to them for a week.

All week she had been fighting with herself. Bryntirion?—or the Dolls’ House? Her own way?—or still another attempt to atone for It? To that whisper of Conscience, that “making up for” It was no use, that nothing would be any use but confession and forgiveness, she was resolutely and absolutely deaf. The very idea was ridiculous, and not to be considered for a moment.

But by Saturday she grew tired of this state of indecision. The matter must be definitely settled. If she was going to Bryntirion, she had better go at once. She would make one more effort—one big effort—to atone for the wrong done to the “red children.” She would do something which would mean some sacrifice. She would go to Bryntirion. Then surely she would be able to forget, and It would be buried and done with.

But she said nothing to Marion yet.

“I’ll go on Monday. That will be time enough to tell any one,” she said to herself, and spent the Saturday on the sands with the Jackanories.

The Jackanories were unusually cross that day, and Marion wondered anxiously if they could have taken cold. Nora was peevish and fretful. Everything was wrong. The sand tickled. The sandflies were nasty. The wind was too cold. The sun was too hot. The sea was nasty. Her dinner was horrid. Jack was horrid. So was Auntie Chris. Her froat was bad—and at that well-known symptom they looked at one another anxiously, and inquired hastily if Jack’s chest was all right, or, as he put it, if his tummy was bad? But his tummy was all right, and they felt relieved. His froat was bad, too, however, and he looked red-eyed, as if he had been crying. Marion hurried them off to bed directly after tea, and Christina said to herself that if they were going to be ill she would certainly have to stay at home to help.

Next morning they both seemed afflicted with heavy colds, but, though they coughed a little, had none of the more serious symptoms so usual with them. Marion, much relieved, kept them in bed all day, and Christina went to church alone.

“I’ll come to-morrow after school,” she said briefly to her uncle, but feeling a little sore towards the “red children” for bringing this disagreeable necessity upon her, she still made no attempt to see them.

As she sat on the sand that afternoon enjoying the Sunday quietness—but it was always like Sunday on the Lonely Sands—she missed Davy sorely, and wondered if he had forgiven her yet, and when he would come to see her again, and what all the mysterious “business” was about. And suddenly Davy came quietly round the corner of the tent and dropped on the sand by her side.

“Oh, how you made me jump! Davy, I am so glad you’ve come! I was afraid to come to you for fear you didn’t want me. Davy, I’m so sorry——”

“That’s all right. But I was sorry, too, because—well, you’ll understand presently, Chris. I’ve come to tell you all about it. Myfanwy says she doesn’t mind now, but don’t talk about it to other people if you can help it. We don’t want outsiders gossiping.”

"I won't. You might know that much. Go on, Davy! I'm dying to hear."

"We're going away."

"Going—away!" she gasped. "But where? Why? When?"

"Now—some day this week. Because we must. Never mind where. We're—we're going to sell Rhianfa," he said, with difficulty.

She turned on him, incredulous amazement in her face. He tilted his slouch hat over his eyes and lay back on the sand, his hands clasped behind his head.

"Davy, what *do* you mean? What *has* happened? Oh, Davy, tell me quick!"

"There's not very much to tell. You know our father made his money in slate, like Mr. Clevelly and so many others, but not in quarrying, in export. When he'd made a good deal and wanted to retire, he formed the business into a company—the Rhianfa Slate Export Company, of Portmadoc—and because he was so well known and well thought of about here, lots of people took shares and put money into it. Of course, we had a good many shares, and Myfanwy and I have been getting a very decent income from it—in fact, we had more shares than any one else. Father put in as manager a fellow he knew and trusted, called Humphreys—not a Criccieth man, or it would probably have been Jones——"

"Davy, don't! Please don't make jokes! I know it's far too serious. Go on, please!"

"Sometimes a fellow makes jokes and laughs to keep from doing the other thing," said Davy, from under his hat. "Well, father trusted the fellow. Perhaps he made a mistake, as people do. Or perhaps the fellow couldn't stand being trusted. Anyway, after doing well enough for years—so far as we knew, at any rate—he bolted a fortnight ago, with all the funds he could get hold of. Don't know where he's gone. Argentine, I suppose. He was at Liverpool and away before we even heard of it. So you see——"

"You and Myfanwy won't have any money left?" said Christina, looking worried. "But you have the house, and it's worth a lot."

"It's not us," said Davy sharply. "It's the other people. Don't you see? We're all right. They're ruined. They put all they had into it, and they did it because it was our business. Now it's all gone. We can't pay them back. Don't you see?"

His voice was sharp with distress. Christina said quickly:

"But everybody will know it's not your fault. You had nothing to do with it. You can't help it in any way."

"There's one thing we can do, to save father's name and ours, and we're going to do it," Davy said, with sudden energy, sitting up and tilting back his hat. "Rhianfa *is* worth a lot. Then there are Sally and Jenkin and the other horses, and the cows and pigs, and the furniture and pictures are old and valuable. If we sell the lot, it will help—perhaps it will even cover the loss, since we won't be making any claim for our share. It may be possible to pay the shareholders back all the money they had put in. Then no one will be ruined."

Christina stared at him, aghast.

"But what about you and Myfanwy?"

"We're going away," Davy said, his face set resolutely. "We'll get on all right. Mr. Clevelly has been very good. He's going to give me a place in his office at the mines. I'm quite old enough to work. So I shall be living up at Blaenau. I'd rather have gone farther away, but Myfanwy wants me to take his offer, as he has been so kind."

Christina turned on him sharply.

"But—Davy! Why should you and Myfanwy be ruined, instead of the other people? It isn't fair! I'm sure it isn't necessary. No one could expect it. The house is yours, and you

ought to keep it. Why should you sell it and give the money to other people, that you know nothing about? Why *should* you? It isn't right."

"We know just this about them, that they trusted our father, and that's enough," Davy said doggedly. "You needn't argue about it, Chris. It's all fixed up now, and will be carried through as quickly as possible. It's no use talking. Other people have done that."

Christina turned on him quickly.

"What do Harry and Marion say about it?"

"They don't want us to sell the house," Davy said reluctantly. "They've said all that you want to say, and a good deal more. But it's no use. Myfanwy and I have talked it over, and we're going to do what we think right. I felt awfully bad about it at first, thinking of those other people—farmers, and shepherds, and shopkeepers, and sailors—all ruined through us, but when Myfanwy proposed this way out of it I felt better. So you needn't say any more, Chris. It's done with now."

"Don't you care about leaving Rhianfa?" cried Christina sharply. "And doesn't Myfanwy care? What about her garden? And don't you mind losing Jenkin? And—and everything?"

"It's like having all one's teeth pulled out at once," Davy said ruefully. "But we're getting used to it now. Yes, Myfanwy feels it, of course, but she's as set on it as I am—perhaps more. She suggested it. As soon as it's decided which day we're to go, she'll send you word, and you must come along and say good-bye."

"And—and where did you say she is going? I can't believe it yet. It seems as if it couldn't be true! Davy, we shall miss you both so dreadfully! It will be miserable without you coming round every day. I can't imagine Llanystumdwy without you and Myfanwy at Rhianfa. But you won't be so very far away, if you're going up to Blaenau. Will you like it, Davy?"

Davy shrugged his shoulders. "Doesn't matter much. I'll get on all right. I'm sorry to say good-bye to every one and everything, but that can't be helped. Neither Myfanwy nor I could have been comfortable to go on living in Rhianfa with everything we wanted, and know that all those people were ruined through us. . . . I don't like Blaenau. It's an ugly hole. But there are some jolly walks about. . . . I don't suppose I shall come down to Criccieth often. It costs money, and we're going to count our pennies for a while. . . . I've got my programme quite clear, you know! I'm going to work hard, and live quietly, and make a fortune for Myfanwy somehow——"

"And then you'll buy Rhianfa again, and we'll all be as happy as we used to be."

"Perhaps. Perhaps we'll go somewhere else. I've a fancy for a big house on the cliffs at Nevin. Mind you, Chris, I don't think the fortune will ever come! I don't quite see where it's to come from. But it's something to think about, and, anyway, I mean to make enough to keep Myfanwy comfortably."

"And she'll live with you up at Blaenau?"

"No, not at present. You see, Mr. Clevelly has been very good, and has helped us all he can. He has arranged that I shall live with one of his foremen, but they haven't room for Myfanwy, and it wouldn't be good enough for her, if they had. So she'll go somewhere else."

"Where do you think it will be? Near you? Or somewhere nearer us?"

"She hasn't quite fixed that up yet," Davy said evasively. "I say, Chris, couldn't we have a bathe? I know it's Sunday, but it's very hot, and I shan't get many more chances. Blaenau doesn't suggest bathes, somehow."

"It looks as if it had never had a bathe in its life—ugly, gray, dirty, slaty, towny place! You'll run away in a week, Davy."

“Shall I? We’ll see!” and he squared his shoulders resolutely. “I don’t take on jobs just to run away from them. I don’t feel particularly drawn to office work—especially in summer, and such a ripping summer, too, but I’m going to stick at it, and I’m going to get on. I’ll be the best boy they’ve ever had in that place. What about that bathe, Chris?”

“All right. Come along!” and they disappeared into the tent in search of towels.

“This is—perfection!” said Davy, as he lay full length in the shallow water. “I’ll remember this often, when I’m being roasted alive up there, and think of you splashing about and worrying over nothing in the world. Perhaps it will help me to cool off a little.”

“Thanks awfully, Chris!” he said earnestly, as they parted by the Dolls’ House. “It’s been jolly to have one more day together, for the last time. I shan’t forget it in a hurry.”

Christina reddened. “I am so sorry I was so hateful to you last week. You must have been worried over all this, and I didn’t understand, and behaved like a silly baby. I’m more sorry than I can say.”

“I was sorry to go away,” Davy said quickly, “for I knew that next time I came it would be to say good-bye. It would have been jolly to have one more chat, without thinking of worries. But I knew you didn’t understand.”

“I *am* sorry! It was just hateful of me to disappoint you.”

“I was sorry to make you mad with me, when we’ve got on so well all through. But I had to keep my word to Myfanwy. How’s Elizabeth?”

“Fine! She’s the sweetest one we’ve ever had. I can’t ask you in, for the Jackanories have dreadful colds, but——”

“That’s a pity, in this hot weather.”

“I don’t know how they caught them, but they’re both in bed. But I’ll see you again before you go, Davy?”

“Yes, you’ll have to come over to say good-bye to Myfanwy—and Jenkin, and Sally! But we shall go sometime this week.”

He waved his hand, and went off up the lane, and she leaned over the little gate to watch him as long as he was in sight.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE JACKANORIES HELPED.

"So to-day I'm to go to prison!" said Christina to herself as she rode to school next morning.

She had hoped that the Jackanories' bad colds might be made the excuse for changing her mind at the last moment, but Marion would not hear of it. The children were still sneezing and seemed feverish, but they had no sign of wheezing or chest trouble, and only a slight cough, and there was no reason why Christina should not go to Bryntirion as arranged. She could go there after morning school, and her bag would be sent during the afternoon with necessities and the latest news of the Jackanories.

So Christina rode to school in doubly low spirits. She looked on the time to be spent at Bryntirion as penance to be endured in expiation of It, and expected to be very dull and very homesick. And, behind all that, was the thought of Davy's coming departure and the loss of Myfanwy. Life without them would be very much poorer. She would miss them all the time.

To describe Bryntirion as "prison" was very ungrateful, of course. The house was certainly old and gloomy, and buried in trees, and in every way a change from the sunny, open freedom of the Dolls' House, but she had been happy enough there before the Dolls' House appeared. But Mr. Clevelly was fussy and particular, and inclined to be nervous of trifles, and he was certainly strict. Christina had had so much her own way for the last few years that she dreaded the return to his authority, and felt sure that she was "in for a bad time," as she put it.

But, after all, it was only for three months or so, and if it helped her to forget that troublesome matter in the past, it would be quite worth it. She did not like the feeling of shame and regret which had troubled her so much of late, and was honestly anxious to atone for her fault—but in her own way. There were some things, she said to herself, which no one could reasonably expect of her, and which she would never do.

The "red children" were not to go to school till they returned to Scotland. They were all well advanced, and would benefit by a little while of freedom. So they were in the garden when she reached Bryntirion at midday.

They were all gathered on the lawn. Billy was armed with a long rake and hoe, one resting on each shoulder, to his great discomfort but extreme importance. Taffy carried an empty watering-can, and beat it with the garden shears. Polly-Joan held the bat, grasping it like a club, and Winifred had a wicket in each hand. They were marching in procession, Billy leading the way, with Polly-Joan behind him, and Taffy bringing up the rear, close at Winifred's heels. In the middle of the line was Dimity, hugging Monk and carrying no weapon, but looking rather scared.

They were marching towards the Ivy Patch, when Christina and Shenkin appeared out of the dark avenue and rode up to the lawn. Billy promptly presented arms, then rested his weighty burdens on the grass as he demanded her name and business.

"Give the password!" cried Polly-Joan shrilly. "If you don't give the right one you can't come in!"

Winifred laughed, and Taffy, having stopped clashing his drum for a moment, began again, and beat a deafening tattoo with the shears.

"It's 'screechy'! That's the password!" he cried excitedly. "We're jus' going to hunt for it in there, where it screeched before, you know! We tried last week, but we cou'n't find it, so now we've got a drum to scare it out. Jus' listen!"

"Have you come to stop?" asked Winifred, when she could make herself heard, and stroked Shenkin's nose to show that she bore him no grudge. "Uncle John told us you were coming. It's very good of you."

"We wanted you to come jus' awful much, my dear Monk and me," murmured Dimity, with the returning touch of shyness with which she always greeted friends. "We don't much like screechies, Auntie Chris."

"Do you think you'll find him, Billy?"

"Well, he must have been there, mustn't he? We all heard him plain enough."

"If you catch him, you bring him to me. I'd like to see him," said Christina, and the procession marched in solemn state towards the Ivy Patch, to the clashing of Taffy's drum, but somehow failed to rouse the screechy.

"I expect he's had a fright and flown away," said Christina, when Billy came crestfallenly to report failure.

"Well, he was there once, so he may be there again. We'll keep a sharp look-out, and perhaps we'll hear him again."

"You look out for things to *see*, not things to *hear*," Polly-Joan pointed out sharply, but Billy argued this, and they were beginning a hot discussion when Winifred created a diversion by suggesting that they should all go to see Shenkin have his dinner in the stable.

"I have to go off to school again soon after two," Christina said, as she showed timid Dimity how to offer Shenkin a lump of sugar in the palm of her hand, Dimity's idea being to throw it on the ground and retreat hurriedly.

"This is the right way—hold it up in your fingers, so that he can bite it—so!" said Billy, the ever-ready.

"'Tisn't! 'Tisn't! Her way's right! I've watched cabmen feed their horses, and they always hold it in their hands. You're wrong as usual, Billy!"

"Look at his mouth, quick, Billy!" cried Winifred, and Billy turned just in time to see Shenkin's big lips and teeth feeling for the sugar in Christina's palm, and forgot to answer Polly-Joan as she deserved.

"Bother 'bout your school," he said. "If you had holidays too, it would be fine. It's deadly dull here. We've played everything, and there's nothing left to do. We can't have cricket all the time—at least, we could, if the girls would bowl, but they won't. They're slackers. And Taffy's only a kid, and bowls all over the place. And when he bats, he only knocks his own bails off."

But fortunately Taffy was looking at the other horses, and did not hear.

During dinner Christina's bag arrived, and with it a note from Marion. She read it, then passed it quickly to her uncle, and turned to the others with startled, anxious face.

"I told you the Jackanories had bad colds? It's turned into measles. Marion found it out directly I'd started this morning. So I'm not to go to school till I hear again. The babies aren't very bad, but of course she sent for the doctor at once, and he said I mustn't go to school for at least a fortnight. And that will be almost the end of the term."

"Good business! That's jolly decent of the Jackanories! I say, s'pose you have it too?" cried Billy.

"Gently! Gently, my boy!" said Mr. Clevelly, looking up from the note he was reading.

"It's not the least likely. I've had it before, and I didn't kiss them good-bye this morning. Marion wouldn't let me. But, of course, it's possible. Have any of you had it?" she asked of Winifred, who nodded.

"Taffy caught it at school, and brought it home and gave it to the rest of us."

"I didn't! I never did! Oh, Winifred, you *are* mean!"

"Hush, hush, Taffy! Not so noisy at table, my boy!" said the old gentleman irritably.

"You silly boy! Of course you did! What's the use of saying you didn't? It gave us a nice holiday."

"So you'll have holidays too! Just what we were wanting! Awfully jolly ripping of the Jackanories!" cried Billy again. "What shall we do this afternoon?"

It seemed to Christina that Mr. Clevelly waited almost anxiously for her reply. She hesitated and looked thoughtful, then asked:

"Have you been up to the golf links yet?—where the flagstaff is, you know," and she fancied her uncle looked relieved. "It's fine up there. You see such a lot of sea, and look right down on the Castle."

"If they are playing on the links, you will be careful, Christina. One hears of accidents from flying balls."

"Yes, uncle! We'll be very careful," she said dutifully.

"I'm not to go to school any more this term," she told them next morning, when the post had brought her a letter from Harry. "There are only three weeks more, anyway, so it wouldn't be worth while by the time I've waited a fortnight to see if I'm going to have measles too."

"I do hope you will! 'Twould be a joke!" chuckled Taffy. "Fancy an aunt having measles!"

The idea seemed to strike the others as funny, for they all laughed, and Polly-Joan cried quickly:

"Of course, we'd all have to take it too. It would be only polite. We'd have to keep auntie company."

"How are the Jackanories?" asked Winifred.

"Doing very well, but still pretty bad. And dear Bill is missing me dreadfully! He goes into every room looking for me, and yowling because he can't find me, the darling! He's so lonely, I think I shall have to go over and see him, poor dear! I know he'd be pleased."

"You will be very careful not to go near the house so long as there is any danger of infection, Christina," said Mr. Clevelly, looking up from his letters.

"Yes, uncle, certainly! Oh, dear, it's just as bad as I thought!" she sighed to herself. "He can't help it, of course, but he *does* scold, and I *don't* like it!"

"Me an' Monk don't like your dear Bill," Dimity was saying, "but we like ve wee kitty jus' awful, *awful* much."

"So it's to be all holidays from now till September," said Christina. "If only we could have Davy to play with!"

CHAPTER XV. WINIFRED'S ULTIMATUM.

"Don't you think it's too dreadful for anything?" said Christina dejectedly.

She had just returned from Rhianfa, after saying good-bye to Myfanwy and Davy, and had given Winifred and Polly-Joan a full account of how she had cried, and Myfanwy had cried, and Davy hadn't cried, but had looked like it—of Myfanwy's distress at parting with her home, her garden, her beloved sweet peas, and Sally—of the horrid time Davy was going to have shut up in a stuffy office at Blaenau, doing business like a grown-up man all through the summer—and of how she had tried again to persuade them to change their minds even now, and stay comfortably at home without worrying about the other sufferers by the failure of the company, and of the utter uselessness of the attempt.

"Davy's like a—a stone wall, when he's made up his mind," she said miserably, "and Myfanwy's as bad or worse. I never imagined they could be like this. Davy always used to do what I wanted, whether he liked it or not, but now he won't listen to me at all. And as for Myfanwy, she's too dreadful for anything! Fancy, absolutely refusing to tell me where she's going to live! I begged and teased, but she wouldn't say, wouldn't give me even a hint! Said perhaps she'd write when she was settled! *Perhaps!* I don't believe she will. She doesn't mean me to know where she is—I can't imagine why. But she said nobody knew but Davy, and she had asked him not to tell, so it's no use asking him. Isn't it dreadful? To lose your friends like that! I don't know when I shall see her again—if I ever do."

She was so miserable over the parting that her nephews and nieces—deeply grieved on their own account to hear that they were to see no more of these new friends—did their best to turn her thoughts elsewhere.

"Tell us something new to do, Christina dear! We've searched for that screechy till we're tired, and there's not a sign of him. We're sick of cricket—even Billy. Going for walks is stodgy and dull, and just like being at home. What can we do that would be exciting?"

Christina threw off her gloomy thoughts with an effort. She was their aunt, and she had come there for the purpose of entertaining them.

"We might go down to the beach. There's always something going on there."

"I don't think we'd better," Winifred said soberly. "The boys and Polly-Joan always tease to get trying the canoes. You know you do, Billy——"

"Well, I want to see what it's like. I'm sure I could manage a canoe. It's awfully easy."

Christina laughed. "It's not quite so easy as it looks sometimes. It might land you in the water just at first."

"Land you in the water! Oh, I say!" jeered Billy. "'Twouldn't land *me* in the water! I'm not so silly. I know I could manage it."

"Well, why don't you try, then?"

"It would be jolly!" Polly-Joan sighed. "But, you see——"

"Uncle John told us not to. He's afraid we'd be drowned or something."

Christina pulled a face. "What nonsense! Every one canoes in Criccieth. If you did go in, you'd be none the worse. The beach is always full of people. Of course, you wouldn't go far out to sea."

"Of course not. But, you see, he told us not to try it at all."

"He'd never know," Christina said doubtfully. "Oh, well, I didn't mean quite that!" as they gave her startled looks again. "But it does seem a pity, when every one else is paddling about and it's quite safe! I know you'd enjoy it, Billy."

But Billy was not to be tempted.

"I'm not a sneak. I don't do things I'd be frightened to tell of," he said sturdily.

"Well, we can't canoe then, that's all. But we could watch the others."

"That's rotten, and awfully hard lines."

Christina knit her brows.

"Let me see! Suppose we go over to the Lonely Sands, and take our tea with us? We mustn't go near the Dolls' House, but we could picnic by the tents, and perhaps we could bathe. Do you swim?"

"No, and so Uncle John told us not to bathe, for fear of an accident," Winifred said dolefully.

Christina made a face again, and Billy nodded.

"Just how I feel myself!" he said. "I can go one better than that, though!" and proceeded to show her the best he could do.

"Christina, it's just dreadful!" cried Polly-Joan. "Uncle John's kind enough, but frightfully strict. It's as bad as being at boarding-school. We mustn't do this, or that, or anything, for fear something will happen to us while father and mother are away. 'Why can't we be good children and stop in the garden and play games on the lawn?' That's what he said to Winifred and me the other day! Play games on the lawn! As if we could stop on the lawn for ever! Everything else is forbidden, because 'something might happen'! It's dreadful!"

"He's dreadfully nervous," Winifred explained. "Of course, he's old, but I do think he's more fussy than he need be. And when we heard you were coming, I said to him that we would be able to do some of these things when you were with us, and he said—well, he said it would make no difference."

"He said, 'I don't trust Christina. She's only a child still, and sometimes hasn't very much sense'!" Billy was delighted to supply what Winifred's thoughtfulness would have suppressed.

"How very kind of him!" Christina laughed. "Well, now, I should say, if he's as fussy as all that, let's do what we want and not bother him with asking leave. If he doesn't know, he can't worry, and it's not the least likely anything will happen. You don't think your father or mother would mind you bathing or canoeing; well, then, why shouldn't you? I'm here to look after you, and I'm nearly grown-up. I'm your aunt, and if auntie gives you leave, isn't that enough? Does it matter what uncle says? Besides, he won't know. It will be kinder not to consult him, so that he can't worry. If he does find out, you can say it's all my fault. Now, don't you agree with me? Let's have a jolly good time, and not worry Uncle John with asking leave. Of course, we needn't do things he's actually forbidden, but I know I can think of lots of new things that will be great fun. What do you all say?"

What Winifred did say, very quickly, and before any of the others could speak, was, "We'll have a Council, and discuss it together. We'd better settle it at once."

The boys and Polly-Joan dropped into their places in the circle on the grass, and Dimity and Monk were told to take their seats with the rest, in spite of Dimity's plaint, "We don't know what it's all 'bout, for we're only free, my dear Monk an' me, an' you haven't 'splained to us one bit." Christina watched as before, feeling herself distinctly an outsider in what was so evidently a recognised family custom.

Winifred addressed the meeting.

"We have to decide," she said soberly, "whether we'll obey Uncle John, or whether we'll take Christina's advice and enjoy ourselves in our own way, and keep the things we do a secret from him."

"You needn't put it like that!" Christina objected quickly, for she had seen Billy's mouth open to say, "Hiding things is a caddish trick. We aren't going to begin *that*!" and Polly-Joan was obviously ready with something of the same kind. "There are different ways of putting things," she urged. "I said, if you think your own father and mother wouldn't mind, what else matters? Don't let's worry Uncle John with asking leave all the time. I'm sure it's kinder not to bother him. I'll see that nothing happens to you. That's what I said. You make it sound quite different."

"But what I *said* is what you really *meant*," Winifred said sturdily. "It sounds very nice the way you put it, but I won't have Taffy or the others muddled like that. They must understand. Then if they like to decide on your plan, and begin doing secret things instead of being quite honest, as we always have been, I'll be sorry, of course, but I can't stop them. But they shall understand. That's why we must have a Council about it."

"Oh well, if you put it like that—!" Christina said uneasily. "I don't want them to do anything wicked. I'm not asking them to be dishonest, but——"

"But that's what it comes to, all the same!" said Billy sharply.

"Perhaps we're too particular," Winifred said apologetically, anxious not to hurt Christina's feelings. "But father was always very strict with us, and taught us to tell him everything. It just depends on what you've been taught, of course. Some people might think it didn't matter——"

"A bit caddish, if they did, all the same," said Billy scornfully.

"They couldn't be really *nice*!" added Polly-Joan.

"But it's such a little thing!" Christina was anxious now to justify herself. "It's not as if it was anything big, anything that really mattered. Whether you bathe, or don't bathe, whether you go in a canoe, or not—it's such a very little thing, but it would make it possible for us to have such jolly times. It would just make all the difference between enjoying ourselves and being frightfully slow and dull."

They saw that clearly, and had already experienced the "dullness" of which she spoke. To accept her doctrine would make many delightful things possible, which in themselves were harmless and innocent enough, but which Mr. Clevelly's nervous anxiety would certainly forbid. Billy and Polly-Joan saw visions of canoes and bathing-tents on the one hand, and on the other, of themselves on the sands or esplanade, safe and dry—and dull. Taffy remembered the tram with the lid to put on when it rained, and the points to be changed by hand, and the pony. Winifred thought of the gardens of Llanbedrog, and the picnics which would be possible under Christina's leadership. And Dimity sat hugging dear Monk and listening in puzzled bewilderment, not in the least understanding what it was all about.

"Surely I'm big enough to look after the little ones!" Christina urged. "I'm nearly two years older than you, Winifred, and I've lived here all my life. I know the way to do everything, and I know my way about, and I always have bathed and canoed and all the rest of it! If you're with me, surely that's enough?"

She felt hopeful as she looked round the circle. Their faces showed so plainly what they would like to say, and her arguments sounded so reasonable. She hastened to press her advantage.

"If you think your father and mother wouldn't mind, where's the harm?"

"They'd tell us first of all to be straight and not hide anything from Uncle John, and that's what I think about it," Winifred said sharply. "You others can do what you like, but I'm not going to do anything I'd want to hide from father and mother when they come home. I never have had secrets, and I'm not going to begin. You can do things you'd be afraid to have known, if you like, but you'll have to do them without me. I won't tell tales of you, of course, but I won't have anything to do with things that have to be kept hidden. There! That's all I have to say about it. Now speak up, all of you, and decide what you'll do."

"Me an' dear Monk will do what you do, Winifred."

"All right, Dimity! That's two of us, anyway."

"No, it's three," said Polly-Joan quickly. "I'm not a shabby rotter. I'll stand by you, Win. I think you're quite right. The boys can be sneaks, if they like."

Her tone implied that she rather hoped they would. It would have been such a pleasantly virtuous feeling if the girls had all decided for what they knew to be right, and the boys for the wrong. It would have been so delightful to look down on them from the superior heights of strict feminine honesty. Winifred looked anxious, but Billy speedily relieved her mind.

"Oh, I'm not a cad! You needn't look at me like that, Polly-Joan! I've said so from the first. It would be playing it low on the old chap, and I wouldn't be so mean."

"And you, Taffy?"

Taffy wriggled uneasily. "S'pose I'll have to say no," he grumbled. "But it would be awf'ly jolly."

"Look here, Taffy Orr, if you ever——"

"I won't! Billy, I won't! Really an' truly, I won't!"

"Well, mind you don't, then, that's all. I guess we've settled that?" he said, looking at Winifred. "Now let's do something or other."

Christina felt she must hide her chagrin so far as possible.

"You'd better come to the Lonely Sands, as I suggested. I suppose you may do that? You needn't bathe, of course, if he objects to that, but I think I shall. You can see to the tea."

"I'd love to. We'll play house in the tent. It shall be the cricket pavilion at an International Match. Billy shall be Scotland, and Taffy and Polly-Joan England."

"Won't be England!" said Taffy unexpectedly.

"Well, Wales, then. Scotland v. Wales, on the Lonely Sands. I'll have tea ready for the teams at half-time."

"Half-time!" jeered Billy. "Half-time!"

"That's in football, Win," said Polly-Joan.

"Oh well, how could I know? And they always do stop for a rest in cricket matches, whatever they call it. You'll want your tea, whether it's half-time or not, I know."

"Me an' dear Monk don't like cricket awful much," Dimity ventured. "We a'n't goin' to play."

"You and Monk will help me with the tea, Dimity. Hadn't you better dress Monk a little before we go?"

"Yes, fink we'd better," and Dimity looked critically at her darling's bare body. "We don't fink we'd like to go froo all ve streets wiv noffing on at all but our fur, for if it rained we'd get so wet."

"Our fur!" jeered Billy. "Oh, I say! Just listen to that! She really believes that hideous old monkey is a bit of her! Isn't she a little duffer?"

Dimity's wail of anger was characteristically over that sentence which concerned Monkey. His mockery of herself passed unnoticed.

"We a'n't hideous! We a'n't ugly! Billy, you're horrid mean, you are! We're a dear darling monkey, an' we don't like horrid boys one bit, an' we're all bits of one another, Monk an' me —,"

"You fetch Monk's red tunic and cap and white blouse, Dimity, and we'll have him ready in half a minute," Winifred said quietly. "Polly-Joan, you go and ask if we can have some things in a basket for tea."

For that afternoon, and for the next few days, cricket on the Lonely Sands, and games among the sandhills and caves, and play-housekeeping in the tents satisfied them, and there was no more grumbling over the restrictions placed upon their actions. But before very long they were once more restlessly craving for new experiences.

The novelty of the new country, the strange language, the beautiful surroundings had worn off, and they pined for adventures. If there had been school-work to occupy a part of each day, they might have been content in the garden for the rest of the time. But with no lessons, and no duties, every moment of the time had to be filled with amusement, and the finding of new pastimes became a serious burden to Christina and Winifred.

If Christina could have had her own way, she could easily have kept them occupied, but most of her proposals ran counter to Mr. Clevelly's expressed wishes.

One morning she suggested fishing in the river at Llanystumdwy, but Mr. Clevelly across the breakfast table sharply forbade them to go near the river.

Christina pulled a face, as he turned to his newspaper again.

"Then I think we'd better play some nice little game on the lawn," she said, and set the boys grinning.

"A very good plan," said the old gentleman, well pleased, and Christina looked what she thought so plainly that Winifred smiled, Polly-Joan and Taffy choked simultaneously, and Dimity—and presumably Monk—stared with great round eyes.

Next time she made her suggestion in private.

"Let's fetch the pony-trap from the Dolls' House, and drive to Tremadoc for a picnic. It's not far, and the pony's as quiet as Monkey. Of course, it would be jolly to go farther. Beddgelert is lovely, and I'd show you Gelert's Grave. But I don't suppose—" and she looked doubtfully at Winifred.

Then she learned that they had begged for something of this kind once before, and had been forbidden any driving, or even walking excursions along the Snowdon roads, where there were so many motors, and the buses passed continually.

Christina sighed.

"Really, I don't see what there is left to do! He seems to have thought of everything and forbidden it beforehand. Now, if you would only take my advice, and not ask about things —,"

"Ah, but we can't do that, you see!" Winifred would answer quickly. "It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be straight. It's better to be dull than mean."

"But it's *very* dull to be as dull as we are just now!" sighed Christina.

CHAPTER XVI. THE FAIRY PRINCE.

And Christina's troublesome conscience? And It lurking in the background? Had they ceased to trouble her since she came to Bryntirion? Had her "penance" accomplished its end? Had she "made up for" the wrong, and was It buried and forgotten?

It was too early to feel sure, she decided, for she was very loth to admit that her plan had failed. The idea had seemed so very reasonable, and she had felt so certain that the matter would be done with now, and It would trouble her no more.

But, just as she had found her sense of shame more keen as she came to know the "red children" better, so now, as she became still more intimate with them, it grew also, and instead of forgetting she seemed to remember oftener and more vividly. Constant daily contact with Winifred and Polly-Joan, with their strict code of honour and insistence on frank and open dealing in every detail, only served to remind her of her own underhand methods, and Billy's outspoken scorn of deceit or concealment in any form made her distinctly uncomfortable.

What if they heard some day of the thing she had done? What if they ever understood how she had kept such a secret? The thought made her grow hot and cold, and tormented her continually. Every time Winifred called a Council, and the verdict was given unanimously—though often grudgingly on Taffy's part—Christina remembered, and was ashamed, and shrank from the thought that they might ever know.

It was not so much the fear of discovery which troubled her, and certainly not the fear of punishment, but rather the overwhelming shame of the thought—of what they would say, of what they would think. She would never be able to face them again. She was ashamed of the thing she had done to a degree which she had never anticipated, and all because of the "red children" and their strict notions of what was necessary to absolute honesty.

"We aren't going to begin *that!* We can't do what isn't straight! Hiding things is a caddish trick!" The words rang in her ears continually—at night, or when she was alone during the day, or when Winifred called a Council to discuss some question—"Can we do it? What do you say, Billy? Taffy? Polly-Joan?" As for the number of times she wished she had let them come to the Dolls' House, without trying to re-arrange matters to please herself, that was quite beyond her power of remembrance. She seemed to be wishing it all the time.

Yes, she was disappointed. Her sacrifice in coming to Bryntirion had not been as effectual as she had hoped. She had not forgotten. She seemed to remember more than ever.

But perhaps it was still too early to feel sure. She had not been many days at Bryntirion yet. Perhaps it had become a habit to remember. Perhaps in time she would learn to forget, and be happy and comfortable again. She would not be disappointed yet. She would not admit that her plan could have failed, and that, in giving up her own way to come to Bryntirion, she had not succeeded in "making up for" the wrong done so long ago.

"I've done all I can, anyway. I don't see what more I could do! I'm sure I've tried my best," she said disappointedly to herself. "I've been real good to them, and played with them, and thought of new games, and taken them out when I could. I *don't see* what else I can do! And if it's all no use, it's a mean shame! That's what I think! . . . I wonder what it is I haven't done? I'm sure I've tried hard enough to make up for It! But it all seems no use. I don't know what more I ought to do!"

And to a certain suggestive whisper—"There's only one way. I've told you what to do,"—she was still resolutely deaf.

"What we want," said Christina, "is a Fairy Prince, who would appear suddenly and make such friends with Uncle John that he'd let us go anywhere with him. Then he'd take us about with him and give us a jolly good time, and we'd bathe, and canoe, and ride, and drive, and have picnics, and fish, and everything!"

"*Wouldn't* it be jolly?" sighed Taffy wistfully. "We could go to see the tram with the lid to put on when it rains, couldn't we?"

"It would just be something like!" said Polly-Joan.

They seemed to have utterly exhausted the possibilities of the Bryntirion gardens. Christina had urged them on to search for the "screechy," but the "screechy" was not to be found. They were tired of the Lonely Sands. They had wandered over to desolate, empty Rhianfa, and had crept through the quiet rooms and echoing passages, and had come home feeling miserable, out of sympathy with the lonely old house.

The furniture had been sold, and the house was for sale also. Jenkin and Sally had not yet been disposed of, but were stabled in town in the agent's care. The garden was already beginning to lose its well-cared-for look, and Myfanwy's peas were running to seed and would soon stop flowering. Christina cried out in dismay at the sight, and instantly cut off every seed-pod she could find. After that, she made a pilgrimage to Rhianfa every two or three days to tend the peas for Myfanwy's sake.

"Not that it matters to her now, but she would hate to see them go like that so soon. She was always so very careful to keep cutting them. I'll look after them for her as long as there's no one in the house. If only I knew where she is, I'd send her some. I know she'd like to have them. Oh, I wish she would write to me!"

She had heard nothing from Davy or Myfanwy. They had left Criccieth, and Myfanwy seemed to have disappeared completely. No one knew where she had gone to live. No one had heard from her. Davy was learning his work up at Blaenau, but would not come down to Criccieth even on Sundays. Christina had written to him, begging for Myfanwy's address, but the picture postcard she received in reply gave her no satisfaction, but only a rather dreary grey picture of the slate quarries. She was keenly disappointed, and very anxious concerning her friend, but there seemed no possible way to trace her, and nothing to do at present but wait till she chose to reveal her hiding-place.

The Jackanories were doing well, but were still in bed. Christina had been forbidden to approach the Dolls' House at present, but had paid it one or two surreptitious visits for a word with dear Bill and Mary and a game with Elizabeth, who was in the most playful stage of kittenhood.

Winifred and Billy supposed her on the Lonely Sands at these times, for she was careful to keep her own counsel on the subject. She had never been inside the house, since that was forbidden, and since Cook was good enough to bring all the cats out to the gate to meet her—with, as a rule, some remonstrance on the part of dear Bill—so she felt that she had really nothing to conceal. But yet she was not quite sure how they would look upon these visits, and so thought it best to say nothing about them.

At one time she would have gloried in creeping into the house unseen and enjoying a while with the cats there, but to her surprise she found she could not bring herself to that now. Her point of view had altered, unknown to herself, during her constant contact with her

nephews and nieces and their doctrine that “hiding things was a caddish trick,” and she did not want to be condemned as a shabby rotter or a mean lot. So it was better not to do things which had been actually forbidden, and which would have had to be concealed at any cost. Nevertheless, there were things—in the past!—which they must never know.

They were sitting on the lawn beside the Ivy Patch, when she uttered her request for a Fairy Prince, and Winifred laughed.

“We have a Fairy Prince, but he’s at home in Glasgow, so he’s not much use, I’m afraid. If he would only turn up here, it would be very jolly.”

“That would be something like!” said Polly-Joan again.

“A Fairy Prince? What do you mean?”

“It’s as good as a story out of a book. Shall we tell you?”

“Me an’ Monk don’t quite know what you mean, for you haven’t ’splained one bit, an’ we’re only free,” Dimity complained.

“I mean Mr. Carruth, Dimmy.”

“Mr. Carruth! Alec!” cried the boys and Polly-Joan, in indignant chorus.

“Oh! Me an’ Monk like Alec jus’ awful much.”

“I thought you did. Christina, he used to live close to us, in lodgings, and we knew he was very poor. He worked at the same big engineering works as father, but in quite a poor position, because, of course, he was only a beginner. He’s quite young. I’m sure he’s not thirty——”

“Thirty!” jeered Billy. “He’s not half that yet—well, I mean——”

“I should think so!” cried Polly-Joan indignantly. “You’ll make her think he’s only a little boy. But I’m quite sure he’s not nearly thirty yet, Win. Thirty’s dreadfully old, and you know he isn’t old a bit.”

“Father knew him, and told us how very clever he was,” Winifred continued. “He knows all about machinery, and had always been working and trying things, and father said he wouldn’t be a bit surprised if some day he made some great discovery or invention. But he was very poor, and at last father discovered that sometimes he had hardly enough to eat. We found out then that his mother was ill, away in some wee coast place down the water, and he was sending every penny he could spare, and often more, to the people who were nursing her. We got very friendly with him, and he often used to come in at night and talk over things with father, and discuss new ideas and inventions, and wonder how they could be done. Then one day something happened. He came in to us very excited and delighted, to tell us first of all, because he said father and mother had been good to him. He had invented something, and had saved up enough to have it patented, and had sent it, without telling us or any one, to some people who make engines and machines—very important people who supply most of the big railway companies. And they had decided to use it, because it was something good and quite new—I don’t in the least understand what, but something to do with boilers, I think. Anyway, it would bring him in heaps of money, and he was going off at once to see his mother and tell her all about it. That was three years ago, and now he’s as rich as rich. He has a beautiful house at the coast, and a yacht, and a big black motor-car, and everything he wants and he’s always very good to us when he’s at home. He’s taken us out in the motor, and on the yacht, and father and mother have been down to stay with him in his house, and they say it’s simply lovely. He’s going to take us all there some day. So he’s our Fairy Prince, and he’s just as jolly as he used to be—jollier, I think, because now he isn’t worried or poor. His mother lived with him in his new house for a little while, and he had all kinds of doctors for her, but she died last

winter. That's the only thing—he's a bit lonely, I think. There's no one belonging to him. He has everything else he could possibly want."

"How interesting! You should write and ask him to come and stop in Criccieth. Then he could go places with us, and Uncle John couldn't say anything," Christina suggested.

"That would be something like!" cried Polly-Joan once more.

"It would be jolly. But I don't like to. He's always willing to do anything he's asked," Winifred said doubtfully. "He came here with us, you know, as father couldn't. But, of course, he still works part of the time. He's full of ideas for more inventions and improvements, and he keeps working them out and trying and experimenting. He'll surprise people again some day with another discovery."

"What a jolly friend to have! Let's all wish very hard that he will appear suddenly, and then perhaps he will. Some people can make other people do things by just thinking hard about them, you know. Perhaps if six of us think hard enough he'll take it into his head to come and visit you, and then—let me see!—he might come by to-morrow's train. Then he'll be here to-morrow afternoon, by the six o'clock train that arrives about seven."

They laughed, and she sprang up.

"Well, as there seems to be nothing else to do, I'm going over to Rhianfa to cut Myfanwy's peas. I'll bring some back with me. Suppose you all think hard about this Mr. Carruth till I come back. Think as hard as you can, and perhaps he'll come to-morrow!"

They laughed again, and one and all promised to think their hardest till she returned. It would be something to do, anyway.

"Something new!" said Polly-Joan.

She left them sitting on the lawn beside the Ivy Patch, in a circle as if for a Council, all trying to look very solemn. Dimity was urging Monk to "fink hard, an' perhaps Alec will come to-morrow!" Billy was holding his head in his hands, to show that it was aching already with the unusual strain. Taffy was lying with his head on Polly-Joan's shoulder, as he said he could think better that way.

Christina laughed, and left them thinking.

"I wonder how long the silence will last?" she thought, as she walked towards Llanystumdwy. "It's very unusual! Uncle will think something has really happened to them this time. It will keep them quiet for five minutes, anyway, and that's something. But I'm afraid they won't get the reward they expect, though they certainly deserve it for trying so hard. I wonder who will give out first? Taffy? Or Billy? Or Polly-Joan?"

"I'll hide in the Ivy Patch and screech," she said to herself, as she crossed the old bridge of Llanystumdwy on her way home again, carrying two great bunches of sweet peas. "It will set them searching again, and that will keep them busy. But I'll have to be careful, or Master Billy will find me out."

So she left the road before the big gates of Bryntirion were in sight, and crept through the meadow and the little gate and the Ivy Patch till she was near the lawn. The children were not there. Evidently the strain of concentrated thought had been too much for them, and they had given it up and gone in search of more active occupation. But they would certainly be somewhere in the garden, and Christina had no fear that they would not hear her "screech."

"I'll have a better chance of getting away," she said, and gave three piercing shrieks through her hands, then picked up her peas and fled.

She reached the road unnoticed and apparently unpursued. Probably Billy was arming his search-party for the encounter with the screechy.

She walked demurely round the corner. Certainly no one would have dreamed of connecting her with those uncouth noises from the Ivy Patch.

Then she stopped, with a gasp of amazement.

The “red children” were all out in the road gathered round a great black car, which stood before the Bryntirion gates. A young man had jumped from his seat and he was standing in the midst of them, and they were all talking at once.

“My goodness!” gasped Christina. “He’s turned up without even waiting for to-morrow!”

CHAPTER XVII. THE FAIRY PRINCE'S QUEST.

"This is our Aunt Christina!" said Winifred, her eyes dancing, her face flushed with excitement. "Christina, this is the Fairy Prince!"

"We were all thinking as hard as ever we could," broke in Taffy, "when we heard 'toot-toot!' and I ran to see, and then I yelled——"

"I should think you did yell!" cried laughing, excited Polly-Joan. "I wonder Christina didn't hear you at Rhianfa."

"You yelled too! We all yelled——"

"You did!" laughed Alec Carruth. "I had a good hearty welcome, anyway. But what were you all thinking about, Daffy-Taffy? You were not much given to serious thought at home, if I remember rightly, and I don't believe Silly-Billy knows how to think at all."

"Gave me an awful headache——"

"*She* told us to!" Polly-Joan explained, pointing excitedly at Christina. "She told us all to think hard, an' p'r'aps you'd take it into your head to come and see us. But we didn't expect you till the six o'clock train to-morrow."

"Telepathy!" laughed the good-looking stranger. "I'm sorry I came too soon. You see, when I felt you all thinking about me, I decided it would be a pity to wait for slow things like trains, so the car and I just came by magic. It took about twenty seconds to come from Glasgow. You should go home that way. It saves a lot of time."

They chuckled, but Dimity, staring solemnly at him over Monkey, asked:

"Did you *really* feel us finkin' 'bout you, Alec? Monk an' me were finkin' jus' awful hard——"

Billy and Taffy were making for the car, but Alec drove them back.

"Hands off! She's dangerous. She's a magic car, you know, and there's no saying what she may do at any moment. You mustn't take any liberties with Peter."

"Peter?" asked the boys.

"Yes, her name's Peter. Didn't you know? I christened her the other day."

"*Her* name's *Peter*! Oh, I say!" jeered Billy.

"Exactly! Didn't I say so? *Her* name's *Peter*! Well, I'm glad I turned up, since you were wanting me so badly."

"We were wanting you just dreadfully. Now——"

"Monk an' me wanted you to come jus' awful much!"

"Still wanting things 'jus' awful much,' Timmy-Dimmy? And is Monk really still alive after all his travels?"

"'Course we're quite alive!" she began indignantly, when Polly-Joan interrupted.

"Now that you've really come, you'll be nice, and take us out canoeing, and fishing, and bathing, and driving, and rides in the car, and long walks, and picnics, and heaps of other things, won't you?"

"Oh, that's the programme, is it?"

"Yes, we want to do all those things. You see, Uncle John won't let us, because *she* isn't big enough——" and they gave him a heated account of their grievances.

"I must have a chat with Uncle John, and we'll see if I'm old enough to be trusted. He and I were very good friends when I was here before. Now what shall I do with Peter? I suppose I can leave her at the hotel?"

"Oh yes, I should think so. They have lots of motors at 'The George,'" Christina assured him. "Or there's a garage down on the Bay."

"All jump in, then, and we'll take her and put her to bed, and I'll leave my coat and things. Then we'll walk back together."

"You'd better make yourself a little less like a Polar bear before you walk back," Winifred laughed.

"Certainly! But we came very fast, and it was quite cold among the mountains."

"Have you come all the way from Scotland in—in Peter?"

"Certainly! A fine run. She's a beauty, is Peter."

Christina stepped in rather nervously, amid the tumbling Billy, Taffy and Polly-Joan, for she was rather awe-stricken by the grand car. But Alec Carruth did not exceed the speed limit when he had Winifred and Dimity on board. He drove very slowly down the high road into Criccieth, and she could not help enjoying the easy motion of the car. "Peter" was a high-powered car, and moved off, and slipped away down the road, and drew up before the big hotel, all without a sound or jar.

"I say, Christina, we heard the screechy again!" cried Billy, as they drove past the postoffice.

"Did you? When?"

"A few minutes ago, just as you came up. It was quite close, in the trees somewhere. Isn't it odd how it comes and screeches, and then disappears again?"

"Yes, very odd. You'll have to search again. I'd like to see the screechy, if you catch it."

Presently they escorted Carruth back towards Bryntirion, but, by Christina's suggestion, turned from the main road by the station, and led him across the railway and by the path through the fields to the Castle, to spend a while on Dinas, the little hill beside the Castle, as Mr. Clevelly was up at the mines at Blaenau and would not be home yet.

By this time, "Alec," as the children called him, was fairly familiar with their present circumstances—the restrictions placed upon their freedom, their hopes from his coming, and all the many things they longed to do.

"He's even told us not to go into the Castle, because there's no fence round the hill and we *might* roll over the edge and down into the sea!" cried Billy indignantly. "As if we wouldn't look where we were going! We aren't babies! I'm longing to climb all over it and look through those narrow windows, and get up on top of the walls——"

"I want to go in the tram with the lid to put on when it rains, and the pony to pull, and the points that the conductor has to run along and change!" wailed Taffy.

"I want to go in a canoe, and bathe——" began Polly-Joan.

"I want to do everything!" laughed Winifred.

"Me an' my dear Monk want to see real live monks in a cage, jus' awful much! Want to see ve Jacksynories, too, but vey're measly, an' Monk an' me don't want to have measles, for we're only free, an' we've had it once——"

"No, I wouldn't let Monk catch measles, if I were you, Timmy-Dimmy," Alec said gravely. "Some people lose all their fur when they have measles, and then they look just horrid."

Dimity hugged Monk anxiously.

"Do vey? Are you *sure*? We don't want to lose all our fur," she said anxiously. "We wouldn't like not to have any fur, all over us, same as our poor tail is already."

This was too much for the boys. But she did not mind their jeers, since Alec was sympathetic.

"We wou'n't look nice 'vout any fur at all, an' we don't like boys, Alec——"

"Not jus' awful much!" said Billy.

"Not one bit! An' you, Billy Orr, not even vat much," cried Dimity, with spirit.

"Do you think Uncle John will consider you old enough to be trusted with us, Alec?" Winifred asked wistfully.

"I'll do my very best to convince him that I am, Winifred. But, do you know, not one of you has asked me why I've come to Criccieth——"

"Thought you came 'cause we thought about you an' made you!"

"Not quite, my dear Daffy-Taffy——"

"Why do you call him that?" asked Christina.

"Is it possible they have never been properly introduced to you yet? But perhaps they didn't like to. Perhaps they were shy. Then permit me——"

Billy and Taffy laughingly protested, but he persisted.

"You thought about me and made me come, so now you must put up with me. I'm going to do just whatever I like. *You* may not like it sometimes, but that can't be helped. You've brought it on yourselves. Of course your dear auntie must know your real names! Miss Clevelly!—Silly-Billy! Jolly-Polly-Joan! Daffy-Taffy! Timmy-Dimmy!" he said ceremoniously, amid much laughter.

Christina laughed too. " 'Timmy-Dimmy' I've heard before——"

"Yes! It means us—my dear Monk an' me," nodded Dimity.

"And the others I can quite understand, especially Silly-Billy! But why Daffy-Taffy? What does that mean?"

"Just the same as Silly-Billy," cried Polly-Joan.

"In Scotland a silly person is called daft, and Taffy is daft all the time," explained Carruth.

"I aren't! I mean, I'm not! Alec, you *are* mean——"

But the others only laughed again, and Christina asked, "And has Winifred no name too?"

"Hers isn't quite fixed yet," Polly-Joan explained anxiously. "There isn't anything nice enough to go with it," and Winifred laughingly sprang up and dropped a graceful curtsy.

"Oh yes, there is!" cried Taffy, eager for a laugh against some one else. "There's 'Grinny-Winny,' that'll do. She does grin a lot, anyway."

Winifred promptly "grinned" at this, and Billy, who had been going hastily through the alphabet, suggested, "I know one better than that,—'Skinny Winny.' She is all bony, if you tickle her, not fat, like Polly-Joan and Dimity."

Winifred laughed with the rest, and pulled up the loose sleeve of her blouse to look critically at her arm.

"Yes, I am getting thin! It's with so much cricket and running about, Billy. Or else it's with the anxiety of all you children on my hands! I'll be worn to a shadow if it goes on much longer."

"Skinny Winny!" jeered Billy.

"Grinny Winny!" cried Taffy.

"Winning Winny! That will do for me," said Alec. "But, to return to the subject before last, I can't quite say I came in answer to your thoughts, Taffy. I'm afraid they weren't strong

enough for that. I started several days ago, and have been loitering about the English lakes, wondering whether I would really come on to see you or not."

"Oh, why? Oh, how mean! Then you might have been here days ago! Why didn't you come as quick as you could?"

"In the first place, Polly-Joan, because I didn't know you wanted me. You weren't sending thought-messages to me then, you know! You should have thought about me last Monday afternoon. I was just hesitating then, and wondering what to do."

"But you wanted to see us! That's why you started to come to Criccieth!"

"As a matter of fact, no! Strange as it may seem, I had another reason. Of course, I had been pining for you all. I was dreadfully lonely. Glasgow felt very stale and flat without Dimity and dear Monk in it," and Dimity smiled up at him confidently. "But still I had another reason for coming to Criccieth."

They all drew nearer expectantly. They were sitting on the flat rocks at the top of the little hill, because these were so much more to their taste than the bench on the very top. They drew closer round his feet, and waited, Christina and the boys with their hands stuck in their pockets, the girls' hair blowing in the wind, Dimity hugging Monk and only half understanding.

"Tell us, Alec! Come on! Buck up, do!"

"I'm in quest of a dream," he said, his face very serious.

They laughed, and looked puzzled, but he insisted.

"When I was here in Criccieth before—when I brought you kiddies from Glasgow—I saw a vision, and I've come in search of it. I want to see it again, and see if it was really as nice as I thought it at the time."

Christina thought she understood.

"I know! Davy Jones said you would come back. When you were here before, it rained all the time, except the first night when you'd just arrived. You just saw enough to make you feel how lovely Criccieth could be, and you've come back to see it at its best. Is that it? Davy said you would. It's horrid when it's wet, but we have to put up with that for the sake of the mountains. When it's really fine, like this, it is glorious, isn't it?"

He laughed, but, looking round on the open blue stretch of Cardigan Bay, the ring of mountains, the blue headlands to the west, the sunny country, and the faint blue cone of Snowdon in the north, acknowledged the charm and beauty of Criccieth in fine weather.

"But it was a different kind of vision I saw when I was here before, and I haven't been able to forget it. Seriously, Miss Christina, though you'll think me very foolish, I saw some one here, just for a moment, just passing in the street, and try as I will I can't forget her face. I've come in the hope that if I see her again she won't go on haunting me like this. Probably a second look at her will be quite enough. Probably I've imagined most of what I seemed to see in her face, and if I see her again I shall perhaps be disappointed, and at the same time so satisfied that I won't want to see her any more. But I've stayed away as long as I could, and I can't forget her. It sounds foolish to you, maybe, but it's true. Perhaps, if you know most of the Criccieth people, you can help me. You can tell me where to look for her."

They were looking at him round-eyed. Christina's face was alight with interest, and Winifred's scarcely less so. The boys and Polly-Joan looked puzzled.

"Sounds to me a silly business," cried Billy. "Who was she? Where did you see her? What was she like? Are you going to speak to her when you find her, or only stare at her?"

"Was she pretty?" asked Polly-Joan curiously. "I wonder if we've seen her! What was she like, Alec?"

"She was riding on a big white horse," said Carruth soberly, and Christina started in sudden, eager excitement.

"What was she like, Mr. Carruth? And where did you see her?"

"Between the station and your uncle's house, as we drove there that first evening. She was riding towards Criccieth, so we met her face to face. I saw her well, and her face has kept haunting me ever since."

"Had she very dark hair, and a lot of it, and very very dark eyes?"

The "red children" looked at her quickly, but not so quickly as Carruth.

"Yes! Do you know her?" he asked sharply.

"I—think so! Yes, of course I do. But you can't see her. She's gone away."

"Gone away!" he said blankly. "And where to?"

"I don't know——"

"Christina, was it Myfanwy?"

"Of course. You've seen her big white Sally, that she always rides."

"What is her name? I didn't quite catch it," asked Carruth.

"Say it all through to him, Christina!" begged Taffy, and Christina laughed.

"Myfanwy Gwennllian Olwen Eluned Jones is her name, but we just call her Myfanwy. I'm hoping to be there when she's married, to hear the poor bridegroom say it all through. I shall get hold of him and coach him beforehand as to how to pronounce it," she laughed.

"Is she going to be married, then?"

"Oh no, not that I've heard of," Christina assured him hastily. "And I certainly would have heard of it. She always tells me everything—at least, she used to, but just lately she's begun having secrets from me. That's how it is I don't know where she's gone. You see, they lost all their money—well, they didn't lose it, really. It was their own doing. But it came to the same thing. So they've had to leave their lovely house, just out there in Llanystumdwy, and it's for sale, and Davy has gone to work in a horrid stuffy office, in a hateful place, all mines and slate and railways and trucks and dirt, called Blaenau—away over there!—and where Myfanwy is, and what she's doing, none of us know, and Davy won't tell."

Alec Carruth questioned her, and learned more details of the story.

"We must get hold of Master Davy, and ask him to be reasonable," he said.

"Reasonable! He's promised Myfanwy, and when that's the case, you might as well ask Dinas here to be reasonable. Nothing you can say will make an atom of difference to Davy, if he's promised Myfanwy. But we can try, of course."

"You have no idea where his sister is living?"

"Not the faintest notion! She may be somewhere quite close, in one of the villages, or she may have gone to Carnarvon, or Liverpool, or Manchester, or anywhere."

"We'll find out somehow," he said confidently, "and then, since she's your friend, and knows these kiddies too, perhaps you'll introduce me."

"Shall we tell her—?" began Polly-Joan, with dancing eyes. "I'm sure she'd like to know she's been haunting you——"

"You'll tell her nothing, miss!" He looked a trifle anxiously at Christina, who nodded with understanding.

"Myfanwy's very jolly. I'd like you to meet her, and I'm longing to see her again myself, so we'll do what we can. Now, that train coming in to the station is the one Uncle John catches

when he comes home from Blaenau, so he'll be at the house before us. Please come and have tea with us at Bryntirion, Mr. Carruth, and you can talk to uncle afterwards."

CHAPTER XVIII. IN SEARCH OF A PRINCESS.

The appearance of the Fairy Prince was as effectual as any of the children could have wished. Alec Carruth did not ask too much at first, but he quickly made friends with Mr. Clevelly, and the very day after his arrival triumphantly carried off the old gentleman, Winifred, Christina, and Dimity—and, of course, Monk also—for a run to Beddgelert in the big black car, which he persisted in calling Peter.

He soon won Mr. Clevelly's confidence, and before very long had obtained leave for the children to enjoy all the pleasures forbidden before, so long as he was at the head of the party.

"This is something like!" said Polly-Joan, as she learned to swim under his guidance, and in a very short time could paddle her canoe almost as well as Christina herself.

"This is jolly ripping!" sighed Billy, as great silent Peter carried them along the white high road to Pwllheli, through quiet villages and avenues of dark trees.

"Oh, I say! This is awful fun!" cried Taffy, when he was introduced to the tiny tram he had so longed to see, and promptly fell in love with it, as Christina had foretold.

"This is beautiful!" said Winifred, when they entered the gardens at Llanbedrog, and stood on the terrace before the old mansion. "What a lovely house! And what a beautiful view!"

"Me an' Monk like real live monks jus' awful much!" said Dimity, when they found the monkey cage in the gardens, and held Monk up to see.

Under Carruth's guidance they motored round the coast to Harlech one day, and climbed Moel-y-gest another. They visited the cromlechs, and the Pennant valley. They picnicked in Dolbenmaen, and in Beddgelert. And on the very first Saturday afternoon he proposed packing them all into Peter to carry them off to Blaenau, to call on Davy Jones.

"It's a great mistake to go by road," Christina exclaimed, when she heard of it. "You miss all the fun of the Toy Railway, and it's well worth seeing. I always go by tram to Festiniog. You really ought to see it."

"Oh, very well!" he laughed. "If we really ought to, we must, I suppose! We'll take auntie's advice, and Peter shall stay at home to-day."

The others protested, and Billy and Taffy were very indignant.

"No silly old train can be half as much fun as Peter. Peter's so awfully jolly," declared Billy rashly.

"Trains are horrid and slow. You are mean, Christina! Why d'you need to go and interfere?" grumbled Taffy.

"You wait and see," said Christina.

"Why, there's no platform!" cried Taffy, when they had climbed up to the station at Minffordd Junction.

"What a rummy train! It's almost on the ground!" cried Billy.

"It doesn't need a platform, you see. Look how close together the rails are!"

At first the boys were not much impressed, and held that Peter would have been much more fun. But they were interested in the little engine, the wide low carriages, and the tiny signals, while Polly-Joan was delighted with each little station.

"But the whole thing looks like one of the toy railways you see in the shops—as if it had just come out of a box," she said.

Christina nodded, and pointed out the view down the valley as they rose high above the river, with Harlech Castle standing out between sky and sea far away on the edge of the coast. Then she called their attention to an engine and a line of trucks on the side of the hill.

"That's our engine," she said.

"Oh, what a story!" cried Taffy, round-eyed.

"*Our* engine! Why, it's miles away!" said Billy indignantly. "Tell another!"

"Christina!" Polly-Joan's tone was quite reproachful.

"But it is, all the same. See, it's passing a white cottage. We'll pass it too in a little while. You see if we don't. I know it's funny, but it's true. The line twists and turns, and the trains are very long. It *is* our engine, Billy. You don't believe it, do you?"

Billy looked doubtful. "I wouldn't like to be so rude as to say so——"

"But you think it all the same?"

"Well, it doesn't look—oh, I say, there's the cottage!"

Christina laughed. "Yes, that's the cottage——"

"And *is* that our train twisting round that corner over there?"

She nodded.

"Well! I never saw a train like this before!" said Billy, in frank astonishment. "Where will it go next? I say, Taff, see the trucks come round that bend! It's like a shelf half-way up a wall. Just suppose they toppled over?"

"They'd land in the trees, away down there," said Taffy, craning his neck to peer down over the precipice. "Just look over, Bill! We're right above the tops of the highest ones. Isn't it queer?"

Dimity took a peep, and drew back from the window.

"Me an' Monk don't like being up so high, not awful much," she said timidly. "Goin' to keep close to you, Winifred."

"The train won't jump over the edge," Christina laughed.

They were all gazing, fascinated, down into the valley—tree tops everywhere—in the middle, a thin white thread of water and broad golden sands, and some tiny cows standing in the river.

But presently the valley closed in and the river disappeared among the trees. Here in its place was another valley, like a deep round cup, every side covered with dense woods. The railway ran along the top edge of the cup, and away down in the bottom lay a little round lake, gleaming white in the sunlight and holding up a mirror to the dark trees behind.

The girls cried out in delight, and Carruth leaned over Dimity and Monk to look down at the water.

"A dream lake, among sleeping woods," he said. "There ought to be a sleeping beauty somewhere."

"I haven't heard of her. It's only Tan-y-bwlch. Yes, it is pretty, of course. Boys! Look at that train over there!"

She pointed to a little engine and row of trucks on the hill crest, apparently coming to meet them.

"That's our engine," she said again.

This time they did not cry out, but only looked at her doubtfully.

"It is!" she assured them. "The line goes right round the valley, almost in a circle, and that's our engine coming back again to meet us. It is really."

"Well, that's rummy!" said Billy, but was content to believe her this time.

Then Tan-y-bwlch, with its dream lake and woods, fell behind as they turned a sharp corner.

They entered the long tunnel, and Dimity, taken by surprise, screamed and clutched Winifred's hand, and dropped Monk on the door. There was much confusion, and laughter, and bumping of heads before he was recovered, and then she sat hugging him and murmuring plaintively that "we don't like so long dark, Monk an' me, for we're only free, an' we di'n't like lying on ve floor, not awful much." Still the train rushed noisily on through the darkness, and the boys began to wonder if they were going right through to the other side of the world.

In the excitement of the search for Monkey, Christina had forgotten to warn them to close the windows. Before they realised it, they were all choking and coughing, and even when the windows were closed, the smoke still poured in upon them from the carriage in front. Billy and Taffy promptly climbed the low partition, and hastily closed all the windows of their section of the train. But the mischief was done, and the carriage full of choking smoke, and they vowed, as they coughed and choked and laughed, that on the way home they would choose seats at the front end of a carriage, and would be on the look-out for the tunnels.

Soon they were in Blaenau, with its railway stations and trucks and engines, its streets of grey houses all alike, its shops and warehouses, and everywhere, the grey-blue slate. The busy smoky town lay in a cup like Tan-y-bwlch, and the sides of the cup were all quarries, with sloping heaps of broken slate hiding the hillsides, and here and there the long straight lines of rail which bring the laden trucks down to the stations for carriage to the coast.

"I say, aren't those ripping! Wouldn't you jolly well like to come down on one of those trucks, Taff?"

"Rather!" said Taffy.

"It's a horrid place. I'm awfully sorry for Davy."

"I think it's jolly interesting. Are those the quarries? How do they work? I say, here's another railway. Where does it go to?"

"Conway, on the north coast. And over there is the station for Bala, away in the middle of Wales. All the lines come here."

"I'm sorry for the people who have to live here all the time," said Winifred. "Look at those wee children! It's like some parts of Glasgow. There's nothing like this in Criccieth."

Christina led them to Davy's lodgings, but they met him outside, just setting out for a Saturday afternoon walk. He was taken by surprise at sight of them, and looked inquiringly from Christina to Alec Carruth, who was promptly introduced as the Fairy Prince.

"He's looking for a Fairy Princess," said Christina lightly. "In the meantime, until he finds her, he's doing just whatever we ask. Now, Davy, you're coming with us for the afternoon. It will be much jollier than going off by yourself. Which way shall we go? And where can we get tea?"

"We might go back to that lake," suggested Carruth. "There are sure to be some picnic places there."

But Davy would not go to Tan-y-bwlch.

"I went down there the other day. Let's go towards Festiniog. It's too far for the kiddies to walk all the way, but——"

"But we'll take the other train, and have tea there and see the falls," Christina interrupted. "That will be jolly. Then we'll bring you back here on our way home."

Davy's independence would have objected, but they would not listen, and they were too many for him.

"I'm sure you'll be only too glad to get out of Blaenau for a while," said Christina. "I wouldn't live here for anything. How are you getting on, Davy? How do you like it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well enough. I'm getting on. It's jolly to be doing something in earnest, not just going to school like a kiddie," and Carruth nodded understanding and approval.

He had looked anxiously at Davy when they met, but had been instantly satisfied with what he saw. Davy's philosophical acceptance of the necessary appealed to him also. The boy was plucky and would get on. And in his face there was a distinct reminder of the Lady of the White Horse.

"Davy, what about Myfanwy?" Christina was asking.

Davy had turned back to the house to leave a book he had been carrying, and with it had apparently left behind any cloud which Blaenau and office work might have cast upon his spirits. He was off for a holiday and ready for anything.

"Myfanwy? She's all right, auntie."

Christina laughed, remembering that tea-party on the sands when he had teased her so. She would gladly accept the teasing now for the sake of seeing him quite himself again.

"I mean, where is she, Davy?"

"H'm! Up a tree, auntie."

"You goose! Won't you really tell me, Davy?"

"Not if I know it, auntie. I'd have to face her wrath if I did, and she'd scold—oh, how she'd scold! Have you ever heard her when she's cross?"

"I've heard you," Christina said suggestively.

"She's worse, much worse. She's a lady, you see. Ladies know how to scold, don't they, Polly-Joan? And then she's Welsh, you know."

"Have you seen her lately, Davy?"

"As lately as you have, anyway, auntie."

"You provoking boy! When did you see her last?"

"Not so very long ago, auntie."

Christina sighed.

"Never mind. I'll talk to you presently, Davy."

"Now I'm going to catch it! You'll hold my hand, Dimity, if she's very fierce, won't you? You like me, don't you, Timmy-Dimmy?"

"I know what she'll say!" Taffy was beginning. "She always does—" when Dimity fulfilled their hopes by slipping her hand into Davy's and murmuring shyly that she and Monk liked him jus' awful much.

The boys jeered and the girls laughed, but Davy was serious and sympathetic.

"Yes, I'm sure you do. All little girls do. There's a little girl in my house in Blaenau who's only free, and she likes me jus' awful, *awful* much."

"My dear Monk an' me are only free," said Dimity confidentially.

"Really and truly? And have you found that screechy yet?"

"No!" cried the boys together. "We've searched and searched, but it's all no use."

"Ah!" and Davy winked knowingly. "You need me to help you. I know just where that screechy lives. He's a great friend of mine. Does he still screech?"

"Sometimes. We heard him 'bout a week ago." Christina reddened and avoided Davy's eyes, but the others did not notice. "Where does he live, Davy? Tell us, and we'll find him as soon as we get back."

"I'm afraid I couldn't describe it exactly, but it's quite easy to find. You must have passed the place dozens of times."

"Is it up in a tree?"

"No, not exactly up in a tree."

"Is it in a bush?"

"Not exactly in a bush."

"Is it in the ivy?"

"Well, not exactly in the ivy!"

They looked at him doubtfully, and he laughed.

"Here's the station! Now for Festiniog!"

"Thought this was Festy-what-d'you-call-it?"

"Oh no! This is only Blaenau."

At Festiniog, in the walk to the river and falls, Christina soon found an opportunity to drop behind with Davy for a private chat. She had begged the others not to tease him with questions concerning Myfanwy, believing that he was more likely to listen to her than to them. So, as soon as they were alone together, she proceeded to enlighten him as to the reason for Alec Carruth's presence there, and the extreme advisability of allowing him and Myfanwy to meet.

Davy looked startled, then thoughtful. That any one should come from Scotland to see Myfanwy was not in itself surprising, in fact, it was very natural. But that a stranger should discern her worth from a mere passing glance in the road that was amazing indeed, for Davy's love and admiration for his sister arose from what he knew her to be in herself, and no casual look could reveal that fully.

"So you must tell us where she is! It's only fair to her, as well to him. He's rich, Davy, almost a millionaire. It would be jolly if—if——"

"Is he a decent sort of chap?" Davy asked abruptly.

"As nice as he can be. They all like him, as Dimity would say, 'jus' awful much!'"

"I'll tell her," Davy said, after a thoughtful pause. "She ought to know. I'll ask her to write to you."

"Can't you tell me where she is?" Christina asked disappointedly.

"No," he said doggedly, "I can't. I promised Myfanwy. But I'll tell her all about it the next time I see her," and that was all he would say.

"Well, he told me something, anyway, though he didn't mean to," Christina said, when they had left him at Blaenau and were in the little train on their way home. "'Next time he sees her'! So she can't be far away, if he's seeing her all the time."

"We must wait now till we hear what she says," Carruth said gravely. "She mustn't feel we're worrying her. We can't go searching for her if she isn't willing to be found. She has the right to say. We have to wait."

CHAPTER XIX.

CHRISTINA ASKS A QUESTION.

"What would you say," said Christina slowly to Billy, "if a fellow you knew had done something wrong, that nobody knew about, and he was ashamed to tell? And if he couldn't forget it, and it kept worrying him all the time? If he wanted to forget and be done with it, what would you think he ought to do?"

She scarcely knew what had brought her to this point. But she did know that she was in the position of the imaginary "fellow." She wanted to forget, and she could not. Her sacrifice in coming to Bryntirion had faded in its object. She evidently had not "made up for" the wrong done so long ago. She had done her very best, she said to herself, and it had been no use. She would have liked now to say that she would do no more and would think of it no more, but she could not. The thought of that letter—the thought of her secret—came upon her continually, and always with a keener sense of shame.

She had wondered lately what it was she ought to do, and so had come to wonder if the "red children" would be able to tell her. She was ashamed and afraid to ask Winifred. Winifred's eyes seemed to look her through and through as it was. She would surely read her secret in a moment. Christina knew she could not look her in the face and ask that question. So she asked Billy, and looked at the other side of the garden as she did so.

Winifred and Polly-Joan were in the house. To be exact, they were in the kitchen, watching the jam-making which went on every day now, and helping to scrape out the pan when all the jars had been filled. Billy and Taffy had expressed their contempt for this occupation, and had been busy with cricket on the lawn. But Taffy had smelt the jam after a while, and, under plea of being tired of cricket, had crept away to the house in hope of getting a spoonful of hot jam right out of the pan. So Billy was left to bowl at the stump which contained the wasps' nest, and Christina had found her opportunity.

Alec Carruth, Dimity, and Monkey were all out in Peter. There had as yet been no message from Myfanwy, though a fortnight had passed since the visit to Davy. Carruth had held to his resolution that she must not be worried or hurried, and that he must not try to find her against her will. He had devoted himself very thoroughly to the children, and had spent most of his time in amusing them in one way or another. But now and then he grew restless, and nothing could satisfy him but a run into the country, and the big black car had visited many of the valleys and quiet nooks and villages. Sometimes he went alone, sometimes he invited one or two of the children. And though he was not deliberately searching for his Lady of the White Horse, which would have been difficult, since lonely villages were many and solitary cottages everywhere, yet he certainly did not go about, as he said to himself, with his eyes shut.

So to-day it was Dimity and Monk who were with him in the front seat, and they had been away all afternoon.

Christina's question made Billy pause in his bowling.

"Don't quite understand. What d'you mean exactly?"

"If a fellow you knew was worried over something wrong he'd done——"

"Something caddish?"

"N—no—well—perhaps!"

"It's not that Davy chap?"

"No! Goodness gracious, no! Davy couldn't do anything mean."

"Thought he wouldn't. Well, who, then?"

"Oh, nobody! I'm only supposing," Christina said irritably.

"Oh, I see! Thought you meant somebody real. Well?"

Christina continued with distinct relief.

"If he wanted to forget it, and couldn't—if it worried him all the time—what would you think he ought to do?"

Billy knit his brows. "Is it a riddle?"

"Riddle? No! I was only wondering what you'd say."

"It's rather a puzzler, all the same," said Billy, frowning, but flattered that she should ask his opinion. "I'll think about it. D'you mean—you said nobody knew he'd done it?"

"No."

"Well, were they blaming some other chap? There's generally somebody blamed for anything that goes wrong."

"But if they weren't blaming anybody? If nobody knew anything about it?"

"But somebody would be sure to know!" Billy cried sharply. "The thing he'd done, whatever it was, would be sure to hurt somebody. Somebody would be certain to be blaming somebody else. Then that wouldn't be fair, and of course he'd feel bad. Then the only thing to do would be to speak up and say he'd done it, for the other chap's sake—no matter what happened. I should think he jolly well would feel bad till he'd put things right, and a good thing too."

"Yes, but if there wasn't any other chap?" Christina insisted. "If no one else had been blamed, and no one knew anything about it but himself?"

"Don't see how that could be possible at all," Billy said sturdily. "He'd done something wrong to somebody? Well, then, that somebody would be sure to blame somebody else. There's always some one blamed for everything that's done."

"But if there wasn't?" Christina persisted. "If no one knew anything at all about it, but he felt bad all the same?"

"Don't see how nobody could know," Billy said again. "Some one would be sure to. But even if they didn't," he added, "I should think he'd have to speak out about it before he'd stop feeling bad. Secrets aren't any good. I don't like 'em. I should think he'd need to tell somebody, sometime or other. There would be certain to be *somebody* he ought to tell," he insisted.

Christina said no more, but she felt very dissatisfied. It was strange that Billy's verdict should confirm that whisper which she had defied so long. "Speak out about it!" That was just what she had said she would never do!

CHAPTER XX. TEA WITH A PRINCESS.

"Now, Timmy-Dimmy, do you know where we're going to-day?" Alec Carruth asked, as Peter bore them gently up the white road and away towards Portmadoc.

"No, Alec, we don't know one bit," and she hugged Monk and waited expectantly. "But we want to hear jus' awful much."

He laughed. "We're going into Dreamland. Do you remember that little lake we saw from the Toy Railway, away down in the valley, among lots of trees?"

"Yes! Jus' 'fore ve long black tunnel, when we were dropped on ve floor, an' we all coughed——"

"That's it. Well, we're going there, right down close to the water. I saw a fine road, and I'm quite sure there must be a cottage down by the edge where we can have tea together, just you and me and Monk. Now, won't you like that jus' awful much?"

"Yes, jus' awful, *awful* much, we will, my dear Monk an' me," and Dimity beamed upon him happily.

"I thought you would. I'm sure there's a cottage just waiting for us."

It did not take Peter very long to find her way to Tan-y-bwlch. It was a hot, still afternoon, and even Snowdon in the distance was very clear. The bare head of Moelwyn stood gauntly out before them as they skirted the base of Moelddu, and every rock and crag, every hill and slope, was clothed with richest pink and purple heather. Even the golden glory of the summer gorse seemed almost overshadowed by the royal purple garment of the autumn.

"There is our dear little wee lake!" and Dimity pointed eagerly forward and down.

"Yes, there it is waiting for us," and Peter took the steep slope very carefully lest she should be afraid.

Down the hill, and then they were creeping along beside the water—for he would not hurry now that their goal was reached. On one side of the road was the steep slope of a hill, clothed with bare-stemmed dark pines and bright cushions of moss and heather. On the other a low stone wall separated them from the lake—shining silver where the sun struck the water, a shadowy mirror where the dark trees shut out the light.

"We haven't ever seen trees standing on veir heads in ve water before, my dear Monk an' me," ventured Dimity. "But it is jus' awful pretty."

"We are won'ring if it's all asleep," she said presently. "Do trees go to sleep, Alec? Haven't vey wakened up yet?"

"They're not asleep," he said, and stopped Peter for a moment. "They're talking in a whisper, so as not to wake the birds, Dimity. Listen!"

A faint breeze stirred the branches of the pines and they rustled and sighed, and Dimity held Monk up to listen.

"All talkin' in a whisper, so's not to wake ve birds!" she explained, in a hushed undertone. "Oh, Alec, we like vis place jus' awful much!"

"Now we must find that cottage for tea," and they went on towards the end of the lake.

Here were cottages, certainly, but only one or two, each very lonely among the trees. An artistic little house in green and brown, beside big gates and a carriage drive, was evidently the entrance to an estate. But farther up the road, a board in a hedge announced "Teas for

Cyclists,” and although it was not by the water’s edge, they accepted its invitation and drew up before the little gate.

No one was about, so Carruth lifted down Dimity and Monk, and they entered the garden. The cottage was whitewashed, with overhanging thatch, and had a low porch with very low wooden seats. The garden in front and at the side was enclosed by a high hedge of gorse, which still held a few stray flowers like golden butterflies. But in front of the gorse on the edge of the lawn, was a row, almost as thick as the hedge, of tall sweet peas, with blooms of every colour in rich confusion. And tending them, snipping off faded flowers which had shown a tendency towards seed-pods, and carrying a great bunch of freshly-cut sprays, was a tall girl in a garden dress of pale green linen, with a large white garden hat on her dark hair.

She turned as the gate swung to, and at sight of Dimity and Monk her eyes grew startled and her cheeks flushed the colour of her crimson peas. For she had heard everything from Davy, and was not quite sure whether to be displeased that he had followed her uninvited, or not. Davy’s story had taken her so completely by surprise that she had not known what to do, and had begged for time to think it over. Not that she was unwilling to see the stranger who had come from Glasgow in the hope of seeing her again. She was willing enough, and even curious concerning him; but she had felt strangely shy at the thought of meeting him and had kept putting off any definite action.

It was impossible to shut her eyes to the possible consequences of a meeting, and she had felt startled, and, after their recent experiences, unprepared for anything which might lead to further change. She had hesitated, also, to give anything which might be looked upon as an invitation, or even to disclose her hiding-place, for fear more might afterwards be expected of her than she was prepared to grant. So she had wondered, and delayed, feeling that she had a right to take her own time in such a matter. She had not expected him to follow her, and was half inclined to be indignant that he had not waited. But the sight of the black car, and the presence of Dimity and Monk, left no doubt as to his identity, and the startled look in her eyes, and the sudden colour in her cheeks, told him that she knew.

He saw her hesitation, and understood its cause. His face had filled with eager delight at sight of her, but now it grew suddenly resolute and he went forward quickly, leaving Dimity hugging Monk and gazing round-eyed at Myfanwy over the furry body.

“Miss Myfanwy, I apologise for coming upon you like this. You will think we are intruding wilfully. Please believe me when I say I had not the slightest idea you were here. We saw the lake from the railway the other day, and it invited us to a picnic. Dimity and Monk and I came here solely in quest of a pleasant afternoon’s run, and if possible a cup of tea. We could not possibly know we should be disturbing you. We will go away at once if you wish.”

Myfanwy reddened again, ashamed now of her hesitation.

“Indeed no! That is nonsense. Of course you could not know, for Davy would not——”

“No, he wouldn’t. I believe Christina did her best, but, as she says, when Davy has promised you, he’s hopeless.”

She smiled, and crossed the grass to Dimity and Monk, and bent to kiss them both.

“And how do you and Monk like the lake, Dimity?”

“Jus’ awful much,” and Myfanwy’s eyes met Carruth’s, and they both laughed.

“Now I must put my flowers in water. If you will sit down, I will see about that cup of tea,” and she disappeared into the cottage.

Under a group of pine trees, where the ground was dry and soft with spiky needles and fallen cones, were three long tables and some garden seats and forms. Alec Carruth lifted

Dimity and Monk on to a form, and sat down himself where he could see the gate and patient Peter outside. He looked puzzled, and a trifle dissatisfied, as he waited for Myfanwy to reappear.

Dimity wriggled down from her seat.

“Want to see if vere’s any flowers wiv little wee pink bonnets on,” she explained, and made for the row of peas.

“Bonnets, Timmy-Dimmy?”

“Yes, pink bonnets. My dear Monk an’ me liked vem jus’ awful much, in her ovver garden,” and she and Monk walked up and down, but failed to find “Red Riding Hood.”

Presently from out of the cottage came an old woman, small and wrinkled, dressed all in black, and wearing a man’s soft hat on her smooth grey hair. She spread a white cloth on the end of their table, and offered them hearty greeting: “Pr’dnawn da! Goot afternoon! Indeed, it iss hot to-tay—yess! Tea for two—no, three?” with a smiling glance at Dimity and Monk hastily taking their seats again lest they should be late. “And cakes for the little lady? And mebbe some jam? Yess? Well, indeed, it will be all ready in three minutes. The kettle iss nearly boiling.”

Carruth had looked relieved at sight of her, but he still waited anxiously for Myfanwy. Presently she came, bringing dainty glass dishes in which stood her flowers, to set them on the tea-table, and he tried to keep her talking with them there.

“Dimity is looking for flowers with bonnets on,” he said.

“Wee pink bonnets, Myfanwy——”

Myfanwy smiled. “I remember. You liked them jus’ awful much, didn’t you, Dimity? But there aren’t any here, I’m afraid. You see, I only discovered them this year, and these are all grown from my last year’s seeds.”

“Christina took me to see your garden at Llanystumdwy,” said Carruth. “She goes over every few days to cut off the seeds, because she says you didn’t like them to run to seed, so they are looking beautiful still.”

Myfanwy looked pleased. “Indeed, now, that’s very good of her! Of course, it really doesn’t matter to me now how soon they die, but I was sorry, all the same, that they should go before their time. It seemed so hard on the poor things, when they had grown so well all the spring.”

“But you have found others here waiting for you.”

“These are my grandchildren,” she smiled. “I gave the seed to Mrs. Jones in the spring. All my last year’s favourites are here. Aren’t they beauties? Look at this giant white! And the mauve—and the crimson—and the cream, they always smell most sweetly of all, I think. And this pale pink is the prettiest of all. I’ve tried several new kinds since I discovered it, but none of them come near it. See how the back petal is waved, like a Frenchwoman’s crimped cap. Isn’t it pretty, all crinkly round the edge?”

She touched the flowers lovingly as she spoke of each in turn, and Carruth watched her and scarcely heard what she was saying. Then she laughed, and turned to go.

“But you won’t get any tea if I stand talking here, and that won’t do, when you have come all the way from Criccieth for it! Indeed, I won’t keep you waiting very long.”

He sprang up. “Miss Myfanwy——”

But she laughed again, and disappeared into the cottage, and he stood, looking still more worried and distinctly dissatisfied again.

Then he sprang forward, as she came out carrying a big tray with cups and plates, and dishes of jam and cakes, and a goodly supply of bread and butter.

“Miss Myfanwy——”

“No, please, don’t! You’ll spill something, I know you will!” she cried ruefully, as he took the tray out of her hands.

“It’s too heavy for you.”

“Heavy! I lift it every day. Put it here, please.”

She set the cups and saucers in their places, and Dimity beamed with delight when one plate was set before her and another before Monkey.

“We do like each of us to have one plate all to ourselves——”

“Jus’ awful much?” Alec suggested gravely, but Dimity was still unconscious of sarcasm.

“Yes, jus’ awful, *awful* much!” she nodded, and he felt properly ashamed of himself.

Myfanwy escaped into the cottage again, and he stood by the table, irresolute, but very dissatisfied. If it was a fact, as seemed obvious from her words and behaviour, that she was in the habit of thus waiting upon casual visitors to tea, he did not like the thought of it at all, but he hardly saw how he could interfere. Certainly he had no right to remonstrate with anything she chose to do, and if he made the attempt she might well be angry. But he felt very uncomfortable, and he was sure Christina and her other friends in Criccieth would feel the same. Perhaps on that point he might venture on a word or two.

Dimity looked up at him anxiously. There was strawberry jam, and the cakes had pink sugar, and there were some chocolate biscuits. What more could even a grown-up want?

“My dear Monk an’ me are wantin’ our tea, Alec! It is an awful good tea, we think.”

Then Myfanwy came out with the teapot, and placed it before Dimity, and arranged the cups and saucers in front of her. Dimity looked up with startled eyes.

“We can’t pour out, Myfanwy! We’re only free, an’—an’ we’re ’fraid we’d spill——”

“But the lady of the party always has to pour out!” smiled Myfanwy.

But Dimity was shy. Winifred or Polly-Joan would have risen to the occasion and accepted the honour with alacrity, but to Dimity the teapot would only be a stumbling-block coming between her and those pink cakes, and keeping her back from more important matters.

“We don’t want to, Myfanwy! We aren’t ladies yet, an’——”

“And one of us is a dear Monkey, who isn’t likely ever to be a lady,” put in Alec. “I don’t think you could allow a monkey to pour out at your table, Miss Myfanwy, and Dimity can’t possibly do it without him, so there’s nothing for it, I’m afraid, but for Dimity and Monk to move up and make room for you. You’ll come to our help, won’t you, since we’re only mere men and monkeys?”

Myfanwy laughed and hesitated.

“Do you think I ought to?”

“Of course. It’s a duty. I don’t know how to pour out tea. I’d put the milk in before the sugar, or the sugar in before the milk, or something dreadful like that. Surely you’ll take pity on us? It’s after four o’clock, and we’re wanting our tea jus’ awful much.”

Myfanwy laughed again. “Well, if nobody else comes——”

“There isn’t a soul about the place. The roads are absolutely empty.”

“Yes, it is lonely, isn’t it? We’re not often very busy,” and she lifted Dimity and Monk farther up the form and took command of the teapot.

“I wonder if you and Monk can manage with one cup between you, Timmy-Dimmy? Or suppose you run and ask the old lady for another?” and Dimity, shy, but anxious that Monk

should be duly provided for, scrambled down from her seat and ran to the cottage door, to ask for “one more cup, please, for my dear Monk an’ me.”

Myfanwy laughed. “That’s really too bad. Mrs. Jones won’t understand. She speaks very little English,” and then the old woman appeared at the door, evidently puzzled as to what the small child and the monkey could want.

Myfanwy called out a word of Welsh, and Dimity came hastening back, with the cup and plate held carefully in both hands and dear Monk under her arm.

“She di’n’t know what Monk an’ me were saying!” she announced gleefully, as she took her place again. “We do like tea in a garden, my dear Monk an’ me, an’ we do like pink cakes.”

Carruth was wondering how to approach the subject which was troubling him. He plunged into it at last, without any preparation.

“Miss Myfanwy, am I making a mistake, or are you in the habit of doing this?”

She gave him a startled look. “What? Taking tea with anybody who happens to ask me? Certainly not!——”

“I didn’t mean that. You are being very good to us. I know quite well that we asked a favour, and that you only granted it because Dimity and Monk are old friends——”

Dimity and Monk, very busy with strawberry jam, stared round-eyed, and nodded in acknowledgment of their friendship.

“I meant, are you in the habit of giving tea to passers-by, and waiting upon them yourself?”

Myfanwy looked seriously at him over the tea cosy.

“Certainly! You saw our board in the hedge. I suppose that was what brought you in.”

“Is it necessary?—for you, I mean? It’s not right that you should have to do it. I am quite sure Christina and Mr. and Mrs. Clevelly and all your other friends would not like it if they knew.”

“No, I don’t think they would,” Myfanwy agreed composedly. “That’s why they don’t know. That’s why I haven’t told them where I am. I like helping Nansi—Mrs. Jones, you know. She’s a very old friend of mine. I like helping her, and it’s quite easy work, but I don’t want all the Criccieth people coming teasing me. So I hope you and Dimity and Monk will keep my secret.”

“Is it necessary you should do it?”

“I want to do it!” she said quickly. “It would be a fine thing if I lived here with Nansi, and never lifted a finger to help her, wouldn’t it? We don’t have very much to do, but she really needs my help, for she speaks very little English, and the girl who lived with her before has had to go away to nurse her mother. So I came just at the right time.”

“It isn’t fit for you——”

“Now that’s utter nonsense,” she said warmly, forgetting that he was a stranger, and eager to justify herself. “I know some people would say that. That’s why I’ve kept it a secret, because I can’t be arguing with people all the time. You’re the first who has had a chance to find fault with me, but I knew some one would, sooner or later. I know what Christina would say, for instance, but it’s nonsense all the same. You don’t say it’s wrong for Davy to work, I suppose? We never thought he’d have to. We expected him to go to college, and then live at Rhianfa to look after things there. But since there’s need for him to work, he’s ready to do it. And so am I. How is it different for me? Why should it be different for a girl? I’m as able as Davy, and I’ve had several lazy years since I left school, while he had to leave before his time.

I don't see why it's different for me, just because I'm a girl. Indeed, wouldn't it look nice if Davy worked hard and I did nothing! Wouldn't I feel content! I'm six years older than he, and I'll not have him working for me—not yet. Some day perhaps he will, but just now if he can keep himself he'll do remarkably well. If I can pay Mrs. Jones by my help for my board here, I'm only too glad to do it. When we decided to leave Rhianfa, I was determined to work somehow and somewhere. Davy didn't want me to, but I made him see that I must, if I was to be happy. This is very much easier than being a governess in Liverpool, and I infinitely prefer it. I wouldn't have patience for teaching. In the winter I shall make cakes and sweets, and try to sell them. There are more people living within reach of us than you'd think, and my cakes must be nice, I think!" with a glance at Dimity. "Next year we're going to advertise 'Schools and Picnic Parties Catered For,' and perhaps we'll let our spare room too, in which case I shall wait on the visitors, for it would be too much for old Nansi. Now, have you anything to say against it?"

"You won't do anything of the kind," he said to himself, but aloud said only:

"I shall come and stop in your rooms next year, Miss Myfanwy."

Her eyes fell before his, and she said quickly:

"Well, don't you think I'm right? Don't you think it's best?"

"I think probably you are right, and that you could not have been content in any other way," he said gravely.

"I had quite a fight with Nansi before she would let me help her. But I knew I was right. And you won't tell Christina or any one, will you?"

The advantage of being silent as to the hiding-place of his princess was quite apparent to him.

"I think it would be a mean trick to betray you," he said seriously, and Myfanwy smiled.

"Please don't tell them. Christina would come and call me names, and scold, and cry, as she did at Rhianfa, and it's really no use."

"She told me how you came to leave home," he said soberly. "It wasn't necessary, you know. No one could have asked you to make such a sacrifice."

"But we felt it necessary, and that was all that mattered, wasn't it?" she said quickly. "We couldn't have done anything else. Have you—yes, you've seen Davy, haven't you? He's been splendidly plucky about it, for he simply hates the thought of office work of any kind, and he's so young to have to begin in earnest. I was sorry——"

"It won't hurt him. He's gone into it like a man, and he'll be none the worse for it."

He sat thoughtfully staring into his tea-cup, and she awoke suddenly in dismay to her duties as hostess.

"But you aren't having any tea! Please let me give you some more! And do help yourself to cakes! I shouldn't have talked so much. I'm sorry. What about you, Dimity? Some more tea for dear Monk?"

Dimity and Monk had been busy with jam and pink cakes, and as Dimity was making full use of her opportunity and of plates and cups for both, she was doing very well. Silently busy while the grown-ups "talked business," she had filled both Monkey's plate and her own with jam and helped herself to bread and butter for both. When all this supply had disappeared, she had sampled the pink cakes in the same double quantities, and finally the chocolate biscuits, so by this time dear Monk and she were approaching a state of satisfaction and had enjoyed themselves "jus' awful much," as she informed them, beaming happily upon them both.

She held out both her own cup and Monk's to be refilled, and Myfanwy smiled, and was careful to make them only half full.

"Then you won't tell Christina, or any one at all?" she said presently, when they rose.

"No, we won't tell—will we, Dimity?"

Dimity looked up, with round startled eyes.

"Is it a secret?" she asked anxiously. "Winifred says it's bad to have secrets, an' Billy says if Taffy has secrets he'll jump out on him in ve dark an' make him scream. We—we don't want to be frightened in ve dark, my dear Monk an' me, for we're 'fraid, an' we're only——"

Myfanwy looked puzzled, but Carruth understood, and hastened to reassure her.

"Some secrets are good, not bad, Dimity, and this is one of the good ones. We haven't done anything bad, you and I, have we?"

"No, nor Monk, 'cept—we *did* eat too many pink cakes," said Dimity doubtfully.

"But they were Miss Myfanwy's cakes, and she said you might have them——"

"We do like Myfanwy jus' awful much, my dear Monk an' me!"

"Well, when a lady asks you to keep a secret, it's quite right to do it. And you'd like to do what Miss Myfanwy wants, wouldn't you? So don't tell anybody that we met her here to-day, for it's her secret, not ours, and it wouldn't be fair to tell. Do you and Monk understand?"

She nodded, and they led Myfanwy out to admire patient Peter waiting at the gate.

"Let us take you for a run—just for ten minutes!" Carruth suggested. "You would enjoy it. She's a beauty."

Myfanwy looked doubtful. "And suppose somebody came wanting tea? It's very kind of you, indeed, but——"

"The old lady will look after them, and, anyway, there's not a soul in sight."

She stepped in at last, and accepted the loan of a big coat because he made her do so, and he carried her and Dimity and Monk off towards Beddgelert, and had reached the little flat plain among the mountain walls, and the little town, and the grave under the tree, before she had thought it time to suggest turning back.

"It can't be the Bridge already!" she exclaimed, as they shot down the white road under the arching trees to Pont Aberglaslyn, and, crossing the old bridge, began the ascent of the Pass.

"Beautiful roads about here. But we must go slowly up the Pass."

"Shall we turn back now?"

He laughed. "No, no. Sit still. You're not on your horse to-day."

"It's such a distance to have come."

"That's where a car has the advantage. Peter will take us back quickly."

"I wouldn't have believed we could get here so quickly," she said, as they passed through the fields towards the town. "It has been delightful. But I really think you must take me home now, please."

"We're coming again to carry you off for a run, if we may, and next time it must be a longer one," he said, as they set her down before the cottage. "That's our reward for keeping the secret. That's the price of our silence. We shall come back again for tea, too, you know. Those pink cakes were jus' awful nice."

"Yes!" nodded Dimity, as Myfanwy laughed and reddened. "Jus' awful, *awful* nice, my dear Monk an' me fought vey were. We want to come back again jus' awful much."

CHAPTER XXI.

CHRISTINA ASKS ANOTHER QUESTION.

“What’s the best way to forget?” asked Christina of Alec Carruth.

They were on the Llanystumdwy road, and something had gone wrong with one of Peter’s tyres. Carruth was taking her as far as Rhianfa, before setting out on one of those lonely runs into the country, which had taken up so much of his time lately. Sometimes he took Dimity and Monk with him. Sometimes he went alone.

For a fortnight Christina had been thinking over Billy’s answer. She would have dismissed his suggestion at once had it not been seconded by her own feelings. But it had agreed so exactly with that thought which had for so long lain unheeded behind all other thoughts, that try as she would she could not banish it from her mind. So now she had followed Alec till she found him alone, in the hope of gaining some help from him. Perhaps his answer would contradict Billy’s and prove it to have been wrong. Perhaps he would suggest some less difficult course.

“The way to forget?” he repeated, somewhat surprised by such a serious question. “Why, try, try, try again, I should say, and if at first you don’t succeed——”

“But if you’ve tried so often that you’re quite sure trying isn’t any use?”

“Then I should say there’s something wrong. What is it you want to forget?”

“Oh, it isn’t—I never said it was me,” she said hastily, reckless of grammar. “I was only supposing.”

“Oh, I see! Well, what kind of thing were you supposing you wanted to forget?”

Christina looked at him sharply, but he was very busy with the tyre and was not looking at her.

“It’s only imaginary,” she said quickly. “But I was just wondering what a person would do if they’d done something wrong and couldn’t forget it?”

Carruth looked at her keenly this time, wondering what lay behind this “supposing.” But her eyes met his defiantly, and he saw she was not prepared to explain. So he set himself to help her if he could.

“When a person has done wrong,” he said soberly, “he’s generally uneasy about it until he has been forgiven by the person he wronged.”

“Oh!” said Christina.

This certainly threw light on the matter. Billy, perhaps from lack of experience, had said nothing about forgiveness. Confession of a wrong which was known to nobody had seemed aimless and unnecessary. What was the good of telling anybody about a thing so far in the past? It was two whole months ago now. But if the aim of confession was to win forgiveness, there was reason in it. She could well understand that a sense of being forgiven could bring also the possibility of forgetting. She began to understand.

But in this particular case, she still felt puzzled. From whom ought she to seek forgiveness? From Winifred? From all the children? The thought was very distasteful, and, moreover, did not quite satisfy her.

“But,” she argued slowly, “what if nobody knew anything about it? People can’t forgive what they know nothing about!”

"No, and so wrong things must be confessed before they can be forgiven, and the person in the wrong must say he is sorry," Alec said gravely, and hoped he had helped her.

Christina sighed, and pushed back her shady hat with a troubled air. As a rule, while she tended the peas in the garden, she thought of Myfanwy and Davy, and wondered where Myfanwy was, and how Davy was getting on, and if he was very tired of Blaenau. But to-day she could think only of Carruth's advice and how it affected herself.

She wondered, as he set her down in Llanystumdwy, and Peter turned and sped away back towards Criccieth, where he was going and if he was not tired of driving alone. But as she worked among the peas, snipping off seed-pods and tying up stragglers, and cutting a big bunch to carry home to Bryntirion, she thought of his advice again and puzzled much over it.

In coming to Bryntirion, she had not gained her object. She had not forgotten. She remembered more than ever. But she wanted to forget. She was heartily sorry she had done wrong—and ashamed of it too. As she could not undo what was done, she had tried her best to atone for it by showing kindness to the children, and she knew she had succeeded in making their stay much pleasanter than it might have been. But so far as she herself was concerned, she had failed. She was still ashamed of her guilty secret, and quite unable to forget it. The "red children" had made her see certain things in a new light. She realised that, in their words, she had done a "caddish" thing, and she was keenly anxious that they should never know.

But on every hand the only suggestion which met her was "Confess!" That meant that they must know.

She sat on the grass, idly sorting the peas into colours. Much as she had thought of late, she was thinking far more seriously now.

"They'd say it was caddish, and mean, I know they would. I suppose it was. They'll never speak to me again, if they ever know. And—and—it's not only the thing itself that's so dreadful. It's having hidden it all this time. 'Hiding things is a caddish trick!' Billy says. I've hidden it for two months. And the longer I go on hiding it, the worse it is, of course. I never thought of that before!" she said aloud, in sudden dismay. "I was thinking it was all done with long ago, but I'm making it worse all the time! Oh, I wish I hadn't! I do wish I hadn't done it. . . . I suppose lots of people have wished that! . . . Then, of course"—following out her line of thought—"making up for it can't be any good when I'm still keeping it a secret. I suppose that's why I can't forget it. . . . I ought to tell. But I can't—oh, I can't! What shall I do? I don't know who to ask. . . . I believe I'd ask Myfanwy, if she was here. I believe I'd tell her all about it. . . . Ought I to tell Winifred and all the others? It doesn't seem as if I ought to do that. What good would come of it? They don't know anything about it, and it would only make them hate me," she thought piteously. "Oh, I don't want them to know! But I don't know what to do. I wish Myfanwy was here! I want somebody to help me. I want somebody to tell me what to do!"

But she could not bring herself to ask Marion or Harry, and Myfanwy did not know that she was wanted.

CHAPTER XXII.

PICNICS WITH A PRINCESS.

Carruth had gone to Tan-y-bwlch by arrangement to-day.

Some days before, he had arrived at the cottage, hoping to coax Myfanwy into going with him for a long day's run into the heart of Wales, but had found her very busy preparing for a Sunday-school party from Blaenau, who were expecting tea about four o'clock. There were to be fifty of them, so she had hardly time to stop to speak to him in the intervals of cutting bread and butter and heaping up thick slices of cake.

So he left the car outside, and offered himself as a volunteer. She declared he would be quite no use at all, but he insisted on having a share, and pointed to a tiny blister on the first finger of her right hand.

"I'll finish the bread and butter. If I can't cut bread and butter it's funny. You arrange the flowers for the table, Miss Myfanwy."

She laughed at the idea that this was all she was fit for, and pointed to a row of vases ready on a shelf.

"I did those last night to save time. My tea-tables will be the prettiest this Sunday-school has ever sat down at."

"I'm sure they will," he agreed. "It's a perfect flower show."

Pink and white, blue and white, crimson and white, mauve and white, scarlet and white, deep rich maroon and white, orange and white, lavender and white, violet and white, coral and white, purple and white—that was her colour scheme for the day. Every colour she could muster had a dish to itself, with a few of the great wide-open white beauties in each. Only the cream were not represented on the tables, for obvious reasons, but these she had arranged in a spray for her own dress, and when Alec Carruth insisted on staying for the afternoon, to hand round the cups and amuse the children, she presented him with a buttonhole of the same.

"Our badge—the sign of the house, you know! These yellow really smell the sweetest, I always think, though the pale pink are prettier."

Mrs. Jones, inside the cottage, heard their talk and laughter as he cut the bread and she went round the flower-decked tables with plates and cups and saucers, and smiled at the sound. It had been dull for Myfanwy, indeed yes, and the gentleman was good-looking and obviously rich. When Myfanwy came in presently for a supply of spoons, old Nansi's comments made her laugh and blush and scold, but when Carruth followed and insisted on buying every peppermint she had in the house, for the children to scramble for in the afternoon, she had nothing to say against him.

That Sunday-school picnic enjoyed itself as it had never done before. In fact, the teachers and officials were almost distressed, since they could not possibly hope to attain to this another year, and they would certainly be expected to. The children would not soon forget their tea in the garden under the pines, with walls of sweet peas on each side, and those vases on the table which they were urged to empty after tea, carrying the flowers away with them, and certainly they would not forget the Lady of the Sweet Peas who waited on them and had a smile for every one. Still less would they forget the gentleman who deluged them with bull's-eyes and chocolates, and who carried the heavy tea urns to and from the cottage.

"Indeed, I won't say I'm not tired," said Myfanwy, when the buses had carried them off at last. "But hasn't it been fun! Thank you so much for all your help. I think they had a good time, poor mites! Fancy living all your life in Blaenau! Poor Davy, I wonder if he's very sick of it yet!"

"What time does he knock off work?" Carruth asked thoughtfully.

"About six."

"It's just that now. I'll take Peter along, and get him to come out for a run for an hour or two. It will freshen him up for to-morrow."

Myfanwy's face lit up. "Indeed, that's more than good of you! If you really will, I shan't know how to thank you enough."

"Won't you come too?" he suggested innocently, as though this had not been his object all the time. "It would be much jollier for Davy. My big coat's lying there just wanting to be used."

"But I have to wash up fifty cups and fifty saucers and fifty plates and fifty spoons!" she objected ruefully.

"Let them wait till to-morrow," he said, knowing very well that Mrs. Jones would make short work of them in her absence.

"Do you think I ought?"

"I think there's no doubt of it. You've been standing all day, and it's time you rested," he assured her gravely. "And think how much jollier it will be for Davy! We'll give him a fine surprise. But we're wasting time and shortening our ride, you know."

So she allowed herself to be persuaded, and she was hurried into the car, tucked in, and they swooped down upon Davy as he was setting out for a lonely evening stroll. Before he had recovered from his surprise at sight of them, he was in the car, with a bunch of sweet-scented yellow peas in his buttonhole, and Blaenau, with its quarries and streets and slate, was far behind.

They were travelling well over sixty miles an hour. Under the circumstances, Master Alec was not likely to think twice about speed limits, and he had glanced at his road map and knew exactly where he meant to go. By way of Roman Bridge, he carried them without a pause to the Fairy Glen. Then, as they recognised it, and gasped to find themselves there so soon, they made their way more carefully through Bettws-y-coed, and, getting up speed once more, raced away northwards towards the sea.

"Where are you taking us?" cried Myfanwy. "Shall we get back to-night?"

"It's only seven," he laughed. "It's light till half-past, and I've got good headlamps. You'll like coming home in the dark. It's full moon, and in these quiet roads we can do almost any speed. We're going a little farther yet."

Through Llanrwst, and then Trefriw, and even Davy, who was enjoying himself intensely, asked how far he meant to go. But Carruth said briefly:

"Don't speak to the man at the wheel!" and they raced on without further answer.

Mountain after mountain fell behind, and the river, whose course they were following, opened out like a lake, and by way of Talycain they came triumphantly into Conway as the sun was setting.

"There! That's an achievement worth boasting of. You can tell them at the office to-morrow, Davy, that you had supper at the seaside last night."

"I wouldn't have believed it was possible," said Myfanwy.

“Half-an-hour for supper, and then back the way we came. I’d like to run along the coast to Carnarvon, and home by Llanberis, but I’m afraid it might make us rather late,” he said lightly.

“Why, you want to see the whole of Wales in one evening!”

“Oh, this isn’t seeing! We’ll take them more slowly another time. But I wanted to convert Davy. I believe he had rather a prejudice against fast cars. And I felt like scorching to-night, after our exciting day with the kiddies.”

“Did we kill anything as we came along?”

“I never kill anything,” he assured her. “Not even chickens, if I can help it, but it takes a really clever driver to avoid chickens sometimes.”

“I felt sure we must kill something, if not ourselves, going at that frightful rate.”

“But it was ripping!” Davy said enthusiastically. “I *was* a bit prejudiced, but then I’d never tried a racer. But it’s just as well my Jenkin wasn’t there to see. He would have despised me dreadfully. Does auntie like it?”

“Auntie?”

“Christina, you know. I guess she hasn’t dared to tell Shenkin.”

“Oh, she says it’s awfully nice, once you get used to it. In fact, they all enjoy it just awful much,” he laughed, and led them into a hotel for supper.

But such evening jaunts were not enough to satisfy him, so he pleaded for, and at last obtained, a promise from Myfanwy that she would keep a certain day free for a longer trip, when they could go more slowly.

And so, having left Christina at Rhianfa that morning, he went to claim the fulfilment of the promise. Hidden under the seat was a big picnic basket, and he had great plans for the day.

Myfanwy appeared at the door when she heard the horn, and presented Peter with a bunch of pink peas as a badge, and Carruth with the same as a buttonhole. She slipped on the big coat, as requested, waved farewell to old Nansi, and asked where they were going to-day.

But that was a secret. She was to wait and see. So she laughed, and took note of every village till she should guess their destination.

Maentwrog first, and then Festiniog, were familiar enough. But here they turned to the east, and took the road through the mountains till a long shining lake appeared, and she cried out in delight.

“Is it Bala? Oh, how beautiful!”

“Yes, Bala. I thought a picnic on the shore would be jolly.”

“I’d like it just awful much!” said Myfanwy. “But what are we to eat? Oh, we can get something in the town!”

He laughed, but refused to stop in the town, and bore her on to the lake. There, having found a spot among the trees, with the water at their feet, and the sharp peak of Arrenig in front across the lake, he produced his basket, and proceeded to lay the cloth and set the table, while Myfanwy, who had offered to help, meekly obeyed orders, and sat by the water till he was ready, and Peter waited disconsolately up in the road.

When they had lunched, he carried her on down the side of the lake, and then slowly up the ascent of the watershed, with bleak stony wildernesses on every side, and only heather and thin grass and scraggy bushes to feed and shelter the sheep. Then down the other side at a good pace once more, and so into grey Dolgelly under the shadow of Cader, and on by the blue estuary and heathery slopes to the sea.

“What a wonderful treat you are giving me! We shall see half of Wales to-day,” she said, as he paused on Barmouth Bridge, and they looked up the river towards the mountains. “Isn’t it beautiful beyond words?”

Tea they took in Harlech, and strolled on the sandhills for a time. Then he proposed to call on Christina at Criccieth, but Myfanwy laughingly declined, and chose rather to go straight home to her mountain lake.

“I shall never forget it,” she said, as he left her at the cottage gate.

“Neither shall I,” said he.

CHAPTER XXIII. CHRISTINA DECIDES.

Christina had said good-bye to Bryntirion, and was taking care of the Dolls' House once more.

She had been summoned home by Marion. Bryntirion did not really need her, now that Alec Carruth had accepted the post of amusement-maker-in-chief, and she was needed at the Dolls' House. For the measles of the Jackanories—"Sounds like a French exercise," laughed Billy—was better, and they had been carried off for a change of air. Being the Jackanories, they had taken nearly two months to recover from what should have been a very simple illness. Being the Jackanories, they had seen fit to indulge in various complications, and the delicate chests had been troublesome long after every sign of measles had left them. But they were well again at last, and off to Morfa Nevin for the sake of its bracing air, and Christina and Shenkin, dear Bill, Mary, and Elizabeth, were taking care of the Dolls' House, with a little help from Cook.

Christina had not been sorry to leave Bryntirion. She liked her nephews and nieces, but she was uneasy and restless now, and she knew, and even admitted it to herself, that there was only one way to end her discomfort. Every one had told her what in her heart she had known already. She had gone to Bryntirion determined never to yield on this point. She left convinced that there was no other way. The question was, could she bring herself to it? And how? And when?

She did not want Winifred, or Billy, or Polly-Joan to know. But every one urged her to confession. Must she tell them? What good would it do? Surely it was a pity, when they knew nothing about it? It could only cause an interruption in the friendly feeling between her and them, and it was difficult to see what would be gained by it.

She sat on the front steps facing the sunset, with dear Bill on the step beside her, and Mary and Elizabeth chasing one another round the lawn. Dear Bill's eyes were almost shut, but he was watching Mary all the time. He looked as if he wanted to join in the fun, but of course could not think of doing anything so undignified. If Christina had not been looking he might perhaps—but it would never do to forget himself while she was watching.

Mary crouched, ready to spring, her tail lashing wildly. Its white tip waved to and fro, and Elizabeth, lying flat on her chest and creeping up, sprang upon it, then raced away as her mother pounced upon her. Dainty Mary caught her and held her down with one paw. Then they were both sent flying, as dear Bill hurled himself from the steps upon them. They fled, and Elizabeth spat indignantly—an accomplishment evidently inherited from Bill himself—and he, left alone in the middle of the lawn, sat down primly and hoped Christina had not been looking. An old man like dear Bill play a baby game with a silly cat and a crazy little kitten? What an absurd idea! Quite the last thing in the world he would ever dream of condescending to!

He need not have been troubled, however, for Christina was not even thinking about him.

She was going slowly over what Billy and Alec Carruth had said, in the hope of gaining some further light on the points which puzzled her.

"There's somebody blamed for anything that goes wrong. . . . It would be sure to hurt somebody. . . . Somebody would be blaming somebody else. . . . He'd done something wrong

to somebody. . . . There would be *somebody* he ought to tell!"

That was Billy's verdict. But, in this case, who was "somebody"? Was it Winifred, as representing the family? Was it her duty to tell Winifred the whole story?

"I don't want to do that! Oh, I don't want to have to do that! And besides—Winifred isn't blaming anybody. Nobody's blaming anybody. Nobody knows——"

"Until he has been forgiven by the person he wronged."

That was Alec, and the verdict was the same as Billy's.

"Who was it I 'wronged'? I don't quite think it was Winifred. Who can I confess to, when nobody knows?"

It came upon her suddenly. Afterwards she wondered that she had not understood before. It was so very obvious. But her only thought had been of Winifred.

"Why, it's *her*!" she cried aloud, with utter disregard of grammar. "I ought to tell *her*! She's—yes, she's blaming Harry all the time, because he didn't answer that letter, and because he wouldn't have the children! I never quite understood that before. Yes, of course, I ought to tell her. She ought to know. She must understand it wasn't Harry at all, but only me. Then I needn't tell Winifred after all! But perhaps *she* will," she added thoughtfully. "If she does, I'll—I'll run away and drown myself in the sea, or get lost in the mountains, or hide like Myfanwy. But I ought to tell her, anyway. I must. I'd better not think about it. If I do, perhaps I won't do it after all. I'll have to write. I wonder where she'll be now? I'll find that out from Winifred. Oh, I do hope she won't tell them! But I'll be glad to have told somebody about it, anyway."

She hastily brought writing things out to her seat on the steps, chased away dear Bill, and sat down to write, feverishly anxious that it should be done before she changed her mind. Then Mary came to offer her help and sympathy, and had to be driven away. Elizabeth came too, and, crouching on the step, watched the moving pen and prepared to spring upon it. So Christina, feeling the occasion too serious for frivolity, carried all three of them into the house and shut them in the kitchen.

It was not an easy letter to write. Her eagerness soon vanished, and she sat nibbling her pen and wondering how to say it. It looked so ugly written down. It would almost have been easier to say it. But it took shape somehow at last.

"DEAR MRS. ORR,—I daren't call you Joan till you've heard the dreadful thing I have to tell you. I don't suppose you'll ever want to hear anything about me again. But I must tell you. I'd much rather you didn't know, but I've been unhappy about it for more than two months now, and I suppose I always will be unless I tell you. That's what Billy says. Of course, he doesn't know anything about it, nobody does, but I asked him about a 'supposing' case, and that's what he said. I haven't told them anything about it. I really couldn't. I don't know if you'll want to tell them, but—oh, please don't, if you can help it! They'll never speak to me again if you do, and I like them all so much. They'll say it was caddish, and I'm a rotter, and a mean lot, and—and I don't want them to hate me. Of course, I *am* bad, but do you think they need to know?"

"I know this all sounds a dreadful muddle. I thought at first I'd tear it up and start again, but I think now I won't. I want you to know how bad I feel. I've been trying all this time, ever since they came, to forget all about it, but I can't. It's worse all the time. I've tried to make up for it, too. I've tried being good to them, and

giving them all kinds of things, and I even went to live at Bryntirion, because they wanted me to. But it's all no use. It keeps worrying me all the same.

"I'd better tell you all about it. I hate to do it, and it looks dreadful written down. It was so easy to do, but it's dreadful to have to tell about it. I thought no one would ever have to know, and I wouldn't have believed anything could ever make me tell. I said I wouldn't, over and over again, but something is making me do it. I think it's your children. For a girl who's been wicked, and deceitful, and done a wrong thing and kept it secret, they're dreadful children to have to live with. They won't keep secrets, or do anything they wouldn't like everybody to know. Do you know the kind of things they say? Perhaps you taught them. 'We can't do what isn't straight! Hiding things is a caddish trick! We aren't going to begin *that!*' That's the kind of thing they say, and they do it, too. And I've done a caddish thing and hidden it all this time. If you tell them about it, I'll never dare to go near them again.

"But I haven't told you yet what it is I've done. I keep putting it off. Anything's better than telling you. Well, I will tell you this time.

"You know that letter you wrote to me, asking me to be good to them if Harry let them come to the Dolls' House? When it came, and Harry's letter along with it, he was away, and so was Marion. I was at home alone with the Jackanories. Well, I didn't want the children to come here. I didn't know them then, and I simply hated the thought of them living here. I would like to have them now, but then it just drove me wild. You see, I do just what I like here, almost, and I knew if they came it would make a difference every way and upset everything. I didn't feel inclined to be good to them, even if they were at Bryntirion, and I felt sure I should be horrid if they came here. I know it was hatefully selfish of me, but I didn't know them then, and that's just how I felt.

"And Harry was away, and couldn't get his letter till Monday! And it was lying there, and I knew that if he didn't get it they wouldn't come here. And I didn't want them to come.

"There now, I've almost told you! Can't you guess? Must I put it down in words—the dreadful thing I did? I *burnt* the letters, Harry's and mine, and said nothing about them. He never knew you'd written. He doesn't know yet. He'd have had the children if he'd got your letter. He said he would if you had only asked him. And I knew you had asked, but I said nothing about it. And you must have been thinking all this time how mean he was not to answer you, and he's been thinking how horrid you were not to write to him, and it's all my fault. He isn't mean, and you're not horrid. No one is but me, and I've been both. But, really and truly, it was only to-day I quite understood it was you I ought to tell. I knew I ought to tell somebody, but I never thought of you until to-night.

"It's no good saying how sorry I am for a thing like that, is it? I've wished hundreds of times that I hadn't done it. I've felt dreadfully bad when I thought what Winifred and Billy and Polly-Joan would say. At first I thought I ought to tell them, but I simply couldn't. *Must* you tell them, do you think? *Must* they know? Oh, please, please, if you possibly can, forgive me and don't tell them! I care more about what they'd say than anything else.

"I'll tell Harry too. I don't want to a bit. I hate to tell him. He's always been so good to me, and it's such a shabby thing to have done. But he's coming here to-

morrow, and I'll tell him, I promise you I will.

"I can't say 'yours affectionately,' or 'sincerely,' or 'truly,' or anything like that, for I haven't been any of them. I'll say what I really am.—Yours miserably,

CHRISTINA.

"P.S.—Please don't tell Winifred."

As she folded up the sheets, her lips were trembling and she was very near to breaking down. She closed the envelope resolutely.

"I won't look at it again. I'll post it as soon as ever I've got the address. . . . And I've promised to tell Harry! How *shall* I do it? How *can* I? But I've promised. I think I'll write a letter to him too, and then go out and——and hide," she said gloomily.

A big drop of rain fell on the letter. She wiped it away hastily.

"How hateful! She'll think I cried all over it, and I didn't. But that's only because I'm not used to crying. I feel bad enough. There's a thunderstorm coming, too, and I don't like thunder when I'm alone in the house. Suppose we're struck and burnt up, and I've never posted that letter? Then nobody will ever know, and she'll go on blaming Harry for ever, and they'll never be friends again at all."

This possibility troubled her so much that, if only she had known the address, she would have carried the letter in to the post, and have risked being caught in the storm which was already rumbling in the hills. But to go as far as Bryntirion was impossible. She glanced apprehensively at the gray stormy sea, and the black curtain of cloud where the mountains should have been, and carried her letter upstairs to wait till morning.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHRISTINA CHANGES HER MIND.

The threatening storm took a long time to come. Those first few drops of rain were by way of warning, and all through the evening there were no more, but the thunder rolled among the hills and the gray clouds on the mountains grew denser and blacker.

Christina sat by her bedroom window and watched the lightning play over the sea. It seemed to go straight down from the sky into the water. She wished the storm would come. The sooner it came the sooner it would be over. Still there was no rain, but the thunder seemed nearer, grumbling and muttering in a continuous roll. It was like the voice of the hidden mountains, seldom heard, but awful when it came. Snowdon, in the black cloud behind, was talking to Cader in the black cloud in front, and the Arans were murmuring and growling to Cynicht and Moelwyn and Siabod.

Dear Bill and Mary did not like it either. They were roaming restlessly about, Bill yowling dismally, Mary taking refuge in dark corners, under beds and inside cupboards, but never stopping in any one place for very long. Elizabeth was sleeping the sleep of an innocent kitten in the kitchen. And Cook was in the coal-cellar—that being the darkest spot she could find—with her boots on, ready for instant flight if it should seem necessary.

Christina leaned out of the window. The rain was just beginning.

Was this a car driving up to the gate? Had Harry come home to-night instead of to-morrow?

It was a taxi from the station. A lady stepped out and came up to the gate. Christina, much amazed, but knowing only too well Cook's present condition, ran down to the door.

"Is Mr. Clevelly at home?" There was something strangely familiar in the sweet voice.

Christina peered at her curiously.

"No, I'm sorry, but he isn't. He's away, but he'll be here to-morrow, if you could come again. Won't you come in out of the storm? I'm afraid it's going to be bad."

"Are you Christina?"

"Who *are* you?" cried Christina, utterly bewildered. "I seem to know you, but——"

"I'm your sister Joan. I wanted to see Harry. But I'll come back to-morrow. I must go on to Bryntirion. I suppose the children are there? I haven't seen them yet. I came here first."

"*You!*" gasped Christina, and then, as the rain came streaming down, "Oh, come in! Do, please, come in! You can't go back to-night. Come in and wait with me! There's no one at home. I'm all alone, except the cats. We're all a bit scared of the storm. Won't you stay here to-night? You can see the children in the morning. Is your bag in the car? All right, I'll fetch it in."

"She must wait!" she was thinking. "If she goes away to-night, I shall never tell her. She must wait!"

She called to the man, and before she would listen to Mrs. Orr's remonstrance, had paid him and bidden him shelter his horse in the stable for a while if he liked. Then she closed the door on the storm, and turned to her guest.

"You're wet through, just with walking from the gate. Come and toast yourself in the kitchen, or you'll catch cold. Cook!" she called. "Cook! Don't be so silly. Here's a lady come for the night, and you really must help me. She's in the coal-cellar, hiding from the thunder,"

she explained. "Now if you'll sit down and get warm, I'll have supper ready in a few minutes."

"But, Christina——"

"I know. It's all right. Just hear the rain! You couldn't possibly have gone back to Criccieth through that. A fire in the dining-room, Cook, as quick as you can, and one in the spare room too. It's turned chilly since the rain came. I'll see to the supper. Were they expecting you at Bryntirion? Will they be wondering where you are?" she asked abruptly.

"No. We came home so unexpectedly that I couldn't let them know. I want to stay at the hotel. There won't be room for any more visitors at Bryntirion."

"There's room enough," Christina said to herself. "But she didn't know if Uncle John would ask her to stop.—Then that's all right," she said aloud. "You can stop with me, and go to see them in the morning. They're all right, and quite happy. I saw them to-day. They were all here to tea."

"I wanted to have a chat with Harry," Mrs. Orr said soberly, and Christina nodded.

"Yes!" she said to herself, as she laid the table for supper. "She thought she'd try once more to make friends, although he was mean enough to say he wouldn't have the children! And my letter is in my drawer upstairs! And she doesn't know! How *can* I tell her? It was bad enough to put it in a letter, but that could be posted and done with. Here she is, and she doesn't know, and I don't know *how* to tell her!"

"We did not mean to come home quite so soon," Mrs. Orr said, as Christina begged her to come into the dining-room, where the table was laid and the curtains drawn, and a big fire was trying to make them think it was winter already, "but in the letters waiting for us at Teneriffe there was an offer of a very good post for my husband, and as he was so much stronger, and as it had to be applied for at once, we came straight home from there. He went on to Edinburgh direct from Liverpool, but I was longing to see the children. If Uncle John will keep them for a week or two longer, we will get settled into our new house before they come home, but I felt I must see them as I was so near. I was glad of the chance to come back to Criccieth, too, but this is a dreadful welcome to have, isn't it?" as the thunder crashed just overhead.

"I hope it will soon be over, now that it's begun in earnest. It's been hanging about all evening."

Mrs. Orr watched her wistfully as she moved about the room, cutting bread and butter, and seeing that nothing was lacking—a tall womanly girl, with beautiful chestnut hair curling about her face. There was a constant troubled look in her eyes. Apparently something was burdening her, and her position alone in the house seemed rather forlorn. She was very deft and clever in her manner as she put this and that in order, and was evidently trying very hard to leave nothing undone for her guest's comfort.

"And Harry is away? Are you quite alone, Christina?"

"Yes. The Jackanories had measles, you know, and then a touch of pneumonia, so they are away for a change. These are the Jackanories," showing a photograph. "So there's no one here but me and the cats. This is William, and that's Mary. I'll show you Elizabeth later. She's the kitten. You must excuse dear Bill if he sits on the edge of the table. He always does. It's one of his little ways. Now if you will sit here we'll have supper."

She was shy and thoughtful and very ill at ease. The duty before her was plain, but she shrank from the thought of it. Mrs. Orr's face was kind, but she was very like Winifred. To tell her that dreadful story would be as hard as it would have been to tell Winifred or Billy or Polly-Joan, and that, Christina had said, she could not bear to do.

"She'll look at me like Winifred would do, right through and through, and I shan't know what to do," she was saying to herself, as she played with a bit of bread and made a very poor supper. "I can't tell her! I can't! It's too difficult! I can't do it."

While she thought it over, her mind full of miserable and desperate ways of escape, she was talking to Mrs. Orr of the children, telling the things she thought would interest her most. She told of Alec Carruth's arrival, at which Mrs. Orr exclaimed in delight, and then, by a natural drift of thought, began to tell about Myfanwy and Davy.

"From Rhianfa, Llanystumdwy?" Mrs. Orr exclaimed. "Oh, I know whom you mean! I remember their parents very well. Myfanwy was a dark-eyed mite of four or five when I knew them, but there was no brother then."

"Davy's six years younger. He has always been my great friend," and she told their story, and hinted at Carruth's interest in Myfanwy.

"But he can't find her. It's a great pity, but we don't know where she is, and Davy won't tell without her leave. We haven't heard anything of her for weeks now."

All through supper she hesitated, and the longer she put off her confession the harder it became. To have talked in this friendly way for two hours, without saying a word about that dreadful story still to be told! It seemed impossible to begin upon it now. It should have been told at once.

The storm was passing off, as she had hoped. The night was quiet again, and the car had long since driven back to Criccieth. As they rose from the table the clock struck half-past nine, and Mrs. Orr exclaimed:

"Is it so late? Don't let me keep you out of bed if you want to go, Christina. I'll go to bed in a few minutes too. I don't feel quite comfortable, making myself so much at home in Harry's house without his leave, you know. I'm afraid he won't be very pleased when he hears about it."

Christina did not say, "He won't need to know. I won't tell him," as she would once have done.

"I think he'll be glad," she said, and stood looking out of the window, half hidden by the curtain.

Her lips trembled. Now was her chance. She ought to speak.

"But I can't! I can't! I'm ashamed! I'll—I'll let her go away, and send the letter after her," she murmured shakily to dear Bill, who was also looking out of the window.

Her hand trembled as she stroked his long straight back. He was standing on his hind legs, his front paws on the back of a chair, and quivering as if he saw ghosts out in the dark garden. She dropped the curtain on his head, and, not heeding his angry remonstrance, turned to Mrs. Orr.

"Good-night! I hope you will be quite comfortable. If there's anything you want, please let me know," and she fled upstairs to her own room.

"I couldn't have kissed her! I didn't dare. But I wanted to! Oh, I wanted to! She's so like Winifred and Dimity. And she looks so—such a real mother! Oh, I wish she knew! I believe she'd forgive me! I *wish* she knew!"

CHAPTER XXV. CHRISTINA DECIDES AGAIN.

Christina put out the light and stepped into bed. She lay down and put her head under the bedclothes.

About ten minutes later she sat up suddenly.

"Christina Clevelly, you're a horrid coward! Just think what Davy would say!—or any one else, for that matter!"

She sprang out of bed, and threw on her dressing-gown. Perhaps it was still not too late.

Mrs. Orr, sitting over the fire downstairs, was dreaming of Harry and their childhood together, and wondering how he would receive her attempt at reconciliation on the morrow. The sudden opening of the door startled her, and she turned quickly, to find herself face to face with an eager wild-eyed Christina, with flushed cheeks, tumbled hair about her face, long blue dressing-gown over her pyjamas, and holding a crumpled letter in her hand.

While she stared at this apparition, the girl ran forward and thrust the letter into her hand.

"Read it!" she cried brokenly. "I wrote it to-night—before you came—but I hadn't your address. I was going to ask Winifred in the morning."

Then she sank down on the rug beside the armchair, and buried her face in her arms.

She was shaking with sobs. Mrs. Orr looked at her in dismay.

"Christina, dear——"

"Read it! Please read it! I was ashamed to tell you, but I couldn't go to sleep with it lying there in my drawer, and you in the next room."

Mrs. Orr sat down beside her, and slowly read the letter. Christina had stopped crying. It was too dreadful for that. She was waiting, tense and very still with anxiety, to know what Joan would say.

"Christina, dear, I'm sorry——"

"Oh, *I'm* sorry!" and she broke down and sobbed again. "I'd give anything to undo it. Do you hate me? I never meant to do so much harm. I never thought about you and Harry till afterwards. Can you forgive me?"

"If you are really sorry, I can't help forgiving, Christina, and I think you are. But, Christina, you know—well, I won't remind you of it all again. I probably couldn't say anything that the children haven't made you feel, judging from your letter. You know how they look on anything underhand. You know what they would say if they knew. Christina, I like their way of looking at things better than yours. Theirs is more honest, and braver, too. Yours is a cowardly way, and rather mean. It's better to be frank and open and honest, as they try to be, even if it means giving up some things at times, than——"

"But I've learnt their way!" Christina cried sharply. "I couldn't live with them for two months and not learn it. I could never do such a thing again. Will you have to tell them, do you think?" she asked nervously.

"No, I won't tell them," Mrs. Orr said slowly. "I would rather they did not know. As you say, it would do no good. No, we'll bury it and let it be forgotten."

"Oh, you're good! You're very kind! I don't deserve it. I think I'm more ashamed, now that you're good to me, than I was before, when I didn't know you."

"Shall I tell Harry for you? Shall I give him this letter when he comes home to-morrow?"

"Will you? Oh, that would be good of you! I didn't know how to tell him. But how is it you're willing to help me? You must have forgiven me really, or you wouldn't be so good to me. I'm glad I told you," she said shakily. "I kept putting it off, but I was miserable all the time."

"I'll tell Harry," Mrs. Orr said soberly. "Now, Christina, you must go back to bed, or you'll take cold. Kiss me, dear, and run away."

"I couldn't kiss you before, you know," Christina sobbed. "How did you know I wanted to? But I suppose mothers always know that kind of thing."

She was very lonely again next day, when Mrs. Orr had gone off to see the children. Some time in the afternoon Harry would come, and Joan had promised to be back before he arrived.

Christina, restless and unhappy, and dreading the thought of what he would say, wandered about the house and garden for a time, then dressed herself for riding, and paid a visit to Rhianfa to care for Myfanwy's peas.

In the afternoon she suddenly realised that to wait at home till Harry came, and then to greet him as if nothing were the matter, would be too hard for her. She sent for Shenkin again, and rode towards the mountains, not caring very much where she went, so long as she was out of the way when Harry came.

She was riding slowly along the Tan-y-bwlch road, when, as she drew near to the corner where it joins the road from Aberglaslyn, a black motor-car came swiftly and silently along from the direction of Beddgelert, swerved sharply round the corner, and away towards Tan-y-bwlch. Christina, unnoticed, reined in Shenkin, and sat staring.

"It's—it's—Peter, and Mr. Carruth! But there's some one with him! I only saw her face for a second, but I know it was Myfanwy! But how—where did he find her?"

Then she understood. "He's known where she was all this time, and never told us! Oh, the wretch! The traitor! The mean thing! To keep her all to himself like that! I wonder how long he's known? I'll tell all the others at once, I just will! It will serve them right. Well, I should think!—" and she nodded expectantly. "Yes, indeed, I'm sure!—I shall expect it of her now!"

She forgot her own anxiety for a time as she thought of them. But as she rode homewards she grew troubled again. Mrs. Orr's gentleness had comforted her greatly, but till she knew that Harry also had forgiven her she could not be quite content. He had always been so good to her that she felt doubly ashamed to have wronged him. She had only just realised that her fault so deeply concerned him, but, understanding at last, she was very deeply repentant and ashamed, and very anxious to know what he would say.

Her own anxiety made her generous.

"I think I won't tell the others, after all. It's Myfanwy's secret. She'll tell us when she wants us to know. They're having a good time, and I'm glad. I wonder if Davy knows? But I guess so. She'd be sure to tell him. Yes, I'm sure he knows. He'll be glad, too."

She led Shenkin to the stable, and went indoors with a heavy heart.

Harry was talking to Joan in the dining-room. He was telling her all about the Jackanories on the sands at Nevin.

But as Christina appeared in the doorway he rose and went to her quickly.

"That was a mean trick to play on me, Chris. I can hardly believe it. But we'll say no more about it now," as she hid her face against his shoulder—"only I didn't think you'd treat me that way, Chris."

And Christina would never forget his tone, nor the look he gave her.

CHAPTER XXVI. THE SURPRISE.

Two days later, Christina received a note from Winifred. Alec wanted them to be ready for him that afternoon, when he and Peter were going to take them all for a ride, and at the end of the ride there would be a surprise. What kind of surprise, Winifred did not know.

"It won't surprise *me*," Christina laughed. "But I won't tell them so. Perhaps it will please them to think it's a surprise to everybody!"

At that very moment, Myfanwy and Alec Carruth were discussing sweet peas in the cottage garden at Tan-y-bwlch. She was proudly pointing out the beauties of her favourite pale pink, while he was insisting that he preferred pure white.

"Well indeed, I just know this!" said she. "I always keep some in my own room, and at first I meant to have them all in turn. But this Gladys—this pink beauty—insists on being there all the time. I may make up my mind that it shall be blue to-day, or orange, or white—but I always find I can't do without Gladys. Sooner or later I find I must have her too. Sometimes it's her shape—see how it crinkles and waves!—and sometimes it's her colour—see how the pink deepens towards the edge!—but I simply can't resist her. So now I have to have two dishes in my room—one for whatever I choose for the day, and the other for Gladys. I can't do without her."

"Ah! That's what always happens when one falls in love," said he.

He had taken her to the top of Snowdon the day before. Peter had carried them as far as Llanberis, and then, scorning the railway, they had climbed to the top, and in the lonely walk up and down had found opportunity to settle many little matters, to the complete satisfaction of both.

"When will they get here?" asked Myfanwy.

"Peter and I are going to fetch them presently. We'll arrive about four."

"Then I shall have tea ready for you," she laughed.

There were many questions asked as the children took their places in Peter—the boys in front with Alec, of course, all the girls and dear Monk behind. Where were they going? What was the surprise? But Alec would not tell them anything, and neither would Peter. They were going for a ride, and they would have tea before coming home. That was all they need know just now. Well then, was tea the surprise? No, not exactly! But they must ask no more questions, but just wait and see.

Christina was asking questions as eagerly as the rest, but with laughing eyes which made Carruth wonder if she had guessed his secret. Dimity and Monk had no questions to ask. They were used to being lifted into Peter and whirled away to Tan-y-bwlch, and the road was familiar now.

"Why, it's that lovely lake!" cried Winifred suddenly, and all, craning forward, looked down the white road to the little circlet of water among the dark walls of trees.

"Isn't it pretty?" said Polly-Joan. "Is it there we're going to have the picnic, Alec?"

"Jolly ripping place for a picnic! Are there boats on the lake?"

"I want to go in a boat!" cried Taffy shrilly. "Alec, you'll take us in a boat, won't you?"

"We've never seen boats on the lake, have we, Timmy-Dimmy and Monk?"

"Has she been here before?" cried Billy sharply.

Peter had reached the road by the lake by this time, and now in top gear sped quietly, smoothly along, as if in haste to reach something—or some one.

“This,” said Alec casually, “is the cottage where we have tea, isn’t it, Timmy-Dimmy and Monk?” and Peter’s joyful hooting set the valley echoing. “And it’s just four o’clock!”

“And where’s the surprise?” cried Taffy.

Then the Surprise opened the gate and smilingly informed them that tea was quite ready.

Christina sprang into her arms and the others crowded round in delight, all asking questions at once. Did she live here? Had Alec found her? How did he know she was here? Had he been here before?

Alec closed the garden gate, shutting poor patient Peter out in the cold. Then, as Myfanwy kissed Dimity and Monk, Christina found herself face to face with Davy.

“Why, Davy, are you having a holiday? I am so glad to see you,” she cried.

“I’m taking one, anyway, auntie——”

“I’ve a bit of news for you and Myfanwy,” she cried. “Myfanwy, listen! Rhianfa is sold! I don’t know who’s bought it, but I was there yesterday, and it’s sold. And—the funniest thing! As I was coming away I met a man leading in Sally and Jenkin! The person who’s bought the house has bought the horses too! Isn’t that odd? But won’t it be jolly for Sally and Jenkin to be at home again? Don’t you think they’ll be glad? Are you glad or sorry the house is sold, Davy?”

Myfanwy looked at Alec Carruth. Davy, looking glad rather than sorry, exclaimed—

“That depends on who has bought it! We’d be sorry to have a rotten lot of people there——”

“Davy!” cried Myfanwy, half laughing, half indignant.

“I’ve a bit of news for you, too, Chris,” Davy went on. “I’m not going back to Blaenau. A chap I know wants me to be his steward, to look after his estate for him, you know, and I’m to begin training for it at once. It’s just the job that will suit me—riding about the farms and bossing every one, you know. So on the whole I don’t mind giving up Blaenau and its hideous old offices, though I was getting on so well there!”

“I’m awfully glad to hear it,” Christina said earnestly. “And who is he, Davy? How did you meet him?” Then, sharply, “Davy, you don’t mean——”

“It’s the chap that’s bought Rhianfa——”

“I’ve bought Rhianfa,” said Alec Carruth. “Davy’s going to look after it for us when we’re living in Scotland. I’ve bought Rhianfa for a wedding present to my wife—the Lady of the Sweet Peas.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

This is the 1940 edition. The *car/taxi* on page [324](#) and the *car* on page [329](#) are all three *cab* in the 1909 edition.

[The end of *Conquest of Christina* by Elsie J. Oxenham (pseudonym: Elsie Jeanette Dunkerly)]