EXPELLED FROM SCHOOL



ELSIE J. OXENHAM

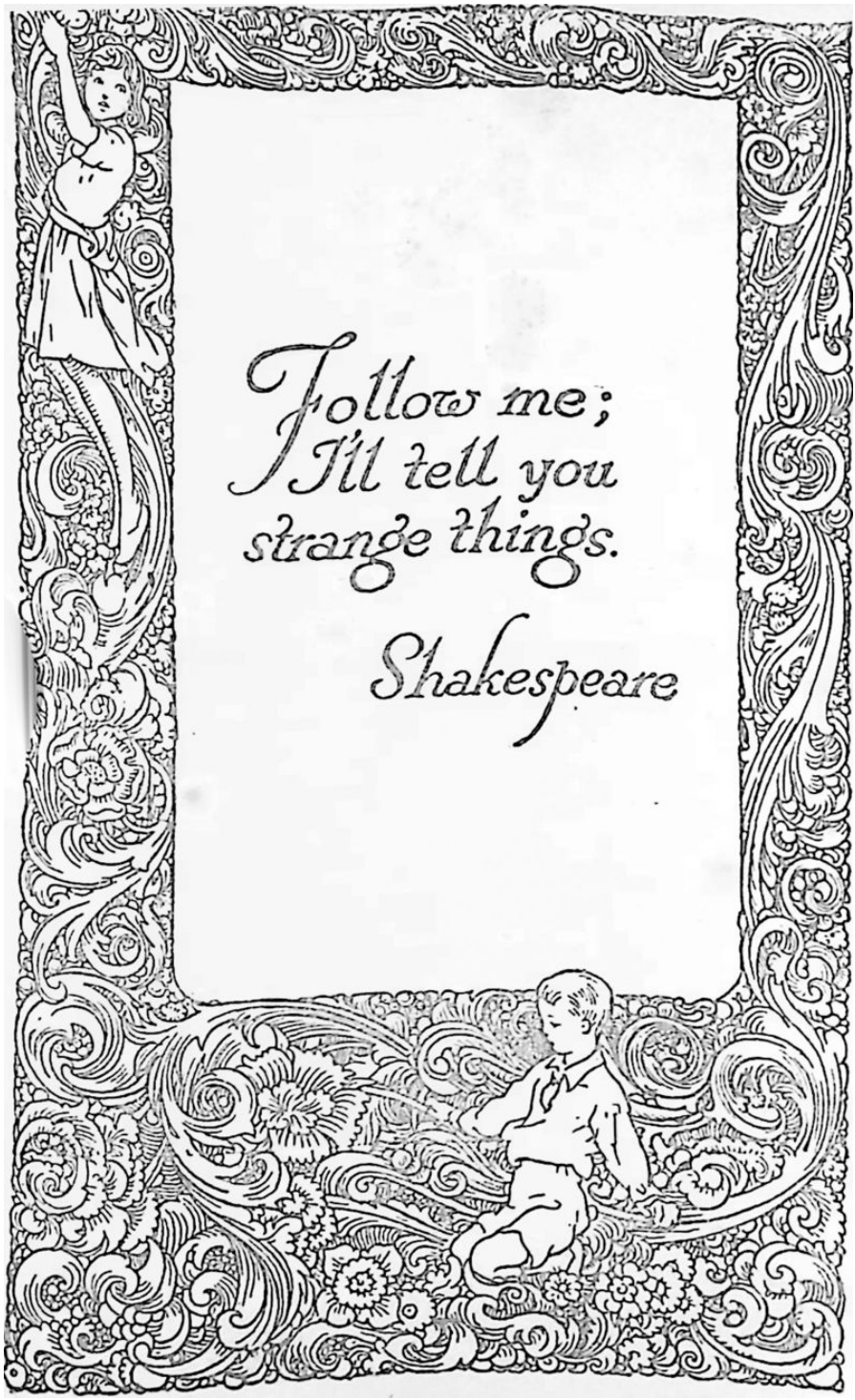
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Follow me;
I'll tell you
strange things.
Shakespeare

Expelled from School

ELSIE J. OXENHAM

London & Glasgow
COLLINS' CLEAR-TYPE PRESS



DEDICATED
TO
MY DEAR MOTHER AND FATHER
WITH BEST LOVE
IN MEMORY AND ANTICIPATION
OF
HAPPY DAYS
IN SWITZERLAND.

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CHAPTER I
THE GIRL FROM ENGLAND

'I do wonder what she'll be like!'

The electric train crept across the viaduct, and one of the finest views in Switzerland lay before Pamela's unseeing eyes. The green Chamonix valley stretched at her feet, pine-clad hills rose steeply on each side, and the overwhelming mass of Mont Blanc—snowfields, rocky cliffs, and glaciers—stood outlined against a deep blue sky. A long tongue of ice, the white Glacier des Bossons, ran down among the fields; a range of jagged needle peaks reached up towards the round snowy cap, as if the lower rocks had bared their teeth in disappointment that they could not imitate his height.

But to Pamela it was all familiar, and she gazed with careless eyes. All her thoughts were on the meeting before her. For the first time she was to have an English girl as friend. What would she be like? What would she talk about?

The only child of a Swiss father and an English mother, Pamela had spent all her eleven years in the chalet near Argentière, which had been her father's home. He had died while she was still a baby, and Madame Gay had lived very quietly, educating Pamela herself, seeing few friends, and scarcely realising that the child needed companions of her own age. Pamela's acquaintances were all French, Swiss, or Savoyard; she had never been to England, and save for an occasional trip to Geneva, or a rare holiday in Montreux, she and her mother never left their retreat. Her friends had been the villagers, the big dogs who lay in the courtyards, the mountains, and the turbulent river, whose hurried passage filled the valley with the never-ceasing sound of rushing water.

But a few days ago Madame Gay had received a letter from an old school friend. It told how, on account of lung trouble, slight but ominous, Miss Garnet had been ordered to live for some months in one of the high Alpine resorts. Her doctor had recommended Finhaut, and she had decided to give it a trial, remembering that her old friend lived near, and hoping to meet her again. She was bringing with her a niece, whose parents were travelling in the East for the sake of the mother's health, whilst Retta had been left in her aunt's care. She was now fourteen, and old enough to enjoy travelling, and Miss Garnet liked to have her company.

That sounded promising, Pamela thought, and she looked forward eagerly to meeting the English girl. She had hailed with delight her mother's proposal to visit the travellers as soon as they had had time to rest after their journey; so now, allowing them one night for recovery, they were on their way to see them, both eager for the meeting. Little wonder Pamela had no eyes for the mountains, which were such old friends, in the prospect of finding such interesting new ones.

The great mountain mass of the Aiguilles Rouges fell behind as the train crept on to Vallorcine. The Buet stood out, bold and commanding, the line swung round curves and passed the black chalets and the cascades of Barberine, and they crossed the frontier bridge and were in Switzerland.

Pamela deliberately moved to the other side of the carriage, and her mother laughed. But Pam shook her head.

'I don't like it. I'm not a fly, and I feel like one when we begin crawling up precipices. No, I won't look out, thank you. If you lean out, mother, you'll tip us over the edge.'

'You silly girl! Surely you aren't really nervous, Pamela? Why, child, the train comes this way several times every day! There has never been an accident— —'

'All the same, I don't like it. It makes me giddy to see the river miles away below me,' and Pamela resolutely kept her face turned from the dizzy depths as the train began to climb, and was soon creeping along its ledge high above the valley.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Pam!' her mother remonstrated. 'Remember you were born here. You're not a tourist.'

'I wasn't,' Pam said stoutly. 'I was born in Argentière, and that's quite different. There you have room to move without falling over the edge. I don't think I'd like to stop at Finhaut. It's just a shelf,' as they caught a glimpse of the village straggling along its shoulder of the hill. 'I'd feel I had to hold on all the time, for fear the whole place should slide over. I don't see how people can ever sleep there.'

'And you a native! I'm really ashamed of you, Pam,' her mother said severely.

Pamela shrugged her shoulders, and said no more. She wondered how the English girl would like living on a ledge half-way up a precipice. Certainly it would be a change from England.

Pamela wondered if Retta had been to school in England. She felt great curiosity as to schools of any land, for her mother had spoken of sending her to school in Vevey or Geneva, when she was older. Pamela dreaded the prospect, and felt that each birthday brought her nearer to her doom. She would ask Retta what school was like.

'I wish she had some other name,' she mused. 'Jane, or Alice, or Mary would sound more English. It must be short for something. I wonder what? I don't like fancy names.'

'Here we are,' said her mother, and led the way up a steep road into the village.

Pamela kept her face carefully turned from the depths of the river valley, over which the station platforms seemed to hang. Some of the hotels had balconies which overhung the gorge also, and she hoped the house to which they were going was not one of these. It was a relief to be in the village, with shops and chalets on each side.

Yes, said Madame at the hotel, the English ladies had arrived an hour ago, and were out on the balcony, she thought.

'An hour ago! I thought they were to arrive yesterday?'

'They were delayed on the journey, Madame. They have only just arrived.'

'Oh, I am sorry! We would not have come till to-morrow if we had known,' Madame Gay exclaimed, and Pamela listened in dismay. Must they go home disappointed? Surely she could see Retta, at least, even if Miss Garnet were too tired to receive visitors.

But the proprietress was leading them to the salon.

'They expect you, Madame. They had your letter,' and she hurried in to announce their arrival.

'Pamela, my dear, how good of you to come so soon! It is delightful to see you again!' Miss Garnet, a tall, fair-haired lady of forty, came hastily in from the balcony, and Pamela junior watched with interest while her mother was caught up and kissed over and over again.

'You don't look much of an invalid, Flo,' Madame Gay said, with much relief. 'I am glad to see you so well. But aren't you over-tired with your journey? We would never have come to-day if we had known——'

'I'm delighted that you did come. No, we aren't tired. We stopped a night in Lausanne, and sailed up the lake this morning. It was a great treat, and most refreshing after the long day in the train yesterday. I knew Retta would enjoy the steamer, and I did not want her to have this last bit of railway in the dark. It's such a wonderful line. We both wanted to get the good of it. And this is your lassie? You call her after yourself? She is very like you, Pamela. You always were a dark little thing. She is just such a shrimp as you were when you first came to school. Do you remember your first day? We took to one another at once.'

'You took me up and looked after me, you mean. How I would have got on without your help, I don't know.'

'They're going to reminisce. Won't you come out on the balcony with me?'

Pamela, gazing and listening, had forgotten the friend she was to meet. At sound of another voice she turned sharply to meet the girl who had entered by the window.

Retta Garnet was tall for her fourteen years, well made and healthy from much outdoor exercise and many school games. Her eyes were a deep shade of blue, which she delighted to match in ribbons and costume when possible. Her hair was fair, flaxen rather than yellow, and fell thick and long over her shoulders, with no ribbon to hold it back. Pamela, her own dark hair drawn smoothly into two tight pigtails, for one moment thought Retta too old to wear hers loose like a little girl. But the thought passed and was forgotten. It would have been her only criticism of this big pretty girl, who with her tanned cheeks and bright fearless eyes, which gazed at strangers frankly as a boy's, seemed all that timid Pamela was not. Pam lost her heart to Retta before ever she knew what she was like. It was a case of love at first sight, combined with violent hero-worship, and the acquaintance which soon grew into friendship only deepened Pamela's first feeling that Retta was just what she herself would have liked to be.

She wore a blue travelling skirt, white blouse, and wide white hat, pushed back, since under the awning the balcony was shady. Her coat and her aunt's wraps lay on one of the basket-chairs, and she made Pamela take another, saying,—

'They'll talk over old times for hours. Aunty's been looking forward to seeing your mother for weeks. I say! you do speak English, don't you? I've been afraid you might only talk French, and I'm no good at French yet. I mean to pick it up as soon as I can, of course. Have you ever been in England?'

'No; I'd love to go.'

'Oh, but this is so wonderful! You've always lived here, then? Lucky beggar! I've never dreamt of any place quite like this. I felt quite funny coming along in the train.'

'So did I,' said Pamela fervently. 'I don't like it at all. Mother laughs at me, but— —'

'Oh, I don't mean *that*! I don't mind the depth. Does it make you giddy? I love it. Aunty was quite wild with me because I would hang out of the carriage window.'

Pamela gasped. She had known instinctively that this girl was very different from herself.

'I don't like it,' she said again. 'I never want to look down while the train's so high up.'

'I think it's just wonderful. But I feel kind of stunned at present. It's all so new. That's a glacier over there, isn't it? What do you call it?'

'The Trient. That's the Trient valley and river away down there.'

'Which exactly is the glacier? The bit that looks all combed up from the bottom, like waves?'

'Yes. That's the ice. We have a big glacier at home, the Argentière.'

'And all that dead white bit is just snow?'

'Yes, a snowfield. It dazzles, doesn't it?'

'It's wonderful!' Retta said again. 'The whole valley is more—more tremendous than anything I've ever imagined. It's so deep and so high, and so—so crushing altogether. I feel like an ant.'

'I feel like that sometimes at home. Here I feel like a fly half-way up a wall.'

Retta laughed, and leaning over the railing gazed down into the depths, and up to the heights behind, and out upon the Aiguilles Rouges, which closed the valley. 'It's ripping! I wish the girls at home could see it.'

'Have you been to school?' Pamela asked eagerly.

'Of course, for years. My folks have to be away a great deal for mother's health, and it wouldn't be fair for Aunty to have me all the time. She says it's rather a strain! But I've had a

jolly time at school. Here comes tea, and I'm dying for it. After tea I'm going for a walk; I haven't had a decent walk for three days. Will you come? You're going to wait for dinner, aren't you?'

'And you'll tell me all about school and England,' said Pamela.

'It's a big order!' Retta laughed, 'but I'll do my best.'

CHAPTER II
THE BOY FROM SCOTLAND

'It's very queer!' said Pamela, and came to a sudden stand among the pine-trees.

She had only just realised the queerness of it. That indeed was where the queerness lay. She had come so far without realising it. Two hours ago she would not have believed she could do such a thing. In Retta's company she had forgotten herself completely.

'What's so queer?' and Retta dropped on a seat among the pines, and gazed back at the village on its ledge.

'That I've come along that road. In the train I thought I never could walk about here for fear of falling over the edge. There's no fence, and I don't like open places, but I'd forgotten all about it. It was only when I looked back that I saw how awful it was.'

'It's not awful at all. I call it awfully jolly.'

'But I'm not like you. I don't like it. You must have talked so hard that I forgot all about it. Thank you for making me forget that awful road. I'd never have got here alone.'

'I call it ripping,' said Retta.

But from where they sat the road, winding round sharp corners of the hill, unfenced and with a steep fall of a thousand feet to the river bed, looked somewhat appalling to those of unsteady nerve. Here and there it bridged fierce little torrents dashing down from the mountains, for Finhaut, in spite of its great height above the valley, was still only half-way up the cliff, and the pine forest reached up to where bare rocky peaks towered above. Only the spell of Retta's stronger personality, which had begun to dominate Pamela already, and the interest of her tales of school life, could have brought the nervous younger girl along the open mountain road. She had listened eagerly to Retta's stories, and now as they sat resting she asked,—

'Are you going back to school? In England?'

'No, that would be too far away. But Aunty speaks of sending me to some school in Switzerland—in Lausanne or Vevey, perhaps. Then I could come to her for holidays. She means to stay here at least a year, if she likes it.'

'Mother says she'll send me in a year or two, but I don't want to go. I'd miss her dreadfully,' Pamela said gloomily.

'Of course you would, at first. But one gets over that, and it's always jolly to make new friends. We might go together. Then I could look after you,' Retta suggested.

'Oh, I wouldn't mind that! But are you going soon?'

'Not at once, I hope. I must be able to speak some French first, or I should feel so stupid. Of course, if you came too, it wouldn't be so bad. You could talk for me. We'd help one another.'

Pamela's eyes widened at the thought that she could be of use to a girl so much older and stronger than herself. But before she could speak, the sound of light wheels on the road behind made them both look round.

The road, winding along the edge of the hill, entered the forest, and was cool and shady. Under foot the pine needles lay thick, and gave a soft yielding carpet to the stony track. The rocks were covered with close-growing plants, mountain flowers, wild saxifrages, and creepers. Down the steep road came a hospital nurse, guiding carefully a long invalid chair, which seemed inclined to run over the dainty mule in the shafts, and needed delicate handling at corners. In the chair lay a long thin boy, large-eyed and white-faced, some books at his side, a round tin sandwich case on his knee.

His dark eyes scanned the girls curiously, evidently recognising them as new arrivals. When he had passed round the bend of the road and was out of sight, Pamela remarked,—

'What a darling mule! But he's needed, to pull that thing up these roads. The nurse could never push it far.'

'He looked ill,' said Retta soberly, and Pamela, glancing at her, found her face very grave. 'It's hard on a boy. I wonder where he's stopping, and if he's been here long?' and as they walked on up the pine-strewn pathway she was silent, as if she could not forget his face.

'Madame at the hotel will tell you,' said Pamela. 'She is sure to know,' and Retta nodded and sought the office as soon as they returned.

Madame could give all the information required. There were not many visitors in the village at present, and she easily identified the boy, the nurse, and the mule. They were stopping at the big hotel across the road, and had been there all winter. The boy was ill certainly, but was stronger than when he came, Madame thought. During the last few days she had seen him walking short distances—down to the station, across to the post card shop, up into the forest, and even, she believed, as far as the *patisserie* at the end of the village. For the first few months he had required to be driven everywhere, so this certainly showed improvement. The name, she understood, was Forsyth, and she had heard it said that he was the owner of large estates in England, being fatherless.

'Scotland, probably,' Retta remarked. 'And who is with him besides the nurse? His mother? Or sisters? There must be some one.'

But Madame said no, there was only the nurse, and Retta's face was sober again as she went out to the balcony.

'How awfully lonely! I wonder how he stands it?' and she leaned over the balcony gazing at the peaks and glacier and deep river-gorge, which already began to seem familiar, her thoughts busy with the desolate Scotch boy across the way.

'I shall speak to him. I might be able to cheer him up,' she said at last.

'But you don't know him! I shouldn't think you'd dare!' cried Pamela.

'I'll soon know him if I want to. I wonder why he's here all alone! He must have some one belonging to him. People aren't often quite alone in the world. How old would you think he was?'

'Oh, I don't know. Nearly grown-up,' Pamela said vaguely.

'I should think about sixteen. It must be awfully slack for him!'

But presently Retta's thoughts, turning on plans for the morrow and a possible introduction to the lonely boy, had taken a new direction.

'I wish you could stop here for a day or two! Didn't you say it had taken you two hours to come? Well, you won't want to come back all that way to-morrow, but I'd like to have you here. Do you think your mother would spare you?'

Pamela's face lit up. 'I'd love to stop!' she said fervently, flattered to think she was wanted, and delighted with the idea of spending a longer time in Retta's company.

'You see, Aunty can't walk far, and I'd have to go about alone. I want to explore, and it's jollier to have company. And you can speak French, so we'd be able to ask our way. I want to follow some of the red and green and blue arrows, and see if they really do lead anywhere,' for the chart in the vestibule with its coloured arrows to mark the walks had caught her eye. 'Come and ask your mother at once!' and they sought the ladies in the salon.

Miss Garnet seconded the invitation heartily. Madame could easily give them another room. There were very few visitors in the hotel yet. And Retta could lend Pamela everything she required.

'They'll be four sizes too big. She's such a speck,' and Retta cast a laughing glance at Pamela. 'But I want her to sleep with me, please, if she doesn't mind. Heads and tails, you

know. The bed's quite big enough. It will be a joke!' And when Madame Gay's permission had been won they went off to examine the bed and see if it could really hold two if one were as small as Pamela.

There was so much laughter in Retta's room that night that Miss Garnet tapped on the door between the two rooms, and at last opened it to remonstrate. The room was in darkness, but from the bed came sounds of suppressed giggling.

'What are you girls up to?' she demanded, and Retta, with a laugh, switched on the light.

'Pam will put her toes in my mouth. I yawned, and when I'd finished I found her foot there. If you look I expect you'll find she's minus a toe.'

Pamela, in a nightdress far too big for her, lay at the foot of the bed, and drew her knees up under her chin.

'I've got all my toes so far, but I don't expect to keep them till morning,' she said. 'When Retta yawns it's like a hole in a glacier, but not such a pretty colour. I'm afraid of falling in.'

'Well, look here! I can't sleep all in a heap, if you can. You'll have to put up with my feet, that's all. I must stretch out. That's why you're such a scrap, I expect, if you always sleep rolled up in a ball like that. You've got all the feather-bed, too,' as Pamela snuggled down and tucked the 'top bed' in behind her.

'Oh, I'm sorry! Take as much as you want. And if you put your feet just here I'll cuddle them. They'll come into my arms nicely.'

'Yes, and then you'll kick, and I shall bounce out on the floor. Well, keep still, then, and don't tickle. Oh, you wretch!' and the bed was in confusion again as Pamela took the hint.

'You shouldn't have said it. It was too tempting. I won't do it again, Retta, really.'

'We'll have two beds to-morrow night if you go on like this,' Miss Garnet threatened. 'You really must go to sleep, girls.'

'Pam's lost in my nightdress,' Retta laughed. 'She's like a pea in a football. I'm going to look for her with a magnifying glass in the morning. All right, Aunty. We'll be good now. I say! Isn't it jolly chilly? It wasn't like this in Paris or Lausanne. My teeth are going like anything. I'm glad I've got you for a hot-water bottle, Pamela. You're awfully warm and cosy.'

'Don't catch cold. Remember we're very near the snow here,' said her aunt. 'Can you stand the window as wide open as that, Pamela? Retta and I are used to lots of fresh air.'

'Oh, I like it, Miss Garnet! I'm used to it, too. We're just as near the snow at home.'

'I like to hear the river,' said Retta, her high spirits calming down. 'It's rushing water everywhere—not just running. It's more than that. But it isn't restful. It sounds in such a hurry, always rushing, hurrying on, as if it would break everything that got in its way. I'm going to listen to it till it sings me to sleep.'

'I always do,' said Pamela drowsily.

CHAPTER III
THE SCHOOLGIRLS

'It's awfully queer!' said Pamela. One night with Retta had been enough to change her 'very' for a stronger word.

Retta laughed. 'What's so awfully queer?'

'You've made me forget to be homesick. I've never been away from mother before.'

'So much the better. She wouldn't want you to feel bad. It would be just the same at school. You wouldn't have time to be homesick. It would be jolly if we could go together.'

'I think I should like it,' Pamela nodded, as they climbed the hill-path through wonderful fields of flowers, waist high, and of every colour. Retta, enraptured, gathered an armful of wild geraniums, marguerites, scabious, and mountain avens, sighing because she could not take all the tiny pansies home with her.

As they entered the forest she looked up, and gave a cry of rapture and surprise. 'What's that? Oh, what is it, Pamela?' and she pointed through an opening in the trees at a great white mountain, with a sharp shoulder, a snowy dome, and a smooth round cap of dazzling white. 'What is it? It wasn't there before!'

'That? Oh, it's only Mont Blanc!' Pamela assumed a tone of exaggerated indifference.

'Only! You improper girl, how can you? Why didn't we see it before?'

'We're higher. We see round the corner.'

'It's glorious!' and Retta's eyes rested on the snowy monarch in such rapt adoration that she stumbled and nearly dropped the flowers she had gathered.

'I want to get higher still. We'd see more if we did, wouldn't we?'

'Oh, yes! There's the whole chain of the Aiguilles, rocky and jaggy, with great sharp peaks. I like them better than Mont Blanc.'

'I like mountains to be rocky and jaggy! "Aiguilles"—that's needles, isn't it? Let's go up this little path! Would we see them from the top?'

'We might. But we couldn't go up there, Retta!' and Pamela looked askance at the track entering their broad path at right angles and going straight up the mountain.

'Oh, it won't be so steep all the way! It's a short cut, leading to some higher road. The first bit will be a real jolly scramble.'

It was certainly a scramble, but to Pamela the reverse of jolly. She set her teeth and followed Retta, hauling herself up by the trees and roots at the side, and clinging to bushes and stones. But at last she was forced to call out to Retta to go more slowly.

Retta stopped remorsefully and swung herself into the roots of a fir-tree to rest. 'Sorry! I thought you'd be used to it. Hang on to that stump; now you'll be all right! I didn't think it would be so far.'

'Suppose—there isn't—another path?' Pamela's heart was still pounding in an unaccustomed way. 'We could never go down this way. It would be far worse than coming up.'

'Oh, but the path must lead to a village or something!'

'*I* think it's a tree-slide—where they bring the trees down. Don't you think we ought to give it up, Retta?'

But Retta did not like the look of the downward path either, though she would not confess it. Going down would truly be far harder than coming up. It would be all she could do to get herself down safely, and Pamela would certainly need help.

'We'd better go on. It *must* lead somewhere!' and she started on the upward climb again.

But Pamela had understood, and now in both their minds there was the unspoken dread of having to go back.

Beneath them the path seemed to drop sheer down among the trees; they felt that to climb down would be impossible—it would be a case of rolling, and if they once slipped it was hard to say where they would stop. They climbed on in desperate silence, buoyed up by the hope of finding some easier way.

'If I once get her safely out of this, I'll never try a short cut again!' Retta vowed.

The knowledge that if there was no other path, every step was making their position more desperate, was too appalling to be faced.

Retta shut it resolutely from her mind; it was keenly present to Pamela's, but she had great faith in Retta, and believed firmly that she would get her down somehow.

It was Retta who was strong-minded enough to make the inevitable decision at last. Pamela would have begged to rest, but would never have refused to follow, so long as she could drag her tired body along.

'Pam, I'm awfully sorry, but we'll have to give it up. This wretched trail is going right over the mountain, I believe.'

'We can't go back!' Pamela gazed down with terrified eyes. 'Retta, we've come *miles*!'

'It's not so very far. We've come slowly. Going down will be easier—at least——'

But Pamela had been bred among the mountains, and knew some things, though she had not climbed much.

'Going down is always worse. I don't believe we can.'

'I'll help you; I'll go first! Try every stone before you rest on it. That's the way! Bravo!'

Poor Pamela slid from root to stone, saved several times only by Retta's arm, which shot out and steadied her like a handrail. A root gave way under her hand, and she turned cold and hot with fright till she found Retta's hand ready to help. But the slip unnerved her.

She stepped on an untested stone and felt it give way. It rolled noisily downhill, and she fell with a stifled scream, sure that she too would go right to the bottom, and perhaps right over into the terrible river gorge so far below.

With a gasp, Retta pounced and caught her, nearly overbalancing herself, but clinging to a root with her left hand. Fortunately it held, but her shoulder felt the sudden strain for days.

'Are you hurt, Pam? Is anything twisted? Your ankle? Your knee?'—she knew herself to blame if the child came to harm. And how could she ever get her down in a damaged condition?

Pamela, half crying but too frightened to break down completely, gingerly straightened her knees, and Retta drew a breath of relief when the thin little legs were straight.

'Does it hurt you? Can you kick?'

'No—yes—I think I'm all right,' she was sobbing in a way that scared and hurt Retta.

'You poor kiddy! You must lean on me next time—though how I'm to get along if she does, I don't know!' she thought gloomily.

Then she had her second terrible moment of that morning, for Pamela gave a frightened cry, 'Retta! Where are you? I can't see!' then relaxed suddenly and lay helpless on the path.

'She's fainted!' Retta gripped her arm in terror. 'Oh, what shall I do? Well!'—fiercely—'I won't cry, and I daren't faint too!'

Sheer need kept her up, or the shock of Pam's collapse might have knocked her over also. She dared not loose her hold of the unconscious girl, so could do no more than hold her up and wait, calling piteously to her to open her eyes. It seemed hours, but was only a few moments, till Pamela's dark eyes looked up at her. She tried to move, but Retta forbade it hastily.

‘Lie still, kiddy. We’re perfectly safe,’ with an anxious glance at the root. ‘Lie still for a while and rest.’

But Pamela had realised their position, and was too anxious to get off the hillside to be content to wait long. Presently she sat up, bracing herself to a great effort.

‘Let’s go on. I’m very sorry, Retta, but I really couldn’t help it. Everything went dark, and I was so frightened. Couldn’t we find sticks that would be some help?’

Retta, peering round, found a stout little fir pole. ‘It’s a good idea. Here you are! Now be very careful when you try to move,’ and she watched in terror lest Pamela should turn giddy.

But Pam had nerved herself to the effort. She would not be afraid. She would not look down the long dusty slide.

She would not think! That terrible moment when she felt herself falling must surely haunt her for ever, but the haunting must not be allowed to begin yet.

Their progress was slow, but steady. At last, with a cry of relief, Retta stepped into a little cross track.

‘This is more gradual, so it can’t be as bad as that horror!’

Pamela drew a long breath as they left the dusty trail. Choosing their steps with care, they went slowly downwards, and at last stood safely on the lower path.

‘Oh, I am glad!’ and Retta dropped down to rest. ‘That was a nightmare!’

‘It was a tree-slide!’ Pam insisted faintly.

Retta glanced at her quickly. Then she sprang up, thrusting her own weariness aside.

‘Have a drink from this waterfall! Then, if you’d like to faint again, there’s a chalet along here where you could do it comfortably.’

But the thought of going to a chalet to faint comfortably made Pamela laugh. ‘I’d rather go down. I’m tired all over.’

They found their way by winding forest paths back to the hotel, and as they crossed the road met again the little company they had seen the night before—the nurse, the mule, and the invalid boy.

‘He does stare!’ Retta commented. ‘I suppose we’re awful sights! You’ve dust all up your back, Pam, and a great hole in your stocking, and your hat’s all twisted! Am I just as bad?’ and she brushed down Pamela’s brown tunic.

‘You’re very dusty,’ Pam said gravely, ‘and there are leaves and dirt in your hair, and your petticoat’s coming down.’

‘No wonder he stared! Come and confess, and be repaired! Oh, Aunty, just look at us!’ she sighed, as they found Miss Garnet on the balcony. ‘We’ve been right up the mountains, on the most awful little path, and it didn’t lead anywhere, and we had to come down again, and that was ten times worse than going up! And Pam tumbled and hurt her knee, and she nearly fainted! I thought we were stuck there for ever; I never was so scared in my life! She says it was a tree-slide, and not meant for people, but I wouldn’t believe her at first; I do now, though! Aren’t we awful sights?’

‘You are!’ Miss Garnet said grimly. ‘Go and make yourselves decent for lunch. We’ll talk about this later, Retta!’

Retta’s confession brought its natural consequence, and any climbing was forbidden unless in suitable company. Both girls had been too thoroughly frightened to risk a repetition of the adventure, however. Miss Garnet said little, but blamed herself for letting them go alone, and kept a better watch on them in future.

Pamela’s scanty wardrobe made her dishevelled condition very awkward. She could not borrow stockings several sizes too large, so Miss Garnet suggested that Retta should spend the rest of the day darning on Pam’s behalf. Pamela herself fell asleep after lunch, and Retta submitted ruefully and sat darning in the sunshine on the balcony. ‘With a glacier opposite,

and Mont Blanc just round the corner!' she groaned disgustedly. 'Why can't I go to sleep like Pam?'

'Pam is quite worn out,' her aunt said gravely.

'She climbed like a little brick. She was awfully scared, but she never said so. She has pluck enough for anything. You'd never think it to look at her.'

'Retta!' a voice called from the balcony above as four o'clock struck. 'I can't find—oh, what *are* you doing with my stockings?'

Retta flourished a brown stocking with a darning-needle thrust into it. 'Come down and find out! There's no one about. Slip on your shoes and run.'

Already Pamela never questioned Retta's orders. She came flying along the passages, to the amusement of the maids, who giggled and pointed at her bare legs as she passed.

'Horrid things! Retta, how sweet of you!'

'Oh, don't imagine they're done yet, my dear! You'll have to sit on your legs. And don't think I'm doing it out of love for you! It's only my anxiety to see you look decent, and—and my tyrant aunt, who has driven me to it! I say, Pam, how did you feel when you came downstairs?'

'Awful! I never was so stiff before.'

Retta nodded. 'Once I'm sitting down I never want to move again. It's agony to stand up.'

'Sitting down's worse,' said Pamela gloomily, and let herself gingerly into her chair.

When tea was brought and spread on the small table, the maid informed them that a portmanteau had arrived for Mademoiselle Gay, and Retta was for giving up her task at once and going to rummage in it for more stockings.

'Your mother's sure to have sent another pair,' she argued.

'All the same, you'll finish your job, Henrietta,' said her aunt peremptorily.

'I ought to do it myself. Won't you let me?' pleaded Pamela.

'No, ma'am—mademoiselle, I mean! She called me Henrietta, and when she does that I know it's very serious indeed. Have some cake?' and she waited on Pamela so that she need not move.

'Is that really your name? I've been wondering what the rest of it was.'

'Yes. Isn't it hideous? It's only used in very serious moments indeed. The girls used to call me Harry at school, and that wasn't so bad. I tried to keep Henrietta a dead secret, but it came out, of course. That kind of thing always does. Fortunately, Harry took their fancy, so they dropped the rest. I was called after an ancestress,' Retta explained solemnly. 'But if you ever call me Henrietta, I'll—take you up a tree-slide and leave you there! Now I feel fit to tackle that last awful hole. It's quite two inches square. How you could make such a hole I don't know.'

'It must have been when I slipped and twisted round,' and Pamela shivered.

'What a row there is going on out there!' Retta was glad of an excuse to change the subject. 'Sounds as if some more visitors had arrived. We shan't have the dining-room to ourselves to-night. What a row they're making! They must be all talking at once.'

'There must be crowds of them,' Pamela murmured, as the noise of chattering and laughter increased. 'What a big party they must be!'

'I'm going to see,' and Retta threw down her work and vanished through the French window.

'No—Retta, come back!' cried Miss Garnet, but Retta managed not to hear.

She opened the door an inch and peeped out, then came back to the balcony looking bewildered.

'It's *girls*! Heaps of them! The place is full of them—a whole boarding-school, I should think! What can they be doing here?'

'Oh—*pensionnats*!' said Pamela. 'They go touring with a governess, you know, and stay a night or two in each place and see the sights. They often pass through Argentière on their way to Chamonix.'

'I say, how jolly! Does the school take them?'

'Of course, so that they may say they have travelled. It's a part of their schooling. They come from Geneva, or perhaps Vevey.'

'And they'll stay the night here? What a joke!'

'Perhaps they'll stay longer. It depends what they want to see. Don't they make a noise?'

'It's like a monkey-house,' Retta laughed. 'It will be rather a joke. I'm awfully glad they've come. Will there be any English girls among them? It's all French they're chattering out there. I couldn't understand a word.'

'Here they come! I wish I had my stockings on!'

Retta giggled, then was demurely very busy with her darning as several girls came through the drawing-room on to the balcony.

'You'll have to sit still till they go, or else get up and show your legs,' she murmured.

The new-comers crowded to the railing, commenting in voluble French on the glacier opposite, the station at their feet, the depth of the valley below. They seemed noisy and excited, laughing and talking eagerly. All wore soft shady hats, light knitted coats or short jackets, strong boots well provided with nails, and rücksacs on their backs. Some took these off and dropped them in the chairs; others did not seem to feel their weight.

Several cast careless glances at the group round the tea-table in the corner—Pamela, little, thin, and dark, sitting curled up in a big chair, her feet tucked under her; Retta, tall and pretty, her loose fair hair tossed back from her face, her eyes apparently intent on her darning, to all appearances a quiet, model girl busy with her domestic duties; Miss Garnet, tall, thin, and languid, palpably an invalid. Then the schoolgirls turned to criticise the outlook again, with a murmured comment from one. Pamela leaned across to Retta.

'She thinks we're English. We look it, she says. And she says you look like a good little girl mending your clothes.'

Retta flushed, and bit her lip. Then she began to laugh. Miss Garnet said reprovingly,—

'Pamela, my dear, you should not have listened. That was not meant for your ears. They think we do not understand.'

'They shouldn't take it for granted, then,' Retta said quickly, as Pamela looked abashed. 'Why should they assume that English people never understand French? So I look like a good little girl, do I? Well, I'm glad I look like one, anyway! They should have seen us this morning up on the tree-slide, shouldn't they, Pam?'

'Or when we reached home, looking so dirty and untidy!'

'Yes. Which girl said it?' and she eyed the backs of the schoolgirls critically.

'The tallest. The dark girl in strawberry red, in the knitted coat and cap.'

'I see. She's awfully good-looking, isn't she? Not pretty, I think; handsome's more the word. Awfully striking. You'd look at her anywhere. But I don't care for that style of doing her hair.'

'It's very usual. Mother sometimes rolls mine up like that.'

'I've seen it before, but I don't like it—like two big saucers over her ears. I like hair to hang down.'

'Yours does, anyway,' Pamela laughed, and after a pause she added, 'She's called Giulia. That's Italian.'

'She certainly looks Italian. Then they aren't all French. What are the others called?'

'That's Yvonne—in blue, beside Giulia. I think they're friends. The one at that end is Suzanne, and the tall girl with the lovely red hair is Bianca, so she's Italian too.'

'I thought Italians were always dark!'

'I seem to have heard somewhere of a Venetian painter called Titian, whose ladies always had lovely red hair,' Miss Garnet remarked. 'But I'll admit that one generally thinks of Italians as dark. That girl is very pretty.'

'The fair one she is talking to is Linda, and next to her is Simonne,' said Pamela.

'I wish I could understand them!' Retta sighed. 'It sounds gibberish to me. You must give me lessons, Pamela. There's a drop of rain. How queer! Where did it come from?'

Miss Garnet rose hastily. 'We hadn't noticed the clouds coming up! Come inside at once, girls. Pamela, I heard you sneeze a short time ago. Jump up quickly, my dear! I can't let you catch cold while you're in my charge.'

'Oh, but she can't, Aunty!' Retta remonstrated, while Pamela looked up in dismay. 'Perhaps it won't be much. She's sheltered by that balcony— —'

'Nonsense! Come inside this instant, Pamela! Don't be silly!'

The schoolgirls, wearing their hats and coats, cared nothing for the slight shower, and stood watching the clouds drift across the face of the Aiguilles Rouges. Pamela cast an appealing glance at Miss Garnet, then reluctantly uncoiled her bare legs, hoping devoutly the girls would not look round.

'You'll have to go. When Aunty speaks like that there's no help for it. I'll try to stand in front of you,' Retta said encouragingly. 'Skip inside quickly and squat on the sofa till they go up to their rooms. Or you can put on your stockings as soon as I've got the needle out. The silly thing's stuck.'

Pamela, extremely anxious to reach the window unnoticed, sidled awkwardly along, trying to keep out of sight behind Retta. Unfortunately, in her efforts to make no noise, she knocked over a chair, and the big Italian girl Giulia looked round curiously. For a moment she stared blankly at poor bare-legged Pamela. Then, grasping the situation, she laughed and turned away quickly and laughed again, with a word to her friend Yvonne, which passed to Suzanne and so round the group.

Pamela fled, but not before several others had glanced round and seen her. She dropped on the sofa and seized the stockings which Retta offered in silent sympathy.

'Horrid, hateful, rude things! They needn't have laughed!'

'Oh, well, Pam, you did look funny, you know! They'd have been angels if they hadn't laughed.'

'That Giulia made fun of me. She's not a nice girl. She made the others laugh,' and Pamela fled as the increasing rain drove the girls in from the balcony.

Retta followed her. 'Let's see what clothes your mother has sent!' and they bent over the portmanteau together.

'Here's a pretty white dress! She evidently thought you ought to change for dinner. Oh, well, if you're going to wear that, I shall have to dress too. Perhaps it will be as well now that the hotel's so full, even if they are only girls,' and Retta selected a blue muslin dress which matched her eyes and spread it on the bed.

As they went down to dinner the proprietress met them, full of apologies for this sudden invasion. The change in the quiet house was very noticeable. The girls were all in their rooms, calling to one another through the open doors, and the corridors echoed with the sound of laughter and chattering. In one room a girl was singing in a deep contralto voice of considerable power and sweetness, and a high clear treble across the passage took up the air. Several others joined in, then some one interrupted with a shrill cat-call, and Miss Garnet fled to the shelter of the salon. Madame apologised again for the noise, and offered, if the English ladies wished, to transfer them to the big hotel lower down the road for meals, so long as the girls remained. Their visit would only last a day or two, but Madame Dufour, the mistress of

the school, was an old friend, and Madame had not liked to refuse to accommodate her. The other hotel would no doubt be quieter, and M. the proprietor was a friend, and would be delighted to take them in.

Miss Garnet hesitated. The house was certainly noisy, and dinner, with so many to be served, would be a slow business. Then she caught Retta's imploring eye, and relented. She had heard her and Pamela discussing the new arrivals, and saw that they were interested and did not want to go.

'We will stay here, Madame. No doubt you can find us a quiet corner for our meals.'

'That's jolly decent of you, Aunty!' Retta said warmly. 'It would have been awfully slack to go off to an empty hotel and know there was all sorts of fun going on here. Now if she'd offered to send us across the road to live with the lonely Scotch boy, there'd have been some sense in it. Perhaps she isn't friends with the man there. I'm glad you decided to stop here!' and they went in to dinner, curious to see the schoolgirls again and to know how many of them there were altogether.

'I wonder which of them was singing? Somebody has a jolly fine voice!' Retta remarked, as they sat down.

'That tall black girl—that Giulia—is not nice. She made them laugh at me.' Pamela's sorely-hurt feelings had not by any means recovered yet.

Retta laughed. 'I'm afraid you've an unforgiving nature, Pamela, my child! Can't you get over it? She didn't mean any harm. She only thought it was funny. And it *was*!'

'She isn't nice. It wasn't kind,' Pamela insisted again, and Retta looked across at her aunt and laughed.

CHAPTER IV
A NOISY EVENING

Dinner was laid for the English visitors in a little glass-enclosed balcony which opened off the dining-room, where through the big windows they had a perfect view of the peaks and glacier, and could watch them hold the sunlight long after the river gorge was buried in gloom. Hitherto Retta had insisted on sitting with her back to the room so that she could see the mountains, but to-night her interest in Nature had waned, and she changed her place so that she could see a section of the dining-room, and watch the girls who crowded into it.

'I can see Giulia and Yvonne,' she announced, as the girls took their seats with much laughter and discussion as to who should sit by whom. 'They're keeping a seat for some one. The German girl Linda wanted it, but they sent her away. Giulia seems to get her own way. They all do what she wants. Oh, it's Suzanne they were expecting. They're quite happy now they're all together. Here comes the big reddy girl Bianca, in such a pretty green blouse. They've all changed their blouses for light ones; it looks so nice. But I wonder how they brought them? They'd have been all crushed if they'd had them in their rücksacs.'

'They have portmanteaux or suitcases as well, and send them on in advance. I asked one of the maids,' said Pamela. 'The rücksacs are only for one night.'

'Oh, I see! Why, how funny!'

'What?' and Pamela tried to see.

'They—Giulia and Co.—invited Bianca to sit with them, and she wouldn't. She walked on, and they laughed and made remarks behind her back. I think perhaps she doesn't approve of them. She looks rather like it. She's one of the oldest, I should think. Her hair's half up.'

'Half up?'

'Yes, turned up with a big ribbon. Oh, she's waiting for some one else. Perhaps that's why she wouldn't sit with them. Some one must be late, whoever she is, for here comes the schoolmistress, and I suppose they'll begin. You can see she's their madame, but she looks quite nice—rather jolly, I should say,' and Pamela craned forward again to look.

'Yes, we're going to begin at last. What an age it will take to serve so many! Bianca's friend is late. I wonder if they get bad marks or lines while they're on tour? It's a jolly way to spend the term! Here comes somebody at last, in a desperate hurry. She evidently thinks something will happen. Oh, what a pretty girl!'

'What's she like? I wish I could see!'

'Come more this way. Don't let them see you peeping, though. This brown girl by Bianca, with the pretty pink blouse and pink ribbons in her hair. Do you see?—with long brown curls—lovely hair!'

'She hasn't as much as you have,' Pamela insisted.

'Oh, I think she has. And I like the colour of hers. It's such a rich brown, and it makes such pretty curls. Mine's just a silly mane. Madame is lecturing her for being late, and she's looking meek and dropping her eyes. She'll wink at Bianca as soon as Madame looks the other way. There! Didn't I say so?' as the brown-haired girl glanced up at her friend and pulled a little face.

'She didn't wink,' said Pamela the particular. 'Yes, she is pretty. I wonder if she's nice?'

'And what her name is, and if she's another Italian, or if she's French.'

'She is not French,' Pamela said positively, 'and I do not think she is Italian. She might perhaps be German.'

'I am very glad we're sitting out here and not in there with them. I should not have thought even fifty girls could make quite such a noise,' said Miss Garnet.

'Oh, Aunty, fifty girls can do a good lot when they try!' said Retta from experience. 'I'd like to be in there. It sounds so jolly. We're out of all the fun here.'

'I'm very thankful that we are. If we had had to sit with them, I think I would have accepted Madame's offer and gone to the other hotel for meals. The noise in there is deafening.'

'It sounds cheerful, that's all! And think how awkward it would have been if another shower had come on during dinner, and you'd had to walk home in pouring rain in your slippers!' Retta argued.

The balcony party were served first with dessert, so were ready to leave the table before the schoolgirls had finished. As Miss Garnet rose Pamela hung back.

'We'll have to pass them all. I don't like to.'

'Oh, come on! Don't be shy!' Retta laughed, and took her arm and led her through the dining-room apparently careless of the fifty pairs of eyes which followed them critically.

After dinner the schoolgirls crowded into the salon, or stood in groups on the balcony and in the entrance hall. Some walked up and down the road, and others wandered into the village shop to buy post cards, or went down to the post-office for stamps. Pamela, sitting in a corner of the salon with Retta, laughed at a scrap of conversation she overheard between the red-haired girl Bianca and her friend, the girl with long brown curls.

'The brown girl is cross with herself because this morning in Chamonix she wanted change for a ten-franc piece, so she went and bought two francs' worth of five-centimes stamps—twenty, you know—meaning to send off a lot of cards to-night, and now of course she finds they are no use.'

'But why not? What's wrong with them?'

Pamela laughed again. 'They're French stamps, and no use in Switzerland. Chamonix is in Savoie, and that is in France.'

'I say! Isn't Mont Blanc in Switzerland?'

'Of course not. Didn't you know?'

'No! I always thought it was. Then can't she use the stamps? What hard lines!'

'Two francs' worth! It was silly not to think before she bought them.'

'I say, Pamela!' Retta had thought the matter over, 'couldn't you take them off her hands? You're going back that way. Is your home in France or Switzerland?'

'In Savoie—France. But——'

'Then couldn't you buy them from her, and she could go and get Swiss ones instead? Your mother could use them.'

'She could, of course. But I wouldn't like to, Retta. How could I go and speak to her?'

'*I* wouldn't mind!' and Retta looked round for the two girls. But Bianca and her friend had disappeared, to buy more stamps probably, so the plan could not be carried out at the moment.

As darkness fell the girls gathered in the salon and dining-room. Some one opened the piano, and a crowd gathered round in a moment. Miss Garnet hastily took up her books and fled to the sanctuary of her own room, bidding Retta and Pamela follow, and they did so, feeling themselves unwanted in the noisy room, but unwilling to leave the merry crowd. But Pamela, though willing to look on and listen, was too shy to speak to any of the girls, and Retta, who would gladly have done so, could not. So they withdrew, but listened from the seclusion of their bedroom to the clamour below.

The shouts of laughter from the dining-room suggested that some game was in progress. In the salon song followed song, led always by the rich contralto they had heard before, but generally with a rowdy chorus. From the balcony, as Retta hung out of her window, came the

sound of low voices, as several girls, wrapped in their coats, talked earnestly together. One little group consisted of Bianca, Linda, and the brown-haired girl, who stood leaning over the railing watching the moon rise and shine on the snowfields of the Aiguille du Tour.

It was ten o'clock before the singing and laughter ceased, and Retta and Pamela were in bed, though to sleep would have been impossible. Evidently Madame Dufour did not keep a very strict watch over her charges, or else all rules were relaxed while on tour. As the girls came up to bed, the corridors were filled with chattering, laughing groups, merry good-nights were called from room to room, and the noise and scuffling sounds from many quarters suggested that going to bed in a strange house was by no means a peaceful proceeding.

'Pillow-fights!' murmured Retta. 'Jolly! Wish I could join in! What are you wriggling about for?' as Pamela suddenly sat up in the dark at her end of the bed.

Then a pillow, aimed carefully in the direction of her voice, caught her full in the face and took her breath away. Pamela lay chuckling, her arms up to ward off the inevitable reply.

'You asked me to!' she gurgled, as Retta gasped and cried out in her surprise.

Then she gave a little shriek and collapsed into a crumpled heap, as Retta launched herself upon her and tickled her under the arms at both sides at once.

'I caught you nicely! I knew you'd be expecting it back! I've been there before, you see. People always put up their arms to stop the pillow, and it's a ripping chance to tickle them. Had enough, you monkey?'

'Oh—oh—Retta, *don't*!' and Pamela wriggled and squirmed frantically.

'Girls, girls, what *are* you up to? I thought you promised to go to sleep quietly to-night?' and Miss Garnet appeared in the doorway between the two rooms.

'She pillow-fighted me, Aunty! Surely that's enough excuse!'

'She asked me to! Well, she said she wished she could. I thought it would be only kind ——'

'Pamela, you *are* a little wretch, for all you're so quiet and meek and mild! I wouldn't have believed it of you!' Retta said indignantly.

Miss Garnet switched on the light and looked at them severely. The bed was in disorder, Pam was huddled in a heap in the middle, Retta, with tousled fair pigtail, squatted beside her, threatening her most ticklish points.

'Girls, this won't do at all! Retta, put the bed straight at once. I shall take Pamela in with me if there's any more nonsense,' and at this terrible threat Retta hopped hurriedly out of bed and Pamela sat up hastily. 'Now let there be no more noise. Remember we are not alone in the house. What will people think of us if they hear you laughing and talking at this time of night?'

'Considering the row they're making themselves, I don't think they'll hear us, Aunty, and if they do they can't say anything. It would be a case of pots and kettles. They're making far more noise than we are. I expect they'll all be late for breakfast.'

But in that she was mistaken. The schoolgirls not only woke early, but took good care that no one else should sleep late. The first of them woke about five, and promptly threw her pillow at her comrade sleeping peacefully on the other side of the room. Together they organised a raid on their companions, and crept down the corridor barefoot and in dressing-gowns and pigtails, armed with pillows and quite heedless of the chilly mountain air. The battle royal which took place in the room first attacked wakened everybody on the corridor, including Retta and Pamela, and warned the occupants of the other bedrooms of what they might expect. Doors were hastily barricaded, and stormed by the attacking party, which grew steadily in numbers, and the uproar increased and reached its height when two parties met and fought the matter out with pillows and knotted towels.

‘They’re a lively lot,’ Retta remarked from the snug comfort of her bed. ‘I suppose they’ll go to sleep again presently, and sleep till nine o’clock. Madame doesn’t seem very strict, does she?’

‘But this is not school. It’s a holiday. They are doing just what they like,’ Pamela argued.

‘They certainly are. You don’t think they go on like this always, then?’

‘They’re getting dressed. I hear the water splashing.’

‘What, at half-past five?’

‘I expect they’re going for some long walk or climb—perhaps to the Col, which we did not reach yesterday. Early morning is the proper time to start. They have climbing boots. Did you see them last night, and the sticks in the hall? Each girl’s had her name on.’

‘Yes, I saw them. But what an early start!’

‘People always start early when they are going to climb. For the mountains they start before it’s light. The girls will have six o’clock breakfast, and be gone before we are down.’

‘Well, I don’t mean to move one minute before half-past seven! I’m stiff and sore all over. Are you?’ and Retta groaned as she turned in bed. ‘Oh, I say! I think I shall break in bits when I move.’

‘Yes, I’m as sore as I can be,’ and Pamela was even more reluctant to move than Retta.

The hotel was quiet long before they could be persuaded to rise—quiet with a stillness all the more striking after the noise of the night before. It was evident that the girls had gone, but their departure was only temporary. They would be back in time for dinner, a waitress explained, in answer to a question from Miss Garnet.

‘And then pandemonium will begin again!’ laughed Retta.

CHAPTER V
MAKING FRIENDS WITH A BOY

The condition of their limbs and muscles helped to keep Retta and Pamela content near home that day. They were suffering the penalty of their escapade, and were so stiff that they could not go downstairs without groans. The walk which pleased them best was the one which led most over level ground, since any slope was painful, and they could not go far without collapsing on a seat to rest. If Retta had been alone she would have tried to conceal her sufferings and make light of the matter, but such an attitude would have been quite impossible to Pamela, so Retta groaned to keep her company, and was perfectly frank about her feelings. She never wanted to climb a hill again. For the rest of her days she would be content to toddle along easy level paths; in fact, she rather thought of taking to a bathchair and hiring a mule to draw her along.

'Borrow the pretty one that pulls the lonely boy,' Pamela suggested. 'He'll lend it to you, I'm sure—after you've made friends with him! You said you would, but you haven't got very far yet. I don't believe you'd dare to speak to him.'

'I've not had much chance yet, have I?' Retta retorted. 'We've only seen him once since we heard his name and knew he wasn't French, and that was yesterday, and you were such a sight that I'd have been ashamed to introduce you as belonging to me.'

'What about you? Your hair was all dust and leaves.'

'Well, remember your stockings! And now that we've exchanged compliments, Miss Pamela, let me tell you again that I *will* speak to him when I get the chance.'

The chance came that afternoon. Miss Garnet went to lie down after lunch, and the girls strolled out for another walk. As they had gone towards Trétien in the morning, with many groans over the steepness of the road, they turned in the other direction, and after crossing five or six little mountain torrents entered the forest and walked on and up by a good road till they found themselves nearly at Giétroz. The big hotels were close in front, two of Mont Blanc's great shoulders stood out whitely against the sky, and it seemed that a little farther walk must show the summit. They went on round the edge of the hill, where there were no more trees, but great boulders covered with every kind and colour of rock-plant, and on turning the corner came suddenly on the invalid chair, the mule, the nurse, and the boy.

He was out of the chair to-day and sitting on a rock by the roadside, a bunch of wild flowers on his knee. The nurse was bending over him, and they were classifying the flowers with the help of a book with coloured plates.

'Now!' murmured Pamela. 'You've found him quite alone! Go and speak to him now!'

'Presently. I want to rest. The nurse is there just now,' and Retta sat down on a big stone.

'She always will be there. I believe you don't want to,' teased Pamela.

'Of course I want to! But I won't do it till I feel ready,' and Retta leaned against a rock and gazed across the valley. 'Look at that ripping waterfall! I can hear it roar though the river's between.'

'It's not so far away. But it would take you a good long while to get there. You'd have to go right down to the river. Aren't you going to speak to him? You said you would. See, she's bringing him more flowers. They must be making a collection.'

'I can't interrupt while they're so busy,' Retta argued, for she had suddenly begun to wonder what would happen if the boy returned her greeting with a cold stare, or the nurse looked her over and wondered how she could be so impertinent. It was a disturbing prospect, with Pamela looking on and waiting to jeer, and Retta, with all her assurance, was hardly

prepared to face it. She felt that she had placed herself in an awkward corner, and did not quite know how to proceed.

But sympathy had prompted her decision in the first place and not mere curiosity, and the feeling which had stirred her when she first heard the boy's story came to her help. He had been here for months—all winter—with only the nurse for company. How could he fail to be lonely? There were hardly any English visitors in the village yet. He could not have many friends. The thought of the long, dull months which must have passed since he saw his home and friends was too much for Retta. With all her carelessness and love of fun and adventure she was very tender-hearted. Suddenly she sprang up and went towards the little group, and Pamela with a gasp of surprise sprang up also, but was careful to keep in the background.

'Won't you let me help you collect flowers? I'd be awfully pleased to. I could climb up the rocks if there are any high ones you want.'

They turned to her quickly, and the boy's big dark eyes lit up.

'I say, that's awfully good of you! Will you really? There's a ripping primula up there, but I didn't like to ask nurse to scramble up for it.'

'Where is it, Malcolm? I'll have a try for it.'

'No, it's not fair to ask you. But perhaps you——' and he looked at Retta.

'I'd love to. I'm longing to scramble up those rocks. You'll catch me if I roll down, won't you? I don't want to go right over the edge, and down a thousand feet! Just which one do you want? I'm afraid I don't know many of the names.'

'Neither did I, this time last year,' and a shadow crossed his face. 'But one must do something. That bright pink clump up there.'

'I'll get it if I can. You might talk to Pamela,' Retta said mischievously. 'She's awfully scared of you. She's Pamela Gay, from Argentière, and she'll talk French or English, just as you like. I'm Retta Garnet, and I only talk English!'

'Retta?' queried Malcolm. 'You aren't sisters, then?'

'No. Tell him, Pamela! She said I wouldn't dare to speak to you. She's shy!' and Retta began the climb, satisfied that she had paid Pamela out for her teasing.

Poor Pamela had crimsoned at this abrupt introduction, and looked like running away. But Malcolm seemed to understand, and while she hesitated, on the point of flight, he turned to her with a friendly smile.

'That was mean of her, wasn't it? How can we talk when we don't know one another? But perhaps you'd like to stroke Pierrot's nose. He's friends with anybody who'll stroke his nose. Do you really speak French?'

'My father was Swiss,' Pamela explained shyly, stroking the sleek gray forehead. 'I've never been in England.'

'Really not? How jolly interesting! But you speak awfully good English.'

'Mother is English. We live at Argentière. If you are fond of flowers, you should go there to get the alpenrose.'

'We must go, Polly!' and he turned eagerly to the nurse. 'And your friend's name is Retta?' he asked, turning to Pamela again. 'What does it mean?'

'It's short for Henrietta. She hates it. They used to call her Harry at school.'

Malcolm laughed. 'That suits her. She climbs like a boy. I expect she plays cricket, doesn't she? I saw you yesterday, and the day before. You only arrived on Wednesday, didn't you?'

Pamela nodded shyly. 'I stayed to be company for Retta.'

'And she led you into some kind of mess up on the mountain?' Malcolm's eyes twinkled. 'You looked as if you'd been in difficulties. You don't want to tell tales, do you?' as Pamela looked down and said nothing. 'I shall ask Harry. I say, it's awfully good of you!' as Retta

came sliding down the rocks and laid the clump of primula triumphantly on his knee. 'That's jolly decent. I'm afraid it was hard work.'

'I enjoyed the climb. But you'd say it was good of me if you knew how it hurts.'

'Hurts? Why?'

'After yesterday, you know. You saw us coming down.'

Malcolm laughed. 'I was just asking Pamela, but she won't give you away.'

'Oh, I don't mind any one knowing! We tried to take a short cut, and went up a beast of a path that wasn't really a path——'

'It was a tree-slide,' said Pamela solemnly.

'And it didn't go anywhere, and we had to come down again, and we couldn't, and it was *awful*! I don't mind telling you I was jolly frightened,' Retta said frankly.

'It was awfully risky. You might have been killed.'

Retta nodded. 'It won't happen again. You can be certain sure of that. Did you think we looked awful sights?'

'Well, you did look rather——' Malcolm laughed. 'I say, how many girls are there stopping in your hotel?'

'Oh, did you see them? Fifty, and not one English girl among them! You should have heard the row last night!' and she launched forth eagerly on the subject of the schoolgirls.

Malcolm listened and laughed, and led her on to tell more. But presently Nurse Polly, with a glance at the clouds gathering round Mont Blanc, suggested a return home, and he rose and went to his carriage.

'I'm not allowed to walk very far,' he said lightly. 'But I can walk twice as far as when I came, can't I, Polly?'

'More than that, I should say. You are very much stronger.'

'My aunt is here for her health,' Retta said gravely, as they turned towards the village, Pamela walking by Pierrot but listening to the talk behind.

'Really? She looks very well. I saw her out walking yesterday, while you were climbing the mountain. I've been here since last September.'

'Yes, why——' She checked herself, and changed the subject hurriedly. 'Wasn't it very cold in winter?'

'It was cold, but clear and dry and sunny. I was able to go out most days. What were you going to ask? Why did I have to stop here?'

'No, I was going to say why is there nobody with you? It seems so lonely. Haven't you anybody who could stay with you?'

'I'm not alone. I have Polly, and we're great chums,' and he smiled up at the nurse. 'But I know what you mean. I've a mother and two little sisters at home—Ivy and Maisie. But the kiddies are delicate and can't be taken travelling, and as they're so small, one six and the other eight, mother feels she ought to be with them most of the time. So when they found I must live abroad for a while, she arranged for nurse to come with me, and knew I'd be all right. She promised to come and stay with me in the winter, and get some one to look after the kiddies, but just when we were looking forward to it and everything was arranged, Ivy was taken ill, and it turned into rheumatic fever, and she was ill for weeks. When she got over it they found it had left her heart weak, and she had to be watched all the time, for fear she'd jump or run or do something like that. The doctor said any excitement might just kill her, and you know how easily kiddies get excited. So mother daren't leave her even for a day. She couldn't trust her to any one when she was like that. We haven't any aunts or cousins who could help, so mother felt she had to stay with her. She wanted to come to me, and she knew I wanted her, but with Ivy in that state what could we do? We had to think first of the kiddy. So we've had to give up her visit for the present. She'll come as soon as she can.'

'What awfully hard lines!' Retta's face was very sober. 'To be ill must be bad enough, but not to be able to have your mother when you're ill is rotten luck.'

He smiled at the boyish expression.

'Such rotten luck that it doesn't do to think about it. If I do I get grumpy, and that's not allowed. Besides, it worries Polly, and she's been a brick all winter. She thinks she isn't keeping me amused, when it's all my own fault for allowing myself to grump. So I've made up my mind not to, you see.'

Retta nodded. She was thinking hard, forming her opinion of him, and said nothing for a time. But presently she asked,—

'Had you been ill long when you came away?'

He glanced at her quickly. 'Rather not! This time last year I was at school and—well, I was tennis champion and captain of the cricket eleven.'

She looked at him wide-eyed. 'Really?'

'It hardly seems possible, does it?' he said grimly. 'But it's so. But I had influenza last June—it went through the school—and with me it went into pneumonia. Then—well, I didn't get strong again, and the doctor began sending for specialists, and they sent me here! They said I'd get strong in the mountain air, and Polly was to see that I did it. It's taken me all winter to start, and I believe she thought sometimes that I wasn't going to start at all.'

'No, that isn't so,' Nurse Polly said quickly. 'You've been making progress all the time, except when you had that touch of congestion in January. That put you back, but except for that you have gained ground steadily, though you didn't notice it yourself till you began to feel strong enough to walk. Now that you are getting about you really feel you are getting on.'

'Anyway, I'm heaps better than I was, and if I stop here long enough I shall be able to go home quite strong again,' Malcolm said sturdily, and Nurse Polly nodded. 'Are you going to stop?' and he looked up at Retta anxiously. 'So many people have come to our hotel, and been friendly, and then gone on to some other place just when I was getting to know them. Nobody stops long. Perhaps if you're staying——'

'I'll be here for some months—unless Aunty sends me away to school,' Retta said quickly. 'I'd like to be friends, if that's what you mean. I only know Pamela, and of course she doesn't live here. She'll have to go back to her mother soon.'

'And then you'll forget all about me, do you mean?' asked Pamela unexpectedly, over her shoulder.

'You silly girl, no! I'll never forget that tree-slide, and I'll never remember it without thinking of you, and what you looked like when you went the colour of chalk and flopped down in the dirt, and I had to hang on to your arm!'

Pamela laughed uncertainly. 'It's going to rain. We'd better go in,' she said, for they had reached the village and were standing between the two hotels. 'There's your aunt at the door, and she's got letters.'

'Letters from home? Goody! I must go. But I say! I'd like to say one thing!' and she turned back to Malcolm and spoke hurriedly and with some embarrassment. 'I'm glad you didn't think it was awful cheek my speaking to you like that. It wasn't just cheek. I wanted to be friends, but I was afraid you might not want me. Then Pam said I was frightened, and I knew I was really, so of course I had to show her I wasn't. I'm glad you didn't mind. I'd like to be friends, for I think you're jolly plucky, you know,' and she turned and fled into the house.

'What a little brick she is!' said Malcolm warmly.

And Nurse Polly nodded, for in this new friendship she saw great possibilities for her patient. She had done everything she could for him during the long winter months, but a

comrade near his own age had been lacking. In Retta's frank companionship and honest and hearty sympathy Nurse Polly saw great hopes for her patient in the future.

CHAPTER VI
MAKING FRIENDS WITH A GIRL

'And I never asked him why he called his nurse Polly!' said Retta. 'Well, I'll ask him next time.'

They had been forced to take tea in the salon, since the rain which had been threatening all afternoon was now falling in torrents. The girls, busy the one with Pierrot and the other with Malcolm, had not noticed the gathering clouds, and had been amazed on looking round to see the mountains misty and the sky black and lowering. A thunderstorm seemed imminent, and they were glad they had reached home safely.

During tea Retta eagerly described their walk, and gave Malcolm's story in full.

'Isn't it awfully hard on a boy of sixteen—he said he was sixteen—who's been keen on games and school, to have to leave it all so suddenly and turn into an invalid and be sent away alone with a nurse? I think it's simply tragic. But he's so plucky about it, Aunty. He didn't complain at all, and tried to seem as if he didn't mind. I should cry from morning till night if it happened to me.'

'You'd stand a poor chance of getting well,' said Miss Garnet. 'But you're right, Retta. It is hard for the boy, and if you can cheer him up at all you must try to do it.'

'Yes, poor chap, I mean to! And there's Pamela looking as glum as sour apples because she's jealous and thinks I'll forget her when she's gone back to her mammy! As if any one who had known Pam once could ever forget her! I'll tickle you in bed to-night for being such a goat, Pam, my dear!'

'Well, I don't want you to forget me.'

'No fear of that—neither you nor the tree-slide! I say, just come and look at the rain! I never saw anything like it.'

They stood at the open window, watching the gray slanting lines, as the steady downpour increased till the thunder of its fall filled the valley, and drowned every other sound.

'I can't even hear the cowbells or the river! I never thought anything would drown those!' Retta marvelled, and then with a sudden idea—'Just think of those schoolgirls, caught in this storm up on the mountain! What will they do?'

'I hope they'll find shelter somewhere,' said her aunt.

'If they don't they'll come in like drowned rats, and need to have dinner in bed, while their clothes are being dried, for they can't have brought much with them.'

'They would bring dry stockings and a second skirt, surely! How very unfortunate for them! The rain certainly looks like keeping on all night.'

'Like keeping on for a week,' Retta amended.

'That sounds like them arriving now,' she said presently, at a sudden bustle in the vestibule. 'Poor objects! Won't they be in an awful state? I'm going out to see——'

'No, no, Retta! Don't be unkind! You wouldn't like it yourself! Let them get up to their rooms and change.'

'I won't let them see me. I want to know if it's them or not,' and Retta opened the door quarter of an inch and peeped out.

'It's them, right enough. They're all soaked to the skin. There are pools of water everywhere already. They seem jolly enough about it, though—some of them. Bianca's laughing, Pam, and wringing the water out of her hat. Here comes Giulia, looking awfully sulky. She evidently doesn't like getting wet. Madame's sending them upstairs to change as

quickly as they can. Oh, she's lecturing the pretty brown girl—Bianca's friend! I wish I knew what it's all about!'

Pamela, peeping under her arm, interpreted.

'She wants her to go and change at once. The brown girl is explaining that she can't, as she forgot to bring another skirt, and Madame is very angry. She says she must either borrow a skirt from one of the maids or go to bed at once. She must take off her wet one instantly. She *is* wet, isn't she? There! Madame's going on to hurry up the others, and the brown girl's wondering if she can get a skirt anywhere, or if she'll have to go to bed. It's only half-past five. What a shame!'

'It was extremely naughty of her to forget to bring one,' Miss Garnet remarked. 'She is well punished by finding herself in difficulties now. She must be a very thoughtless girl.'

Retta made a grimace. She could imagine herself in just such a predicament, and felt much sympathy for the thoughtless girl.

'I could lend her a skirt, if I could only tell her so! I say, Pam, couldn't you— —'

Then she and Pamela flashed an incredulous look at one another, as the girl, released from Madame's scolding, surveyed her soaked skirt and streaming hat and said cheerfully, to no one in particular,—

'What a beastly mess! I'll have to go to bed. Oh, what a fag!'

'She's *English*!' gasped Retta, and flung the door wide.

'I say! I've plenty of skirts, and we're just the same size! You're welcome to them all!'

Madame and the rest of the schoolgirls looked round in surprise. But Retta disregarded them, and gazed eagerly at the English girl. Her face had lit up in sudden gratitude.

'How awfully good of you! Will you really lend me one? Oh, one will be quite enough, thank you so much!'

'Come along and choose which you'll have!' and Retta led the way, full of delight at thus finding a friend.

'We didn't know you were English. We thought you were all French. You talk French all the time, don't you?'

'We have to. I'm used to it now. I didn't know you were English last night, or I'd have spoken to you then. Bianca told me to-day that there were English people in the hotel, and I made up my mind I'd speak to you to-night. My name's Una Deverell.'

While spreading out her skirts for inspection Retta told her own name and Pamela's, and explained their lack of relationship.

'Bianca said she thought you couldn't be sisters,' Una commented.

'I was longing to speak to some of you last night, but Pamela was too shy to translate for me, and I didn't dare to attempt French. I can ask a question or two, and get them fairly right, but I can't understand the answers.'

Una laughed. 'I felt very awkward at first, but I've been in Vevey for two years, and of course it's all right for me now. Didn't you think us a very rowdy lot?'

'We thought Madame wasn't very strict,' Retta laughed. 'If you go on like that at school you must have a pretty good time.'

'Oh, it's different at school! The little ones are there, and we have to set a good example, and all that kind of thing! But in holidays Madame lets us do pretty much what we like.'

'But isn't this the middle of the term? It's June!'

'We always go touring for a week in June—just the seniors. The kiddies are left at school, of course. Last year we went to Zermatt, and the Rhone Glacier, and the big tunnels. This year we've been doing Savoie and the Chamonix valley. We're to see Trient to-morrow, and then the Col de Balme and the Col de la Forclaz.'

'It's an awfully jolly kind of half-term holiday! I wish they did it at home!'

Una laughed. 'In the winter we go to see the cities—Geneva, and Lucerne, and Berne, and Thun, and Zurich. Yes, it's very jolly. We do pretty much as we like. So long as we don't actually burn the house down, Madame won't interfere. Did we wake you this morning?'

'Of course you did! Did you think any one could sleep through that racket?'

'I began it,' Una said demurely. 'Bianca was so sound asleep! I threw my pillow at her, and then we went together to attack the others.'

'I'd have liked to join in, but Pamela and I were too stiff to move. We didn't want to get up at all. We climbed the hill yesterday, you see. You'll all be stiff to-morrow.'

'Oh, no!' Una said lightly. 'We're in good training now. We went up the Flégère and Montenvers and across the Mer de Glace at Chamonix, and that's fairly good practice. We were stiff the first day, of course, but it soon wore off. Madame sent us some long walks before we left Vevey, so that we'd be used to it—to Mont Pélerin and Les Avants, and so on. Those make you jolly stiff.'

While she talked she had slipped off her wet skirt and stockings, and stood barefoot and in her petticoat, the wet garments in one hand and Retta's skirt in the other. But the polished floor was cold, and she stood first on one foot and then on the other, and finally turned to the door.

'I'd better get some dry things on! I'll come back later, but it's rather chilly!'

'I'm awfully sorry I kept you talking! It was too bad!' and Retta threw open the door. 'I could have lent you stockings too. Are you sure you won't have anything else? You're welcome to anything I have.'

'It's awfully nice of you! But I have stockings, thank you. I did remember them! But I'm deeply grateful for the skirt. I really didn't want to have to go to bed at half-past five.'

'No, it would have been horrid. Which is your room? This one?' as Una dropped her soaked garments in a heap on the mat.

'Haven't we made the house in a mess?' she laughed. 'I'm afraid I dripped in your room, too. I'll tell the girl to come and mop it up. We'll meet later, then,' and she nodded to Retta and hurried in to change.

'Two new friends in one day! It's jolly!' Retta murmured, as she went back to her room to dress for dinner.

The afternoon's wetting had not damped the feelings of the schoolgirls. They seemed to cast off all weariness with their wet clothes, and assembled in the dining-room in their usual high spirits, making merry over their plight of a couple of hours before. Even Giulia had recovered, and was talking and laughing with her chosen friends, the French girls Yvonne and Simonne. Una nodded to Retta as she entered the room, but postponed further conversation till afterwards. But after dinner, as Retta and Pamela stood at the window of the balcony in which they had dined, watching the rain still falling in torrents, Una came up behind them.

'I was looking for you. Isn't it coming down? Do you think we'll be washed away? I say, your aunt and our Madame are getting quite chummy.'

'Why, where are they? What do you mean?' Retta exclaimed, while Pamela shrank shyly away.

'In the salon, talking hard. Your aunt sympathised with Madame about the rain, and asked where we were when it began, and Madame's delighted to have some one to talk to. Your aunt speaks French all right, doesn't she? They're having a real good chat.'

'Aunty'll be glad, too. Tell us what your school is like! In Vevey, did you say? I'm going to school when I can talk French, either in Vevey or Lausanne.'

'You might come to us,' Una suggested. 'I wish you would! It would be jolly to have another English girl. I'm the only one at present. Does your aunt want you to go to any particular school?'

‘I don’t think so. She was going to make inquiries. I wouldn’t mind, if I have to go somewhere,’ Retta said thoughtfully. ‘You like the school, then?’

‘Oh, pretty fair! Madame’s rather too slack for me. I’m not particularly keen on lessons, but I’d rather do them in earnest if I do them at all. We waste an awful lot of time. If things were stricter I’d like it better. There’s a lot goes on——’ She shrugged her shoulders and stopped abruptly. ‘Well, I won’t tell tales! But there’s a lot goes on that Madame knows nothing about.’

‘Do tell us!’ Retta coaxed, but Una shook her head.

‘There are some jolly girls. I’ll introduce you to Bianca. She’s my special chum. Linda is nice, too. She’s German.’

‘And Giulia? And Yvonne?’

Una’s face showed her astonishment. ‘How did you know?’

‘Pamela heard them talking. She understands French, so she told me their names. Is Giulia nice? She’s awfully handsome, but she looks rather managing.’

‘She is bossy. She gets her own way with most of the French girls—she’s Italian herself, of course. They call her “The Countess,” because of her bossy ways. I believe her grandmother is one. But——’

‘But she isn’t one of your special chums?’ said Retta, watching her closely.

‘That’s putting it mildly! She doesn’t like me; in fact, she’d do anything to spite me,’ Una said lightly. ‘It doesn’t worry me, though. But I didn’t mean to tell tales. We won’t discuss people. It’s always risky. There’s thunder! I’ve been expecting it. Let’s watch the lightning,’ and she switched off the electric light.

Pamela slipped into the lighted dining-room. To stand in the dark and watch a thunderstorm did not sound attractive to her. She preferred not to see the lightning, and as the thunder began to roll and echo among the mountains she dropped into a chair, and, putting her elbows on the table, covered her ears and sat wishing Retta would come.

But Retta and Una were enjoying the weird glimpses of the peaks and glacier and valley, showing suddenly cold and gray in the swift flash, and the ceaseless roll of the thunder as it re-echoed from cliffs and rocky walls. So that they might hear better, Una opened the windows and set wide the glass door leading to the verandah, and they listened to the deafening roar of the rain, mingling with the clamour of the torrents on every hand and the distant foaming of the river in the gorge below.

‘It’s no use talking till you shut those windows,’ Retta shouted in Una’s ear. ‘But isn’t it fine? It’s grand to hear it.’

Una nodded, but did not attempt to make herself heard above the uproar. They could hardly hear the laughter and talk of the girls in the rooms behind for the thunder of the rain on the roof.

Presently Una closed the windows, shutting out some of the clamour. Retta looked round at the various girls in the room. ‘Giulia’s awfully good-looking, isn’t she?’

‘Oh, yes! And she can be awfully fascinating when she likes. But—well, I won’t say it! It sounds rather horrid.’

‘But what?’ Retta naturally demanded; but Una would say no more.

‘She’s quite a leader in the school. The younger girls all look up to her.’

‘Bianca doesn’t approve of Giulia, does she?’

‘I never said so,’ Una said quickly.

‘No, we guessed it before we knew you, from the way she looked at her.’

‘She doesn’t always agree with her,’ Una said evasively, ‘but that’s natural. People can’t always agree, and those two are as different as they can be. But when you live with people you have to get on with them somehow.’

Retta did her best to lead her on to say more of Giulia, but Una would not be persuaded. They were still talking on the balcony when Yvonne appeared with a message which Una translated for her new friend's benefit.

'Madame and your aunt wish you and Pamela to go to the salon, that your aunt may introduce you. I wonder if she's thinking she might let you come to us?'

'It would be awfully jolly,' Retta said thoughtfully, and though she asked no questions in public, she noted the fact that a prospectus of the school lay in Miss Garnet's lap while the introductions were taking place. Seeing the possibility that Madame might be her future schoolmistress, she was on her best behaviour, and consequently unnaturally quiet and demure, and Madame formed a high opinion of her as a quiet, lady-like child who would be easy to manage, and quite an acquisition to the school. She expressed herself as delighted to perceive the friendship which had sprung up between Retta and Una, and suggested that they should see as much of one another as possible in the short time remaining to them. Which precept the girls proceeded to put into practice as soon as they were released from her presence, though in ways not intended by Madame. With Pamela they ran upstairs, and when Bianca came up to bed about ten o'clock, she found the bedroom lit up and three dressing-gowned figures with streaming hair and unused brushes squatting on Una's bed, eating biscuits begged from the waitress, and exchanging anecdotes of school life. Pam, indeed, had none to tell, but she listened with eager interest to the chatter of the elder girls.

'Ah!' and Bianca stood and looked at them, and then, in hesitating English, with a pretty foreign accent, 'You are perhaps too busy for me to enter? But, truly, it is after ten o'clock, and Madame your aunt will be seeking you English girls.'

'She'll guess where we are,' Retta said easily. 'What pretty English you speak! You're Bianca, aren't you? I know, because Una said she threw her pillow at you this morning. I'm coming in to-morrow to chuck mine at her—if I wake first!—so don't lock your door, will you?'

Bianca laughed. 'That is not *gentil*, and Madame thinks you are a so quiet, *gentille* mademoiselle.'

'Dear old lady! Don't undeceive her. We looked *gentille* when we arrived home after our morning up on the hill, didn't we, Pam?'

'Up the tree-slide,' insisted Pamela, and helped herself to another biscuit.

'What was that?' Una asked curiously.

'I'll tell you, if Bianca will begin getting ready for bed. While she stands there I feel we ought to go.'

'Do your hair, Bianca, there's a dear!' begged Una, and Bianca obligingly changed to her dressing-gown and loosened the thick plait which she wore turned up under a broad ribbon. She braided her hair in two ruddy pigtails while listening to Retta's story of their adventure, and shook her head as she remarked that they might have been killed.

'Everybody says that,' Retta said cheerfully. 'It certainly was a beast of a path.'

'It was a tree-slide,' said Pamela again.

'Now if you will please to go—is that good English?' Bianca began doubtfully.

'Quite! It's absolutely clear and to the point. You couldn't possibly have put it more plainly if you'd tried all night. Come along, Pam! We'd better shift.'

'—I wish to go to bed,' Bianca finished carefully, and Retta laughed and departed with a very sleepy Pamela for their own room.

The storm was still rolling among the cliffs as they prepared for bed.

'Listen!' said Pamela suddenly, at the sound of singing.

Retta flung open the shutters and leaned out into the rain. 'I say, Pam! Look here! How weird!'

On the balcony of the salon, protected by the verandah, and clearly visible in the light from the window, stood Giulia, a long coat thrown over her light blouse, her friends crowding behind, watching her eagerly. Gazing out at the storm, she was singing some wild melody unknown to Retta, the words Italian, the voice the rich contralto they had heard the night before.

Retta and Pamela stood entranced. But when Giulia's song was finished she disappeared, and silence reigned.

'Weird! She is weird!' Retta murmured. 'I wonder if she's often taken like that? I shall dream about that weird song, Pam!'

'They're jolly girls,' she decided, as she climbed into bed. 'But I would like to know what that "but" about Giulia meant! "She can be awfully fascinating, but——!" Is Una just jealous of her because she's a favourite, or is there something wrong with her? They won't tell me, but if I should go to this school I guess I'd soon find out. I think I'd rather like to go!'

CHAPTER VII
RETTA'S RIOT

Pillow in hand, Retta slipped out of bed, and crept to the door. Pamela was still asleep, and so, she hoped, was Una. But just as she reached her new friend's door it opened, and Una herself came stealthily out, armed with her pillow also.

For a moment they looked at one another in mutual disappointment, then both began to giggle. At Una's whispered suggestion they threw down their pillows and sat on them, cuddling their feet in their dressing-gowns.

'Let's have a duel!' whispered Retta. 'That would wake all the rest!'

'They'd all join in. We might have sides. What time is it?'

'Half-past four, and still raining like mad.'

'Yes, isn't it jolly chilly? We must do something, or we'll freeze.'

'Well, listen!' and Retta whispered vigorously.

Una laughed and nodded, and together they crept down the corridor, gently opening every door, removing the key, and locking the door again on the outside.

'I was afraid some might be locked inside,' Retta whispered.

'Madame won't allow it. It's strictly forbidden, but—yes, I thought so!' as one door refused to open when she turned the handle.

Una frowned. Retta whispered anxiously, 'Perhaps it's Madame's room. Do be careful!'

'No,' said Una, her lips compressed. 'Madame's upstairs. It's Giulia and her lot. Yvonne shares her room, and Simonne and Suzanne are next door. You'll find that's locked, too. They will do it. How like "The Countess"! She doesn't mean to be taken by surprise, whether she's doing anything wrong or not. That rather spoils our little game, doesn't it?'

'Never mind! Perhaps they'll join in. Let's do all the rest.'

Up and downstairs they crept, and locked up every room which contained schoolgirls. Then in their own corridor they began their duel, the winner to be the one who first drove the other to her room. With a wild warwhoop, calculated to wake every one in the neighbourhood, Una rushed upon Retta, and a scuffle ensued, with much shouting and confusion. In the excitement of the tussle they forgot the plot so carefully laid, but were reminded of it when the rest of the girls, wide awake and eager to join in the fun, found themselves helpless in their rooms.

'What's up? What's the row? Whatever is going on?'—the questions were shouted from room to room, and then, as all ran to their doors and found them locked, an indignant uproar arose, handles were rattled till they seemed like to break, and a vigorous tattoo was begun upon the panels. Angry cries for the missing keys, and threats of vengeance, told Retta and Una of the complete success of their plan. With one accord they called a truce and slipped back into their own rooms, satisfied that they had roused the house and provided some entertainment for a dreary morning.

Pamela was sitting up in bed, looking with startled, solemn eyes for her companion. Retta landed beside her with a flying leap, and laughingly explained the sudden hubbub.

'But they are still shouting and hammering on the doors!' objected Pamela.

'Of course. They're all locked in. They want to know what it was, and how they're to get out.'

'Madame will be coming to see.'

'Una says not, that she'll just turn round in bed and say to herself that it is those wicked girls again. It's a wet morning, you see, so they won't want to get up. When they find we've

stopped they'll soon quiet down and go to sleep again. If any one likes to come they can unlock the doors. The keys are all there. But *I'm* not going to,' and she snuggled down under the feather-bed. 'Ugh! It is cold!'

Pamela was rather scandalised, but could do nothing. It never occurred to her to go and unlock the doors. If Retta wished them to remain locked, locked they would be, so far as she was concerned.

They lay listening to the indignant outcry, for the girls had no intention of submitting tamely to such treatment. They were determined to get out, and to know who had locked them in. Suddenly Retta sat up.

'Some one's going along the passage. I hear voices. I wonder if it's Madame?'

Pamela shivered at the very thought, and drew the blankets over her ears. Retta listened intently, expecting to hear doors open and a stream of angry girls burst forth. But nothing happened, the whispering died away, and the hubbub continued, the imprisoned girls pounding on their doors and shouting indignantly for rescue. With a chuckle she lay down again.

'Giulia and her lot, of course! They could get out, so they came to see what was up. They'd see the keys outside and understand, but they evidently didn't see why they should spoil the fun, so they've gone back to bed. What a joke! I wonder how soon the rest will get tired? I hope they won't break open the doors, that's all!'

'Girls, what *do* you suppose those children are up to this morning?' called Miss Garnet from the next room. 'I never heard such a disgraceful noise! I wish Madame would be a little more strict with them, even on holiday.'

'It is awful, isn't it, Aunty? They seem to be hammering on their doors for some reason. I'm sorry they've wakened you,' Retta said politely.

'Wakened me! I should think they've wakened the village! They must be trying to batter down their doors, I should say.'

'They are awfully noisy. I think they might let decent people sleep, don't you? It's not five o'clock yet. Perhaps they'll quiet down soon and go to sleep again. Nobody could want to get up early to-day. It's pouring rain, and awfully cold and dark.'

It was some time before the disturbance died away. A number of the girls, finding no notice taken of their cries and feeling chilled and sleepy, went back to bed with the reflection, 'If they don't see any of us down to breakfast they'll have to come and let us out!' But others kept up their tattoo on the doors until implored by their neighbours to desist, and it was an hour before peace reigned. When all were quiet, Una slipped out and ran along the corridor, noiselessly turning the keys, then retired to her bed and slept peacefully for two hours.

Retta woke at nine o'clock, wondering if the escapade in the gray early morning had all been a dream. But a big rent in her pillow-case assured her of its reality, and reminded her of probable consequences, and she knew that confession would be inevitable. Her aunt would certainly want to know how that hole had occurred. She had never in her life avoided the consequences of her misdeeds by failing to own up, but she had no objection to delaying her confession as long as possible. So she turned over her pillow and dressed hastily, for Pamela, already plaiting her hair, informed her that Miss Garnet had gone downstairs without them.

'That's what comes of fooling round at half-past four!' Retta mused. 'I wonder if Una's owned up, or if they still don't know who locked them in!'

'They're much quieter this morning.'

'Yes; we'll see what they're doing when we get downstairs,' and they hurried down to the dining-room.

The schoolgirls had resigned themselves to a morning indoors, for the rain was still falling heavily, and looked like continuing all day. Madame of the hotel had produced draughts, dominoes, cards, and writing materials, and all were busy in the way which pleased them best.

Giulia and her three friends were playing whist in one corner of the dining-room; Una and Bianca at a long table were writing picture postcards. Una looked up, and met Retta's laughing nod with an unmistakable wink, and presently she came along for a chat, when coffee and rolls had been cleared away. Miss Garnet sat writing letters, so the girls talked in low tones.

'Do they know?' demanded Retta.

'Not yet. They're all wild to find out who locked them in. I was as anxious as any one, of course, and pretended to be awfully wild at being wakened like that, so they never suspected me.'

'Shan't you own up?'

'If Madame asks I shall, of course, but not just for the girls. It's part of the joke.'

Retta nodded. 'Bianca must know? She must have missed you.'

'Yes, but she won't give me away. She doesn't know you were in it.'

'Well, but Giulia and her set must know too! I heard them come along the passage to see what was up. They couldn't help noticing the keys in all the doors but ours, and then they'd surely understand.'

'Oh, I saw to that! I put our keys on the outside, too. They couldn't tell they weren't locked.'

'What a ripping idea! Then they'll have no idea who did it?'

'Not the slightest. Giulia's been round trying to find out, and pretending to be wild at being wakened. She's really wild because she didn't happen to think of it herself. She hates to be left out of anything. Well, Bianca?'

'Madame is asking who locked the doors this morning,' and Bianca stood with her hand on Una's shoulder. 'Some one has told her the doors were locked, and she is displeased. No one seems to know who did it,' and she looked questioningly at Retta.

Pamela gave a frightened jump. Retta looked serious.

'Bother!' and Una rose reluctantly. 'I'll have to go, I suppose. Who told her about the doors, Bianca? I thought she'd just suppose it was another pillow-fight.'

'I do not know who told her.'

'Perhaps Giulia sneaked,' Una said lightly. 'Well, I'd better get it over. I'll come back later, Retta.'

'I'm coming with you. It was my idea——'

'Oh, but there's no need! She's not your head.'

'Retta, my dear!' exclaimed Miss Garnet, looking up in dismay. 'Your idea? Do you mean to say——'

'Yes, Aunty. It was Una and I. I was going to tell you.'

'I hope you were. I think you might have told me before,' her aunt said severely.

'There hasn't been much time yet. There's a horrid hole in my pillow that I knew I'd have to account for,' Retta sighed. 'I can't think how it got there!'

'I think you can guess,' her aunt said grimly. 'Go and apologise to Madame at once. I will speak to you afterwards.'

Retta pulled a face and turned to Una. 'I shall catch it twice over. You'll get off best.'

'But there's really no need for you to come to Madame!' Una expostulated. 'I'll tell her it was my fault. She'll be quite satisfied and not surprised! There's no need to drag you into it at all.

'What nonsense! Did you think I'd funk like that? You must think me a rotter! Come on!' and Retta took her arm. 'Where is she? I say, we won't have to confess *in French*, will we? For I can't, you know. You'll have to speak, and I'll nod and say, "*Oui, très mal!*" That's the best I can do, I'm afraid.'

Una laughed. 'Please don't try, then! No, she speaks beautiful English. I'm not supposed to, but as you're there that will be reason enough. I'm afraid Madame will lose her good opinion of you. I wish you wouldn't come, Retta. I wouldn't mind a scrap, and——'

'Rot!' said Retta briefly. 'Why, it was my idea! D'you think I'd let you take the credit of it?'

Una chuckled. 'You're a good sort! I hope you'll come to school. See the others stare! They're not surprised at me, but they didn't expect to find you mixed up in it.'

Retta laughed, to conceal her nervousness, for she was not sure how Madame would view her interference.

'She told us to see as much of one another as possible,' she suggested, and Una exclaimed, —

'So she did! I'll remind her. She'll appreciate it! So it's her own doing, after all!'

Madame had entered the dining-room, and was questioning the whist party, looking very severe. She smiled, however, at sight of the two girls arm in arm, and addressed them in English.

'Good-morning, my dears! I am glad to see your friendship makes good progress.'

A guilty look passed between the culprits. Then Una burst out, 'Oh, Madame!——' but Retta was before her.

'Please, Madame, it was I who proposed that we should lock the doors.'

'I locked them,' Una supplemented. 'And then we fought in the passage. It was only a joke, really, Madame. I didn't think you'd mind.'

Madame threw up her hands with a gesture of dismay.

'At Una I am not surprised. But you, my dear! You whom I thought so *gentille*, so——'

'Yes, I'm afraid I'm not as good as you thought. I'm sure I wish I were,' Retta said ruefully.

'You went running about the house in the early hours of the morning, fighting with pillows?' and Madame's despair found vent in a groan. 'I had not thought it of you, my dear.'

'But, Madame, you did tell us to be friends and to be together as much as we could!'

Madame looked at her, the corners of her mouth twitching.

'Una, my child, did you suppose I meant at four o'clock in the morning, or playing tricks on your companions?'

'N-no, but—but it happened to be convenient! Don't be cross, Madame! It's a holiday, and we did no harm! It was only a joke!'

'Anyway, it was mostly my fault, for it was my idea,' Retta said sturdily.

'Well, well! You are foolish children. Why you must leave your beds in the cold, after walking all day and getting so wet, is more than I can understand. I ought to punish Una, for she knows very well that I will never permit doors to be locked. What if fire had broken out in the house while all those girls were locked in their rooms? You never think of such disasters, but they are always possible. But I cannot justly punish Una and not you, Miss Henriette, and I have no authority over you, so——'

'I'll do anything, and I'm sure Aunty would——' Retta was beginning, when Una pinched her into silence.

'Be quiet, silly!'

Madame looked at them severely, and gave them a short lecture on the rights of other people's property, expressing the hope that none of the doors had suffered during what she called 'the riot.' Then she dismissed them, bidding them go to Madame the proprietress and apologise for the disturbance, and ask if any damage had been done.

'She's an old dear,' Retta murmured, as they turned away. 'But she isn't strict enough to boss a school.'

‘Oh, she’s not always like this! You were there, you see, so she couldn’t say very much. You were a distinct protection,’ Una laughed. ‘It was awfully decent of you to come——’

‘Gracious me! What else could I have done? *Don’t* be silly, Una!’

‘All the same, it was awfully bricky of you,’ Una insisted. ‘I say, is your name really Henrietta?’

Retta nodded. ‘Awful, isn’t it? I don’t think parents should be allowed to inflict such atrocities on helpless infants. I don’t allow my friends to mention it. But it’s distinctly improved by being turned into French. As your old lady pronounced it, it wasn’t so bad.’

‘It was rather pretty, I thought. But she isn’t an old lady, Retta. I shouldn’t think she’s any older than your aunt. You should see her climb! She can beat most of us.’

‘Yes, she looks like it. I said from the first she looked jolly. But all head mistresses are old ladies, whatever age they are.’

Una laughed. ‘Well, what about Madame of the hotel? What will she say, and where will we find her?’

‘In the office. Oh, she won’t say anything! She’s a dear, too. I hope nothing is broken, though.’

Madame received their apologies with a smile, though with obvious surprise at sight of Retta, as she had naturally put down all the disturbance to the schoolgirls. She reassured them regarding the doors, and even accepted Retta’s explanation concerning the torn pillow with a good grace.

‘I’ll try to mend it, if you like,’ Retta offered; ‘but if you really care about the pillow I don’t advise you to risk it. My sewing’s rather——’ and Madame laughingly declined the offer.

‘I’ve a good mind to say Una had better see no more of you, Retta,’ Miss Garnet said severely, when they returned to her in much relief that their tribulation was over.

‘Oh, Aunty, you couldn’t be so horrid! Why, Madame never said anything as hateful as that, and it’s her business to look after Una! If she thought I was bad for her she’d have said so, surely.’

‘You get off best, after all, Una,’ she murmured, as they retreated into a corner. ‘Madame’s forgiven you, but Aunty hasn’t got over it yet.’

‘She’s going to talk to Madame,’ said Una, watching as Miss Garnet put her papers together and rose.

‘To apologise for my outrageous conduct. It’s a good thing they’re so chummy. Will the girls be down on you now that they know you locked them in? For if so, you must tell them I helped. They can come and call me names if they want to, but it won’t do much good, as I shan’t understand.’

‘Oh, no! They’ll take it as a joke,’ Una laughed. ‘They’d have been wild if they’d caught us at the time, but they can laugh over it now.’

They sat together all morning, writing postcards and chatting at intervals. Pamela came up and shyly offered to take Una’s French stamps off her hands, and with an unexpected two francs to spend, Una felt rich, and must entertain her new friends. She vanished upstairs and enlisted the sympathies of a chambermaid, and presently summoned Retta, Pamela, and Bianca to her bedroom, and proudly showed a dainty afternoon tea-service, with plates of biscuits, laid out on her suit-case. It was only eleven o’clock in the morning, but that was of no consequence whatever. The streaming windows and cold penetrating wind made the cups of hot tea a sight to be hailed with delight, and the girls squatted on rugs on the floor, tall Bianca and small Pamela side by side, and drank one another’s health.

‘To our next meeting!’ said Una solemnly. ‘Surely we’ll meet again some day! Perhaps you’ll come to Vevey, or we may come back here.’

‘Did you know we go home after lunch, Una?’

‘Bianca, no! I hadn’t heard! Who says so?’

‘Madame told me to pass word round, while you were up here preparing this feast. We are to pack before lunch, and be ready to start by the three o’clock train.’

‘Oh, but why? We were to stay till to-morrow at least, and I thought we’d wait a day longer since we’ve had to waste to-day. We haven’t seen Trient yet, or even been across to the Tête Noire, and Madame promised we should go there!’

‘She says perhaps we will return another year, but the weather has changed, the barometer is very low, and it is not likely that we would be able to see any of those places for some days. We could not climb the Col de Balme in weather such as this! So we return to Vevey to-night, and perhaps we will re-visit this valley later on.’

‘Oh, what a shame! Then this is a good-bye feast. It wasn’t meant to be,’ Una said dolefully. ‘I’ll be awfully sorry to say good-bye, Retta.’

‘So will I. It’s been very jolly having you here. The house will be horribly quiet when you’ve gone.’

‘Yes, I’m sure you’ll miss us!’ Una chuckled.

‘There will be no one to fight with pillows!’ Bianca put in.

‘And no one to give us tea and biscuits!’ murmured Pamela.

‘I’m sure you’ll miss us dreadfully—especially in the early mornings! We’ve tried to keep you lively, anyway.’

‘You’ve done it!’ Retta laughed. ‘Shall we help you pack? I say, Una, what *was* Giulia playing at last night?—I mean, what was she singing for? Did you hear her?’

‘Yes,’ Una said gravely. ‘I’ve heard her do it at Vevey, when we’ve had wild nights on the lake. The school is close to the water, and I’ve seen her stand on the balcony and sing like that, when the waves were dashing on the wall and the wind came howling across from the mountains. It seems to affect her somehow; she calls it “singing to the storm.” It would be somebody’s Storm Music from some opera: Wagner, very likely; Giulia’s crazy for him. She’s a queer girl in lots of ways.’

CHAPTER VIII
'PRESSING FLOWERS'

By three o'clock an unusual stillness reigned in the hotel. The schoolgirls were gathered in the station, waiting for their train. Retta and Pamela hung over the balcony railing waving a last farewell, and others besides Una and Bianca waved their handkerchiefs to the girl who had locked them in. They had not been able to speak to her, but she had been an object of much interest to them all.

By four o'clock all sign of their invasion had disappeared. The house was once more an hotel, awaiting summer visitors, and no longer a boarding-school—or a bear-garden, said Miss Garnet, who could not forget the torn pillow. Retta lay in the salon half asleep, and very doleful because she had lost her new friend. Pamela, fully aware that she was no longer sufficient of a comrade to satisfy her, moped in a corner of the dining-room, and wondered if the time had not come for her to go back to her mother.

Presently Retta sprang up. 'I'm going to call on Malcolm. It's just across the road. That much rain won't hurt me, Aunty. I'll put on my mack and goloshes, if you like.'

Without a thought of Pamela, she ran out through the rain, and at the door of the big hotel opposite demanded 'Mr Forsyth.' Malcolm greeted her with a shout.

'Isn't it hopeless weather? I'm awfully glad to see you, Harry, old chap.'

Retta paused abruptly. 'I say, who's got cheek now? I never said you might call me that.'

'Ladies who speak to gentlemen without introductions must expect to be called things. I like it. It sounds so jolly chummy, and you said you'd be chums.'

Retta laughed and surrendered. 'Well, you may, then. Nobody else does, now that I've left school.'

'All your girls have gone, haven't they? We watched them set off. Doesn't the house seem awfully quiet without them?'

'Frightful! I don't know what to do. I made friends with one of them, an English girl. She was so jolly!' and Retta launched forth into a description of Una and of the happenings of the day before.

Malcolm sat laughing at her story of the 'riot' and their subsequent confession.

'But where's the kiddy?' he asked. 'Has she gone home?'

'Pam? Oh, she's somewhere about. I forgot all about her.'

Malcolm said nothing, and Retta sat silent for a moment. Then she exclaimed, 'It is rather mean, isn't it? I asked her here to be company, but I've made friends with you and Una and forgotten her. I expect she's lonely. Perhaps I'd better go back and cheer her up.'

'Fetch her here, and we'll all have tea together. Polly will tell them downstairs that we've two visitors, won't you, Polly?'

'Why do you call her Polly?' Retta asked curiously, as the nurse nodded, and went off to arrange it.

'I asked her if I might, when we found we were to spend the winter together. It sounds so much more friendly than "Nurse," don't you think so? She said her name was Mary, so I said I'd call her Polly, and she didn't mind. She's an awfully good sort.'

'She looks jolly. Shall I fetch Pam, then?' and Retta ran back and burst into the dining-room, crying,—

'Pam! You're to come to tea with Malcolm and Nurse Polly! They've such a pretty sitting-room, and heaps of books. He wants you. Come along!' and Pamela's dismal face brightened.

'I thought none of you wanted me any more.'

‘You goose! But I’m sorry I went without you, Pamela, dear. It was mean, I know,’ and Retta did her best, by drawing shy Pamela into the conversation and the games which followed tea, to atone for her neglect.

Among other treasures, Malcolm showed his books with coloured plates of Alpine flowers.

‘Mother sent them when we wrote and told her what heaps of flowers there were. We’re learning the names and making a collection of pressed specimens. Of course they’ll lose their colour in time; some of them go off at once. But it’s something to do. I’m going to send them home to the kiddies as soon as the book is full. It will please them, anyway. So we search for new ones all the time, and try to identify them as we find them. Then we stick each new one in the book, and write against it who picked it, and where, and the date.’

‘I wish I could find a new one, so that I’d be in the book!’ Retta said eagerly. ‘I wish that primula I picked for you yesterday had been new!’

‘Does it seem very queer to you?’ Malcolm asked suddenly.

‘What?’ Both girls stared at him blankly.

‘To see me so keen on these flowers. It’s more a girl’s work than a boy’s.’

‘I don’t see why!’ Retta said stoutly. ‘You must do something. You can’t do the things other boys do, just at present, but you’ve done them before; you said so, and you’ll do them again when you’re stronger. Just now you must do what you can.’

He gave her a quick grateful glance. ‘I believe I shall, you know. At one time I didn’t think I ever would. But now I do think I’ll be able to do proper things again some day.’

‘Of course you will!’ Nurse Polly said quickly. ‘Don’t doubt it for a moment, Malcolm. You’re getting stronger every day. In the meantime you must be patient, and be content with the things you can do.’

Malcolm looked at Retta. ‘When I was a kid, I thought I was going to do tremendous things in the world. Then this happened, and it seemed all up with me. So now I read about the things other people have done. There’s Captain Scott’s story, and Amundsen’s book, and lots of others. I like explorers best. We read them aloud. Perhaps some day I may do something worth while myself. Just now I—press flowers!’ and he eyed her keenly.

Retta had a moment of vision. ‘Perhaps pressing flowers isn’t such a little thing after all! Perhaps it means a good lot,’ she said, and Nurse Polly nodded approval behind her patient’s back.

‘It does!’ said Malcolm grimly, thinking of the long days in which he had practised patience and self-control. ‘I thought you’d understand, Harry, old chap.’

‘If you “press flowers” well just now, you are more likely to be able for the greater things later on,’ said Nurse Polly, as she led Retta and Pamela to the door, for the dinner-bell was ringing across the way.

‘I hope you’ll soon come back,’ she said heartily. ‘You do him good. He wants some one to put new heart into him now and then. I do my best, but a stranger’s better still. He’s had a dreary time, and would never have improved as he has if it had not been for his good spirits. But I’ve had hard work to keep him up to the mark at times. He keeps himself there while you’re about. Come again as soon as you can!’

‘I will!’ Retta nodded. ‘I’d do anything to give him a leg-up just now,’ and she went soberly in to repeat the conversation to her aunt.

‘I want to talk seriously to you girls,’ said Miss Garnet, as they sat down to dinner.

‘Oh? Is it past or future?’ Retta demanded, her mind reverting to the ‘riot,’ but also to her aunt’s long talks with Madame.

‘Future—with an occasional reference to the past, which you fully deserve, my dear! Pamela, I have a card from your mother asking that you go home to her to-morrow, and inviting Retta and me to go with you and stay for a few days.’

‘That will be jolly! But what am I to do without her when we come back here? I’ve got used to having her about. I’ll be lonelier than ever,’ said Retta, and Pamela flushed gratefully, and was ashamed of her doubts of her friend.

Retta saw it and was ashamed also, for she knew that she had forgotten Pam for the time. She resolved to atone for it somehow, and try to make her forget it.

‘I feel as if I’d been away from mother for a very long time, instead of only two days,’ Pamela said shyly. ‘I’m so glad you’re coming home with me. I want Retta to see our house, and the mountains, and the glacier. You can look at Mont Blanc from your bedroom window, Retta.’

‘But before we see your mother I want to ask you girls a question.’

They looked up in astonishment, and she continued,—

‘You no doubt saw that I had some talk with Madame Dufour last night and this morning. She was trying to persuade me to send you to her in September, Retta, and to ask Madame Gay if she would not like Pamela to go too. I have not decided yet what I shall do, but the school seems highly spoken of, and the fact that I like Madame, and that you have made acquaintances among the girls, makes me inclined to consider her proposal seriously. I want to know, would you like to go? What is your feeling in the matter? And what shall I say to your mother, Pamela? Shall I propose this plan, or shall I simply tell her that I think of perhaps sending Retta to Vevey, and leave it to her to suggest your going also?’

Pamela, looking rather alarmed, glanced at Retta in appeal. Retta said quickly,—

‘I think I’d like it. Yes, I’m sure I should. I have to go somewhere, I suppose?’

‘I think it would be best. You would soon grow very tired of this village, especially in winter. As you know, I think of spending the winter here, and you would find very little to interest you in Finhaut.’

Retta nodded. ‘It would get jolly slack, I suppose. Of course, there’s Malcolm! But I know you said I’d have to go somewhere, and I don’t really mind. Well, then, I’d much rather go to this school where I know somebody! I’d be awfully glad to see Una again, and I guess we’d manage to have a good time!’

‘The one thing which makes me hesitate,’ said Miss Garnet gravely, ‘is the fear whether you and Una would not be continually playing foolish pranks as you did this morning. I would have liked to feel that Madame kept a stricter hand on her girls. She seemed to me altogether too lenient.’

‘Oh, but this was a holiday, Aunty! Una says they don’t go on like that at school.’

‘I sincerely hope they don’t. I asked Madame if Una would be a suitable companion for you, for as the only English girls in the school you would naturally be friends, and she——’

‘We’re friends already!’

‘She spoke well of her on the whole, describing her as straightforward and honourable, though very thoughtless at times. Last night she seemed to hope your influence might help to steady Una, and though I felt doubtful I said nothing to take away her good opinion of you. However, you managed that very thoroughly for yourself, and she seemed much less sure of the effect of your influence this morning.’

Retta had the grace to blush. Then she laughed.

‘Poor Madame! I saw she had quite a wrong idea of me. Don’t you think it was only honest to undeceive her? I’m sure I shouldn’t do Una harm, Aunty!’ indignantly. ‘What a horrid idea!’

‘You will either do her harm or good. You can’t leave her unchanged by her meeting with you. So much is certain,’ her aunt said gravely. ‘What do you think about it, Pamela? Would you like to go with Retta if she goes?’

'I'd rather go with her than alone, but I don't want to go at all, please,' and Pamela evidently shrank from the thought.

'Oh, but you'd have a ripping time, Pam! You'd enjoy it, and I'd look after you. You said your mother meant you to go soon.'

'What would she do without you, my dear?'

'Go to England,' said Pamela instantly. 'She has often told me so. She won't go unless she can stay for some months, as she is always very ill when she travels, and she has never taken me because her sister, to whom she would go, is an invalid, and does not like to have children in the house. But if I went to school, mother would go to her for a long visit.'

'You wouldn't disturb the invalid sister any more than a mouse, Pam,' said Retta. 'Unless you slept with her, of course, in which case you'd throw pillows at her and tickle her toes. I'd forgotten that.'

Pamela laughed. 'I would rather go to school with Retta than alone,' she said again.

'Well, I will think it over and consult your mother. We would have to make inquiries about the school, of course.'

'I think it would be jolly!' Retta said exuberantly. 'And if I went'—with sudden remembrance—'I'd find out what Giulia's "but" is! Una said she could be awfully fascinating, but——! I do wonder what she meant!'

'As for Madame not being strict enough!' she laughed to Pamela afterwards, 'of course she *may* be stricter at home! But if she isn't, well, it gives all the more chances for having good times, doesn't it? I guess Una and I would be able to get up a bit of a row now and then! I don't think it would be dull, anyway!'

CHAPTER IX
AN INTERLUDE

Pamela's home was a brown wooden chalet on the outskirts of the little old town of Argentière. From the front windows one looked over to the long gray glacier, with high jagged peaks behind, white cascades, where the melting snow came pouring down, and patches of cold shining green, where the ice showed bare. The side windows looked out upon the green valley of Chamonix with sunny meadows and shady woods, the tumbling gray river, and the great dome of Mont Blanc towering overhead.

'I feel like an ant at the bottom of St Paul's,' laughed Retta.

'In Finhaut I felt like a fly crawling on a shelf half-way up a wall,' Pamela retorted.

An hour's walk by the noisy river, churning among its boulders, took them round a great corner of the hill, and showed a sight which left Retta stunned and breathless when she saw it first. On each side of the valley were great rocky walls, clad with pine woods, and these alone were of considerable height. But above the green hill on the left towered a row of marvellous rocky giants, great peaks and spires of weird, fantastic shapes, thrusting up sharp needle-like pinnacles, with heavy snowfields wherever the snow could find space to lie, and all the face of the dull red rock powdered with a new white dusty fall, thanks to the storm of the day before.

'It was snow up there, of course. Isn't it pretty? I like to see the mountains when there is new snow,' said Pamela, as they stood by the station at Les Tines and gazed up at the chain of Aiguilles.

'Some one's powdered them over with a huge sugar-sifter, like tarts or Christmas pudding. They're ripping!' Retta murmured. 'And that long gray thing, like Mont Blanc putting out its tongue at us, is another glacier? It looks cleaner than some of them.'

While Miss Garnet and Madame Gay talked over old memories and made plans for the future, the girls, under the guardianship of an old guide who had climbed with Pamela's father many years before, went up the Flégère and the Montenvers, and Retta made the acquaintance of a glacier at close quarters. By previous arrangement they walked one day to Montroc, and there met Malcolm and Nurse Polly, who had driven over from Finhaut in search of the alpenrose. Their picnic lunch was spread among the low green shrubs, with pinky blossoms on every side, and Malcolm gathered with his own hands enough to fill the carriage before starting for home.

Then Retta and Pamela said good-bye, marvelling that their friendship was not yet a week old, for they felt as if they had known one another for ever. They had many plans for meeting during the summer, however, and expected soon to be together for months, for Madame Gay had welcomed the thought of sending Pamela to school in Retta's company, and it was practically decided that they were to go to Vevey in September. Pamela looked forward to the day with apprehension, Retta with keen anticipation.

She found plenty to interest her in Finhaut during the summer, however, and the months passed quickly. Her friendship with Malcolm grew and deepened, and was helpful to herself as well as to him. No longer lonely, his health improved rapidly, and when July came he was able, with the sanction of his doctor and under Nurse Polly's watchful care, to travel home to Scotland by easy stages and spend a few weeks with his mother and little sisters. A visit to the doctor who had sent him abroad yielded a favourable report, and the hope that one more winter spent in the pure mountain air, with its power of healing and giving strength, might complete the cure and fit him for a normal life once more. With that hope before him, he went

cheerfully into exile again, and returned to Finhaut just in time to see Retta before her departure for school.

'You're really going? In September? I shall miss you awfully, Harry, old chap! I hoped you'd be here through the winter.'

'I'll come back for Christmas, you know. But I'm afraid the holidays are rather short.'

'We could have had jolly times. It's ripping here in winter—avalanches going on all the time, and so on.'

'It sounds ripping. I'm not trying to be sarcastic. I mean it. It would be so jolly interesting and different from home.'

'You won't be able to come home by train, you know.'

'Won't I?' and her eyes widened. 'Don't they run in winter?'

'Well, I should say not! They'd be swept away. You know that open stony place between here and Trétien? That's one of the avalanche tracks.'

'Will I have to walk? All the way from Martigny?'

'Oh, I guess you'll be able to get a sleigh.'

'How awfully jolly! I shall look forward to it all the term!'

'I'm sure your French can't be good enough yet,' Malcolm argued. 'Don't you feel as if you needed a few months' more practice?'

'It is pretty groggy, but Aunty thinks it won't improve much more till I'm right away from English people. She says my accent's bad, and so does Pamela.'

'I shan't half miss you,' he sighed. 'There's nobody here in winter.'

'I'll write, if you like. I'll write every week and tell you everything,' Retta said impulsively. 'But you must answer—really answer, you know—and tell me what you think about all I tell you, and lecture me on the messes I get into, and so on.'

His eyes danced. 'I'll be your father confessor, and give you reams of good advice. Will you really write? I'll look forward to your letters. They'll be the next best thing to having you here. But you'll forget, or be too busy.'

'I won't. I'll not let anything interfere with my letter to you,' Retta promised, and she kept her word, though often with difficulty.

With Vevey in her mind, she had been working hard at French all summer, corresponding with Pamela, talking to Madame and the maids, asking her way whenever she went out and struggling to understand the answers, and making conversation with the French visitors in the hotel, the people in the shops, the villagers she met out walking. So she had made steady progress, and, though not fluent, yet felt much more at home in the language than on her first arrival.

As Miss Garnet was not strong enough to attempt long excursions, she watched the visitors in the hotel carefully, and presently, selecting some whom she felt she could trust, requested that Retta might join them on some of their long tramps. They were a lively party of young people, several girls, the husband of one, and the brother of another, and set off every day with alpenstocks and nailed boots to walk and climb. In their company Retta climbed to the Col de la Gueulaz, to the Cascade de Bouqui for the wide view of the Chamonix Aiguilles, and down into the river gorge and up the other side to the Tête Noire, and so to Trient and the Col de Balme.

Every now and then she spent a day with Pamela, when their conversation was chiefly in French, and they walked in to Chamonix to do shopping. But Chamonix was overflowing with tourists and motorbuses, a huge hotel at every corner, a cinematograph theatre in one street and postcard bazaars and curio shops in all the rest, and Pamela always gave a sigh of relief when they turned their backs on its bustle and walked out towards Les Praz, and another when they reached her quiet old home-town under the glacier and the crags of the Flégère. Retta

enjoyed the excitement of the little tourist metropolis, however, and declared it felt like being in London to go there.

'Quite like Piccadilly Circus!' she insisted.

'Then I don't want to go to Pic-Something-or-other!' retorted Pamela, and could not often be persuaded that a day in town was necessary.

As the time for her departure drew near, Miss Garnet spoke seriously to Retta on one point.

'You must be very careful, Retta, what you do at school, for Pamela's sake. You can see for yourself how she looks up to you and copies you. You will be much together, and——'

'Not so very much, Aunty! She'll be quite a junior. She'll soon make other friends. There's three years between us, you know. That means a lot at school.'

'Pamela is counting on your company and protection; at first, at least. You must try to see that she makes good friends. I hope you will be careful for yourself also. You have been to school before, and must realise how much depends on the friends you make. Don't let yourself be led by a passing fancy, or for any slight reason, into intimacy with girls for whom you do not really care.'

'Oh, I shan't chum up with any rotters, Aunty. Trust me for that! Besides, I shall have Una, and you know her. She's a good sort.'

'You won't limit your friendship to Una. I want you to be careful about the others.'

'Well, there's Bianca. I'm sure she's awfully good.'

'Remember that you will either get good or harm from your friends, just as you will either do them good or harm. You can't help it. You will act on them, and they on you, even when you are least thinking of it. Don't make your school a worse place because you have been there, and don't come home worse than you went.'

'What a horrid idea, Aunty!'

'A serious one, my dear, that is all. You make friends very easily, and are easily led by your companions. You are ready to go to any lengths for what you call a joke. Just be careful, especially at first,' and she entered the salon, leaving Retta very thoughtful on the balcony.

Next day she joined Madame Gay and Pamela in the train, and they travelled slowly down to Martigny, and more swiftly to Montreux. A few days in a big hotel followed, while Madame Gay superintended the provision of winter outfits, Miss Garnet having commissioned her to supply Retta at the same time as Pamela. Pam was in a state of extreme nervousness, and was already beginning to suffer from homesickness, and to dread the time when she must say good-bye to her mother; but Retta was looking forward to her new life with keen interest and curiosity. Would it be very different from school in England? Would she be welcomed by the French girls? Would Una be glad to see her? And would she have anything to do with the popular Giulia, or would 'The Countess' keep her at arm's length? Above all, what was Giulia's mysterious 'but——'? All her questions would soon be answered now.

CHAPTER X
A ROYAL WELCOME

'Giulia, my dear, these are our two new English girls. You will perhaps remember seeing them in the hotel at Finhaut. Take them and show them over the house, and introduce them to your companions. I hope you will be friends.'

Madame Gay had said farewell some minutes ago, tearing herself with difficulty from Pamela's arms. Madame Dufour, thankful to see the elder of her new pupils quite composed and even eager-eyed, had said with ready sympathy,—

'*La pauvre petite!* Let her cry, Henriette, my dear. It will help her. We will talk, you and I. You do not cry, then? You have been to school before?'

'Oh, yes! I wanted to come. I'm not afraid,' and Retta had sat with her arms round Pam, answering Madame's questions in stumbling French.

The fact that she could understand at all had been a great relief to Madame. She asked her questions in slow, easy French, which Retta followed without difficulty, and consequently formed a high opinion of her own powers.

Then Madame had sent for a girl to take charge of the strangers, and to Retta's surprise Giulia and not Una was sent for. But she was reaping the fruits of that morning prank at Finhaut, for Madame, considering her and Una a mischievous pair when together, had determined that if possible Retta's friends should be found in other quarters. At least, she would provide her with other companions than Una, and as Giulia was a recognised leader in the school, she sent for her as a matter of course. Many results, however, came from this simple beginning.

Giulia, as she entered the room, had not looked amiable. Showing new children round was a nuisance, and she resented being taken from her friends for so trivial a duty. But at sight of Retta and Pamela her face lit up with a radiant smile of welcome. To the amazement of both, she seemed not only glad but positively overjoyed to see them. Pamela's sobs ceased from sheer surprise, and Retta felt a throb of delight. To be welcomed by the popular 'Countess' was surely a compliment, and an auspicious beginning to their school life.

Giulia came forward with outstretched hands, and a torrent of eager French greetings. She was delighted, enchanted, to see them again. She had never forgotten their meeting at Finhaut, though unfortunately she had been unable to talk with them as she would have liked to do, her English, alas, not being very brilliant. But now, if they had learned to speak French— —

'I could speak French before,' said Pamela bluntly, while Retta stared, for Giulia had not seemed particularly anxious to talk to her at Finhaut. 'I could have told Retta what you said,' and so unintentionally gave Giulia a home-thrust in return for the mockery which had been their first intercourse.

For a moment the big girl was taken aback. Then she laughed it off.

'Yes, my dear, but that is not the same. One does not talk so easily through a third person. And then your compatriot Una had taken possession of you, and you had no time for any one else. Thinking we would not see you again, and that talking would be difficult, we others left you to Una, but we are overjoyed that you have come to join us. You must be friends with us as well as with her now. My little sister Francesca shall be your friend. She is twelve years old, just a little one, like you. And you'—to Retta—'shall be ours. You will find that Italian and French girls can be quite as friendly as English. Well, *petite*, have you forgiven me because I laughed at your bare legs?' and she stooped and kissed staring Pamela. 'You must

not hate me for that. It was too droll. I did not mean to hurt you. I saw you were angry at the time, but you have forgiven me now, *n'est-ce pas*?'

She waited for an answer, and Pamela perforce murmured with hot cheeks, 'Oh, yes! I was silly, no doubt.'

'I will forgive you that, and then we shall be friends. Is it not so?'

She seemed to expect an answer again. Pamela felt bewildered, for she had not felt the need of forgiveness. But she could not but agree, so she said shyly, 'Yes, thank you very much,' and Giulia laughed.

'That is settled, then. Now I will take you to Francesca. I will take good care of them, Madame! Come, and you shall meet Yvonne, and Simonne, and Denise, and Louise!' she said to Retta, and they left Madame beaming with pleasure over the success of her plan.

'And Una?' Retta asked.

Giulia laughed. 'Una, of course. But she cannot have you all to herself now. Your name is ——?'

'Retta Garnet.'

'Retta! It is a strange name, but easier to say than some of your English names.'

Retta laughed. 'It's not a usual English name,' she admitted. 'Will you please speak French more slowly? I know very little yet, and I do not understand always,' for Giulia's quick chatter was very different from Madame's slow correct speech.

'Ah, but you speak prettily, and your accent is good. You will soon speak as quickly as I do,' Giulia assured her heartily, and Pamela looked at her with wide astonished eyes. Then Giulia laughed. 'We have forgiven you for locking us in our rooms. But you must not do that here. Madame allows no keys to bedroom doors.'

Retta looked at her quickly. 'But I did not lock you in! Your door was locked already.'

It seemed to her that Giulia's dark eyes held a look of annoyance. But it was only for an instant.

'Do all English girls remember every little thing, and speak of them so readily?' she was saying to herself, but aloud she said, 'This is the music-room. Are you fond of music? We have a very good master, who comes twice a week. Now we will go upstairs to see your bedroom.'

It was a keen disappointment to Retta to find that she was not to sleep in the same room as Una. Knowing nothing of Madame's plan, she thought it a very bad arrangement that she and Pamela must share a room with Giulia's young sister Francesca and an older girl Louise. But Giulia explained that Madame considered it would be better for Retta's French that she should not sleep with her English friend—a very insufficient reason, Retta thought, since she could still talk English with Pamela if she wished, and it was sure to be forbidden, in any case. Madame Gay had expressly stipulated, however, that Pamela should have Retta's company at night; at least, for her first term.

The rooms were large and airy, with four beds in each, and wide windows overlooking the lake. The house stood between the high road and the water, and only a strip of rocky beach kept the waves from washing on the outer wall. Retta went to the window, and stood gazing at the blue water and the Alps of Savoie opposite.

'I could look at it for ever! What are all those mountains at the end?'

'Oh, the Dent de Morcles, the Catogne, the Combin, and the Glacier de Trient,' Giulia said carelessly.

'The Glacier de Trient? That we see from Finhaut? Really? How strange! How—how awfully queer!' and she lapsed into English, finding her French inadequate.

'The girls are in the garden. It is by the lake, and we spend much time there,' and Giulia led them out to a large garden, shaded by great trees, with seats in odd corners, two good

tennis courts, and a low stone wall rising from the rocks and the water of the lake.

Giulia led the way straight to an arbour, draped in creeper and late clematis, where half a dozen of her special friends were sitting. School had nominally begun two days ago, so all unpacking and arranging for the term were done, and they were spending a lazy Saturday afternoon.

Retta looked round for Una, but did not see her. Then, as she realised into what company she was being introduced, her eyes widened and her amazement at the extraordinary friendliness of Giulia increased. In spite of herself she began to wonder if 'The Countess' could have some unknown motive in being so very friendly. For Giulia had led her straight into the circle of her chosen intimates, and Retta had seen enough of school life to know that such a proceeding was unusual. A favourite such as Giulia was always surrounded by her little court of admirers, and it was difficult and a matter of time for an outsider to gain admittance. To be welcomed at once into the innermost circle was very pleasant, but it was also amazing and rather overwhelming.

Yvonne, Denise, Suzanne, and Simonne greeted her warmly, complimented her on her pretty hesitating French and praised her accent, speaking slowly and distinctly so that she could understand. Louise welcomed her as a room-mate, and promised to give her hints which would be useful. Francesca, a dark-eyed child with black hair rolled up over her ears like her elder sister's, was called from the other end of the garden, and led Pamela away, shy and rather frightened, to meet her companions.

'There's Hortense, and Elsa—she's Linda's little sister—and Margot, and Marie. You'll like them best,' she said, and Pamela was too nervous to refuse to go.

Then Una came flying across the lawn, her racquet flung aside, and hurled herself on Retta, regardless of the girls looking on.

'I've only just heard you've arrived! I was playing, and no one told me. I am so glad you've come, but I do think Madame might have sent for me to meet you at first.'

'I have been doing the honours of the establishment to Retta, my dear Una. I hope she has found me a good substitute for you,' Giulia said blandly.

'You've been very good, and I'm very much obliged to you,' Retta said warmly. 'But I'd like a chat with Una now, if you don't mind. We were friends before, you know.'

'Oh, of course! Will you join us here, and we can all talk together?'

But that was not to Una's mind at all.

'No, thank you! We'll be talking English, you see. It's always allowed on any one's first day,' she explained to Retta. 'Come and sit on the terrace,' and led her to a seat above the water.

'Did Madame hand you over to Giulia?' she demanded.

'Yes. I was awfully surprised. I thought she'd send for you. But Giulia was awfully good, Una. She couldn't have been nicer. And the others were friendly, too.'

'That's nothing. They do what she tells them,' and Una sat frowning across at the mountains.

'What's the matter? Don't you want me to be friends with them?' and Retta looked at her anxiously, naturally wondering if her obvious discomfort arose from a touch of jealousy. 'But I want to know everybody, Una!'

'It's not that. But I can't explain,' Una said uneasily. 'You'd think me a horrid little cat if I said all I'm thinking. No, don't ask me. I couldn't explain. But I do wish Madame had sent for me instead of Giulia! I wonder why she didn't?' and she sat drumming with her fingers on the stone balustrade.

'I suppose she wanted me to speak French. She says that's why we're not to sleep together. I thought that was awfully mean.'

‘I wonder,’ said Una slowly, ‘if it’s because of what happened at Finhaut? If she thinks we’ll be up to games if we’re too much together?’

Retta laughed. ‘That might be it! She thinks she’ll give me other friends, and keep us apart as much as possible.’

Una nodded. ‘I believe that’s it. She’ll say it’s because of your French, of course.’

‘Oh, well, since we’ve seen through it we’ll spoil her little plan, dear old lady! We can be chums though we don’t sleep together. Shall I be in class with you?’

‘Not at first. You couldn’t possibly. You must get more used to French first. As soon as you can read easily and work in French, you will be put in a proper class, but until then you will have to work at easy lessons by yourself.’

Retta laughed. ‘I’ve been reading French all summer. I think I’ll soon pick it up. Giulia said I had a good accent.’

‘Giulia!’ Una cried scornfully. ‘Retta, your accent’s *awful*! Did you really believe her?’

Retta stared. Then she began to laugh. ‘Really? Yes, I did believe her. How could I know? She said it so—so convincingly. Oh, well, I suppose she was trying to make me feel comfortable. It was jolly nice of her, even if it wasn’t true.’

Una grunted. ‘If you like that kind of thing! But it was silly of her, for you were bound to find it out. Madame won’t be happy till she’s changed your accent.’

‘Pamela told me it was bad, of course! Oh, well, Giulia was just trying to be kind for the first day. It was very thoughtful of her,’ Retta insisted.

‘Retta, do you play tennis? Will you make up a set with Yvonne and Louise and me?’ and Giulia came up racquet in hand. ‘Denise will lend you her racquet. Do you play?’

‘Oh, yes. I would be glad to play,’ and Retta sprang up eagerly. ‘I always used to play at school, and at Finhaut I played with Nurse Polly, and sometimes with visitors at the hotel, too.’

She played well, and Giulia was loud in her praise, and welcomed her as quite an acquisition. Una watched with gloomy eyes.

‘Why couldn’t Denise have played herself? Why should Giulia come and take Retta away from me? Why is she so keen on Retta, anyway? It means something, or I don’t know Giulia. Has Madame told her her little plan, and is Giulia playing up to her and trying to keep Retta from being too much with me? Or is she up to some game of her own? I don’t understand yet, but for some reason she means to get hold of Retta. I wish I knew what she’s up to!’ and she watched the game gloomily and was filled with forebodings.

CHAPTER XI
FIRST DAYS AT SCHOOL

Strange as it seemed, it soon became evident to Retta that two parties were contending for her friendship. Una and Giulia both were anxious for the chief place in her affections. Not only so, but each was anxious to keep her as much as possible away from the other. At first she felt ashamed of the thought, as it seemed to make her of too much importance in her own eyes and in theirs, but she could not long be blind to what was so obvious. Even Pamela, growing used to her surroundings and fairly happy in the company of Elsa, Margot, and Marie, remarked,—

'I don't get a chance to talk to you nowadays. Either Una or 'The Countess' is always running after you! I don't like Francesca,' she added bluntly.

'Don't like her? Why not, you goose?'

'She says things that aren't true. She says one thing to Madame and another when she isn't there.'

'Don't have too much to do with her, then,' Retta advised. 'Elsa looks a nice little thing, and I'm sure Margot's a dear. Can't you play with them?'

'I do. I don't talk to Francesca now. I told her what she said wasn't true, and she won't speak to me. I'm glad!' Pamela's uncompromising honesty had solved the difficulty for her.

Retta laughed. 'Oh, well, if you're happy enough with the others that's all right!' and went off to play tennis with Giulia.

Una strove hard to keep her friend, but she was heavily handicapped. Madame had thrown Retta into her rival's arms at the very beginning of her school life, and Giulia's warm welcome and flattering, if not very sincere, words had won for her a high place in Retta's esteem. Moreover, 'The Countess' was the school favourite, and Retta would hardly have been human if she had not felt pleased to be chosen as her friend. To a few of the girls, Bianca was chosen leader, and Una, Linda, and several others gave her hearty allegiance. But among the rest Giulia was queen, and Retta found herself invited to the position of queen's favourite, she knew not why. To refuse without reason would have seemed ungracious and silly, and even Una would give no reason why she considered the friendship so undesirable.

'If Giulia's the kind of girl you like, I've no more to say,' she said at last, when Retta pressed for her reasons. 'I can't tell tales. I can't talk against the girl. I'm not a sneak. You'll have to find out for yourself. Perhaps you won't mind when you do. But I mind, and Giulia knows it, and doesn't like me. I don't like her either, so we're quits. If I talked to you against her you'd think it was jealousy, because I can't keep you to myself, and it's not that.'

'You are talking against her! I wish you'd speak out—if you really have anything to say, Una.'

'I'd better say no more, then,' and Una set her lips grimly.

She had injured her own cause more than Giulia's by her remonstrance, for Retta inevitably believed that it had been prompted by jealousy, and felt a touch of indignation towards her friend and of sympathy for Giulia. Una saw it and was miserable, but her anxiety not to tell tales forbade her to speak more plainly. Retta must find out for herself.

On one day of the week they were thrown much together, however, and that day was Sunday. The French and Italian girls were conducted to Mass in the early morning by one of the mistresses; the Protestant girls went alternately to a Lutheran service in German, and to the English church, in charge of Madame herself. During the afternoon Giulia and her friends were taken to concerts in Montreux or played tennis in the garden. It was left to the others to

join in the games or not as they pleased, or as their consciences suggested, but they were not allowed to join the concert parties. Retta looked scandalised when on her first Sunday afternoon Giulia, racquet in hand, invited her to make a fourth in their game.

'You play so well. I want you for my partner,' she urged, with the fascinating smile she used so skilfully.

Retta hesitated in some embarrassment, anxious to explain that she did not care to play on Sunday, but afraid of giving offence. Una came to her help.

'Won't you come and write letters with me in the arbour? We may play if we like, but I always feel it's not quite the thing to do what we wouldn't do at home.'

Retta turned to her gratefully. 'I'll come with you. I'd like to play, Giulia, but I know my people at home wouldn't like it. If you'll ask me again another day I'll be pleased to.'

Giulia laughed, with a light touch of scorn.

'Oh, you English girls and your English Sunday! Very well, my dear, we will play to-morrow, for I must have you for my partner. Run along and write your letters, like good little Una.'

Retta flushed. Then she laughed, and turned to Una.

'If Giulia went to school in England, wouldn't she hate it? Of course, heaps of English people spend their Sundays at tennis nowadays; but I don't like it, and I know Aunty wouldn't.'

'My mother asked me to keep the Sunday as far as possible as I should do at home, and I've always tried to,' Una said gravely. 'We miss a good deal, for all the best concerts and plays are on Sundays, but Madame would never allow us to go, however much we wished it. I write home every Sunday afternoon.'

'I must write to Aunty, of course. She'll send on my letters to mother and father. They're in Japan at present. Mother had a breakdown, and the doctor said she must travel, and have constant change of scene for two or three years. She's heaps stronger, but she won't be home for a year yet. Then I have to write to Malcolm, too. I promised him I'd write regularly. He was quite cut up when he heard I was going away. I've told you about him—the boy who presses flowers!'

'What happens when anything goes wrong here?' she asked presently, as they sat writing in the arbour above the lake. 'Do we get lines, or bad marks, or fines, or what?'

'Things are very slack. It's not like school at home,' Una said thoughtfully. 'But, of course, we have to know our lessons and to keep certain rules. Except on Sundays we must all speak French, unless we have special permission. We must not talk after lights are out, nor read in bed at night; we may read in the morning so long as it is daylight, if we wish, but we must not have any story-books except those in the library; and we must not leave our bedrooms to go to any other girl's room——'

'Nor lock the doors!' laughed Retta.

Una laughed also. 'There are no keys now. Madame has taken them away. Sometimes in the morning, when we assemble in the hall, she will ask if any girl has broken any of these rules, and we are trusted to own up.'

'And do we? Always, I mean? You would, of course, but does everybody?'

Una looked uncomfortable. 'Well, you see, she does not ask every day, and if it has been four or five days ago girls may forget. You can't remember every time you speak English. I wish she'd ask every day.'

'It gives a jolly convenient excuse, anyway. But, of course, decent girls wouldn't take advantage of it.'

'Let's finish our letters!' and Una began to scribble hastily. 'I'm just telling mother about your arrival and of Madame's little plot to keep us separated.'

Retta laughed. ‘But I want to know more! What happens when we confess?’

‘Oh, she puts a star against your name, and you aren’t allowed to go shopping on Saturday. So of course she often asks on Fridays! And very often there are picnics, and if you have had too many stars you have to stay at home. Sometimes, if it’s very bad, you have to write out French grammar or learn some of their silly poetry.’

‘She doesn’t fine away all your pocket-money? I do think that’s a mean trick!’

‘No, but if you can’t get to town to spend it it’s not much use. Of course,’ Una added slowly, ‘there are girls who aren’t above asking some one else to do their shopping if they aren’t allowed to go themselves; but they aren’t supposed to do that.’

‘Well, hardly! It’s rather like crawling round the rule, isn’t it?’

Una nodded. ‘If we really want something important, and can’t get it for ourselves, we may ask the mistress in charge of the shopping party to get it for us, and she does so if she considers it reasonable. But sweets and so on aren’t considered reasonable! You’ll enjoy the walks to town, so don’t go and get yourself starred and lose them all. In summer we go and have ices in a jolly café where there’s a good band. Often we take the train or boat in to Montreux, because the shops are so much better there.’

‘And you and I and Pamela are the only English girls? There’s no English mistress? I should have thought——’

‘There was one. She was very jolly. But she left to get married last term, and there’s no new one yet. Madame takes the English lessons herself, and I’m sure she’s quite able to. She speaks beautiful English. I wonder how you’ll like doing lessons in French?’

‘It’s a nightmare to think about, especially arithmetic,’ Retta said cheerfully, but did not seem at all weighed down by the prospect. ‘I suppose they won’t insist on my thinking in French, though! I’ll be able to work out things in my head as usual, but if I’m asked to give my answer in French I’ll be completely done for.’

At first, as she anticipated, she found the effort to work in a foreign language very trying. History and geography books seemed only a jumble, and their contents, when she finally arrived at their meaning, extremely uninteresting. History had been one of her favourite subjects at home, but it was some time before she could work up any enthusiasm for the French history she was now set to study. Lectures given in class were equally unintelligible, and while the other girls were taking notes of the facts being described, she would sit wondering what it was all about. Essays were things to be dreaded for the first few weeks. But by degrees her mind became accustomed to the sound of the strange tongue, and then her progress was more rapid. Pamela, of course, had no such difficulty, and soon took a good place in her class, and gave proof that her mother’s teaching had been satisfactory.

CHAPTER XII
SEVEN TO TEA

'Retta! Hush, don't wake the little ones! Would you like to join in a joke?'

The bedroom was dark and quiet, the night-light burning on a table by Pamela's bed. Some of the younger girls, Pam among them, were allowed a light in case they should be nervous in the dark; hence Madame's injunction against reading at night. Retta, bewildered, tossed aside the bed-clothes and sat up, staring at the apparition in dressing-gown and slippers which had crept to her bedside.

'Giulia? Yes, I'd like any joke, but——'

'Come with me, then. Louise is coming. Don't make a sound,' and Retta saw that Louise was already out of bed and groping for her slippers.

It was Monday night, the close of her first school day. That morning Madame had asked in the hall if any girls had broken rules during the last few days, and had particularly specified speaking in forbidden languages, talking after lights were out, and going to any other girl's room at night, and Retta had watched with keen interest while Linda rose and confessed to having talked in German with her little sister, and several younger girls did the same. Then Una ruefully admitted that she had spoken to Bianca late one night.

'But she didn't answer,' she added quickly.

The delinquents had duly received stars placed against their names, and Retta had wondered how long it would be before she found herself in a similar plight. Now here was Giulia, in a forbidden room, deliberately inviting her to break the rules. She felt bewildered. But Louise evidently meant to go, and Giulia seemed to expect her to do the same. Well, she would be in good company, and her respect for law and order was not proof against so tempting an offer. If she refused, it was more than probable there would be no more invitations. She would be put down as dull and timid and uninteresting. The thought was unendurable. Surely it was worth while risking the penalty for the sake of standing well in Giulia's good graces! And she was not particularly anxious to go shopping on Saturday afternoon.

'All right! I'll come. Wait half a minute,' and she reached for her dressing-gown.

Led by Giulia they crept down the corridor, Retta wondering much what was to take place, and if Una or Bianca had been invited. She knew which was Giulia's room, but to her surprise they passed it and entered another at the end of the passage.

'This is No Man's Land—an empty room,' Louise explained in a whisper, when the door was safely shut. 'If this room were used we'd miss it terribly. You see, if Madame asks if we went to any one else's room we can honestly say no.'

Retta's eyes widened. She was honesty itself, and this argument could not commend itself to her frank nature. This was what she called 'crawling round' a rule. She was glad the suggestion had not come from Giulia. Louise she had instinctively distrusted from the first. But she had no time to argue the matter, for Louise, seeing the doubt in her eyes, spoke to Giulia in the swift French which was still unintelligible to Retta, and gave a curious little laugh as she did so. Giulia turned to her guest.

'This is all in your honour, to welcome you into our friendship,' she said, in slow, careful French. 'We have been friends, we six, but now you are to be one of us, and we shall be seven. That is one of your English poems, is it not?—"We are Seven." I had to learn it with that terrible Mees Jackson who left last term.'

'Why, Una said she was so nice!'

'Oh—Una! Do not quote Una to us, my dear! She is just a child at times. She does not see things as we others do. Yes, Una liked Mees Jackson, I believe, but she was not liked by us.'

'I'm some months younger than Una,' Retta laughed, but feeling that it would be more honest to confess it. She did not want to be admitted to any one's friendship under false pretences. 'So if she is just a child, what must I be? I'm not fifteen yet.'

'Oh, *la, la*! But you are older, Retta, my dear. It is not all a matter of years and months. We are pleased to have *you* for a friend.'

It all sounded very pleasant, but rather strange, Retta thought. But of course they must be in earnest. What possible motive could Giulia have in pretending such friendship if she did not really feel it? Certainly they all seemed very cordial. Yvonne offered to share a cushion with her on the floor, Simonne to lend another dressing-gown if she felt cold. Denise and Suzanne were pinning a dark curtain across the shuttered window, but turned to nod their greeting.

Retta looked round curiously. A bolster from the unused bed was thrown down against the door, so that no light should betray them. A couple of night-lights and a spirit lamp shed a faint, weird glow about the room. On a flat trunk were spread little cardboard dishes of chocolates and rich iced cakes and buns. A kettle was boiling on the lamp, and a tray of small blue coffee cups stood ready. Giulia took up a teapot, however.

'In your honour, my dear Henriette, we drink tea! As a rule we prefer coffee, but we know you English people require tea,' and she filled the pot, while Retta murmured her thanks, rather overwhelmed by such ceremonious treatment.

'Your friend Una gave you a tea-party in the hotel, we understand. That was to say good-bye. Now we give you one to welcome you as our friend,' and Retta could not very well point out the essential difference between the two parties—that Una's had been fair and above board, and this was secret and by night. However, there was excitement in the secrecy, and if they owned up afterwards where was the harm? So she argued, and could not bring herself to say anything to interfere with the feast.

'I hope I have made the tea properly. Never before have I made English tea, but they told me in the shop how to do,' Giulia remarked.

Retta watched anxiously, for she had had experience of foreigners' tea, and rather expected a thin watery liquid to appear. But the tea, as Giulia filled the cups, was as black as coffee.

'It's rather strong, isn't it?' she ventured. 'Shouldn't you put some water in?'

'But the pot is full already,' and Giulia regarded the little cups doubtfully. 'It does not look like the tea I have seen before, truly, but I have done just what they told me. What makes it so black and thick?'

'How much tea did you put in?'

'A spoon for each of us and one for the pot—eight. Is that not right? I have always been told to put one for the pot,' she insisted, as Retta began to giggle.

'Yes, but you don't go on for ever! There's a limit! For twenty people you wouldn't put in twenty spoonfuls.'

'No, twenty-one, I thought. You must not forget the pot.'

'No, no! It would be far too much. If there are only two people you might do as you say, but after that you don't want so much. For six people four spoonfuls would be plenty.'

'So? Then it is not right? But they told me——'

'It tastes vile,' Denise remarked, taking a sip of the muddy liquid.

'And what spoon did you use? It all depends on the size of the spoon, of course. Oh, Giulia, *not* that table spoon?'

'I feared lest our small spoons would be too small, so I begged Annette—the chambermaid, you know—to bring a larger one.'

‘Eight tablespoons! Oh, I say!’ and Retta lay back against the bed and laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks in her efforts to do it quietly.

Giulia looked at her, hesitating between amusement and offended dignity. Then she laughed also, and at that all the others joined in.

‘Well, at least, it has amused you, my dear, and has given us all a laugh. I shall understand next time——’

‘Next time I think you’d better make coffee,’ giggled Retta.

‘Can we not drink it, then? Well, at least we can eat the cakes and sweets,’ and they fell to upon these, while at Retta’s suggestion the water in the teapot was poured off the leaves into the empty jug on the washstand, and the pot refilled as soon as the kettle boiled again. The tea was still strong, but they had no more water, so had to make the best of it and sip the black mixture with a large addition of sugar and milk, and many assurances that it was very nice, to comfort Giulia.

‘Pauline and Clotilde would have liked to come, too,’ Denise remarked, ‘but they could not, of course. Pauline sleeps in my room,’ she explained to Retta, ‘and Clotilde in Giulia’s. It would not do for every one from a room to go, for fear Mademoiselle should come along, as she does some nights, and ask at the door if we are all in bed. There must be some one to assure her that all is well, or she would come in to see.’

Retta’s eyes took on their doubtful look again. She was enjoying the excitement and secrecy, and was proud to think that the feast had been given in her honour, but she quite intended to confess when questioned, and to take the necessary punishment. If she did that, she felt all would be well. But she could not have said, ‘Yes, Mademoiselle,’ to that supposititious question, as Denise evidently expected the other girls to do.

‘Where do you keep all your things?’ she asked, unwilling to dwell on the difficult questions involved.

‘In our own rooms. I keep the dishes, Denise the lamp, Simonne and Louise brought the cushions, and Suzanne the curtain. The spirit and the matches are Yvonne’s. We will wash the dishes early to-morrow morning, and put them out of sight. No one comes into this room at night, so we cannot be discovered.’

Half an hour later Retta crept into bed, having eaten more sweet cakes than had ever fallen to her lot at one time before, and so many chocolates that she never wanted to see another. Before she fell asleep she lay thinking over the tea-party, and laughed again as she remembered Giulia’s eight table-spoonfuls of tea.

‘Now we’ll have to pay for it! I wonder how soon Madame will ask? She doesn’t do it every day, Una said. No shopping for any of us seven this week! Never mind, we’ve had our fun! Shall I tell Una about it? I’d better prepare her, perhaps. Then she won’t be too surprised when I confess. No,’ on second thoughts, ‘it’s maybe just as well she should look surprised! Madame would find it hard to believe she wasn’t in it, too, since she expects us to be together. Then I won’t tell her. It’s better she should know nothing about it. I mustn’t get her into trouble,’ and she was careful not to mention the feast to either Una or Pamela.

She waited day by day for Madame to ask her usual questions, and grew impatient for the time to come, for she did not like the feeling of an unconfessed sin upon her conscience, even if it were only a slight one. It did not seem to burden Giulia or the others, but that was probably because they were used to the sensation. To Retta it was irksome and distressing, and she wished fervently, like Una, that Madame would ask every day. She longed to ease her mind, and was greatly relieved when on Saturday morning Madame put her questions.

‘Has any girl untidy drawers or wardrobe to report?’—the bedrooms having been examined by a critical governess the day before. ‘Have any girls spoken any language but

French without permission? Have any left their proper bedrooms at night, or spoken after lights were put out?'

Retta rose at once. 'There'll be seven of us, anyway,' was her thought.

Several girls had risen to report untidiness or to confess to forbidden conversations. Una's drawers had been all in confusion, a regular occurrence.

'And you, Henriette? I am sorry to see that you break the rules so soon, my dear.'

Retta awoke to the fact that Madame was addressing her, and Una gazing at her in dismay. She was still stunned and bewildered by a great shock. Of the seven who had made up the tea-party she had been the only one to rise.

She had looked expectantly across at Giulia and the rest. But Giulia, Yvonne, and Denise were whispering together—as they had no right to be doing at such a moment, but Madame's attention was fully occupied elsewhere. Was it possible they had not heard the question?

Louise and the other two met her eyes defiantly, with a look which dared her to betray them. That she naturally had no thought of doing, but her face was a shade paler than usual with the shock of her dismay as she turned to answer Madame, conscious suddenly of Una's distress and Pamela's amazement.

'I went out of my room one night, Madame. I am *very* sorry now that I did it!' she said, in stumbling French, whose grammar was all wrong but whose meaning was clear.

'To whose room did you go, my dear? What girl would lead a stranger astray so early?' Madame had seen Una's start of surprise and obvious dismay, and knew that this time at least the two had not been companions.

Retta realised that the other six were probably waiting for her answer. She kept her head and said distinctly,—

'To no one's room, Madame.'

'To no one? But, my child, that is foolishness! Did you then go only into the corridor? Surely you went to meet some one?'

'Yes, Madame.'

'Well, then, where? Whom? Who asked you to go?'

'I couldn't tell you, Madame.'

Madame had seen that same quick hurt look in Una's eyes during her early days at school, when she had been asked to betray her companions in some prank. She recognised the uselessness of further inquiry. Retta would not tell. Madame would inevitably come off worst if she tried to force her. She said gravely,—

'Very well, my dear. You would have been wiser to tell me, as I cannot think you are as much to blame as some one else, who has not the courage nor the honesty to confess her fault. No girls who have stars against their names will go to town this afternoon. Now fetch your needlework and mending, and go to work in the garden.'

Retta, grim-faced and puzzled, but determined to be satisfied, ran past Una, who was waiting for her; and Una, seeing her expression, let her go. She raced upstairs after Giulia, who had disappeared hastily with her friends, and came upon them in 'The Countess's' bedroom.

'Giulia! What did it mean? You could not have heard—say you did not hear Madame speak! I cannot believe you would be such a—a *sneak*!' She knew no French equivalent.

'*Qu'est-ce que c'est cela—un* sneak?' laughed Giulia. 'That is not a French word, my dear Retta. What are you asking? Did I hear what?'

'Madame asking me whom I went to meet—or if any one had been out of their rooms,' Retta was furious between doubt and anger. '*Did* you hear, and still say nothing? *Could* you?'

'Did she ask that this morning?' Giulia's face showed frank surprise. 'I thought she only asked about untidy rooms. Denise spoke to me just then—didn't you, Denise?—and I did not

know Madame had asked anything more. I didn't hear her say anything about going out of our rooms, honestly I didn't, Retta, my dear.'

Retta stared at her, a great doubt in her honest eyes. There had been more than a mere question and answer. How was it possible that Giulia could have missed it all? And yet—was she telling a lie? She had certainly been talking to Denise.

She turned on Louise. 'You heard! Why didn't you speak?'

'She asked if we'd gone to any other girl's room, and we hadn't. "No Man's Land" is nobody's room. What was there to say?' Louise asked triumphantly.

Retta's anger blazed out at that, and she burst forth in English, since her French was far too limited for her feelings.

'Is that how you crawl out of it? Then I think you're a set of mean sneaks. I call it disgusting! You knew very well what Madame meant. Besides'—and she struggled to express herself in French now—'she did not say that. She asked if any girl had left her proper bedroom at night!' and she faced them triumphantly.

'No, really? She did not say that, did she, Simonne?'

'I'm quite sure she didn't,' Suzanne asserted. 'She always asks if we've been to any one else's room and we hadn't.'

'Giulia had been to mine——'

'But she didn't hear!' Yvonne reminded her sharply. 'I never heard Madame ask that either. Are you sure you aren't making a mistake?'

'I'm certain she is. Madame *never* asks that!' Simonne chimed in, her eyes exultant over Retta's discomfiture.

'She did! I heard her say it. You can ask the others—Una, or Bianca, or any one.' Retta was not shaken in her opinion.

'My dear Henriette,' said Giulia suavely, 'your French is marvellous for a beginner, but it is not yet perfect. You would easily mistake Madame's words. As I did not hear her speak, I can offer no opinion, but I have never heard her put the question in that form. It is far more likely that you were mistaken than Louise, Suzanne, and Simonne. If she had asked as you say she did, they would of course have confessed at once. As they did not, that is surely the best proof that you were mistaken. When your French is more perfect you will not make these little mistakes.'

Louise giggled. Retta faced Giulia with clear, honest eyes.

'And if I were mistaken, would you be satisfied to escape in such a way? After all, what does it matter exactly what Madame said? We know what she meant. We went out of our rooms in secret and without permission. It does not matter where we went. Would you be satisfied to say nothing about it? Wouldn't you feel you were being mean? Wouldn't you be ashamed?'

Giulia shrugged her shoulders impatiently. 'My dear Retta, what a fuss about nothing at all! If I had heard Madame speak, of course I should have answered her as you did. Now let us take our needlework down to the garden. My stockings are full of holes, alas! You were darning your little friend's when we first met, do you remember?'

'Come and find your work, Retta,' and Louise took her arm in a friendly manner.

Retta drew away from her sharply. '*You* heard, anyway, and you hadn't the—the *pluck*—to own up!' she panted, and ran off alone.

'*Qu'est-ce que c'est cela? Le* pluck?' laughed Giulia. 'She will soon forget, Louise. Do not trouble her just now. But truly, she is as bad as Una! I had hoped she would show more sense.'

Retta had left the bedroom before Louise reached it. 'Gone to consult that Una about us,' murmured the French girl, but in so doing she measured Retta by herself.

Utterly miserable and bewildered, Retta had gone to talk to Una, indeed, but not concerning the subject uppermost in her mind. She had no mending to do, having so recently arrived, so she sought Una in the garden and offered to help with her darning. Una was alone, waiting for her.

'Well?' she asked.

'Well what?' and Retta threaded her needle with elaborate care.

'Retta, what's the matter? Won't you tell me all about it?'

Retta shook her head. 'I'd rather not. Let's talk of something else.'

'Oh, but I want to know! Don't be unkind, Retta!'

'Tell me!' said Retta suddenly. 'I have spoken English already, since she asked us, you know. Shall I not go and tell her at once? She may not ask again for a week, and it is so long to wait. I am afraid I shall forget.'

Una laughed. 'What, so soon?'

But it had been no laughing matter to Retta. 'I did not know the French. It did not seem sufficient. I needed English. I think I will tell Madame at once.'

To her surprise, Madame did not scold her, though she eyed her keenly for a moment. But Madame had understood more than Retta realised, though she did not know whom the other culprits had been. She guessed something of the feelings which French had seemed inadequate to express, so she asked no questions, but dismissed Retta with a gentle, 'Try to remember, my child. It is hard for you at first, but you will soon grow accustomed to it,' and Retta went back to Una, saying fervently,—

'She's a dear old lady, after all!'

With all her questioning, Una could draw from her no explanation of her confession in the hall.

'We were doing something we should not have done,' Retta admitted so much. 'I cannot tell you who the others were, and I will not talk about it, Una, so please do not tease me.'

'It's not difficult to guess!'

'I will not talk about it,' Retta said again. 'Will you play tennis with me this afternoon, since neither of us may go to town?'

Una eyed her curiously. She had felt that Retta would have to find out certain things for herself. Were they beginning to dawn on her now? She said no more, though very curious, and Retta sat darning and frowning, and coming to silent decisions.

It was not possible that Giulia had heard Madame's question and remained silent. Louise and the others she dismissed without further thought. They were beneath contempt. Any future friendship with them was out of the question. But she could not give up Giulia so easily, and, after all, why should she? If Giulia had not heard, she was not to blame for her silence.

And here Retta knew that she was in the wrong, and so much in the wrong that she dared not discuss the matter with Una, and was therefore forced to keep silence on the whole story. For she wanted to believe Giulia innocent and trustworthy, and wanted it so very much that she was wilfully blinding herself to certain ugly facts. They were dimly present in her mind, but she would not face them.

Giulia had not answered her last question. Would the quibble which had been good enough for Louise have satisfied her also? It was hard to say. She had not admitted that it would, but an ugly doubt lurked in Retta's mind and gave her great discomfort.

Again, if Giulia had really not heard Madame's question, did that dispose of the matter? Was it right to say she was therefore not to blame? She knew now that the question had been asked, and, so far as Retta was concerned, answered truthfully. Surely an honest girl, finding she had missed the chance of confession, would have gone to Madame afterwards to explain her responsibility and take her share of the blame? Retta knew many at her old school to

whom that would have been the only possible course in the circumstances. She knew very well that in joining in the clandestine tea-party she had done wrong, but she knew just as thoroughly that the chief responsibility lay with those who had invited her to the feast. Without their invitation she would not have dreamed of leaving her room. Without at all desiring to shirk her fair share of blame, she could not but feel that Giulia was more in fault than herself. And Giulia had been content to say nothing.

To a nature like Retta's, such a revelation, if fully grasped, must have ended all possibility of friendship with the girl who had failed in honour. But Retta desired Giulia's friendship keenly, was proud and flattered by her choice of her as a companion, and could not bear the thought of breaking off the intimacy. During this week they had been much together, and Giulia had used every art she knew to strengthen her hold on the English girl. She had fascinated her with caressing words, with praise, with expressions of friendship, and had singled her out for favour so obviously that some of her former friends had been moved to jealousy. Retta, pleased and touched, had responded with real affection, and now, although a doubt of Giulia's perfect honesty had crept into her mind, she could not bear to break away from her.

So she deliberately blinded herself to those ugly aspects of the case which were trying to force themselves on her notice, and regretted it bitterly later on.

Until now her friendship with Giulia had been blameless, brought about by Madame herself, though frowned on by Una. Received by Giulia with open arms as she had been, Retta could hardly have failed to respond. But in later days, when she thought over their intimacy and its results, she admitted candidly that from this point onwards she had been to blame. She had had warning, not from Una, but from her own observation, and she had let it go unheeded.

At the time she would not admit it as a warning. But it had been sufficiently clear to cause her much discomfort, and to require to be shut out by a deliberate effort. And she dared not discuss the matter with Una, lest Una should voice her suspicions and confirm them, and make friendship with Giulia impossible.

CHAPTER XIII
A MIDNIGHT ALARM

Giulia came back from Montreux that afternoon carrying a cardboard box. She opened it and handed it to Retta.

'A few grapes for you and Una, Retta, my dear, as you could not go to town to-day. The shops are full of them. Wash them carefully before you eat them, in case the vines were sprayed with vitriol in the spring.'

Retta hesitated. Was this purely a kind thought on Giulia's part? Or was it a bribe? Were the grapes to buy her friendship? If she accepted them, she could not possibly maintain the dignified attitude of aloofness which would no doubt have been correct in the circumstances. But she had no intention of doing so. She had made up her mind to remain on friendly terms with Giulia, but to be led into no more false positions. She took the grapes, and scorned herself for doing so, then hated herself still more for the unkind thought they had suggested. What right had she to suspect Giulia of anything so small as trying to buy her friendship with grapes?

One result of the evening tea-party was to throw her more into Giulia's company. She would not when she could help it have anything to do with Louise, Simonne, and Suzanne, and was decidedly suspicious of Denise and Yvonne. She could not refuse to make a fourth with them at tennis now and then, though she preferred that Una, Bianca, and Linda should be her companions whenever possible. But she rigidly refused to be intimate with any of the five who had joined in the tea-party, and Giulia, seeing this, did not press her into their company too often when they were all together. But she was much with Retta, and in this closer companionship they became perhaps more intimate than before.

Giulia discovered, or professed to discover, that Retta had a very pretty soprano voice, and helped her to select songs which she was sure she would like and which would just suit her style. This sounded important, and Retta, who had not known she had any 'style,' and had never given two thoughts to her voice, was delighted and flattered once more, and forgot her doubts and suspicions. Giulia turned out her duets and pressed her to take the soprano part in several, and they spent much time practising together.

'I thought she was going to be my friend and yours!' groaned Una to Bianca. 'I hardly see anything of her. Giulia's with her all the time.'

It was not quite so bad as she made out, however. Retta and she were often together, and their companionship was not blameless. On one occasion, at least, they did their best to justify Madame's opinion that they were better separated, and to live up to the reputation they had earned at Finhaut.

They often recalled the 'riot,' and one day Retta sighed, 'It was a joke! I wish we could have another! Really and truly, everybody enjoys something like that, you know. It wakes things up, and does nobody any harm.'

'Well, what could we do?' They whispered together for a time, and at last evolved an elaborate plan of campaign.

The school pet was a gray kitten, very fluffy and long-haired, known as Fifi, a great favourite with most of the girls. That night when Retta went up to bed, Fifi was in her arms and was smuggled into her bedroom unnoticed by any one. Offered a sleeping-place under the down quilt, Fifi naturally settled down for the night without a sound, no doubt thanking her stars for this improvement on her basket in the kitchen. Retta crept into bed without disturbing

her, only alarmed lest her rapturous purring should betray the secret to Louise. But Fifi's purrs died away, and she slept the heavy sleep of a very warm and very happy kitten.

Retta lay listening. Madame was always the last to go to bed, and her room was just below. A sharp click gave warning that her electric light was switched off, and the house settled down for the night. For another hour Retta lay awake, watching the time by the light near Pamela's bed. Then she slipped out, caught up the sleeping Fifi, and was along the passage, barefoot and shivering, before Fifi knew what had happened. Very carefully she opened a door, thrust the indignant kitten in, and fled.

Now Fifi considered the world created for her particular benefit, as is the way of kittens, puppies, and babies. Cushions were for her to lie upon, food for her to eat; it was the duty of the universe to be kind to her. She had accepted her translation to Retta's cosy bed as a matter of course, but this was different. When Fifi was unhappy she could be trusted to let the universe know it had failed in its duty. She was very unhappy now, and felt deeply injured as well. She lifted up her voice in a wail.

'Wow-wow-wow! I am cold and deserted and miserable! Where is the warm bed in which I fell asleep?' she demanded at the top of her voice, and four sleeping girls, and four more on each side, started up in sudden nightmares, with no idea what the hideous outcry just at their ears could be.

Giulia pulled the bed-clothes over her head. 'Clotilde! Yvonne! Turn up the light, quick! What is it?'

But Clotilde and Yvonne were under the bed-clothes also, and had no intention of coming out. Suzanne, shivering with fear but desperate, skipped across the floor, then gave a yell of terror as a furry body rubbed in delight against her bare legs. With a bound she flung herself on top of Yvonne, sobbing with fright that some monster had attacked her. Nothing would induce her to leave the bed again, in spite of the remonstrances of the half-smothered Yvonne. Fifi, disappointed of her new-found comforter, set up another wail, and all four girls cowered on their beds and would not move.

From the rooms on each side came indignant remonstrances, but Fifi wailed on and no one offered to comfort her. Suddenly the door was thrown open, the light switched on, and Bianca stood there in her blue dressing-gown, her ruddy hair hanging in two long braids on her shoulders.

'Girls, what is the matter?'—and then she laughed, in spite of herself, at sight of the very small kitten in possession of the floor and the girls shivering on their beds, Suzanne crouched at the bottom of Yvonne's, the other three below the clothes. Clotilde peeped out, and Giulia sat up, feeling she had made herself ridiculous.

'It's all very well for you, Bianca,' she said crossly. 'You've got your slippers on, and you can see the creature. It's no joke feeling its claws in your foot.'

'It attacked me. I didn't know what it was, and I got a dreadful fright,' protested Suzanne. 'It rushed straight at my legs!'

'I can't imagine Fifi attacking any one. She's only cold and lonely,' and Bianca took the desolate little creature up in her arms. 'How did she get here?'

'*I* don't know! She wasn't here when we went to bed.'

'Are you sure? Perhaps she was in some corner.'

'She never stays in corners,' said Yvonne, correctly enough. 'If she'd been in the room at all, she'd have been in the middle of one of the beds.'

'How can she have come here, then? Was your door not closed?'

'Of course it was closed, Bianca! Do you think us silly?'

'Then some one must have opened it,' Bianca remarked.

‘It certainly looks like it,’ Giulia retorted. ‘Unless Fifi did it for herself! Why isn’t the little silly in the kitchen as usual? Mademoiselle,’ as a governess appeared, looking severe, ‘I am sorry, but we are not to blame. We were sleeping, all four of us, when we were wakened by a terrible noise. It was terrific! We were all alarmed, naturally, as we did not know where it came from; then Suzanne tried to turn on the light, and a monster attacked her feet! Then Bianca came and opened the door, and there was Fifi! How she came here we do not know. *We* did not want her!’

Mademoiselle held the opinion that Fifi must have found the door ajar and have crept in in search of company. Every one knew her craving to be among friends. She could not bear to be left alone if she knew where to find some one who would pet her. But Bianca said at once, ‘I found the door shut. She could not have closed it behind her,’ and disposed of that theory. There was evidently more in the matter than could be explained by a mere wandering fit of Fifi’s.

‘Some naughty girl has played a trick on you,’ Mademoiselle said briefly. ‘We will make inquiries in the morning. Give me the cat, Bianca. Get into your own bed, Suzanne, and do not be a silly child. I do not believe Fifi attacked you. Has she scratched you anywhere? No? I thought not. Your own fear made you a coward. Now go to sleep again quickly, girls, and let there be no more talking,’ and Fifi vanished to the lower regions.

Next morning came inquiries, and ready confession from the culprits.

‘It was my idea, Madame. I planned it,’ said Una.

‘But I took Fifi up to bed with me, and put her into the room at midnight. We thought it was best to divide it like that.’

‘Una and Henriette once more! My dear Una, when will you be old enough to give up these foolish pranks? Henriette, I am grieved to see you in disgrace again, my child. I did not expect you to give so much trouble.’

‘We didn’t break any rules,’ Retta pointed out. ‘There’s no rule against putting cats in bedrooms, Madame.’

‘My dear, my dear! Who would dream that any one would wish to put cats in bedrooms? May not one leave something to your common sense? Or have you none?’

‘It was only a joke, Madame,’ Una argued. ‘It did nobody any harm. It must have been worth it just to see Giulia and the rest so scared of Fifi.’

Madame’s reply to this was a lecture on the danger of such practical jokes. If one of the girls in the bedroom had been afflicted with a weak heart, the sudden fright would have given her a shock which might have been very dangerous.

‘Ah, but, Madame, their hearts are all right! We thought of that. We wouldn’t have frightened any of the little ones, like Elsa or Margot or Pamela, but Giulia and Yvonne and Suzanne and Clotilde! Nothing could hurt them.’

‘How can you be sure of that, my dear? And even so——’

‘I’ve played tennis with them,’ Retta said promptly. ‘There’s nothing the matter with their hearts.’

‘That is no guide, my child. They might still have been very nervous, and a sudden shock might have done them harm.’

Retta thought of the tea-party, when Giulia and her friends had deliberately risked the shock of sudden discovery.

‘I don’t think they are nervous,’ she said sturdily.

But Madame could not be persuaded to view the matter as a joke, and their punishment included a long piece of French grammar for Retta and a poem for Una to learn. Their Saturday afternoon holiday was forfeited also, whereby they lost a very enjoyable outing up to Mont Pélerin, and spent a dull afternoon at home in the garden.

'Yvonne doesn't like you,' said Una suddenly, as they sat resting on the wall above the lake, after a hard-fought game of tennis.

'I'm sure I don't care! I don't like Yvonne! But why does she dislike me particularly? Not because of the Fifi business, I suppose? She and Suzanne were angry about it,'—they were talking French, or she would have put it more strongly, but her French was still limited—'but Giulia took it as a joke when she found it was my doing. She has soon forgotten it, but the others do not love me more for it. Is that what is the matter with Yvonne?'

'No, it's more than that. It was before that. She was Giulia's chief friend till you came. Now you seem to be taking her place, and she does not like it.'

'Oh, she's jealous? Well, *I* don't care! But I don't know why Giulia has been so nice to me! I can't think why she took the trouble, for I was quite a stranger. She was nice whenever I arrived. I've often thought it was queer.'

'It was queer,' Una agreed. 'I suppose she took a fancy to you, but it is strange, because ——'

'Thank you! Very strange, I'm sure!'

Una laughed. 'You didn't let me finish. Because you are so much younger than the rest of her friends. They are all in her own class, and all about seventeen—her own age.'

'And I'm not fifteen yet. Yes, it is queer. So Yvonne's jealous, is she? I'm sorry if I've made her feel bad, but it isn't my fault, you know.'

'She knows that. She is more angry with Giulia than with you. She feels she has deserted her. Giulia's more with you than with Yvonne at present. I would not care to quarrel with Yvonne myself. Giulia should take care.'

Retta turned to her with wide eyes. 'What do you mean? What do you think Yvonne would do? Has she got such an awful temper? I haven't seen any sign of it.'

'No, but it's there, and now and then it blazes up. When it does there's an explosion. Yvonne in a rage is really worth seeing. She's a Corsican, you know.'

'I thought she was French?'

'Well, Corsicans are French—of a kind, aren't they? But you know what they are in plays and novels—men with very hot tempers, always wanting revenge on some one, and creeping about with a long knife to stab their enemies in the dark! Yvonne's like that.'

Retta laughed and shivered. 'Una, what nonsense! Where does she keep her long knife? She couldn't have one, you silly!'

'No, but she has the temper. She would do something desperate if she was angry enough. She might get Giulia into trouble. She'd stick at nothing if she once quarrelled with her.'

'What an uncomfortable girl to have about!' Retta laughed. 'I hope she won't want to put her knife into me!'

'Giulia ought to be careful with Yvonne,' Una said again, and Retta, thinking over what she knew, agreed, but kept her reasons to herself, for they never discussed Giulia together. Retta's dread lest her stifled suspicions should be confirmed was too great to allow of that, and Una was too honourable to use such an opportunity to attempt to turn her against the friend she had chosen. But Retta thought to herself,—

'Una's right. Yvonne knows too much. She could tell about that tea-party, and—and there may be other things I know nothing about! I suppose if she got in one of those tempers she wouldn't mind going to Madame and telling tales. Of course she'd bring herself in, too, but perhaps she wouldn't mind that either. Well, I shan't have more to do with her than I can help!'

She glanced curiously at Yvonne as she came in from the excursion, her arm through Giulia's. She was a tall, handsome girl, as dark-haired and black-eyed as Giulia herself. She dropped her friend's arm and turned away, and Giulia came up to Retta, half a dozen

enormous white chrysanthemums in her hand. She never forgot to bring home a gift if Retta happened to have been left at home.

'Here, my child, these are for you, because you put the kitten in my room! But don't do it again! I might not forgive you so easily next time. Are these not beauties? But you should have been with us, Retta, my dear! The view was exquisite, with the mountains all covered in fresh snow, and the woods up there are marvellous, all possible colours. We wandered in them, and Yvonne and I lost ourselves, and found we were walking towards Gruyère instead of to Vevey. There were small paths everywhere, and we lost sight of the coloured rings on the trees, so of course we went wrong. But the woods were very beautiful. I wish you had been there!'

'Yvonne doesn't,' Retta thought, as she thanked her warmly for the flowers.

CHAPTER XIV
THE END OF A FRIENDSHIP

One morning early in October Madame entered the hall to make her usual inquiries with a smile on her kindly face.

'The old lady has something good for us,' murmured Giulia. 'Is it a concert? Or a picnic? Or something new and exciting?'

'It's to be hoped nobody has much to confess, or she may not tell us,' Retta remarked.

Giulia glanced at her queerly. On this subject of owning up to wrong-doing they did not see eye to eye, to put it mildly, but Retta wilfully ignored the fact. To admit what she knew to be true—that she had never yet known Giulia confess to anything—would have meant the end of their friendship, and she was not prepared for that. She knew that Yvonne and the rest were not straightforward, she knew that Giulia was their leader, and that they took their tone from her, but she refused to draw the obvious inference. Whatever the others were, Giulia was all right, she told herself defiantly.

But Madame made her announcement before asking her questions. A world-famous actress was coming to Montreux next week, and would give an afternoon performance on Saturday. It was an opportunity not to be lost, and Madame proposed to take all those girls whose classes had not received among them a single bad-conduct star during the week. So they must all be very careful of their behaviour, as if any one broke rules she would disqualify not only herself but her companions.

Giulia led the girls in a round of applause, but Retta looked indignant.

'I call that a sneaky thing to do!' she said wrathfully. 'Why should all the class be stopped because of one? It isn't fair. I don't think Madame ought to make a condition like that.'

'You must be more careful than usual, that is all,' said Yvonne, a queer look in her black eyes, and took Giulia's arm and began to whisper to her in a corner.

The whole school seemed to feel the same, and their extreme goodness all week was phenomenal. Madame congratulated herself on at last having found a weapon which really took effect upon them, and wished famous actresses would come more often.

It was the first week in which Retta had been considered qualified to take her place in a class with the others. She had been at school for three weeks now, and her French was improving rapidly through constant use, so she was able to struggle along, though still far behind the standard of the rest. She had been placed in the class below Una, who again was in the form below Giulia, Yvonne, and Bianca. With the rest of her class-mates she felt keenly the responsibility of Madame's decision, and tried as hard as any not to get into trouble. Each evening reached in safety was greeted with a sigh of relief by all.

On Friday evening, just before bed-time, Giulia called to Retta from her bedroom.

'Retta, my dear, here is a story we have all been reading. Would you like to have the loan of it next? Yvonne and I want to know what you think of it. It is a tale of Corsica, her home, and is very exciting. We want to know how it pleases you. You are so very English!'

Retta laughed, and took the book all unsuspecting. It was pleasant to have girls so much older than herself ask her opinion, and she always enjoyed a thrilling story. A few tales of adventure had come her way, but not many novels so far. She remembered Una's description of Corsican life on the stage, and looked for some excitement.

She was not disappointed. The book was pure melodrama, fortunately of a fairly harmless type, or harmful only in the state of excitement it was liable to cause, but utterly worthless and very different from the books in the carefully guarded school library, which Giulia and

Yvonne despised, and even Retta found dull and uninteresting. She read a couple of chapters while undressing and brushing her hair, then with immense self-denial put the book away for the night. It would have been so easy to read on with Pamela's night-light beside her bed. Later she wondered if Giulia had hoped she would do so. She woke early with the story still in her mind, opened one shutter very quietly, fetched the book from her wardrobe, and settled down to an hour of blissful over-excitement before Louise or the younger girls awoke.

'Has any girl spoken any language but French? Or left her bedroom at night? Or read in bed? Has any girl any books which are not in the school library?'

Madame looked round anxiously. She was as eager as the girls that all should have the promised treat, but it was impossible not to ask. The girls were all watching anxiously lest any one should rise. So far as they knew, no rules had been broken, but many felt doubtful of several of the elder girls, and some of the little ones were seldom out of mischief.

Retta, realising in a flash what she had done, grew hot and hesitated. Must she bring all her class into disgrace? Must they all lose their treat through her? Would it not be allowable just for this once to say nothing? She had never meant to do harm. She had never thought. She had quite forgotten this rule, and had taken the book without realising it was forbidden. Surely she might let the question pass this time!—not for her own sake, of course, but for the sake of the other girls. And she had only been in the class a week. How they would all hate her!

But Giulia must have known when she gave her the book! She and Yvonne had been reading it, but of course they would say nothing. For that Retta was prepared in Yvonne's case. In Giulia's, she was facing an even more horrible thought. Had Giulia done it on purpose? Had the offer of the book been deliberately planned to bring about this moment? Were they waiting to see what she would do?

Retta's thoughts went no further. She had a sick feeling that there was more to come, and that her friendship with Giulia was as dead as with the rest. But there was no time to think of that now. She started up, white and then red, as all the girls turned to her in blank dismay; but very determined.

'Madame, I have a book. I am very sorry. I had forgotten we were not allowed.'

'Henriette, my dear!' Madame's kind face had fallen in grievous disappointment, and a smothered groan broke from the unfortunates in the class. 'How could you forget so simple a thing? Silly excuses will not help——'

'Indeed, Madame, I never thought of it. I—I saw the book'—sudden colour filled her face as she remembered how it had been offered and how eagerly and unsuspectingly she had accepted it—'and I wanted to read it, and never thought that it was not allowed.'

'Where is this book?'

'Upstairs, in my room, Madame.'

'You must bring it to me at once.' Madame looked intensely worried, for she knew the harm a bad book could do. 'Where did you buy it, my dear?'

Retta shook her head. She had never told tales, and she never would. The form of the question had been a relief. Madame had not asked, 'Where did you get it?' which would have been even more difficult to answer.

But Madame felt that even if she insisted on knowing the name of the shop which had sold the book she could not blame the man, who would naturally retort that it was her place to keep a better watch on her girls. That any one should have lent the book to Retta, and should let her bear the blame alone, never occurred to Madame.

'And so you are in trouble again, Henriette,' she said gravely. 'Your record at school is a very bad one, my dear. You have been constantly in trouble. I shall not be able to keep you here if there is much more of it,' and Retta looked up with startled eyes. 'This time it is not

yourself alone, but your companions also. Surely the thought of them might have kept you within bounds for this week at least!'

Retta looked up, her lips trembling.

'Indeed, Madame, I have tried. We have all tried. We have been very careful. I did not realise that I was doing wrong. I have never read a forbidden book since I came to school, and I never thought there was harm in this one. It was only when you asked us that I understood I had broken rules. I beg you not to punish the others for me! I will stay at home and do any punishment you like,—I will learn grammar or poetry all day, or go to bed at lunch-time, if you wish,—if you will let the rest of the class go to the play. Truly, I did not mean to do wrong. Only I did not think.'

'But, my dear, when will you learn to think? How am I to teach you? Surely you need some hard lesson, and if your companions lose their pleasure through you— —' and the faces which had held a spark of hope as Retta pleaded fell once more.

'Madame, I pray you, be kind to us this once! I have been in the class only a week!' Retta begged, her face piteous in its distress. 'Let it be as if this was still last Saturday, and I had not yet been placed in any class!' Then with a sudden inspiration, 'Let me stay at home on Wednesday also, when we were to sail across the lake to St Gingolph for a picnic! I wanted to go, but I will gladly stay at home if the girls may go to the play to-day.'

Madame surveyed them with troubled eyes. Some of the girls were in tears. Retta was flushed and eager, but not far from breaking down. Giulia and Yvonne, not being concerned in the matter at all, looked mildly interested. Retta, feeling the strain too much and afraid of collapsing in public, dropped into her seat and buried her head in her arms on the table, and they waited in tense silence.

Madame was reluctant to depart from her given word. On the other hand, she was very anxious that the girls should have their pleasure, and considered it an advantage from an educational point of view that they should see the great actress, who was growing old and might not act for many more years. There was something to be said for Retta's argument. The trouble might very well have happened a week earlier, when her fall would have affected none but herself.

'I shall have to think it over for a time,' she said very gravely. 'Henriette, bring the book to me at once. Girls, you may go. I will tell you later about this afternoon.'

The girls filed out, looking very serious. Retta, white and grim-faced, ran up to her room for the book, and Madame gave a sigh of relief at sight of it. It was only silly, not as harmful as she had feared. She said gravely,—

'Now what am I to do with you, Henriette, my dear? You give me constant trouble. I did not expect it from you.'

Once more Retta pleaded, and promised, and even cried, and at last Madame gave in. She sent her to her room for the rest of the day, gave her a long poem to learn, and, a harder penalty still, some punishment sewing which would take quite two hours. She kept the rest of the girls in suspense till lunch-time, then announced that she would allow them to go, since it was clear that Henriette had acted more from thoughtlessness than wilful intention.

Pamela crept up to her bedroom as soon as possible and found Retta finishing a lonely lunch and looking very glum.

'Would she let me stay with you, do you think, Retta? I'd like to, really. I don't care a scrap about the silly play. I'd much rather be with you.'

'No, kiddy, she wouldn't hear of it, and neither would I. Besides, I don't want any one. I couldn't have enjoyed the play to-day. I want to be left alone.'

Pamela looked at her with troubled eyes.

'What's the matter? Aren't you well? Don't you want to go this afternoon?'

'No. I want to think about something.'

'Won't you be lonely?'

'No. I don't want to talk to any one. I've a poem to learn, a silly thing, and heaps of sewing,' and she laughed ruefully. 'I shall be quite busy. Don't think any more about me, Pam. I shan't be miserable—not about the play, anyway.'

'What about Wednesday? Aren't you to go to Gingolph either?'

'Yes, she wants me to go there. She says I'm missing everything because I'm so bad! And she says she plans things that she thinks it will be good for us to see, and then I upset her plans and have to stop at home! She threatened to expel me next time,' and Retta laughed uneasily. 'I don't think she would, you know, unless it was something very awful, but——'

'Oh, Retta, how terrible! But you will be more careful?' pleaded Pamela tearfully.

'Yes, dear, I will. Now hadn't you better get ready?'

'When did you buy the book, Retta?' and Pamela presented her back to be unbuttoned.

But Retta shook her head and had nothing to say on the subject. The mention of the book seemed to have upset her, Pamela thought, for she looked glum and unhappy again, and at times almost fierce. She would not talk to Louise and Francesca when they came up to change their dresses, and was glad when they left her alone at last, and even Pamela had kissed her good-bye and gone reluctantly downstairs. Then the house was very quiet, and there was nothing to come between Retta and her thoughts.

She tried to learn the poem, then tossed it aside and took up her sewing. Hemming dusters was not a congenial task, but at least it could be done without interfering with thoughts which must have their way.

At another time she would have been thankful that if she must be imprisoned it was at least in a back bedroom. To spend all afternoon in the front of the house, with windows which looked only upon the streets and houses across the road, and the constant noise of trams and motors and trains in her ears, would have been a great trial. But these back windows were above the lake, and the quietness was only broken by an occasional screaming gull or passing steamer.

It was all very familiar now—the snow-capped Grand Combin in the far distance, the pointed Catogne the nearer Dent de Morcles, with its sharp little peak, and the bold Dent du Midi; the flat Rhone Valley, with its lines of stiff poplars; the cliffs behind Montreux, with Chillon low on the water-line; the Rochers de Naye and pointed Tours d'Aï behind, and the stretch of blue lake in front; and opposite, the fine range of the Savoie Alps, with early snow in the higher crevices, and shadows filling the deep glen behind St Gingolph; the little white towns on the shore, the rocky breaks in the hill, and the woods in all their autumn glory of bronze and gold. Retta knew it in every aspect, at all hours of the day, and even at night, when the red, white, and yellow lights of Montreux and Clarens, shimmering in the lake, were reflected till they were cut off by the next promontory, and gave the distant towns the look of fairy palaces, while the chain of lamps around the hill at Glion was a gleaming crown to the whole.

Although she had seen it so often it charmed her still, and if she gazed with careless eyes between her stitches it was not that she did not appreciate its beauty, nor yet that her thoughts were busy with the great actress and the play. It was a matter which touched her much more nearly that made Retta pinch her lips and look across at the mountains with eyes full of misery.

Had Giulia done it on purpose? She must have known what the discovery of the book would mean. She must have known that Retta would confess if the question were asked. Had the offer of the book been a deliberate attempt to get her into trouble?

At first it seemed to Retta that this must be so, and she was intensely miserable at the thought. But as she went over and over the whole matter she grew ashamed of herself for harbouring such a suspicion. Why should Giulia do such a thing? Why should she wish to bring her into disgrace? If it had been Yvonne who had offered the book, Retta would easily have believed it had been done with the wish to bring harm upon her, but why should Giulia do it? She had always been friendly, even going out of her way to be kind, and to a girl much younger than herself. What reason had she to suspect her of so unworthy a trick, Retta asked herself indignantly, and dismissed the thought as quickly as it had come. What had suggested it she did not know.

It was possible, of course, that some such thought had been in Yvonne's mind, and that she had suggested the loan of the book to Retta at that particular moment, when it was likely to have such serious consequences. Giulia might not have seen through the trick, but might have passed on the book in all innocence. Yvonne was capable of anything, in Retta's estimation.

'Let us lend the book to *la petite Anglaise*, and see what she has to say about it.' She could almost hear Yvonne say the words. And Giulia would agree, with no thought of what was to come of it, while Yvonne laughed in her sleeve, and laughed again as Retta in equal innocence took the book so eagerly. She grew hot with shame as she remembered how easily she had been deceived, and hotter still with anger against the girl who was perhaps to blame. But it was certainly not Giulia, Retta told herself.

Then her natural honesty chid her again. What proof had she that Yvonne had anything to do with the matter? What right had she to blame her without proof? If she believed that Giulia had lent the book without any evil intent, what need was there to blame Yvonne for suggesting it? Why look any further to find out how the trouble had arisen? Giulia had enjoyed the book, had desired to share it with a friend, and so had lent it, and she herself was the only one to blame in that she ought to have known better than to take it. It was thoughtless of Giulia not to have realised what she was doing, and of course she had no right to have the book at all, but there was no need to suspect her or Yvonne of underhand plotting.

So Retta argued the matter out, and took most of the blame to herself. But at this point she dropped her work, put her elbows on the sill and her head down on her hands, and faced a new problem, and one from which there was no way of escape.

Giulia had not owned up. When she found what trouble the loan of the book had caused, surely mere honesty should have prompted her to say it was hers. She had left it to be supposed that Retta had bought the book and brought it into the house, and that no one else had seen it. Retta felt sick as she realised what it meant. She would not have believed that any girl could so desert a friend. That Giulia should be the one to fail so hurt her beyond words.

Madame's first question had of course demanded an answer from Giulia as well as from herself. Giulia and some others had read the book. 'We have just finished it,' she had said. But none of them had spoken. That was ugly enough, for Giulia could not pretend a second time that she had not heard the question. It was the incident of the tea-party over again. Had Giulia heard that time also? Retta's heart sank as she thought of it.

But bad as was her silence in answer to the question, it was still more terrible that she should allow another girl, and a younger girl, to take the blame alone. Once more Retta saw clearly that though she was to blame herself, Giulia was still more so. For Giulia had been longer at school, and must have known that the book, or any such book, was forbidden. Yet she had passed it on without a word of warning, and then had failed to take her share of the blame.

Retta was heavy-eyed and worn out when she turned at last from her dusters to her poem. This time she kept at it till she had learned it, for now she did not want to think. She had come to the end of the matter, and to the end of her friendship with Giulia.

CHAPTER XV
GIULIA'S 'BUT——'

'Una!' said Retta gravely, as they walked to the English church next morning. 'When, in Finhaut, you said to me, "Giulia can be very fascinating, but——" and then wouldn't tell me the rest, what did you mean?'

Una looked at her quickly. 'Don't you know? Haven't you found out yet?'

'Were you going to say, "But she isn't straight—isn't honest"?'

'Yes,' said Una grimly, 'I was!'

'I wish you'd said it.'

'How could I, Retta? It seemed so sneaky.'

'I know. But I haven't enjoyed finding it out for myself.'

'I'm sorry, for I believe she's got you into trouble more than once, though you won't admit it. But it didn't seem fair, Retta.'

'I don't mind getting into trouble. It isn't that; though Madame has a very bad opinion of me, I believe! But I liked Giulia. I liked her very much, Una. And it isn't nice to have to quarrel with her.'

'Was she to blame about that book yesterday? Oh, well, never mind, I won't ask! But she is a downright mean, shabby creature, that's what I think!'

'We won't talk about her. But I wanted to know if that was what you had meant.'

'Yes! I never yet heard Giulia own up to anything; but she isn't as perfect as all that, you know.'

'No,' said Retta, with a slight laugh. 'Neither is Yvonne. Are all Italian and French girls dishonest and cowardly?'

'No,' said Una quickly. 'That's not fair, Retta. You happen to have got with a horrid lot, that's all,' and Retta thought of her aunt's warning and flushed. 'Some of them are as nice as they can be. Look at Bianca! She's as honest and straightforward as anybody, and awfully kind and good-natured, too. You know how Madame trusts her!'

Retta nodded. 'Yes, she's all right, and so are some of the others, I suppose. Perhaps they aren't all Giulias!'

'I hope not!'

'Now tell me about the play?'

'Did you have a miserable afternoon all alone?'

'Yes; but not because I was alone. I would have been miserable if I had gone to the play,' Retta said quietly, and Una, glancing at her quickly, understood.

So far Retta had not met Giulia since the morning when Madame asked her questions, for she had spent the evening in her room, with only a brief visit to Madame's study to break its monotony. She had repeated her poem and shown her finished needlework, had received another lecture and another caution for the future, and had been sent upstairs again for the rest of the evening. In the morning she had purposely avoided a meeting with Giulia till she had had her talk with Una.

But it could not be postponed for ever, and in the afternoon Giulia came up to her as she sat writing her weekly letter to Malcolm.

'See, my dear, what I have brought you from Montreux! I have had hard work not to begin upon them myself, and Yvonne and Suzanne are begging for a taste,' and she opened a box of preserved fruits.

For the sake of their former friendship, Retta was anxious to break with her as pleasantly as possible. The break was inevitable, but she told herself that there was no need to quarrel over it. But she must make it plain that they could no longer be friends.

'I can't take them, Giulia. Thank you very much, but it's quite impossible.'

'Oh? And why?' and Giulia looked down at her with raised brows.

Retta gave her a quick, troubled look.

'Because I can't go on being friends with you. I'm sorry if you're angry, but——'

'Angry!' Giulia's scornful laugh had more than a touch of anger in it, in spite of her quick denial. 'My dear child, why should I be angry? I have plenty of friends. You surely do not suppose I am pining for your friendship in particular? I have offered you mine, and, to be sure, you have seemed glad enough to take advantage of it until now. I shall not cry my eyes out if you choose to sulk, be very sure of that.'

Retta sat looking down at her letter, her lips pressed tight. It was true, of course. They did not want her particularly. They had taken her into their midst when she was a stranger and might have been lonely. It was her own fault if she could not be satisfied with their companionship. On the other hand, she knew now that her standard of right and wrong, of honesty, was not theirs, and that she must not remain on friendly terms with girls who looked at such vital matters in such a very different way.

'If we are no longer good enough for you, we shall have much pleasure in leaving you to yourself, my dear Henriette. At the same time, let me tell you I consider you are making a ridiculous fuss about nothing.'

'It isn't nothing! How can you say it?' and Retta's wrath blazed out. 'You said nothing when Madame asked about books. That was telling a lie. It was equal to it, anyway,' as Giulia gave a scornful laugh. 'And when she blamed me you said nothing, and let her think it was my book. That was mean and cowardly, and what any English schoolgirl would be ashamed to do. I could never be friends with a girl who did that.'

There was an ugly gleam in Giulia's eyes as she listened. But it died away quickly, and she said, quietly and almost pleasantly,—

'But, my dear Henriette, you have not considered the matter. I had not only myself to think of, or of course I would have spoken. That would have brought all the class into disgrace, and they would have lost their pleasure, and that would not have been just. You said so yourself. Madame listened to your excuses, because you are a stranger, but she would not have listened to me. Moreover, we are the eldest girls, and Madame would have been ashamed if she had only been able to take little girls to the play!'—an argument which made Retta look up in blank astonishment. Did Giulia really want her to believe she had kept silence for the sake of Madame's feelings?

Giulia felt that her argument was weak, and hurried on. 'Do you not see that for the sake of the others in the class I could not speak? And you had no right to, either. You should have thought of them before yourself. You are terribly selfish with your goodness, you and Una. You care for nobody, so long as you are satisfied with yourselves. You should try sometimes to put the feelings of other people first, my dear! You will find that Jeanne and Elise and Babette and the others in your class think you very unkind not to have considered them, and very silly to make such a fuss about such a very little thing.'

Retta, bewildered, could scarcely find words for all she wanted to say.

'It's not a little thing!' she panted. 'But it's because you consider it a little thing that we can't go on being friends. And all that about thinking of the others is just *rubbish*! I know that much!'

'As you will, my child,' and Giulia turned away. 'Shall I then give these to Yvonne and Suzanne?'

'Yes!' said Retta curtly, and Giulia laughed and went off to tell the story to her friends. Retta heard their laughter, and her anger flamed up again.

'I wish I'd thrown her hateful sweets into the lake!' she murmured fiercely, then plunged into her letter and told the whole story to Malcolm, but without mentioning names. It was a relief to tell some one, and she was sure of his sympathy. He always answered her letters by return of post, and sometimes followed them with a second when he had had time to think over her news. Whatever she told, he seemed able to understand, and to enter into her troubles and problems in a way that showed he had not yet forgotten his own school life. She could write to him far more freely than to her aunt.

'I don't like that "other girl" you've been so friendly with, who played you such a shabby trick,' he wrote next day. 'She must be a regular rotter. Don't have any more to do with her, Harry, old chap! You said you'd just had a regular scrap when you wrote, so I hope that's the end of her so far as you're concerned. But she won't forgive you in a hurry, so keep your eye on her, for she'll do you a bad turn if she can. She may pretend she doesn't care, but she'll care right enough, and she'll pay you out if she gets the chance. Is it that Giulia you've always been writing about? For if so, I guess she's used to being made a fuss of, and she'll bear a grudge against you for throwing her over. She likes to boss, and she'll either try to get you under her thumb again or to get back at you somehow. Or is it Yvonne, the one with the temper? Keep out of the way of those two, Harry, old chap, or you'll find yourself in a worse hole yet.'

'It's true, and he does understand,' Retta said to herself, as she folded the letter. 'Oh, he needn't worry! I'll keep out of their way, right enough. There'll be no difficulty about that now!'

She had apparently given dire offence to Giulia and her friends by her plain speaking, and they were leaving her severely to herself. Her class-mates looked on her as a source of danger in their midst, since she seemed quite unable to hold her tongue when prudence demanded it, so she was left much to the society of Una and Bianca, and on the picnic trip across the lake to St Gingolph was in their company most of the time. But Una was taking a music exam. in a month, and had to put in extra practising, and during school hours Retta could not be much with her. She tried hard to be content alone, and not to feel shut out when Giulia and her satellites gathered in a group and talked and laughed together. But it was hard, and she often found herself looking back regretfully to the days when she had been one of them.

There was more cause for Malcolm's warning than he knew. Retta's hot words —'mean'—'cowardly'—'I could never be friends with a girl who did that!'—had gone home. Giulia hated her for them all the more because she knew they were true. Perhaps her hatred was the deadlier because it was hidden. She left Retta to herself for quite two weeks, and was apparently unaware of her existence. But she confided in Yvonne, and Yvonne, rejoicing in the quarrel, gave her much advice, and talked to her against Retta at every opportunity.

When Retta's birthday came, a few days later, Giulia had a chance to show her feelings, and seized it. Retta's gifts were many; a big box of sweets and fancy chocolates and a huge birthday cake came from her aunt, another of fruit and beautiful flowers from Malcolm, while from Japan came a fascinating collection of curios and a complete costume for a Japanese lady. Una, Bianca, and Pamela, who were helping her to unpack, cried out in delight, and Retta donned the kimono at once.

'Will somebody do my hair for me? Una, ask Annette for a big dish for the cake. We'll have it after dinner to-night.'

Bianca came to help, and between them Retta was transformed into a very dainty Japanese lady. When the dinner bell rang, she sailed into the dining-room bearing aloft the great cake on its big dish, and was greeted with delighted applause. She had sent Pamela to lay a flower

and handful of sweets on the mat outside each girl's door, and all had taken the hint and were wearing the flowers when Retta's appearance with the birthday cake explained the mystery. Only Giulia and her friends did not look overjoyed when they discovered whose flowers they were wearing, but Retta refused to leave any one out, and had treated all alike.

When Giulia understood, she unpinned her chrysanthemum and laid it on the table, and Yvonne, after a moment's hesitation, did the same. Retta saw, and flushed, then laughed scornfully and pointed out to Una what they had done.

'Spiteful babies!' she said.

'Giulia's a cat, and Yvonne's a silly sheep,' Una said wrathfully.

CHAPTER XVI
GIULIA GOES TOO FAR

In speaking of the days that followed, Retta would never allow Giulia to be blamed in her hearing. She had acted with her eyes open; she was so very much to blame herself that there was no need to drag Giulia into the matter at all. Giulia had certainly led her into the scrape, but not without giving her warning, and she had gone willingly. She had hardly realised the enormity of her offence, to be sure, but she had known very well that she was doing wrong. So why blame Giulia, even though the invitation came from her? Even when she understood the matter fully, she held honestly to her view of her own guilt.

'Giulia was hateful, of course, but I was awfully silly—as soft as I could be,' was her verdict. 'I'd said I'd have no more to do with them. I knew if we were found out not one of them would own up, and yet I couldn't bear to be left out. I just played into their hands, like a soft, silly thing. What's the good of blaming Giulia?'

She was very dull during the days that followed. Una was working hard, so Retta tried to console herself with Pamela, who had formed a close friendship with Elsa and Margot. The little ones welcomed an elder girl as their friend, but Retta found them much less exciting than Giulia and her set. Giulia had foreseen it, and knew when to strike.

Retta was sitting in the arbour one evening, watching the sun set over the far-away Geneva end of the lake, when Giulia and Yvonne came strolling round the garden arm in arm, and paused to lean over the stone parapet. Retta could not help hearing every word they said; afterwards she knew that she had been meant to hear.

'Shall we ask any one else?' asked Yvonne.

'I think not. There was a time,' said Giulia slowly, 'when I'd have thought *la petite Anglaise* would do. I thought she had some spirit in her. But she has not the courage of a fly. What do you think?'

'She would be afraid!' Yvonne said emphatically. 'She has tamed down into such a quiet little thing. Oh, you could never ask her, Giulia!'

'It is a pity, for she would have found it interesting. It is something she could never see in England, I have been told. But she is a sheep, just like Suzanne or Clotilde or Pauline. They would all be afraid, and so I think would Henriette.'

'What would I be afraid to do?' and Retta came indignantly to the door of the arbour, forgetting that they had not spoken to her for a fortnight. 'You've no right to say I'd be afraid till you've asked me. I ought not to have listened,' she added honestly, 'but I was here first, you know.'

Giulia and Yvonne did not seem to resent having been overheard, however. They too seemed to have forgotten the quarrel.

'We were talking of an adventure we are planning,' Giulia said amiably. 'Would you like to hear about it? It is a secret, but we might perhaps tell *you*,' and before Retta quite realised it she was sitting with them in the arbour, being taken into their confidence as if the quarrel had never been.

'I don't think Henriette will care about it,' Yvonne objected. 'I am sure she would be afraid, Giulia. Do you think it wise to tell her?'

'You might as well give me a chance before you decide so positively that I'll be afraid,' Retta said indignantly. 'I'm not usually afraid of things. I've joined in a good many, and never —what's the French for "funked"?—never been afraid of one yet. Won't you let me join in this, Giulia? You'll find I'm not afraid!'

'I'd be very pleased to have you, and I am sure you would enjoy it. We'll tell you about it, anyway, for we all know you would never betray us, even if you did not care to join.'

Retta nodded impatiently. 'Of course! But what are you going to do?'

'Madame has gone away for ten days, as you know,' Giulia said eagerly. 'Now, Retta, up at a village not two miles away there is a fête held sometimes on Sunday nights, and this next Sunday is one.'

'On Sundays?'

'It seems strange to your English ideas, no doubt, but it is very usual here. One of the maids, Annette, comes from the village, and she told me about it. I have seen it once, and found it very interesting. It is a real country festival, and the people come from the villages all round. There is music, and much to see and hear. Yvonne and I mean to go on Sunday night after it is dark, and see the fun.'

Retta looked at her with startled eyes. 'Go? But how will you get out?'

'Annette will let us out. Madame will be away, and if Mademoiselle should discover our absence—well, you know how easy it is to keep her quiet.'

Retta knew very well. She had more than once seen Mademoiselle coaxed and wheedled into silence when she ought to have reported some misdemeanour to Madame.

'How long will it take?' she asked thoughtfully.

'Not very long. We would not stay long. But I want to see the fun.'

Retta felt a strong inclination to 'see the fun' herself. She was by nature inclined to join in anything which was going on, and dearly loved an adventure, and this sounded interesting.

'I suppose Mademoiselle will ask, in Madame's place if we have left our rooms at night, but she is not likely to ask if we have left the house or been to fêtes,' she mused.

'Exactly! You can say you have been out of your room, if nothing else will satisfy you. She will never guess how far you have been.'

It was an unworthy quibble, of course. It was deceiving Madame, and Retta knew it. But she argued that if she answered the questions asked, that was all that was required of her. Nevertheless, she felt sufficiently uneasy to hesitate, and Yvonne laughed.

'I knew it! These English girls are no good.'

'Of course, if you are afraid, we will go without you,' Giulia said quickly.

Retta's cheeks flamed. 'I'm not afraid, not a scrap, and I'd like to see the fête. I don't see what harm can come of it.'

'Nor I. Very likely if Madame was at home she would take us herself. You ought to see it, as you are a stranger to the country,' and this time Retta did not dispose of the specious arguments as rubbish. 'Well, what do you think? Will you come with us to-morrow night?'

Retta nodded. Yvonne's laugh and Giulia's hint had won the day. They must not think her wanting in spirit or pluck. They should see she was as willing to take risks as themselves.

'How do we manage it?' she asked, and Giulia bent to give her instructions, a gleam of satisfaction in her black eyes.

As soon as lights were out next evening and Mademoiselle had made her nightly round, Retta slipped out of bed, fully dressed, and put on her long, dark mackintosh and a cap. Then, shoes in hand, she crept out, leaving Louise, Francesca, and Pamela quietly in bed.

When she had gone, Francesca sat up and called quietly across the room.

'Pamela! Listen! Some of the seniors are going out for a bit of fun, and you and I are to be allowed to join. Would you like to go?'

'Going *out*?' gasped Pamela, sitting up in astonishment, while Louise lay and watched them. She knew all about the proposed excursion, but had no wish to take part in it. It was far too risky for her.

‘Yes. It is all arranged, and there will be no difficulty. Nobody will know. Your friend Retta Garnet is going. Wouldn’t you like to go with her?’

‘I don’t know,’ and Pamela shivered between fear and excitement.

‘If you’re coming you must be quick. See, she has gone already. I waited till she had gone, for fear she did not know I was going, and might try to stop me. I heard her say she would like to take you, but she thought you might be frightened.’

Pamela slipped out of bed and began to scramble into her clothes.

‘If she’s going it must be all right. I’ll go anywhere with her. She oughtn’t to have said I’d be frightened. I went up the tree-slide with her,’ she said, trembling with nervousness, however. ‘Isn’t Louise coming?’

Louise shook her head and turned her back upon them. She would keep on the safe side and not even need to confess to having spoken. If anything was discovered, she would be in a sufficiently awkward position in being an inmate of this guilty bedroom.

Pamela, keenly excited over this strange adventure, crept out carrying her shoes and following Francesca. Nothing like this had as yet come within her experience, but whatever Retta did must be right. And right or wrong, Retta had said she wanted her company, and that was enough for Pam. Right or wrong, she must go.

Retta had found Giulia and Yvonne not ready, so had had to wait. And when presently they led her out to the gate, and Annette, nodding and smiling, opened it for them, they still had to wait for Francesca.

‘She will come in a moment,’ Giulia whispered. ‘Hide here in the shadow. We will bring you a present from the fair, Annette, and we won’t forget your message. You’re a dear! Ah! here come the little ones!’

‘*Pam!*’ cried Retta, in blank amazement, too much astounded to ask what the reference to a message meant. ‘What *are* you doing here, kiddy? Oh, Pam, how could you?’

Pamela looked up at her with great startled eyes. ‘You said you wanted me,’ she faltered. ‘But you thought I’d be frightened.’

‘I never said so! Who said I did? Oh, what a shame! I’d never have dragged you into this! Who said it?’ Retta demanded wrathfully.

‘Francesca told me——’

‘Giulia said she thought she’d heard you say——’ began Francesca defiantly.

‘Come along! We mustn’t lose a minute. Why are you all standing there?’ and Giulia came bustling up. ‘Here’s the tram. It’s just a little way, but it will save us the walk, and the streets are so crowded on Sunday nights.’

Retta in her anger at the trick played on Pamela would have given up the expedition and turned back with her, if she had not been so eager to see the fête. But she would have been keenly disappointed to give it up now, and moreover, if she turned back at the last moment the others would certainly think her fears had conquered her. She could not endure that, so she reserved her protest and swallowed her wrath for the time. She followed the others into the tram, and in the crowd of holiday-makers which filled it she could not talk even to Pamela. She kept close to her, determined at least to see that she came to no harm. And Pamela should not be blamed for this escapade, of that she was resolved. As for Francesca, she should hear Retta’s opinion of her later. Pamela, frightened and dismayed to find that she had been deceived, kept as close to Retta as she could, clinging to her hand, watching everything with wide eyes, but speaking to no one.

When they left the tram, a long walk led them through dark country lanes and past one or two small villages. Then, when Retta was beginning to wonder where the fête was to be held, and to suspect that Pamela was growing tired, they turned a corner and came on a most surprising scene for a quiet Sunday night.

In an open space there was a surging crowd of country folk; covered stalls lit by lamps and candles, where sweets and cakes and toys were for sale; long wooden sheds with benches and tables; forms and trestle tables out in the open. A band in one of the sheds was playing a waltz, and on a wooden flooring railed in by fences men and girls were dancing, swinging round and round in couples. There were flaring lights everywhere, shouts and laughter mingled with the music and with the cries of stall-keepers and vendors of drinks and ice-cream. Men and women, boys and girls, sat at the tables drinking beer, eating cakes and gingerbread, and singing when the band stopped playing. It was a strange, weird scene to come upon suddenly, under a starlit sky, at the end of a quiet country lane.

Pamela clung to Retta, and stared with wide, round eyes. Retta felt bewildered at first, and could only stand and gaze, but presently she grew used to the noise and wildly flaring lights, and began to wander round and look at the curiosities on the booths—gingerbread men and animals, boxes of chocolate, sugar figures, cakes, and biscuits. They both shrank from the beer-drinkers at the tables, not knowing how very harmless the drink was, but leaned on the barrier and watched the dancing with much interest.

Everybody seemed ready to dance—boys with boys, girls with girls, small children together, if need be. A hat was passed round after each dance on behalf of the band, and all the dancers dropped in a coin. In another place two men in tights were wrestling and tumbling, and passing round a hat after their performance also.

The crowd was composed almost entirely of villagers, but once the girls passed a group of visitors watching the scene with amused interest, evidently English or Americans. A sudden thought made Retta murmur,—

'I hope none of those ladies will recognise us! They may be from Montreux, but they might just as well be from Vevey, and they might have seen us out for walks. I believe that one in the funny hat is watching us suspiciously. But surely she couldn't be such a rotter as to sneak!'

'To tell Madame, you mean?' and Pamela shivered.

'Yes; but don't worry, Pam. You'll be all right. I'll see to that. It's not your fault you're here. But let's get away where she can't see us. I don't like to feel her eyes on me all the time; though I dare say I'm only imagining it, after all.'

They lost themselves in the crowd, out of reach of the lady's curious stare, and looked anxiously for Giulia and Yvonne. But they, with Francesca, had slipped away among the crowd also, and it was not easy to find them in the dark.

Retta, with her arms round Pamela, wandered back to the barrier and stood watching the dancing once more. Then a cry of incredulous dismay broke from them both as the whirling couples passed round, for Giulia swung past them on the arm of a big red-bearded Swiss. Her mackintosh was thrown aside, and she wore her Sunday dress of white serge, and, with no hat and her black hair rolled over her ears, looked almost grown-up. Her eyes were blazing, her face alight with enjoyment, and she danced gracefully and made a pretty picture which won applause from the onlookers.

Retta, breathless and angry, for she felt that this was going too far, looked for Yvonne and Francesca. They appeared in a moment, dancing together, which gave her some relief. Then the music stopped, the crowd broke up, and began to stream towards the refreshment sheds for beer and cakes, and the dancers came laughing out of the ring.

Retta, dragging Pamela after her, pushed her way through the crowd and caught Giulia by the arm.

'I am going home!' she panted. 'You had better come, too. Oh, how could you do it, Giulia?'

Giulia, with a laugh, dropped her companion's arm and dismissed him with a little bow.

‘My dear child, what’s the harm? We only went round once or twice.’

‘With a man you don’t know! I think it’s simply hateful!’

‘Oh, *la, la*! What a fuss about a little thing! And I do know him, my dear. You do not understand. He is Annette’s young man, and she gave me a letter for him asking him to look after us, and told me where to find him. So it is all right, you see. He is quite respectable, and all that.’

‘I think it’s simply horrid!’ Retta insisted. ‘You don’t know him, and anyway, a man like that! I don’t know how you could! Madame would certainly expel you if she knew.’

‘Oh, Madame! I dare say she would. But Madame is old-fashioned and dull.’

‘She’s a lady, anyhow!’

‘And I am not?’ demanded Giulia angrily.

‘Not when you dance in a place like this, and with men like that,’ Retta said fearlessly. ‘You never told me you intended anything like that, or I would never have come. You said we would only look on. Pamela and I have had enough, and we are going home. Are you coming?’

‘You can’t, if we don’t. You’ll lose your way.’

‘I could find it. Any one would tell us the way to Vevey.’

‘Oh, well, I’ll come,’ said Giulia, feeling that she had perhaps gone too far. ‘I’ll get my coat and cap,’ and she turned to Yvonne.

‘Henriette wants to go home to bed. She is soon tired, is she not? But we must not let her go alone.’

‘I said it was a mistake to bring her,’ Yvonne said scornfully, as she helped Giulia into her coat.

Retta said nothing, but followed them down the dark lane in silence. But presently Giulia turned to wait for her, feeling that her conduct required some excuse.

‘I did not mean to dance, Retta, my dear. I had no thought of it when we set out. But I cannot resist a waltz. I have always loved dancing. And when he was so polite, and said they would all esteem it an honour if Mademoiselle would join, how could I help it? I forgot what I was doing. I had no thought of Madame, nor of you, nor anything. It was the music, I suppose.’

‘I don’t know how you could!’ Retta said coldly, and said not another word as they tramped homewards, were admitted by Annette, and crept up to their rooms, undiscovered, but not by any means satisfied with their evening’s adventure.

CHAPTER XVII
EXPELLED

The more Retta thought over their visit to the fête, the more unhappy did she become. She was annoyed with herself for having been persuaded so easily into Giulia's company again. She was more than sorry to have taken Pamela into such a place.

It had all seemed to her much less innocent than it really was. The beer and wine were of the least harmful possible, the dancing purely light-hearted, with many children taking part, the whole a regular entertainment for Sunday evenings, much patronised by the villagers. But it had not seemed harmless to Retta, and the fact that it had been held on Sunday made it still more horrible to her. She knew how Madame would view their presence in such a place, and how her aunt and Madame Gay would object to their going there unprotected. Even to look on would be a heinous offence. To take part would never have entered her head. The sight of Giulia dancing had given her a shock which she could not forget.

Mademoiselle, as Madame's deputy, duly inquired if any girls had broken rules, and Retta and Pamela duly confessed to having left their bedroom one night, were reprimanded, and lost their Saturday shopping. Then the incident was supposed to be over, but Retta was by no means easy in her mind. She had done all that was asked of her, she had given a truthful answer to the questions put, and she argued as Giulia did that if those questions did not go far enough that was not her affair. If Mademoiselle wished to know if any girls had left the house at night, she should put the question in that form.

But Retta was uneasy, all the same. She knew very well that Mademoiselle had never dreamt of any girl doing such an unheard-of thing. How could she possibly ask such a question? Retta felt that they were deceiving her, and through her Madame, and was restless and unhappy in consequence.

She hoped that her uneasiness would wear off, and that she would be able to forget. But the thought weighed upon her more heavily as the days passed and there seemed no possibility of their escapade being discovered. When Madame on her return complimented the girls on their orderly behaviour during her absence, as reported by Mademoiselle, Retta sat with downcast eyes looking so palpably miserable and guilty that Giulia longed to shake her, and Yvonne laughed scornfully. But they did not remonstrate with her afterwards, for their sudden intimacy had broken down as completely as before. Giulia resented Retta's criticism of her conduct as unladylike; Retta wanted to have no more to do with Giulia. Yvonne fostered the division between them, so once more they were not on speaking terms.

Then on the day after Madame's return the crisis came, and it was almost a relief to Retta, although at the time it seemed the end of all things; at least, it put an end to her distress.

After midday lunch, Madame unexpectedly summoned the whole school into the hall, her kindly face clouded in great distress. The girls assembled in surprise, asking one another what it meant. Only five had any idea, and they did not think their guess could be right. How could Madame possibly have heard? Who could have betrayed them? For a moment Giulia wondered if Retta's troublesome conscience could have prompted her to so crazy a deed as an unnecessary confession, but a glance told her it was not so. Retta looked uneasy and unhappy, as she had done ever since the fête, but she was plainly as much puzzled as anybody.

'Girls!' and Madame surveyed them with eyes full of pain, 'which of you has deceived me? One of you has kept something from me. Who is it?'

There was an amazed silence. Giulia looked round as if searching for the culprit. Retta's head drooped and her heart beat wildly as she waited for more. Pamela, sitting with her own

class on the other side of the room, looked round for her in terrified dismay.

Madame's eyes sought Retta also, for she had reason to think she knew the culprit. She hoped keenly to find herself mistaken, for if Retta with her bad record was in fault this time, Madame felt there would only be one course open to her. She dreaded it, and would have been glad to find the guilty girl in any other quarter. At sight of Retta's shamefaced attitude her heart sank. She went on gravely,—

'This morning I received a note from an American lady staying at the hotel just across the road,' and then Retta and Pamela knew. Pamela's heart turned cold, and she wondered wildly what would happen. Retta nerved herself for the ordeal, and wondered what would be the end of it. Was it possible Giulia and Yvonne would allow her to take all the blame in a case like this?

'This lady tells me that on Sunday evening a week ago she visited a fête in one of the villages, and that among the crowd she recognised some girls who, she feels sure, belong to my school. She thinks there were two. I cannot believe that any girls in my care would go alone to such a place at night. I have told the lady I think she must be mistaken, but she has seen you leave the house for walks, and says she is sure she has made no mistake.'

She did not add that the lady had described one of the girls she had seen: 'A child about fifteen, with a quantity of very fair hair, hanging loose; very pretty hair. I have often noticed her. She looks like an English girl. Of course, I hope you won't be too hard on her, Madame, but I do think you ought to know.'

'I cannot think how any girl could so deceive Mademoiselle and me, nor how she could manage to get out at such a time. But the American lady was quite sure, so I must ask you—was any girl at this fête on Sunday night?'

Amid breathless silence Retta stumbled to her feet.

'I was there, Madame,' she said.

'*Encore l'Anglaise! Toujours* Henriette!' murmured the girls, in excited surprise. 'But how could she get out?'

'You again, Henriette?' and Madame looked very grave. 'My dear, I have had trouble with you ever since you came to school. I did not look for this from you. Were you alone?'

Retta said nothing. Giulia frowned angrily.

'Why can the little silly not say yes? She has no right to drag us into this with her. If she had said nothing Madame would have been satisfied that the interfering American was mistaken,' she muttered indignantly.

Then Pamela, trembling all over, rose in her seat.

'I was with Retta, Madame,' she said, and Retta looked up, relief in her eyes. She did not want Pamela mixed up in the matter at all, but it would have hurt her if she had not had the courage to confess.

'She was not to blame, Madame. I took her with me. She would not have gone but for me.'

That Madame could well believe. Her face had filled with astonishment at sight of Pamela. She was the last girl Madame would have suspected of such an escapade.

'I am glad you are honest about it, anyway. You may sit down, Pamela. I will speak to you afterwards. Henriette, my dear, what made you do this thing?'

'I wished to see the fête, Madame.'

'Where did you hear of it?'

'I heard some one talk about it. They said it was interesting, and I thought I would like to see it.'

'And who let you out?'

'I couldn't tell you, Madame.'

'But, my dear, I must know! I cannot have some one in the house who is not to be trusted.'

Retta shook her head and looked stubborn. Madame eyed her gravely.

'Never mind! I shall find out without difficulty,' and Giulia grew impatient to get away. She must warn Annette, and persuade her to say that only two girls had gone out that night. With the help of a little wise bribery that would easily be arranged. Annette had known she was taking risks at the time. She would have no difficulty in getting another place, and a sufficiently handsome present would buy her silence.

Madame, with a heavy heart, dismissed the girls and bade Retta and Pamela follow her. The others went off, eagerly discussing the matter, surprised that the English girls should have ventured on so risky an excursion, surprised also that Pamela had not been afraid to join in it, and wondering what her punishment would be, and whether Retta would be expelled. Madame had threatened it, they knew. The few in the secret kept their own counsel, and Louise greeted Francesca in almost the same words as Clotilde and Suzanne were greeting Giulia and Yvonne.

'You may think yourself fortunate to escape so easily! We told you it was risky. Fancy that American recognising you! Did you see her?'

'No. But fancy her betraying us to Madame! Who would have thought any one could do such a dirty trick!'

'Henriette would say that comes badly from you, Yvonne,' said Clotilde. 'She no doubt feels you have played quite as ugly a trick on her.'

'Bah! She is a silly child. She need not have spoken,' Giulia said angrily. 'Madame will ask her more questions. I do not feel that we are safe yet. I hope she will be careful what she says.'

In Madame's study Retta and Pamela were undergoing a severe cross-examination. But Madame could draw no more from them than she had already learned. They had heard 'the girls' talking of the fête; they would not mention names. They had been curious to see it, having never seen anything of the kind. They had slipped out at night and had found the way without difficulty. They had not stayed long. No one had spoken to them or molested them in any way.

Madame sighed. As for the accomplice among the maids, of whose existence she felt sure, she would soon discover and deal with her. The question of how to deal with the culprits was more serious.

'And why did you deceive us all in the matter?' she asked sternly. 'Why did you not confess your fault to Mademoiselle?'

'We did, Madame. We told her we had left our rooms at night, and she kept us in on Saturday.'

'Left your rooms! Was that all you said? And you had been two miles from home?'

Retta's eyes fell. 'That was all she asked.'

'My dear, my dear! How could she dream of asking if you had left the house? I thought you prided yourself on being so honest, Henriette? Do you consider that was honest?'

'No,' said Retta miserably. 'No, I knew it wasn't. It's worried me ever since, Madame.'

'I am glad to hear it. It might well trouble you. Well, my dear, you know what I must do?'

Retta turned white as she looked up quickly.

'You won't expel Pamela? Her mother would be so upset. Indeed, Madame, it was all my fault. Pamela would not have gone but for me. She thought I wanted her to go with me, and—and I did not send her home again. I tried to take care of her. You won't send her away?'

'But I do not want to stay, Retta, if—if you——'

'But your mother wants you to, Pam. She is in England, you know. Think how bad she would feel! Oh, Madame——'

‘I shall not send Pamela away,’ said Madame gravely, ‘because I do not for a moment believe she would have done this thing alone. She is much to blame for being led away by you, and I am deeply grieved that she had not the courage and good sense to refuse to go with you, but——’

‘I’d go anywhere with Retta!’ Pamela said defiantly.

‘That is precisely what I fear, my dear, and that is partly why I intend to write to Miss Garnet and tell her I must send Henriette home at once,’ and Retta quivered. She had never expected to be expelled from school. But for the last hour she had known what was coming, and that though she might possibly save Pamela she could not save herself. ‘It may seem that I am severe,’ Madame continued gravely, ‘but I have had constant trouble with you, Henriette, and you cannot plead that you did not know this was wrong.’

She paused, and Retta shook her head hopelessly.

‘I knew, Madame. But I wanted to go.’

‘You have great influence over Pamela, and I fear for the result if you and she are allowed to be together. You have led her into serious trouble this time, and you would do so again. It is evident she will copy you so long as you are before her as an example. For her sake, and for the sake of the rest of the girls, I must send you away. It grieves me more than I can say, but you must see that I cannot permit such an influence as yours in the school.’

Retta quivered again. She had not realised that she might be looked upon as an evil influence, and the thought stung her like a blow. If only Madame had known the influences which had brought her to this position, and which would still be at work in the school! But it did not occur to Retta to speak out, and she would not have acted upon the thought if it had entered her mind. In theory she might have agreed that Madame ought to know, but in practice she could never have been the one to enlighten her.

‘When shall I go?’ she asked drearily, and Pamela ran to her with a sob and clung to her. Retta’s arm went round her mechanically, but she looked at Madame.

‘I must write to your aunt,’ Madame said heavily. ‘I will send some one with you to Martigny, and no doubt she can arrange to meet you there, or to send some one, in her place. But that could hardly be arranged before the day after to-morrow. She will only receive my letter to-morrow morning.’

‘She could send some one at once, or I could go alone from Martigny,’ Retta said eagerly. ‘There’s no difficulty once I’m in the Châtelard train; nothing to do but sit still.’

But Madame would not hear of her travelling unattended.

‘I will ask Miss Garnet to telegraph. If she can meet you to-morrow evening I will send you by the afternoon train. It is better, no doubt, that you should go as soon as possible, but I am sorry you are so eager to leave us, my dear.’

‘Oh, what’s the good of waiting?’ Retta’s voice broke. ‘You won’t want me to see the girls, I suppose. What good can I do here?’

‘I see no use in separating you from them, especially as it may be for a day or two,’ Madame said gravely. ‘You had better go to your room now, and write a note to your aunt, which can go inside my letter. You will leave it open, of course. But you may join the other girls after work is over and for dinner.’

‘I don’t know that I want to,’ said Retta, thinking of Giulia and Yvonne. ‘Of course, there are Una and Bianca. I’d like to see them again. I don’t care about any of the others.’

‘My dear! I am sorry to hear you say that. I thought Giulia was your friend?’

‘She was once. But we don’t agree on many points,’ Retta said tersely.

‘Was Una concerned in this matter at all? Was she aware of it beforehand? I wonder she did not go with you.’

‘I didn’t tell her about it, Madame. She didn’t know.’

Madame had seen Una's look of astonishment when she heard of the American lady's statement, and of incredulous dismay when Retta was found to be the culprit, so was satisfied that this was the truth. So she raised no objection to their meeting.

Retta went to her room, and sat down to write that difficult letter to her aunt, and Pamela went back to her classroom, with a long punishment lesson in German to learn, which would keep her busy for several evenings. Francesca and Marie, Elsa and Margot, questioned her eagerly as to what Madame had said and what Retta's fate was to be, but Pamela was dumb, and only shook her head, with quivering face which threatened tears if she were teased too far.

Retta's letter to Miss Garnet was very brief. Knowing that Madame would read it she could not say much. She told how sorry she was to give so much trouble, and begged to be allowed to go home as soon as possible. But she made no attempt to excuse herself, feeling her guilt too deeply for that. When she took the letter down to the study and laid it beside Madame on the desk, she stood hesitating.

'I don't think I've said how sorry I am, Madame,' and her voice broke. 'I did not know what to say. I could not think. I did not think I should ever be expelled from school. But I am sorry. I have been very silly and—and weak. I knew what I was doing, but I wanted to do it, and I could not resist it. I know that is no excuse, and you cannot keep me here if I do not keep the rules; but, indeed, I am sorry to have troubled you so much. And I never meant to lead Pamela into trouble. It was all a—mistake. She thought I wanted her to come, and I did not, but I did not send her back. But please do not look on her as a troublesome child, for she is not. Left alone she will be all right, but she cares more about me than about doing right or anything else, I am afraid.'

'In that case, Henriette, it is indeed best that you should not be with her too much until you can control yourself, and set her a good example.'

'Yes, I understand that. I do not think you will have more trouble with her when I am gone,' and Retta went gloomily up to her room and sat thinking it all over till the gong rang for classes to stop and she could go and look for Una.

'It's not the first time I've led Pam into trouble!' she said to herself at last. 'There was that day we went up the tree-slide at Finhaut; what an age ago it seems! She didn't want to go; she said from the first it wasn't a real path. But I would go, and she came to please me. This was just the same. She didn't like the whole affair a scrap, but she thought I wanted her, and that was enough. She's an awful little brick, and frightfully plucky! She won't funk a thing! But any one can see it's bad for her to be with me—until I get some sense, anyway! The sooner I go home the better,' and she stared unhappily out at the lake and mountains. 'If I wasn't such a rotter it would be all right; but as I am, I guess I'd better go as soon as I can, and leave Pam in peace!'

CHAPTER XVIII
LAST HOURS AT SCHOOL

'Retta! Oh, what did she say to you? Pamela won't tell us,' and Una caught her by the arm and led her out into the garden.

'I'm going home to-morrow or the next day,' Retta said quietly.

'Oh—Retta!' Una wailed. 'Oh, *no*!'

'Oh, yes! She said she would next time, you know.'

'But it isn't fair!' and Una started up, her eyes blazing. 'You weren't in this alone, I know. Oh, you haven't said so, of course!' as Retta looked up quickly. 'But I know, all the same. You'd never do such a thing alone. You'd never have thought of it. You'd never have been able to find your way. And I can guess who led you into it. I'm going to Madame!'

'Una, don't be silly!' and Retta caught her arm. 'That won't do any good. You'll only get me into worse trouble. I won't answer any more questions. If you put it into her head that there are more to ask, she'll go on at me again, and I shan't know how to satisfy her. I'm not going to tell, so it won't do any good.'

'But it isn't right, Retta! It's not fair it should all fall on you. Was it your own idea?'

Retta shook her head drearily. 'Don't tease me, Una. You wouldn't like me if I sneaked.'

'I wonder if sometimes it isn't right to sneak! I feel just furious over this,' Una said wrathfully. 'I know it's Giu——'

'Una!'

'Well, I'm sure of it. I shall tell Madame there's somebody.'

'You'll only make a mess of things, Una. You don't know anything, and I won't say anything, and yet you'll go and tell Madame there's something she doesn't know. What will be the good of it? It will only make her suspicious——'

'She ought to be suspicious! She ought to know!'

'But if we can't tell her, what's the use?' Retta asked wearily. 'And it's not only on account of this last affair that she's sending me away. It's everything altogether. She says I've a bad record, and I've been constantly in trouble, and I'm a bad influence in the school——'

'Somebody else is a much worse influence!'

'Yes!' said Retta, with sudden energy, 'and that's what you can do for me, Una! Keep an eye on Pamela! Don't let her get too friendly with Francesca! She doesn't care for her, so I think she'll be all right; but if you would watch for me, and try to take care of her I would be very grateful.'

Una nodded. 'I'll do it. But can't I do anything to help you yourself, Retta? I feel just sick about it all. I feel it's partly my fault, too, for sticking to that wretched theory and leaving you so much alone. I knew you had quarrelled with Giulia and might be lonely, and I might have been with you more if I'd thought of it. I suppose you were dull, and so you felt ready for the first thing any one proposed to you, but——'

'Yes, that was it. I was horribly dull. But it wasn't your fault. I was just awfully soft and silly, and when this was put into my head I hadn't the sense to say no. And—oh, well, I can't tell you, Una, but I don't believe you'd blame me very much if you knew how it happened. I let myself be talked round, you know. But don't say any more about it. I'll be rather glad to get home. I don't think I'd ever get on well here——'

'That's rot, and because you're feeling bad, that's all.'

'I do feel bad. I thought it over this afternoon. I've been soft and silly, and allowed other people to make me what I'm not really, so that Madame thinks badly of me and will be glad to

get rid of me. Aunty warned me before I came, but I took no notice. It makes you feel awfully small to know that as soon as you get with other girls you let yourself be drawn into all kinds of things, and made quite a different sort of creature! I never had any trouble at my last school —nothing serious, you know—but I suppose that was because I happened to get with a nice set. As soon as I get with some who aren't nice—I can't help it, Una, they aren't— —'

'Oh, I know they aren't! It's an awful pity you chummed up with Giulia and her lot, but I couldn't stop you, Retta.'

'That's Madame's own fault, of course, but I can't tell her so. She didn't know I was soft. I didn't know myself. I'd have laughed if you'd told me.'

'And she doesn't know Giulia, though she thinks she does. I think some one ought to tell her,' Una said indignantly.

'I wonder why Giulia took me up so at first! I've been thinking about it again. I can't help wondering,' Retta mused. 'I don't trust her, Una.'

'I should think not!'

'I did for a long time. I've been wondering if she could have had any reason.'

But no reason suggested itself, and Una could not help her. Giulia came up presently, and Una waited curiously to see what Retta would do. But Retta waited, with tightened lips and a queer look in her eyes, till Giulia was about to speak. Then she turned her back on her and stood leaning over the parapet.

Giulia stopped, astounded, and stared at her and then at Una. Una looked back at her quietly, defiantly. Then Giulia, with a short laugh, turned away and went to tell Yvonne, and Una said quietly,—

'That's the end of her, so far as you're concerned, Retta. I think perhaps you'd better leave, for she'll never forgive you, and she'd make trouble for you somehow.'

'Yes, and since I'm so soft she'd manage it. I'd play into her hands sooner or later, as I've done before.' Retta's self-esteem had received a severe shock, and she could not forgive herself for her want of backbone.

The other girls saw that something was amiss and that she did not want to speak to them. They were curious to know her fate, but neither she nor Una volunteered any information at first, both feeling too sore to speak of the matter. But presently Pamela ran up and threw herself into Retta's arms, and sobbed out her grief till Retta nearly broke down herself.

'They've all been asking me what she said, but I wouldn't tell them,' she faltered, and Retta looked up quickly.

'Don't they know? Oh, well, you might tell them for me, Una. Tell them I'm going home, perhaps to-morrow. I'm not afraid for them to know. You'll only have to tell one. It will soon get round.'

The news soon spread, and Bianca, Linda, and a few more came up during the evening to offer their sympathy. But Retta felt that in their eyes Madame was justified, and that they considered her very much to blame, not only for going out herself at night, but for taking Pamela. She was glad when they left her to Una and Pamela, and with these two she spent the evening. But it was an uncomfortable time, and she hoped more than ever that she would be able to go home on the following day. The rest of the girls gazed at her awkwardly from a distance, as one on whom an unheard-of calamity had fallen, but did not know how to show their sympathy. Neither Giulia nor any of her friends came near her, for the word had been passed round that Henriette had been rude to 'The Countess,' and was to be left severely to herself. As that happened to be what she wanted where they were concerned, she had no complaint to make.

But during the evening Una stole away and sought an interview with Madame.

‘Madame!’ she burst out, all the feelings she had repressed while in Retta’s presence flaming up. ‘I beg you not to send Retta away! It is not just. I am sure she was not alone in this business. She could never have found her way to that village alone. I am sure somebody suggested it to her and went with her.’

‘Una, my dear!’ and Madame looked up in distress, ‘I have no intention of being unjust to Henriette. If she was led into this wrongdoing by any one else I would not be so hard on her. But how is it possible? She mentioned no one else.’

‘But how could she, Madame? She will never tell tales. If you ask her now she will not say. She has not told even me anything, but I am sure it is so.’

Madame made a gesture of despair. ‘My dear Una! Then what can I do? If you can give me any reason to think you are right, I will send for Henriette and question her again. I have no wish to be unfair to her. But she never hinted that any one was with her but Pamela. The lady who saw her spoke only of two girls. Can you give me any reason for what you say, or is it only what you think, my dear?’

‘Only what I think, Madame—and that I know Retta,’ and Una’s voice broke. ‘I don’t believe this was her own idea. But—but if any one asked her to go she would not refuse.’

‘Then she would be much to blame,’ Madame said gravely. ‘But, Una, you forget that I asked the whole school who went with Henriette, and only Pamela replied. Surely that is answer enough to your suspicions! No girl who had been equally guilty, or more guilty, as you suggest, would keep silence and let her companion take all the blame.’

Una grew hot from head to foot. ‘You’ll think me a horrid little thing, Madame, but there are girls in the school who’d do it.’

Madame raised her eyebrows. ‘Kindly tell me to whom you refer?’ she asked coldly. ‘You must either give me the names or withdraw your insinuation against your schoolfellows, Una,’ and Una knew that she was seriously displeased, and that she had probably done more harm than good to Retta’s cause.

‘I can’t mention names, Madame. You know I can’t. But I’m sure it’s so.’

‘Then, my dear Una, I can only assure you that I know you to be mistaken. I shall take no notice whatever of your ridiculous and wicked statement. Your anxiety for your friend has led you too far. I am deeply grieved that you should harbour such suspicions of your companions. You may go.’

Una paused in the doorway. ‘There’s one thing you might do, Madame,’ she said recklessly. ‘When you find who let them out of the house you might ask how many went that night. I’m quite sure there were more than two.’

Then she fled, and Madame sat frowning, deeply grieved and angered. At last she sent for Annette, who had already been questioned to the point of confession, and questioned her again. But Annette held stoutly to her first story. There had only been the two English young ladies. Madame sighed, and yet was relieved. Retta’s guilt had been a great blow, but to find that any other girl had shared in that guilt and yet had kept silence, would have hurt her more deeply still. She could not dream that Giulia had spent a useful five minutes with Annette before afternoon classes. Madame could only blame Una for her ugly suspicions of her schoolfellows, and poor Una found herself looked upon coldly in consequence.

She did not tell Retta what she had done, fearing that no satisfaction would be gained from Annette. So Retta remained in ignorance of her friend’s attempt to plead for her, and was much relieved that Madame asked her no more questions.

She gave up next morning to packing, while waiting for Miss Garnet’s telegram. It came at midday, giving the time at which some one would meet her at Martigny. Within an hour she had said good-bye to Una and Pamela, and was seated in the train opposite a very stern-faced Mademoiselle.

Who would meet her she did not know, but hardly thought her aunt would come herself, as she had not been very well for a week or two. Retta longed to see her with a positive hunger, but there was no sign of it in her grave face as she sat gazing out at the lake till it was lost to view, and then at the snow-clad hills of the Rhone Valley.

Mademoiselle looked at her curiously. She was so quiet, this English child. She did not seem distressed, though she was being sent home in disgrace. Most of the girls Mademoiselle knew would have cried themselves into hysterics in the circumstances, but this girl had not cried at all, if those who had been with her were to be believed—Madame, Louise, who shared her room, the girls in the playground. None of them had seen her cry. Perhaps she had wept in the night, but her eyes had not been red or swollen in the morning, though she looked tired, as if she had not slept well. She was strangely like a grown-up person, and Mademoiselle knew that in similar disgraceful circumstances she would have been in tears herself. Would Henriette remain as composed and apparently undisturbed even when she met her friends, or would she break down then and show a becoming sense of her position? Mademoiselle waited, and watched her curiously to the last.

In spite of her longing for her aunt, Retta almost hoped some one else would meet her, and yet she shrank from the thought of being taken home by a stranger who would know why she was coming in the middle of the term, and might ask questions. Miss Garnet would ask questions, too, and they would have to be answered, but Retta hoped fervently that it would be in private. In spite of her calm face and manner, she was feeling the events of these two days more than she had ever felt anything in her life before, but so far she had not wanted to cry. It was far worse than that. She felt, as she said afterwards, 'all frozen up inside, and as if I'd go mad if I ever got unfrozen again.' Her stony eyes and quiet cold face were a correct indication of her feelings. How long this state of mind would last she did not know. For ever, she supposed. She, Retta Garnet, had been expelled from school because she could not keep the rules. She was being sent home in disgrace. It was far too horrible merely to cry over. She could never forget it all her life. To the end of her days she would remember this journey, with Mademoiselle sitting reproachful and unsympathetic on the opposite seat.

As the train drew in to Martigny, Retta for the first time showed interest in anything as she looked eagerly to see if her aunt was there. Then she gave a quick little breath of surprise and relief at sight of Nurse Polly on the platform.

'That lady has come to meet me. She is a friend—the nurse dressed in blue.'

'Your aunt is not here?'

'No, Mademoiselle, she is not well. She has sent this lady,' and Retta climbed hastily down from the carriage. 'Oh, Nurse, how good of you to come!'

Her voice trembled for an instant, and Nurse Polly saw at a glance how it was with her.

'I was very pleased to come,' she said cheerily, and at the first sound of her voice Retta braced up and became more like herself. 'I've been finding books in the town for Malcolm. He's got through all we have. Thank you, Mademoiselle. I will see to her now. This is all her luggage? Many thanks. Miss Garnet is much obliged to you for your trouble.'

'I am grieved that it should have been necessary,' Mademoiselle said acidly, and Retta flushed and looked at Nurse Polly. She must understand, of course. Would she say anything? Would she ask difficult questions?

Nurse had frowned at Mademoiselle's uncalled-for remark.

'We must hurry to our train. Good-bye!' she said coldly, and led Retta away.

CHAPTER XIX
BAD BUT HONEST

'So you've come to take the bad girl home, Nurse?' and Retta looked up at her with a doubtful smile.

'I was very pleased to come,' Nurse Polly said cheerily. 'I know one person who'll be glad to see you, and that's my young man. We haven't told him you're coming. He thinks I've just come down to Martigny for a few hours' change of air and to see how the hills of the Rhone Valley look in snow. He'll be glad to have your company.'

'You haven't told him I've—made a mess of things?'

'Not yet. It's no business of his or mine. You can tell us as much as you like later on. We'll ask no questions.'

'That's awfully good of you,' Retta said gratefully. 'How is Malcolm?'

'Oh, very much better! We take quite long walks now. He will be as strong as ever by next spring.'

'I'm awfully glad! And Aunty?'

'She is just fairly well. On Monday she went over to Argentière, as Madame Gay had asked her to do, to see if the house was all right, and the journey tired her so that she has had to rest ever since. But she is very comfortable in her new chalet. You will find it a delightful little home, much nicer than the hotel.'

'I'm glad she likes it,' and Retta lapsed into dreamy silence.

Nurse Polly glanced at her thoughtfully. She looked tired out, and Nurse guessed that she had been undergoing a severe strain for the last day or two, and did not tease her with questions. She sat gazing down into the white valley with sombre eyes as the little train crept like a caterpillar up the steep hill-side by long curves and zigzags. In the far distance the giants of the Bernese Alps stood out, dazzlingly clear in their winter snow. Then a corner shut them out, and Salvan lay below, its roofs all covered with snow. And presently they were creeping up to the ledge high above the river, with steep white cliffs on both sides, black lines of pine-trees, and the familiar Aiguilles Rouges rising grandly at the end of the gorge. The Trient Valley with its peaks and glacier opened out, and the train came to a stop in the little station at Finhaut.

Retta was not returning to the hotel. Miss Garnet had taken a chalet in the village for six months, and had moved in at the beginning of October. The owners would probably wish to return to it in the spring, but for the winter months it would be a pleasant home, and more cosy than the big empty hotel.

It was dark long before they reached the station. Indeed, it had been dark before Retta reached Martigny, but a clear moon lit up the snow and showed her the valley and mountains in their winter dress. With Nurse Polly she walked through the village, interested in spite of her depression in its changed appearance, for snow lay thickly everywhere. The chalet stood on the outskirts of the village, and was reached by a queer little path between old black wooden buildings, and Nurse Polly went with her to the door.

'Here she is, Miss Garnet! I've brought her home safely. Her box will be sent up presently. Now I must hurry back to my young man. He'll know the train is in, and he'll be getting impatient.'

'We are deeply grateful to you for your kindness, Nurse,' Miss Garnet had come to the door and greeted Retta without a word but with outstretched hands.

Retta ran to the shelter of her arm, and as it closed round her she broke down, with a sob of relief. Nurse Polly had been prepared for that, and so had her aunt, who drew her in gently and closed the door.

'Aunty! Oh, Aunty, it wasn't all my fault!' Retta was 'unfrozen' at last, and was crying as she had never cried before.

It was partly in expectation of some such breakdown that Miss Garnet had begged Nurse Polly to go to Martigny in her place. Retta would not cry before a stranger, she knew, but was likely to collapse at their first meeting.

'I am quite sure you have something to tell me, Retta, dear. Madame gave me all the particulars she could, but I feel sure there is more to tell. I cannot believe that I have heard the whole story!'

'Do you think I might tell you? Wouldn't it be sneaking? I do want to tell somebody,' sobbed Retta.

'I think you must tell me, dear. I do not want to know names, and I will not repeat what you tell me to any one, but I want to know the whole story, for your sake and my own. We must not have secrets from one another. I want to understand. The story, as I have heard it, is not like you. I am sure there is more to tell. I know you like what you call a joke now and then, by which you mean some prank more or less against rules, but it is not like you to go so far.'

'Not by myself, anyway. But sometimes quite decent people get really bad when they're with others, Aunty.' Retta tossed aside her hat and travelling coat, shook the tears from her lashes and pushed back her loose hair, and sank down on the rug before the big wood fire.

'Ah! You have discovered that for yourself? Tell me all about it, Retta.'

'Yes, I'll confess altogether. I want you to know just how bad it is. It is bad, Aunty, and I'm not pretending it isn't. But it isn't all me, all the same.'

She rested her chin on her hand and gazed into the fire.

'It's what you warned me of before I went. I've thought it all over, and I see it now. I made friends with a girl, Aunty—not Una. She was there, too, but Madame insisted on me being friends with this other one. Well, she's not a nice girl, but Madame doesn't know that. At first I didn't either, and I liked her awfully. Then, when I got doubtful of her, I still liked her so much that I made excuses for her, and wouldn't believe she was horrid. I went on being friends long after I knew I oughtn't to. Then I couldn't help seeing she was a rotter, so I tried to break off from her.'

She paused, gazing into the fire. Miss Garnet saw the pain in her eyes, and guessed that the shock of the discovery had been severe.

'What was wrong with her?' she asked gently.

Retta flushed, and her lips quivered. 'She wasn't straight. She wouldn't own up. She kept quiet when Madame asked if any one had broken rules. Lots of the girls were like that. It made me feel sick, but I wouldn't believe it of—her—till I really had to.'

'You had to believe it at last? You weren't misjudging her, Retta? You're sure there was no mistake?'

Retta flushed again. 'Oh, no! There was no mistake, Aunty. I tried hard not to believe it. But—she let me take the blame of things all alone. I'd done with her after that.'

'You always owned up yourself?'

'Aunty! What do you think of me? I may be bad, but at least I'm honest!' Retta said warmly. 'That's why Madame thinks me so much worse than the others. That's why I'm here, and why she told me I was an evil influence in the school! Lots of the others are just as bad, but they keep quiet about it. Una and I couldn't, so we've got very bad characters. But you wouldn't have had us say nothing when we'd broken rules?'

'Certainly not! But couldn't you manage not to break them?'

'I did try very hard after that. I had nothing to do with that girl for a fortnight. And then—oh, Aunty, then I was soft, and weak, and silly! That's the truth, and I'll make no excuse and tell no fibs about it. She isn't really so much to blame, for I knew quite well what I was doing, and how wrong it was, and that not one of the rest would have the decency to back me up and confess, if Madame ever found out. I knew what *she* was like, and that they were all just the same, and that I ought to have nothing more to do with them, but when they seemed willing to be friends again after all that time, I just gave in, like a soft, silly thing, and went with them. I know it was wrong as well as silly, and I knew it at the time. But I was dull and I wanted to go, and—and they said I was afraid, and had no "go" in me, and I couldn't stand it!' Her cheeks burned with shame at thought of her own weakness. 'I'll take any punishment you like, Aunty, and I'm more sorry than I could ever tell you, but that's just what happened. They asked me, and I went.'

'And when Madame found out, no one would confess but you?'

'And Pam!' Retta's face lit up. 'Pam was in it, too, Aunty, and she had the pluck to stand up before the whole school and say she'd been with me. It was hard enough for me, but I'd done it before. But Pam's a nervous kiddy at any time. It must have been a nightmare to her. I think it was awfully plucky.'

'I was terribly grieved to hear you had led Pamela into trouble, Retta. I warned you that she would copy you. Could you not have been careful for her sake?'

Retta's face darkened. 'I didn't mean to lead her into trouble. It was all a—a mistake. Aunty, it was horrid! I don't quite understand it myself. Pamela turned up just as we were starting, looking awfully scared, but saying she'd go if I wanted her. I'd never thought of wanting her, and asked who had said I did. She said some one had told her I wanted her to go, and when I was mad they said they thought some one else had said I wanted her, or some muddle like that. I couldn't get to the bottom of it, even afterwards. It seemed to have been some mistake. And yet I've wondered since if it wasn't done on purpose.'

'How do you mean? And why?' asked her aunt quietly.

'I don't quite know myself. But I thought perhaps they half expected we'd be found out, and wanted to make me get Pam into trouble. They'd know that would make me feel bad. And they knew I'd confess, and that they wouldn't, so they were safe enough. If she hadn't spoken up they'd have teased me about it afterwards, because they knew how strongly I felt about that kind of thing.'

'But why should "they" be so anxious to get you into trouble of one kind or another?'

'Because I'd said what I thought of their sneaky ways,' Retta said grimly.

'I see. But, my dear, they could not have brought this trouble upon you if you had not allowed it.'

'I know. Oh, I know, Aunty! All yesterday I was seeing what an idiot I'd been. I just played up to them all I could. If they'd wanted to get me expelled I couldn't have helped them more, but I don't suppose they really thought it would come to that.'

'Did any of them say they were sorry?'

'I wouldn't let them. I wouldn't speak to them. I was too disgusted with the way they'd left me to own up alone.'

Miss Garnet sat thinking it over, and Retta, after a glance up at her, leaned her head back against a chair, utterly tired out.

'What I would like to do, my dear,' said her aunt at last, 'would be to write to Madame and tell her just what you have told me.'

'*Aunty!* I told you as a secret! You could never sneak like that!'

‘I suppose not,’ Miss Garnet said slowly, feeling that the confidence entrusted to her so freely must not be abused. ‘You would feel I had betrayed you, I know.’

‘I’d never forgive you, Aunty! I could never like you again. But you couldn’t play such a horrid trick on me. You never would!’ Retta said fervently.

‘I would much like Madame to know you are not the only one to blame. I think she ought to know you were drawn into it by others—though that does not at all excuse you, Retta. Still, I think she ought to know, and to know also that there are girls in the school who are deceiving her. But you have told me the story in confidence, and I feel I have not the right to repeat it to Madame against your will.’

Retta had waited in an agony of suspense. Now she threw herself into her aunt’s arms.

‘Aunty, I knew you’d never do it! It wouldn’t be honourable, and you couldn’t do such a thing. And I’ve told you no names, you know. Madame wouldn’t be satisfied if you did write to her. She’d only think you were making excuses for me and accusing other people. They’d deny it, and there’d be an awful fuss and all kinds of unpleasantness. I couldn’t prove anything against them, even if I told the names, and that’s a thing I’ll never do.’

Miss Garnet nodded thoughtfully. ‘After all, it is Madame’s school. It is for her to find out such things. She ought to know her girls. No, I will not write to her, Retta. As you say, it would be very unpleasant. And even if I could induce her to take you back, I should not send you, my dear, for it is plain you are not to be trusted with girls of a certain type. I had thought better of you, Retta. I thought you had more character than to be led by others so easily. Evidently you are not fit to go to school and mix with girls of every kind.’

‘I’m all right when I’m with nice people!’ Retta sighed. ‘It sounds awfully soft, I know. I’d have been all right with Una. But, Aunty, if I had to go back—which I don’t want to do, you know—I’d never have anything to do with that lot again! I’m sick of them all.’

‘I hope you have learned a lesson. You evidently needed it, Retta, dear. Now come and have some dinner, and then you must go off to bed at once. You look tired out.’

‘I couldn’t sleep last night. I was wondering what you’d say,’ Retta confessed. ‘Aunty, you’re a brick! I’m so glad you understand! I’m afraid people will think it’s awfully funny when they see me back so soon!’ she said ruefully, as she prepared for bed. ‘I’ll have to say the school had measles! Or that I’d quarrelled with all the girls! Or that I was frightfully lonely!’

Her aunt looked at her quickly, and Retta laughed. ‘Oh, I’ll be honest, Aunty, dear! But I shan’t say more than I have to. I’m afraid they’ll wonder!’

‘You will have to put up with that,’ Miss Garnet said gravely.

CHAPTER XX
MALCOLM UNDERSTANDS

'You'll have to account for your sudden appearance to Malcolm, Retta,' said Miss Garnet at breakfast-time.

Retta pursed her lips. 'Shall I say the air of Vevey didn't suit me, and I've come home for the good of my health? All right, Aunty, I'll play fair. I'll tell him just what has happened, though it won't be easy.'

She went along to his hotel during the morning, but he was out,—had gone in the direction of Trétien, the porter thought. So she set out to find him, mounting the steep path swiftly, with keen delight in the exhilaration of the sharp cold air. Everywhere there was snow; the pine branches were heavy with it, drifts stood high against the sides of the black chalets, a vivid contrast of colour, the cliffs and rocks and fields were white, the peaks all apparently larger and nearer than in summer. The air was very clear and dry, and the sun amazingly hot. Before Retta reached the steep height at the end of the village she was glad she had taken her aunt's advice and worn no coat, and before she found Malcolm and Nurse Polly she was wondering if even her white jersey could not be dispensed with.

She came on them on the open shoulder of the hill, where the road reached its greatest height and began the *zigzag* descent to Trétien and Marécottes, and at last by many long loops to the Rhone away below. Here the peaks beyond Martigny came into sight, the Muveran and Dent de Morcles, and a glimpse of the Oberland, while at their feet the valley fell away to a chasm of tremendous depth. It was a sunny, open spot, the highest point of the long ledge on which Finhaut, Giétroz, and the railway hung high above the gorge, and yet there was almost no wind. Malcolm and Nurse Polly were resting, sitting on a plaid spread on the snow, he reading aloud while she worked at some needlework. Retta did not hail them till she had drawn near, and then her call startled Malcolm so that the book of travels fell from his knee and nearly slid over the precipice.

'Malcolm, ahoy! I say, are you glad to see me?'

'Hal—*lo*! Harry, old chap, where *have* you come from?' and he started up in amazement. 'What on earth's happened? This isn't the Christmas holidays? I wasn't expecting you for seven weeks yet. What's up? Scarlet fever in the school?'

'Oh, Vevey didn't suit me—too relaxing, you know. I need good bracing air, like this.'

'Really?' Malcolm looked at her doubtfully. 'You don't look very groggy!' and Nurse Polly gave her a questioning look.

'I'd like to let you believe it, or that Aunty was lonely and sent for me to keep her company. But it isn't that.' Retta seated herself on the plaid, fanning herself with her knitted cap. She looked up at him apprehensively. 'I've been chucked out—expelled, you know.'

'Whew!' he whistled, and stood gazing down at her in dismay. 'I say, old chap, that's a bit rough! What happened?'

'I broke bounds again, too awfully for Madame to overlook it this time. So she said she'd have to send me home, since I couldn't keep the rules.'

Malcolm whistled again. 'What on earth were you up to? And who put you up to it? Was it that Italian girl again?'

Retta's eyes blazed in sudden gratitude. 'Do you know, Madame never asked if any one had put me up to it! She was quite satisfied that I'd done it all on my own. And it's the first thing you ask! Aunty was sure there was some explanation, too. Madame never thought of

that. She never asked if it was my own idea, or anything. She thinks I'm a regular rotter. I have plagued her, I know, but I'm not as bad as she thinks. Like to hear all about it?'

'Rather!' and he dropped on the plaid beside her. 'Fire away, old chap!'

'May I stay, or is the story only for Malcolm?' asked Nurse Polly.

'Oh, please stay! I couldn't talk about it yesterday, Nurse; not till I'd seen Aunty. But you understood, didn't you? I knew you did. It was awfully decent of you not to tease me just then.'

'I saw you didn't feel like talking. I met Retta at Martigny,' she explained, in answer to Malcolm's questioning look. 'But I said nothing to you, as Miss Garnet had asked me to let her tell you herself.'

'It was just like Aunty! It wasn't any too easy. I didn't want to confess to you,' Retta admitted. 'It doesn't feel nice to say you've been sent home in disgrace like a kid.'

'Let's have the story!' said Malcolm abruptly, and Retta plunged into her explanation.

'You see, Madame went away for ten days, and things got awfully slack under Mademoiselle. She didn't keep order a bit; the girls just did what they liked. And Una was swotting for an exam. and practising all day, so I got awfully dull. Then one of the girls told me——'

'The Italian creature?' demanded Malcolm.

'Never mind. It's of no consequence. She told me of a fête at a village two miles away,' and Retta described vividly their night exit from the school, and the strange festival among the hills, ending with the way they had been betrayed by the American visitor.

'You can guess the rest,' she said briefly. 'You know enough about those girls by this time. I've told you in my letters.'

Malcolm could very well imagine the end of the story. He knew how impossible it would be for her to lessen her own guilt by accusing others who had kept silence, but he ventured a remonstrance, all the same.

'Well, but, old chap, that's a bit rough on you! They were just as bad—worse, for it was their idea. You'd never have tried it alone.'

Retta shook her head. 'I certainly shouldn't. But I couldn't do anything, could I? Even Aunty sees that. I was afraid she'd want to write to Madame, but she sees it would do no good.'

'Was it that Italian bounder?' he demanded wrathfully.

She laughed a little at this description of Giulia. '"The Countess" wouldn't know herself under that name. Never mind who it was. It's no affair of yours. And it wasn't only one, either.'

'They ought to be ashamed of themselves!' he said indignantly. 'But I thought you were done with all that lot, Harry, old chap? I thought you'd had a regular flare-up with the Italian cad?'

'I had. We cut one another dead for a fortnight. That's where I went wrong,' Retta said frankly. 'I let myself be talked round. Would you have believed I'd be so soft?'

He laughed. 'Well, I'm awfully sorry about it, in one way, but it's ripping to have you back. Come to stop this time?'

Retta flushed. 'I think so. Aunty says I'm evidently not to be trusted at school with other girls.'

'Did she say that? Hard lines!' he said sympathetically. 'Was she mad with you?'

'No, she was jolly decent, but she had to say something, you know. You're heaps better, aren't you?' Retta asked soberly, as they walked down to the village after a lively snowball battle with Nurse Polly. 'It's awfully jolly to see you able to do so much.'

‘It’s awfully jolly to be able to do it! Oh, I’m as right as can be! But it was better not to risk the winter at home. Mother’s coming out for Christmas.’

‘How awfully fine for you! Will she bring the little girls?’

‘No, she’s asked a friend to look after them. Ivy’s stronger, but she couldn’t stand the long journey. But it will be jolly to have mother; quite different from last Christmas.’

‘You are very different from what you were last Christmas,’ Nurse Polly remarked.

Retta found her unexpected holiday not by any means all bliss. There were no English people in the village but themselves, Malcolm, and Nurse Polly, and every one knew that Miss Garnet’s niece was expected home from school for Christmas. Her sudden appearance was therefore as much of a surprise to the villagers as it had been to Malcolm.

She had to face many interrogations, and suffered keenly under them. She was too honest to give a false reason for her presence, but shrank from taking the whole village into her confidence. As all the village was interested in her, and remembered her stay in their midst during the summer, when in her efforts to perfect her French she had made friends with everybody, she found constant difficulties during the first few days, and was relieved when the surprise died down, and she was allowed to go her way unquestioned.

The village in winter was a very different place from what it had been in summer. Everything was under snow, and with the closing of the train service they were almost cut off from the outer world. Letters and newspapers only came occasionally, and Retta and Malcolm had to depend upon themselves for amusement.

There was practically no winter sport in the village, though by travelling to Chamonix they could have all the excitement and company they wanted. But Finhaut was too steeply perched on its ledge to allow of anything in the way of skating, skiing, or tobogganing. However, Malcolm owned a toboggan, and craved for opportunity to use it, so had found certain slopes near Châtelard which were practicable, and he and Retta managed several fine runs without being precipitated into the river. They went long tramps in the dry, hard snow, and there were always sleigh-rides to be enjoyed. There was much sunshine, no fog, little wind, and the crisp clear air was a never-ending delight, and very bracing to Retta after the warmer climate by the lake.

Christmas brought disappointment to them both, borne philosophically by Malcolm and wrathfully by Retta. Another attack of illness on the part of little Ivy, brought on by over-exertion, kept the anxious mother at home, and Malcolm could not grumble at her absence in his relief at the vast improvement in his own health.

Pamela had been invited to spend her Christmas holidays with the Garnets, since her mother was still in England, and as the date drew near Retta looked forward eagerly to her coming, and to the chance of hearing the latest school news. Una wrote regularly, but as her letters had to be fit for Madame’s inspection, she could not tell much, and Pamela’s letters were not very satisfactory. Retta had a score of questions to ask, and her disappointment was therefore keen when a letter came from Madame Gay in England, explaining that she had decided to let Pamela spend the short ten-days’ holiday at school, and enclosing a letter she had received from Madame Dufour.

It was this letter which roused poor Retta’s wrath to the highest pitch, for Madame Dufour regretfully informed Madame Gay that it had been necessary to remove Henriette Garnet from school on account of misconduct, and suggested that as her influence over Pamela was undoubtedly evil, it would be well if they were not permitted to spend the holidays together. Madame therefore suggested that Pamela should remain in her care, which would be much to her advantage, as a number of other girls from distant homes would do the same, and Madame intended to take them all for a week to Munich, for some sight-seeing, which would improve their minds. She thought it would be very advantageous to Pamela to be one of the party, and

Madame Gay agreed with her on this point. She wrote, however, that she did not accept Madame's statement regarding Retta, and did not believe she had wilfully led Pamela into trouble, or would be likely to do so again, but she thought it would be well for Pamela to join the party for Munich, and as the holidays were so very short she had better remain at school until the summer.

Retta shed tears of angry disappointment over the letter, and mentally shook her fist at Madame Dufour. She felt sure Pam would have chosen to come home, and would be as keenly disappointed as herself. The only bright spot lay in the fact that she had heard Giulia and Yvonne say they were going home for Christmas, so that during the holidays Pamela would be thrown more with the girls she could trust—Una, Linda, and her little sister Elsa, none of whom would be taking the long journey to their homes. Pamela would have plenty of friends, but Retta feared she would be lonely all the same, and she wrote pathetically to Una begging her to comfort the child and give her as jolly a holiday as she could.

Malcolm sympathised keenly with her in her disappointment, and was as indignant as she over Madame Dufour's letter. He often led her on to discuss the events of her short life at school, taking a deeper interest in her affairs because at the time he had none of his own. All he had to do was to eat and sleep, walk and read, and get strong in every way he could. His life was quite without excitement for the time, so he found in the story of Retta's misfortunes the element of interest lacking in his own, and by his insight and comments helped her to understand some points which she had not grasped at the time.

'That girl, the Italian bounder, was jolly clever, you know,' he said one time, as they sat resting in the snowy fields by Châtelard after a toboggan run. 'You weren't half smart enough for her, Harry, old chap.'

'Perhaps not. But how, please? What ought I to have done?' the 'old chap' asked meekly.

'If you'd seen through her from the first! That time she asked you to the tea-party—well, she'd got you then, you know. If only you hadn't gone!'

'If only I hadn't!' Retta sighed. 'But what do you mean, Malcolm?'

'Once you'd gone to that tea-party she'd got you in her clutches.'

'Eight table-spoonfuls!' Retta murmured reminiscently. 'It *was* black! Well?'

'Well, there were three things you could do, but no matter which you chose she scored. You could say nothing, as she meant to do. In that case she'd soon have let the other English girl know you were no better than the rest of them. See?'

Retta nodded. 'That would have been awful! Una would have been terribly cut up. Well?'

'Or you could sneak to Madame and get them all into a row. She risked that.'

'She knew I wouldn't. It would have been just as awful as the other. Una would never have forgiven me either way.'

'No, either would have meant a split between you two. Perhaps that's what she was after. Or you could do what you actually did, which was nothing. In which case she could do what she liked with you.'

'How? Why?'

'She could get you into trouble as often as she liked, for she knew you'd confess for yourself but not tell on her. Don't you see? That party was a try-on, to see how you'd take it, but she scored whatever you did. Jolly smart! If only you'd seen through it!'

'If only I had!' Retta said gloomily, her face hot as she realised how completely she had lent herself to Giulia's schemes. 'Of course, there's a fourth thing I could have done, and that's have no more to do with her! That's where I went wrong. But why should she be so keen to get me into trouble? She was awfully friendly at first. Afterwards, of course, I offended her by telling her what I thought, and then no doubt she did try to get me into a mess.

I suppose that's what she was driving at in the end, and I certainty helped her all I could. But you seem to think she had some such plan from the very beginning. Do you mean that?'

'I'm not sure. You say she was friendly, but she certainly got you into two or three awkward holes. Could she have done it on purpose? Could the friendliness all have been put on? Had she any reason for a spite at you from the first?'

'Oh, I don't think so! I wouldn't like to think she'd been pretending all along!' Retta cried quickly, hurt by the very thought of such insincerity. 'But Una and I often wondered why she should be so awfully chummy with me,' she added. 'It did seem queer, for there seemed no reason for that either.'

Malcolm sat making snowballs and taking shots at a solitary pine-tree, his brows furrowed in puzzled thought.

'How did the Italian bounder like your other friend, Una?' he asked suddenly.

Retta stared. 'Not at all. They're sworn enemies. Una hated Giulia's ways and told her so, and Giulia hated her for it. That was long before I went to school. When they were here in the summer, Una told me Giulia would do anything to spite her. Those were her very words. But what has that to do with it?'

'I've got it, then!' and Malcolm flung his last snowball at the tree and turned to her excitedly. 'I see it now! But you couldn't, of course. It explains everything, and it's just what you'd expect of such a caddish girl. Don't you see, she was waiting for a chance to pay your friend Una out for what she'd said. Then you turned up, and she knew you were Una's friend. So she set herself to take you away from Una by being chummy with you herself, and then when she'd fairly got hold of you, and the tea-party had shown her what you were likely to do, she set herself to get you into all the trouble she could, *because* you were Una's friend. She thought she'd get back at Una through you, and I've no doubt she did it, too. Then that last time when Pamela was humbugged into joining you, that was to hit at you through Pam, by getting her into trouble, too, if you happened to be found out. You'd offended her, you see. I told you she'd pay you out somehow. I don't suppose she knew you'd be expelled, but she knew that if any one got into trouble it would be you and Pam. For if the kiddy hadn't spoken out you'd have been upset, you know. It's quite possible if you hadn't been found out that last time she'd have found some way to make Madame suspect you'd been there, and set her asking questions. She could have sent an anonymous letter, for instance. She knew you'd have to confess, but she felt safe enough herself. But there was no need. The American lady did that for her. But when she took you to the fête she certainly meant that you should be found out somehow. Now do you see it all?'

Retta rose. 'Yes, I see,' she said grimly. 'I almost wish I didn't. It's all so awfully hateful. I feel just sick when I think how she played with me, and how I believed in her and—and liked her. I think you're right, but I'd never have seen through it for myself. It's so horribly insincere. She's such a fraud. I'd never have understood.'

She stood looking down the valley, her back turned to him, for several minutes. At last she turned and faced him, her eyes full of pain.

'Now that you understand and there's no more to puzzle over, I'd like you to stop thinking about it, Malcolm. I can't bear to think about it myself. I'm going to forget school and Giulia and everything. Please, we won't talk about it any more.'

'All right, Harry, old chap!' Malcolm said gently. 'But I think you had rotten luck at that school, getting in with such a shabby lot of girls.'

'But Aunty says I ought to have been able to stand that, and not turn into a rotter myself. She's quite right, of course. I feel rather a worm altogether!'

'Not a worm! It's not as bad as all that! And I'm jolly glad to have you back,' Malcolm said heartily, and after that the subject of school was avoided between them during the months

that followed.

CHAPTER XXI
TOO AWFUL FOR WORDS

Retta's resolve not to talk about school and Giulia was kept to the letter. Her desire not to think about them was another matter. Una wrote to her continually, and so did Pamela, and her thoughts were much with them in Vevey during the spring.

Anxious to atone so far as she could for her misdeeds, she worked steadily under her aunt's guidance, read much French literature, made good progress in German and mathematics, and practised both singing and pianoforte regularly. Out of lesson hours she was continually with Malcolm and Nurse Polly, and reaped the reward of her regular correspondence with him in his understanding of her every mood and his constant good comradeship. It had cost her some sacrifice of time and energy while at school to write so often, and many a time Giulia had tried to coax her from her task. But now she found that Malcolm never failed to understand her, and often seemed to know her thoughts before they were spoken. They were the best of friends and were constantly together.

In writing to Una she had not dared to give the explanation of Giulia's friendship, as declared by Malcolm. It was not a matter to write about, and least of all in a letter to school, which might be seen by unauthorised eyes. If ever she met Una again, she would ask her opinion on the subject, but she could not write about it, and at present it still hurt her too much for discussion. With all her faults she was very honest, and the treacherous insincerity of Giulia's designs wounded her whenever she thought of them.

Una's letters, as the spring term began, were full of a new girl, Antoinette Remy, from Paris, whom she described as being older than herself and very pretty. Giulia had taken a fancy to Antoinette from the first, Una declared, and Yvonne was once more finding herself left out in the cold. Yvonne was offended—Yvonne was angry—Yvonne was very angry—Yvonne would not speak to Giulia—so ran Una's letters all through the spring, and in one she ventured the opinion that Giulia ought to be more careful and not neglect her old friend so completely. 'For if Yvonne turns nasty she'll be very nasty, and I think she's going that way.'

When May came, Miss Garnet found it would be necessary to give up the chalet to its rightful owners, who wished to occupy it during the summer. As there was some possibility of Retta's parents returning to Europe in the autumn, and new arrangements might then have to be made, Miss Garnet decided not to take another house for the present, but to move back into the hotel in which they had stayed at first. Retta pleaded that they should join Malcolm in his hotel, but her aunt preferred the other, and they settled there accordingly.

Una's letters at this time told how the usual summer trip was planned, and how they were shortly to start for a little town in the Austrian Tyrol, from which they could make many trips, and see much of the district.

'I thought perhaps they'd come back here to finish this valley, since the weather stopped them last time,' Retta said, in telling Malcolm of the letter. 'But I'm glad they're going somewhere else. It would have been too awful for words if they'd turned up here!'

Early in June she went with Miss Garnet for a short stay in Argentière, for Madame Gay had returned at last, and coming via Lausanne, had spent a few days in Vevey, taking Pamela out every day and hearing all those sides of her school life which could not be told in letters. It had been a time of bliss to Pamela, who still missed Retta sorely, though otherwise she was happy enough at school. It had also brought Madame Gay some relief on the subject of Madame Dufour's letter.

‘Pamela insists that Retta was not to blame in that matter of the fête,’ she said to Miss Garnet, as they sat in the garden together, while Retta out on the lower hills gathered alpenrose to take back to Malcolm and to post to Pam as a reminder of home. ‘She says there were three other girls with them, who never confessed when the whole school was questioned, and that she firmly believes the expedition was planned by one of these, an elder girl, and that Retta only joined in it on her invitation. She assured me that Retta was both annoyed and distressed, as well as greatly surprised, when she turned up to go with them, though Pamela had been led to believe that Retta wanted her to go. It seems to have been some misunderstanding. And Retta took great care of her, “held on to her all the time,” she says. So in spite of Madame’s letter I think we may acquit her of any wish to lead Pam into trouble, and possibly of any blame in the other matter, too.’

‘I am sure you may do the first,’ Miss Garnet said warmly. ‘She would never dream of leading Pamela wrong. She has been most anxious since she left school that the child should not get into bad companionship. You heard how eagerly she asked who had seemed Pam’s chums, so far as you could judge from her talk, and she was obviously relieved when you said Elsa and Margot and an elder girl named Una. She trusts Una, and considers the other two safe friends of Pam’s own age. There is evidently some set she is anxious Pamela should not be drawn into. I imagine she has had experience of it herself and learnt a lesson. As for the other matter, I do not consider her free from blame. She went into it with her eyes open, and with a guilty conscience, and she showed herself weak and wanting in the power of resistance in so doing. She is quite aware of it, and much ashamed of herself. But I do not think she is so much to blame as Madame considers. There were certainly others concerned in the matter, and it was unjust that Retta and Pamela should have to take all the blame because only they were honest enough to confess. Did Pamela give you any names?’

Madame Gay smiled and shook her head. ‘I couldn’t induce her to do that.’

‘Nor will Retta, of course, so I have done no more in the matter, since she urged me so strongly to let it drop. I hardly saw what more I could do, since it is not a question which admits of proof. But I am satisfied that she was drawn into the affair by others, and that she meant no harm to Pamela. That, however, does not excuse her for going herself, and she is quite aware of it.’

‘I shall tell her I do not blame her for Pamela’s share in the matter. Pamela must have known it was wrong to go, even if she believed herself invited by Retta.’

She spoke to Retta on the subject, and Retta heard her verdict with much relief. Remembering the terms of Madame Dufour’s letter, she had met Madame Gay with a touch of shyness. A burden was lifted from her heart when she heard that the letter had not been accepted as a final proof of her guilt, and though she did not try to excuse herself, it was a relief to know that others could make excuses for her.

Miss Garnet had planned to stay in Argentière for a week, on Madame Gay’s urgent invitation, and had given notice in their hotel to that effect. But a sudden illness on the part of the old servant who did the work of the chalet made her change her plans. Madame Gay’s time was fully occupied in nursing the woman, and it was not fair that she should have guests as well. They said good-bye in spite of her protests, promising to return later, and went back to Finhaut unexpectedly, not troubling to send word in advance. Their rooms were waiting for them, so it seemed unnecessary to telegraph, and there had been no time to write.

It seemed to Retta that there was something odd in Madame’s face as she greeted them, something more than her natural surprise at their sudden return. She looked worried, if not dismayed, Retta declared to her aunt, as they went upstairs.

‘I thought for a moment that she’d let our rooms over again to some one else! What could be the matter with her?’

'Nonsense, Retta! It's your imagination.'

'I'm sure it wasn't! She looked quite upset at sight of us.'

'Well, our rooms are all right, anyway,' said Miss Garnet, opening her door.

They were dressing for dinner when a sudden clamour in the corridor made Retta put her head into her aunt's room.

'I say! It sounds as if another school had arrived! What a row! I wonder if that's what was wrong with Madame? If she thought we wouldn't like it? Perhaps she thought they'd be gone again before we came back.'

'How very annoying!' and Miss Garnet frowned as the laughter and chattering in the corridor increased. 'Well, Retta, you needn't ask me to send you to *this* school. Don't make any friendships among the girls, even if some of them should be English.'

'I won't,' Retta promised, and went back to her room to finish doing her hair, which, now that she was over fifteen, was tied back with broad ribbons in two thick wavy masses, there being far too much of it for one. 'I wonder if they'll be anything like the last lot?' she mused, as she arranged her parting. 'It will be queer to see some girls again. I don't believe I've spoken to a girl for six months.'

The big dining-hall had not been in use since the summer season began, as the few visitors in the hotel preferred to have their meals served in the small glass-covered balcony. There was a lonely French lady with whom Retta had formed an acquaintance which was helpful to her French conversation, two Americans, and a German couple, all of whom were staying for several days, besides occasional birds of passage who only stopped for one night. For all these dinner was laid in the balcony as usual to-night, but the long tables in the hall were spread also, though none of the girls had made their appearance when Miss Garnet and Retta passed through and took their places on the veranda.

The other visitors were grumbling at the invasion. Such a noise! Such confusion! And Madame had apologetically confessed that they had come for three nights. The head mistress was an old friend, it appeared, and had telegraphed in some emergency begging that her girls should be accommodated, and Madame had not liked to refuse.

'Madame seems to have several friends among head mistresses. It must be good for business. Madame Dufour was an old chum of hers, you know,' Retta said to her aunt, and then addressed the French lady at the next table. 'If these girls are anything like those who came last summer, there will be more noise yet. They didn't go to bed till midnight, and were pillow-fighting by four o'clock in the morning.'

'*Quel dommage!*' cried the poor lady in dismay.

'But they went off for the day before eight,' Retta added consolingly, 'and didn't get back till dinner-time. Perhaps these will do the same.'

'Have you heard the name of the mistress of these girls, or where they come from? I know one or two schools in Genève.'

'No, we didn't ask. Here they come! There'll be a fine row in there presently. I'm jolly glad we're out here,' she murmured in English, and leaned forward to watch the girls through the glass door.

Then she shrank back with a little cry, a wave of hot colour sweeping into her face at sight of the first two girls. Her aunt looked at her in quick dismay.

'Retta! Surely it's not——'

'Yes, it is! Giulia and some one I don't know! Oh, Aunty, what can I do? Can't I get away somehow? I don't want to meet them again! It is too awful, just as I said!'

Miss Garnet looked much disturbed. 'Madame ought to have explained when we arrived. You could have gone across to Malcolm. It is really most annoying!'

'No wonder she looked funny! She ought to have told us,' Retta said brokenly, sitting with bent head and burning cheeks.

'Of course, Retta, dear, Madame does not know. She was never told the whole story, was she?'

'No, you said there was no need. Oh, Aunty!'

'Well, take your soup anyway, my dear!' her aunt said briskly. 'They do not know you are here, and cannot discover you till dinner is over at least. You need not let their presence interfere with your meal. Remember we have had a railway journey since lunch.'

Retta sighed, and turned drearily to her soup. Who could care to eat with such unlooked-for trouble hanging over her? She scarcely spoke during the meal, and sat looking so white and downcast that the French lady glanced at her curiously.

'Mademoiselle Retta does not eat. Is she then not well?' she asked sympathetically, and at that Retta pulled herself together, feeling her aunt's eye upon her. She replied that she was tired after the journey, and made a brave effort to eat.

'Ah, yes! It is a tiresome journey—so slow, and always losing time at Vallorcine and Châtelard,' her friend agreed.

Retta loitered over her fruit in the obvious hope that the schoolgirls would have finished and would go and leave the way clear for her to escape upstairs. But though the other visitors on the balcony departed, the girls sat talking and laughing, and at last Miss Garnet said quietly,—

'We had better go, Retta. Marie is waiting to clear this table.'

Retta looked at her appealingly. 'Aunty, I don't want to! I can't face them all.'

'But we can't sit here for ever, my dear. Marie has been twice to see if we have finished.'

'Tell her to clear away, then, and let me sit here. Say I want to watch the mountains.'

Miss Garnet said nothing, and Retta glanced at her quickly.

'Aunty, what are you thinking? That I'm funking it?'

'I think you will have to face them sooner or later,' her aunt said gravely. 'If they are going to stay for three days you cannot possibly hope to keep from meeting some of them.'

'I thought perhaps if I could get upstairs, they might be gone before we're down in the morning, and perhaps I could have dinner with Malcolm—he's asked me often enough—and come back after they'd gone to bed——'

'You would meet them in the corridors sooner or later,' Miss Garnet said decisively. 'Would you like them to believe, as they certainly would do, that you had been hiding from them? And would you really like to creep upstairs as if you were afraid to meet any one? Come, Retta! I quite agree with you that it is very trying, and I am much annoyed that it should have occurred, and shall say so to Madame. But since it has happened, is this how you are going to meet it? If you try to hide, and slink about unseen—oh, I know it sounds unpleasant, but it is what you are proposing,' as Retta looked at her with suddenly crimson cheeks, 'won't you feel rather ashamed of yourself? You will have to meet them sooner or later. Why not get it over? Can't you face it out? I know it isn't easy, but haven't you enough pluck to carry you through? Surely anything is better than hiding as if you were afraid or ashamed?'

'I'm both!' Retta said breathlessly. 'But I won't hide. I hadn't thought of it quite that way. It is jolly beastly, but I won't funk. It's my own fault, really, of course. We'd better go at once, then, Aunty. You'll come, too?'

It was a tremendous ordeal to her to face those girls, all talking and laughing and quite unconscious of her presence. Probably Madame Dufour was there, too, though Retta had not seen her yet. She had not dared to look up again since the dreadful moment when she

recognised Giulia. Yvonne, Una, Bianca, and the rest must be there, of course, though she had not seen them yet.

She was white as she passed through the open door into the hall, but coloured painfully at the sudden amazed silence with which her appearance was greeted. An indignant exclamation made her look in the direction of Madame Dufour. It was obvious from Madame's face that their presence was as much of a surprise and an annoyance to her as hers to them. Retta bowed in response to her cold astonished stare, then, with head held high and cheeks burning, she walked between the long tables, followed by her aunt, both acutely conscious of the staring eyes fixed on them. Retta had not seen Una nor any of her other friends. She had seen no one clearly but Madame. Her only wish was to reach the door without loss of dignity and escape upstairs.

Then came the sound of a chair pushed back on the polished floor, a falling fork, and flying feet, and Pamela threw herself upon Retta with a cry of joy, heedless of Madame, of the staring girls, of anything.

'Retta! Retta! Oh, I am so glad to see you! I didn't know you were here. Oh, Retta, I have missed you so!'

'Pamela, return to your place instantly!' Madame had risen indignantly.

Una and Bianca had started up also. Pamela's cry had broken the spell of amazement which had held them all dumb. Giulia, with a laugh, turned to explain to the stranger at her side. Yvonne, frowning as she found herself forgotten, began to whisper energetically to Denise and Suzanne.

Retta's arm had tightened round Pamela, and for a moment she held her as if she could not let her go, her lips trembling.

'Pam, darling, I didn't know you were here either. How sweet of you to come and speak to me! But you'd better go just now, dear. We'll have another chance. Aunty will see to that for us. Madame's looking like a thundercloud. Oh, I am glad to see you again! You are getting big, kiddy!'

She looked appealingly at her aunt. 'I must speak to her, Aunty! Can't you settle it with Madame? Isn't she a plucky kid to come to me in spite of everybody?'

'I didn't think of anybody when I saw you,' Pamela confessed.

'I'll make it all right with Madame,' and Miss Garnet turned to Madame Dufour, while Retta, taking this for permission, led Pamela away, her arm still round her shoulders. As soon as the door was closed they fled upstairs.

'Come up to my room! We can talk there. Aunty will settle it with Madame,' Retta panted. 'Oh, but I did feel bad, Pam! You don't know how hard it was to come out of that balcony when I knew they were all in there! You cured me, though, you dear! It was simply sweet of you to fly at me like that!'

'I don't know when I was so glad before,' Pamela said fervently.

CHAPTER XXII
A DIFFICULT EVENING

Madame Dufour had watched Pamela's departure with indignant eyes. But Miss Garnet gave her no time for protest.

'I can quite understand, Madame, that you are as much annoyed at this meeting as we are. But it will hardly be possible to keep Retta and Pamela apart. We have spent the last two days with Madame Gay at Argentière, and she has not the slightest objection to the girls being together. Indeed, she said to me that she hoped they would spend Pamela's holidays together, and she has invited Retta to stay with them for as long as I am willing to spare her. So I think we must allow them some conversation together.'

'So long as Pamela is in my care I would prefer that she did not talk with Henriette,' said Madame stiffly.

'It is a pity you brought her to Finhaut, then,' Miss Garnet retorted. 'Come, Madame, it is very unfortunate, and awkward and annoying for us both, but we cannot keep the girls apart when we spent the morning with Pamela's mother, and she is willing they should be together. Retta will naturally wish to give Pam the latest news of her home. Let us rather discuss how this *contretemps* has occurred and abuse Madame in company. She did not tell us you were coming. I suppose she did not tell you we were here. But we thought you were going to the Tyrol?'

'There was illness in the hotel in which our rooms were engaged,' Madame said, still stiff and annoyed. 'We only heard two days ago. I could not take my girls where there was danger of infection, and we had no time to make other arrangements. It was easier to write to Madame Pelot, and bring the girls here to visit those places we were forced to miss last year. I understood you had left the hotel, and were living in the village. I did not address you here last October.'

'We only took that house for six months,' Miss Garnet explained. 'We are spending the summer here. But we had gone to visit Madame Gay, and returned unexpectedly this afternoon. No doubt Madame Pelot thought your visit would be over before we came back. She gave us no warning of your coming when we arrived two hours ago. We were quite taken by surprise.'

'We also,' and Madame's tone implied that the surprise had not been a pleasant one.

However, Miss Garnet drew her into conversation, accompanied her to the salon, and begged that some of the girls would favour them with a little music. Giulia was called up to sing, and came with her new friend, Antoinette, as accompanist, Yvonne frowning in the background, for this had been her privilege.

'Won't you come and turn over, Yvonne?' asked Antoinette.

'No!' snapped Yvonne, and went out into the balcony.

Madame Dufour raised her eyebrows. This was not seemly behaviour. No doubt the girls must have their little tiffs, but they ought to keep them hidden in public. She frowned throughout Giulia's song, and prepared a rebuke for Yvonne when opportunity offered.

Bianca was also called upon to sing, and brought Una to play for her. Miss Garnet found their style more to her taste than Giulia's, and applauded heartily, begging for another song. When it was over she turned to Madame, who had softened under her appreciation.

'These two were friends of Retta's, Madame. Will you not permit them to see her? It is seven months since they have met. You would hardly ask them to be under the same roof and not have a chat.'

‘I presume if I refuse permission they will make their own arrangements for meeting without it?’ Madame knew the ways of some of her girls.

‘Certainly not!’ Miss Garnet said quickly. ‘I know nothing of your girls, but I can answer for Retta. She will not meet her friends in any underhand way. She would be too proud. She will wait for your permission.’

Madame doubted this. In her opinion, Retta’s pride had not saved her from clandestine acts in the past.

‘I would prefer that they should not talk with Henriette,’ she said coldly, and Una’s face fell.

She had turned eagerly on the music-stool to await the answer, and now sprang up and came forward quickly.

‘Oh, Madame, I beg you to allow me to speak to Retta!’

‘No, my dear. I forbid you to do so. Say no more about it. Do not ask me again.’

Una left the room looking mutinous, and Bianca’s face showed her disappointment also as she took up her music and followed. Madame said stiffly,—

‘I do not consider Henriette’s influence over either Una or Pamela was good, and I would much prefer that she should not have any communication with them. If she wishes to meet any of her former companions it should be one of the elder girls, who is less likely to be affected by holding converse with her. If she cares to talk with Giulia Tarelli, for instance, I shall raise no objection. They were companions at one time.’

Miss Garnet was keenly anxious to know which girl was to blame in Retta’s mind for all her troubles. She had no idea, however, and knew that Retta would never tell her. She said gravely,—

‘I will tell her what you say, but I know Una was her friend. She will particularly desire to see her.’

‘And I particularly desire that she should not.’

Miss Garnet could say no more. Presently she went upstairs to Retta’s room, where the two girls sat in the twilight exchanging confidences.

‘I think you must go down now, Pamela, dear. You have had a good chat, but Madame does not wish you to talk with us again without her permission, so you will remember, won’t you?’

Retta looked up with hot cheeks. ‘Aunty, isn’t she hateful? I didn’t know she could be so horrid. As if I’d hurt the girls by talking to them!’

‘I know, dear.’ Miss Garnet sounded decidedly ruffled. ‘It is very ridiculous, but it is no doubt partly annoyance at finding us here. You will have to put up with it, however. Perhaps she will feel differently about it to-morrow.’

‘I want to see Una!’

‘I know. I asked particularly that you might do so, and she objected and expressly forbade Una to speak to you. She also hinted that she expected you to meet her without permission.’

Retta’s cheeks flamed again. ‘How horrid of her! I wouldn’t think of it—not when she’s said we’re not to meet.’

‘I told her that, and she looked doubtful. It is impossible for her to watch Una all the time, Retta; but remember if you do meet you are on your honour not to talk.’

Retta nodded gloomily. ‘But there’s something I must say to Una! Something I can’t put in a letter! And I want to know her opinion of it! Aunty, how can I be in the same house after all these months and not speak to her?’

‘You must wait for Madame’s permission, Retta. If you cannot do so, I must send you back to Argentière. Madame Gay would understand.’

'No! That would be running away; Madame would think so, anyway. All right, Aunty, I'll play fair. Pam, you must tell Una not to try to speak to me. Make her understand I can't do it, so it will be no good. I won't send her any other message, though it would be easy enough to give you a note for her. But that would be going behind Madame. She'll probably suspect me of it, anyway. It would get you into trouble, too. Good-night, kiddy!'

'Madame raises no objection if you wish to speak to some of the elder girls,' Miss Garnet observed. 'She particularly mentioned one who used to be your friend, she said. You may talk to her, if you like—Giulia Tarelli, the tall, dark girl who sings.'

Then she knew who was to blame in Retta's mind. For Retta flushed hotly and spoke out, with angry eyes.

'She's about the last person I'd want to speak to. I don't care if I never see her again.'

Her eyes fell before her aunt's, and she turned away quickly, her lips quivering. She had betrayed herself, she knew, but it was of no great consequence now. Miss Garnet would not tell Madame.

Pamela had glanced up at her quickly, at the mention of Giulia's name. It was plain to Miss Garnet that she was in the secret. No doubt Retta had been warning her against Giulia once more.

Retta led her to the door and kissed her, thanking her again for her impulsive greeting. As she opened the door, the sound of voices and laughter in the corridor made her pause, and Miss Garnet looked up quickly to see which of the girls were passing. If it chanced to be Una and Bianca, it would be very hard on Retta that she might not greet them.

But it was Giulia and Antoinette who came down the passage arm in arm. Antoinette was shorter than Giulia, but as Una's letters had told, very pretty, with gold-tinted hair and fair complexion, and she seemed to have gained a firm hold on 'The Countess's' affections. Retta could well believe that Yvonne must feel sore and deserted in this new state of affairs.

Madame Dufour had apparently told Giulia of her willingness that she and Retta should meet, for as Pamela came out of the room Giulia hurried forward before Retta could close the door.

'Retta, my dear, I have Madame's gracious permission to speak to you, though she will not grant it to Una, it seems. I am glad to see you again after so long. What have you been doing with yourself all these months?'

Miss Garnet watched Retta curiously. She had looked up in astonishment at sound of her name. Had Giulia forgotten their last meeting and the repulse she had met with then? How could she still pretend to be friendly? And why should she? Surely she must be satisfied with the trouble she had brought upon both Retta and Una! Or did she hope by once more entangling Retta to bring her into still deeper waters? But now that Retta understood there was no fear of that.

She drew herself up. 'Thank you! But I'd rather not. It is very kind of Madame, but I will only speak to whom I choose, and I do not care to talk with you, Giulia.'

'*Well!*' Giulia's tone expressed her scornful amazement.

'If your friend wants to know why I am so rude, I have no doubt you can explain. I understand better than I did before I left school, and better than Madame does. Good-night, Pamela! Remember what I have been saying to you,' and she bent to kiss her and whisper in her ear.

'Be careful of Giulia! She'll be wild, and if she can't get at me she may try to go for you and get back at me that way. It would be just like her. So do be careful, kiddy! It would worry me awfully if she got you into trouble. Don't let her cheat you in any way. She's quite capable of it. Now run along and say good-night to Madame.'

Pamela fled in one direction. Giulia had already dragged Antoinette off in the other, her face crimson with anger.

Retta closed the door wearily. 'I do hope she won't get hold of Pam! It's what she'd love to do—to pay me out, you know. Did you think I was dreadfully rude, Aunty?'

'Was that the girl?' her aunt asked quietly.

'It doesn't matter. She's one I don't care to know. Una's worth dozens of her, if Madame would only believe it. I'll go to bed, Aunty; I'm very tired.'

The girls had disappeared for their excursion when Retta and Miss Garnet came down next morning, much to their relief. When her morning lessons were over, she went in search of Malcolm, who had watched the school arrive, and was awaiting her eagerly.

'I nearly came across last night, but I thought you had plenty of visitors for one day! It's the same lot come back, isn't it? I think I know which is the Italian bounder. It is jolly hard lines, old chap! It's simply rotten for you that they should turn up here again. Madame must be wild!'

'She thinks I'm a bad influence on everybody I meet,' Retta said gloomily.

'There's an influence that's a jolly sight worse! I'd love to talk to her for five minutes!' he sighed longingly. 'I'd soon give her a fit of hysterics! Couldn't you introduce me, Harry, old chap? I'm glad you gave the Italian cad a knock or two, anyway.'

'I didn't,' she sighed regretfully. 'I've thought since of dozens of things it would have been good for her to hear. I really didn't say anything nasty at all. She was mad, but I think I was most moderate.'

'But she wouldn't like it, and she won't forget it. Since she can't get at you, she'll probably go for the kiddy Pamela, or your other friend, and get them into trouble if she can. It's a horribly sneaky way of doing things.'

'I've warned Pamela. She'll be careful, I think. She hates Giulia, anyway. But I can't warn Una.'

'Oh, well, she ought to know her ladyship by this time. Unless she's a regular duffer she'll be on her guard.'

'But there's no particular reason she should be just now. She doesn't know we had a shindy last night. Of course, if she knew I'd offended Giulia again she might be careful, but she doesn't, and I can't tell her.'

'Yes, that's awkward, and then she doesn't understand her methods as well as we do. You had no chance to explain all that, did you? But she knows she's not to be trusted. She ought to be careful. I wonder the Italian bounder was so willing to overlook the past and be friendly! You didn't part on particularly pleasant terms, did you?'

'No, we wouldn't speak. I cut her dead and she hated me for it. But she didn't know then I was to be expelled. Perhaps she hadn't meant to go quite so far. I suppose she thought she'd paid me out and might forgive me now. But I wouldn't have it.'

'I'm jolly glad you wouldn't. But she'll be awfully mad, of course. Nobody likes to forgive some one and have their forgiveness flung in their face. She'll get back at you somehow, old chap. Keep your eyes open!'

'I don't see what else I could have done,' Retta said heavily. 'But if I thought she was likely to hurt Pamela, if I saw any sign of it, I'd feel inclined to go to Madame—I really would, though I don't know what good it would do. She wouldn't listen, and she'd be awfully mad. It would probably do more harm than good. How could I say I believed Giulia was trying to get Pam into trouble to spite me! It sounds too mad, and too awful besides.'

Malcolm nodded. 'It wouldn't help. You'll do more good by warning the kiddy herself. You've a fine chance while you have her here. You could hardly put it in a letter.'

‘But Aunty says we’re to wait for Madame’s permission before we talk any more! You know what that means.’

Malcolm whistled. ‘Then you must write to her every week, saying, “Be careful! Be careful! Be careful!” She’ll understand. After all, there’s only six more weeks of term, and then she’ll be home for two months, and you and her mother can din it into her as much as you like.’

Retta nodded. ‘It will be awfully jolly to have her all the time! And perhaps Madame will relent, and let us have another chat before they go.’

‘Don’t do anything to make her mad. Keep on her right side, if you can,’ Malcolm advised, and she nodded and went soberly home to lunch.

CHAPTER XXIII
CAUGHT IN A TRAP

Retta sat in a corner of the salon writing to her mother. The room was filled with tired girls resting after their day's tramp, but they had received orders from Madame not to speak to her, and were all busy about their own concerns. Some were on the balcony, some at the piano, others chatting in corners.

They had been much surprised when Retta walked in and took her seat at the writing-table, having expected her to retire to her own room as she had done the night before. But then she had had Pamela's company, and had been feeling crushed and miserable, anxious only to escape. To-night she was in a defiant mood, and would not submit to be driven from all the sitting-rooms. She had as much right to be there as themselves, and if she did not speak to them even Madame could not object. So she sat and listened to the talk, writing occasionally, her back turned to the girls, but her interest very much with them.

In one corner Pamela sat reading. She had been sitting alone when Retta entered, for her chums, Elsa and Margot, were not here. Twelve years was the age limit which juniors had to pass before they were allowed to join the tourist party, and Pamela was the only one of the trio who had qualified for this year's trip. Francesca was in the party, but to Retta's relief it was evident they were not companions. Francesca sat with several friends playing cards in one corner, and Pamela sat lonely and dull in another. Her face had lit up at sight of Retta, but had fallen again as Retta, smiling faintly, shook her head and passed on to the writing-table.

In another corner Yvonne sat scowling over a strip of crochet on which she was working, for Giulia and Antoinette were talking together out on the balcony. Una was not to be seen, but presently the door opened and she entered, her arm linked in that of the German girl Linda. Together they flung themselves on the couch at Retta's elbow. She looked round in surprise, and Una gave her a deliberate wink. Then she turned to Linda and began to talk volubly, in a low tone, but quite loudly enough for Retta to hear every word.

'Didn't we have a fine walk to-day, Linda? And wasn't it funny when we crossed the stream and Madame thought we would fall in, and screamed each time the stones shook under our feet! And *did* you notice Yvonne all day? Wasn't she in a rage? She would not walk near Antoinette, nor look at Giulia. She hates them both, I am sure. Some day she will explode, and somebody will be hurt. You can see she is just boiling inside.'

As Linda had taken part in the day's excursion, there could be no need to give her an account of it, so Una's remarks were obviously for Retta's benefit. Linda's part in the conversation was limited to giggles, which suggested that she quite understood. Retta laughed and listened for a time as Una rattled on, then bent and poked her in the back.

Una looked round with dancing eyes but firmly-closed lips, as if to say that nothing should induce her to disobey Madame's wishes. Retta raised her eyebrows and looked a remonstrance, for surely this was disobeying them in spirit if not in letter. Una shrugged her shoulders, and proceeded to give Linda more information, which she received with more delighted giggling.

'You know, Linda, it has been going on ever since last summer, this trouble between Yvonne and Giulia. Once they were such friends, but Giulia can never stick to one, and Yvonne expects to be the only one with her friends. She cannot bear that any one should be liked but herself. First it was Retta Garnet,' as if she was quite unconscious of Retta's presence. 'Giulia made a favourite of her, and Yvonne was angry. But Retta was younger. It was not quite the same. She was not with them in class, and in many ways Yvonne still had

Giulia to herself. When Retta left they were better friends again for a time, and then after Christmas Antoinette came, and Giulia took a fancy to her from the first, just as she had done to Retta. You know how we wondered at the time at her friendship with Retta, especially as she was so much younger!'

How Retta longed to speak and solve that mystery for her! But she kept her eyes rigidly to the letter she was not writing, and wondered if Yvonne could hear, or if Francesca was listening to report the conversation to her sister. The music of two girls at the piano drowned the words so far as those across the room were concerned, however, though every word was clear to herself. She wondered if she ought to go away and so frustrate Una's obvious intention of holding a one-sided conversation with her, with Linda as a safeguard in case Madame entered. It was wrong, according to Madame's ideas, no doubt, and she ought not to countenance it by staying to listen. But Madame's commands seemed quite unreasonable, and yet were being obeyed to the letter by Una. How could she ask more? So Retta argued, while feeling uneasily that she ought to go. She stayed and listened while Una chattered on, enlarging on the strained relations between Giulia and Yvonne.

'You heard Madame lecture Yvonne this morning because she spoke rudely to Antoinette last night? Well, but did you look at her? Did you see her face? The others were all listening, and Giulia *laughed*! I was looking at Yvonne just then, and I can tell you I was frightened! She'd have killed Giulia if she could. She's got over it for the time, but it will happen again. It was awfully foolish of Giulia. I think she's stupid, for she ought to know Yvonne by this time. Any one can see the state she's in. She was white with rage this morning. And Giulia laughed! It's simply silly, you know. Of course, she's always reckless about everything, but she's playing with fire where Yvonne's concerned.'

'But what could Yvonne do, Una?' Linda asked uneasily, forgetting to giggle.

'Do! She looked as if she would get Giulia in the dark and stab her. Actually I suppose she won't, but there's plenty she can do. Giulia's taking risks, whether she knows it or not. *I* know what Yvonne could do, if you don't, Linda! She'll stick at nothing when she's in that frantic state—I say, here's Madame! Well, she can't say anything!'

Linda began to giggle again. Una became very intent on the lace pattern of her handkerchief, her eyes demurely downcast. Madame, entering to bid Pamela and Francesca go to bed, caught sight of Retta's back and long fair hair, and looked round suspiciously.

Pamela, reading quietly in her corner, was obviously innocent, but Una was another matter. She was sitting very close to Retta, and she looked guilty. Madame called her up, and Una crossed the room and stood before her.

'Yes, Madame?' she asked innocently.

'Have you forgotten my wishes, Una? Were you talking to Henriette?'

'Oh, no, Madame! I have not spoken to her. I have only talked to Linda.'

Madame looked at Linda, who said at once, 'It is the truth, Madame. We have not talked to Henriette.'

'But we would be very glad to, Madame, if you would be so kind as to give us permission,' Una coaxed.

'Why then did you sit so close to her, my dear Una?' Madame's suspicions were growing.

'There were no other seats when we came in, Madame,' but Una's eyes were downcast, and she played guiltily with her handkerchief.

'Una, look at me when you answer! Is that the truth, my dear?'

'N-not all of it, Madame.'

'Well, then?'

'It was so that she could hear,' Una confessed, her eyes falling, but a laugh lurking about her lips in spite of herself. 'But, indeed, I never spoke to her, Madame.'

‘Did you not rather speak to her all the time? Una, my dear, I do not call that very honest. I am not surprised at Henriette, but— —’

‘Madame, that is not fair!’ Una cried quickly, as Retta turned swiftly in her chair. ‘She was there before I came. Why should she go away because I chose to sit near her and talk? And she poked me in the back and looked proper at me, to make me go away. She couldn’t do more than that. All her things are spread out there, and there’s no room to write at the big table because the girls are playing cards there. You couldn’t ask her to stop writing letters just because I chose to sit on the sofa! She wouldn’t speak to me, and she won’t, till you give her leave.’

‘I expected you to wait for that also, Una. You knew very well that you were doing what would displease me. I thought you were more honest.’

Una’s face flamed. ‘Madame, I am honest, but it is hard! We were chums, and we have not met for seven months.’

‘It is because I know it is hard for you that I do not give you a harder punishment. You will go to bed now, at the same time as the little ones, Una, and do not try again to evade my commands in such unworthy ways.’

Una made a little grimace. ‘Good-night, all! Come on, Pam! I’ll race you upstairs!’

But it seemed that Madame relented after that. For the next evening, after a long day’s tramp to Trient by way of the Tête-Noire, when the girls were settling down to rest, Giulia went along the passage and tapped at Una’s door.

‘Una, Madame gives you permission to talk with Henriette Garnet this evening.’

‘Really? What a darling! Thanks so much for telling me, Giulia! Where is Retta?’ and Una raced away in search of her friend.

Giulia laughed and went into her own room. She knew enough of Una and Retta to feel fairly sure of the result. She felt safe enough, but forgot that Denise and Yvonne had the room next to Una and Bianca.

Una looked into the salon, but Retta was not there. Madame sat listening to Antoinette at the piano, so Una said fervently, ‘A thousand thanks, Madame! You are most kind!’ and fled, doubting if Madame had heard her, however.

She found Retta in the dining-room, where the tables had been left clear so that the girls might use them and not be too crowded in the salon. Miss Garnet sat busy with needlework, and Retta sat opposite, at work upon a blouse she was making under her aunt’s directions. Una fairly threw herself upon her.

‘You dear thing! At last! I’ve been simply pining to speak to you!’

‘Una! Has Madame— —’

‘Have you permission to come, Una?’ Miss Garnet demanded.

‘Oh, yes! Madame’s relented at last. She sent to tell me so. Now let’s have a real good chat, in case we don’t get another! What was it you wanted to tell me, Retta?’

‘Something I’ve found out. Malcolm saw through it first and told me. I’d never have understood alone. I think I know now why Giulia was so—pretended to be so fond of me, Una.’

Una’s eyes widened. ‘Oh! But how could he tell you? He’s the boy who presses flowers, isn’t he? The boy you used to write to every week?’

‘Yes,’ and Retta spoke energetically but scarcely above a whisper, her head bent very close to Una’s, as she gave Malcolm’s solution of the problem.

Una stared at her, her eyes growing wider still.

‘Just to spite *me*, because you were my friend and I’d feel it if you got into trouble? But how horrid, Retta! How simply hateful! And to get you expelled!’

‘She couldn’t know what would come of it, of course. But I think he’s right. I think that’s what she was after. Of course, she took risks herself. I might have told Madame, or we might all have been seen at the fête together. She risked that.’

‘As she’s risking a good deal in making Yvonne so wild just now,’ and Una glanced at the next table, where Giulia and Antoinette were sitting. ‘They’re hardly on speaking terms now. It is hard on Yvonne, but she has got a horrid temper! Well, but, Retta——’

‘And I’ve offended Giulia again, so you’d better look out or she’ll be trying to get at you next by way of paying me out. And you will keep an eye on Pamela, won’t you? For Giulia knows I care a lot about her, and she did look wicked last night. I haven’t told you about that yet,’ and she whispered the tale of the meeting in the corridor.

‘She won’t love you for that,’ Una commented. ‘I wonder she took the trouble to give me Madame’s message, and to give it so pleasantly.’

‘What message?’ Retta looked up quickly.

‘That Madame had said we might talk.’

‘*Una!* Was it Giulia gave you that message? Not Madame herself?’

Una shook her head. ‘Retta, do you think——? I never thought of it. I quite believed her.’

Their eyes met, the same dread in the mind of each. Miss Garnet, watching them, said quietly, ‘What’s the matter, girls?’

‘We’ve been tricked again!’ said Una angrily. Then her eyes danced. ‘But we’ve had our talk! You’ve told me what you wanted to, Retta, and it’s jolly important. It can’t matter if we talk a little longer now. We both believed it was all right.’

Retta shook her head, her eyes angry and determined.

‘I gave my word,’ she said resolutely. ‘If she’s made me break it, I’ll tell her what I think of her, and I don’t care who hears. Then I’ll go and apologise to Madame,’ and she started up.

Una caught her arm. ‘Retta, wait a moment! Think! What are you going to say? You can’t *tell*, Retta! Tell Madame she told a lie? How can you?’

‘Una, what do you mean? Retta, please explain this?’ Miss Garnet said severely.

Retta stood hesitating, an angry frown on her face as she looked at Giulia. She, Antoinette, and Suzanne had picked up the cards and were looking for a fourth. Antoinette turned to Yvonne, who sat scribbling post cards and scowling at every one.

‘Come and join us, Yvonne! We want one more!’

‘Soft, silly thing she is!’ murmured Una. ‘She won’t see how Yvonne hates her!’

‘No!’ snapped Yvonne, and turned her back on them.

Giulia laughed, a careless irritating laugh. ‘Find some one who is reasonable, my dear Antoinette!’

Yvonne pushed her cards aside and rose, with what intention no one knew. Probably in her anger she hardly knew herself. But at that moment the door opened and Madame entered.

Her eyes swept round the room. Yvonne, white with anger, stood looking ready to fly at Giulia, who was unconcernedly dealing out cards. Retta stood hesitating, Una’s hand still on her arm. Miss Garnet waited in puzzled distress for some explanation of the abrupt end of their conversation. It was evident to Madame that they had been sitting together. Her voice was cold with scorn and anger as she spoke.

‘Ah! It is what I feared! Una, I thought better of you. At Henriette I am not surprised. But that you should countenance this amazes me, Miss Garnet! It is barefaced disobedience, and I thought I heard you say——’

‘Madame, it is not as you think!’ Retta’s voice rang out fearlessly in the silence which had fallen as every girl in the room turned to listen. Madame’s appearance had stunned Una into silence for a moment, and Miss Garnet had only just grasped what had happened.

‘We thought it was all right, Madame, honestly we did!’ Una panted breathlessly.

'Honestly! That comes ill from you just now, Una. A more dishonest proceeding— —'

Giulia sat shuffling her cards, a smile about her lips. Antoinette stared in frank bewilderment. Yvonne, with blazing eyes, waited.

'Madame, it is true. We have not been dishonest,' Retta said quietly. 'Perhaps we were foolish to be tricked so easily, but we have done nothing wrong. I gave my promise, and I did my best to keep it. I'd never have broken it knowingly.'

Madame threw up her hands in helpless wrath. What could she say to a girl caught in a dishonourable act who spoke in this fashion? Then Miss Garnet interposed, speaking as quietly but as resolutely as Retta had done.

'Madame, there is some misunderstanding here. You have not questioned the girls. It is only right to let them defend themselves. I am sure they thought you had given them permission to meet, though how it came about I do not know. If you ask them they will tell you the same thing, and will no doubt explain just what happened.'

'I gave them no permission.'

'But we thought you had, Madame!'

'Una, that is preposterous!'

'I think not,' Miss Garnet said quietly again. 'I questioned Una when she came here, and she assured me you had given her permission to come. I am sure she spoke the truth.'

'Madame, *I* have never told you anything but the truth!' There was angry meaning in Una's emphatic tone.

'I understood she had permission to come, Madame, or I would never have talked to her,' Retta insisted. 'Last night I did not speak to her.'

'Madame, if we had wanted to talk in secret, without your leave, we would have met in some corner where you could not see, or upstairs where you would not easily find us. We would not have sat here where every one could see, and you might enter at any moment!'

Madame began to look puzzled. There was reason in Una's plea. She said helplessly,—

'But, my dear Una, how could you think I had given permission when I know I gave none? It is ridiculous. You may have made Miss Garnet believe it, and Henriette would naturally be only too ready to do so, but I gave you no such permission, my dear.'

Miss Garnet looked at Una. Retta looked at the ground. If Una's words were doubted, must she still be silent? Una would say yes, of course, but was it right?

Una's eyes fell before Madame's. 'Some one told me you had given me leave to talk to Retta. I never questioned it, Madame, but just ran to her. It was silly, no doubt, but I had hoped you would be kind.'

'But who told you such an untrue thing? This is a most extraordinary story, Una!'

'Somebody!' and Una hung her head.

'Come, my dear, you must give me the name—if there is one! If you will not do so, you must see that I must doubt your whole story.'

'I can't help it, Madame. Some one told me, but I can't sneak. You can't expect me to.'

'I certainly expect you to. To make such a preposterous statement, such an accusation against one of your schoolfellows, and then refuse to substantiate it, is merely ridiculous. I must know whom you are accusing. If you will not tell me, I shall be forced to believe that there is no one, and that you are trying to screen yourself behind an anonymous accusation—a very silly and cowardly thing to do, and quite useless, I assure you.'

Una's cheeks burned. She sat looking down and said no more. Miss Garnet said gravely, 'Retta, do you know?'

'Yes, Aunty; but I can't sneak either. How could I? But what Una says is true.'

'Madame, I have not heard the name myself, but I have very strong suspicions as to who is the culprit,' said Miss Garnet decisively.

Una looked up quickly. Retta gave a cry. 'Aunty!'

'I want no more suspicions,' Madame said impatiently. 'Unless you can give me facts, I pray you to leave this matter to me, Miss Garnet.'

'You can't, for you don't know them, Aunty,' said Retta defiantly.

'I cannot leave matters as they are,' Miss Garnet insisted. 'These girls have done no wrong. Una, you are keeping silence through a mistaken sense of honour, dear. In a matter like this your first duty is to be honest with Madame and let her know the whole story. She cannot possibly be just to you until she knows more. You are deceiving her, and you have no right to do that in order to shield some one else, who probably does not deserve it.'

Una looked uncomfortable. 'I couldn't sneak,' she said again.

Then Bianca spoke up from the doorway, where she stood among others who had followed Madame into the room.

'Madame, Una's story must be true. An hour ago she looked into the salon, in search of Retta, I suppose, and said to you, "A thousand thanks, Madame. You are most kind!" You did not hear, because Antoinette was playing and you sat by the piano, but I was near the door and I heard her plainly. She would not have said that unless she had believed she had your permission. She was making it no secret that she was going to talk to Retta.'

Madame's face grew more puzzled than ever. Bianca was one of her eldest and most trusted girls. Her word could not be doubted. It looked as if Una's story must be true.

'Then, my dear Una, I must know the name of the girl who gave you such a false message.'

Una shook her head. Miss Garnet frowned.

'Una, don't be silly. Retta, if you know, surely you can see that it is your duty to speak?'

But Retta shook her head also. 'It's so horribly like sneaking, Aunty. How can I?'

'For the sake of justice I must know which of the girls in my school could be guilty of such an act, and such a deliberate attempt to get another girl into trouble,' Madame insisted.

They were still silent, however, and she turned away impatiently.

'Surely no girl would lie to me! Yvonne, was it you? Linda? I need not ask Bianca. Denise? Suzanne? Louise? Giulia? Antoinette? Simonne?'

The question met with steady denial. It was obvious that a girl who had not hesitated to give a false message would be ready to conceal it by an untruth. There was a hush of excitement in the room. The girls who had been in the salon crowded into the doorway to listen. As Giulia answered with a prompt, 'No, Madame!' but with lowered eyes, Retta's head drooped in shame for her, and Una reddened indignantly.

Madame looked round at them helplessly. 'Is every one here? Then one of you has not spoken the truth. Either it is you, Una, or— —'

'Pamela is not here,' said Miss Garnet, glancing round the room.

'She was overtired with the walk and is lying down. But surely she would not— —'

'It wasn't Pamela,' said Una quickly.

'It was Giulia Tarelli,' said Yvonne.

CHAPTER XXIV
CLEARING THE AIR

'Yvonne, what do you mean?' Madame cried indignantly.

'It is not true,' said Giulia, but looked uneasy.

A wave of hot colour had swept into Una's face. 'Sneak!' she said, looking at Yvonne.

Retta dropped into her seat and buried her head in her arms on the table. Miss Garnet looked relieved.

Yvonne, white and shaking, leaned against the wall and spoke jerkily.

'It is true. My room is next to Una's, and I was there. I heard Giulia tell Una Madame had given permission for her to talk with Henriette this evening. Una thanked her and ran off, without asking any questions.'

'Sneak!' said Una fiercely again, and Retta's shoulders quivered. It was horrible to her that any girl should thus betray another.

'It is not true!' said Giulia angrily. 'I was downstairs talking to Antoinette. Is it not so, Antoinette?'

But Antoinette's wits had deserted her. 'I don't know. When?' she faltered.

'I did not say when, but Giulia seems to know,' Yvonne retorted, and Giulia gave her an ugly look.

Madame gazed from one to the other, a stricken look on her face. 'Which of you is lying to me? Girls, I did not think this of you!'

'Yvonne is mad,' said Giulia bitterly. 'She's making it up because she's jealous. She hates me because I like Antoinette. At least, Antoinette is not crazy! Every one has seen how Yvonne hates me. This story is just to spite me.'

It sounded plausible. Madame could not forget how she had been forced to rebuke Yvonne for allowing her anger to master her only the day before. She had seen how ill she had taken the scolding, and how she had avoided Giulia at every opportunity during the last two days. Perhaps anger and envy had led her to make this preposterous accusation. That would be easier to believe than that Giulia had been guilty of such underhand conduct.

'Yvonne, my dear,' began Madame.

But Giulia's words had put the finishing touch to Yvonne's wild anger. Her brain was whirling and quite beyond her control. She hardly knew what she was saying as she burst out again,—

'And I will tell you more, Madame! I am not mad; I am not making up this story. It is true, and there is more behind. It was Giulia who invited Henriette Garnet to go to the fête. I was there, too, but it was Giulia's plan. She wished to get her sent away from school. If the American lady had not seen Henriette, Giulia would have sent a letter to you, saying that some of your girls had been seen there, and when you questioned us Henriette and Pamela would have had to confess. That was Giulia's plot, but there was no need to carry it out, and no time, because we were betrayed by the American.'

Retta had looked up quickly. At this confirmation of Malcolm's suggestion her eyes met Una's triumphantly. Miss Garnet was listening intently, much interested. Madame, looking very white and dismayed, sank into a chair and signed to Yvonne to continue.

'It was Giulia who lent Henriette the book you found her reading, without warning her that it was forbidden. It was Giulia who led her into trouble over and over again, and then refused to confess and let her take the blame alone. She did it as part of a plan which she had arranged with me and some others when she heard Henriette was coming to school, to get her disgraced

because she was the friend of Una Deverell, and she hated Una and wished to distress her. And there are many other things.'

'Sneak! Oh, Yvonne, how can you do it?' cried Una, the first to break the spell of dismay which held them all. 'But it's true!' she added.

'It is *not* true!' Giulia was white and frightened now, and her eyes shrank before Madame's stony look.

'Every word is true. I know, because at that time I was her friend and knew her secrets,' and Yvonne collapsed into a chair and began to cry hysterically.

'Henriette, is this story true?' demanded Madame, her face grim, her manner very far from the fit of hysterics Malcolm had predicted.

'Oh, what does it matter?' wailed Retta. 'I'd rather you had never known than have heard like *this*! It's terrible! Yvonne, how could you do it?'

'Retta, don't be silly!' said her aunt sharply. 'You must answer Madame's question now. Was it Giulia who took you to the fête?'

Retta did not answer. Madame said very gravely,—

'Some of you girls must help me now. Yvonne accuses Giulia, and Giulia denies it all. What am I to do? I must know which to believe. I understand your reluctance to betray a schoolfellow, but that is not the question now. Yvonne, if she speaks the truth, has done that for you. I must know whether to believe her or not. Otherwise all is confusion. Una, was it Giulia who gave you that false message from me?'

'Yes,' said Una, and sat with bent head and shaking shoulders.

'Ah!' Madame drew a sharp breath of pain. But perhaps it was better so. At least Una's character was cleared. Madame realised that the conversation which had introduced all the trouble had been innocent, after all. But more lay behind. Yvonne's wild words had touched on matters which all had thought forgotten.

'Then we may let that question rest. I regret that I was unjust to you, Una, but I could not understand your story. Miss Garnet, you will understand and pardon me. But there are other matters connected with this.'

'Yes,' Miss Garnet said quietly. 'Retta, dear, you must not refuse to answer any questions Madame may ask you now. You owe it to her to help her out of this difficulty.'

Retta sat with head buried in her arms again. 'It's all done with. Why go back to it now?' she wailed, without looking up.

'Henriette, my dear, is this story of Yvonne's true? Were you taken to that fête by some one else? And was it by Giulia, who is three years older than yourself? You never hinted at any such excuse.'

'She wouldn't, naturally,' Miss Garnet commented, as Retta did not raise her head. 'But when some of your girls are not sufficiently straightforward to own up when they have done wrong, it comes hard on those who are willing to do so, Madame.'

'Henriette, was it Giulia who invited you to the fête?'

But Retta shook her head, and her aunt frowned. Before she could speak, however, Bianca interposed again.

'Madame, would it not be well to send for Pamela? She was there, and could tell you if she and Retta went alone. She has not heard what Yvonne has said. If her story is the same, you will know it is true.'

Madame grasped the point at once. Pamela could corroborate Yvonne's story even better than Retta. Her evidence would be beyond suspicion.

'Go and fetch her, then, Bianca. But perhaps she will not tell me, either,' Madame added helplessly.

'She will if Retta tells her to,' Una remarked. 'She'll do anything Retta tells her.'

Bianca went in search of Pamela, and Retta looked in distress at her aunt.

'What ought I to do, Aunty? It's so difficult.'

'Most certainly you must encourage Pamela to help Madame all she can. It is necessary that this matter should be cleared up completely, since it has gone so far, Retta. No good could come of leaving it undecided now. You must see that yourself. Madame must know how to act.'

Yvonne sat sobbing stormily, the tempest of rage which had shaken her not yet stilled. Antoinette looked white and frightened, as did most of the other girls.

Retta looked at Una. Una shook her head, as if to say that matters were beyond her. Retta looked at Giulia, and then looked quickly away. Giulia sat gazing at the floor with white frightened face and not a word to say. She had realised that not even Retta's sturdy silence, of which she had availed herself so freely, would help her now. As Bianca returned, followed by Pamela looking very startled and sleepy, Giulia shrank and hid her face in her hands.

Pamela looked round with frightened eyes, realising that something unusual was happening. Bianca had only told her she was wanted, and she looked bewildered and rather scared, very small and shrinking to be the one to give the casting vote in such a big question, to decide between three girls all so much older than herself. Madame looked from her to Giulia, then to Yvonne, and then to Retta. Pamela's word would decide which of the three was to be trusted. Fortunately, Pamela did not understand, and looked back at Madame, hopelessly puzzled.

'Pamela, my dear, we wish you to tell us who went with you to that fête last October? You cannot have forgotten. Were you and Henriette alone?'

Pamela had not forgotten. Had not that fête separated her from Retta for all these months? She looked at Retta and then swiftly at Madame, her lips quivering in distress.

'Retta told me never to tell tales, Madame.'

Miss Garnet smiled. Madame looked at Retta, who said brokenly,—

'You'd better tell now, Pam. They all say it's right. *I* don't know!'

'Were you and Henriette alone, Pamela?' Madame asked quietly again.

'No, Madame.'

'Who was with you?'

Pamela looked again at Retta for guidance. Retta nodded, and she looked up at Madame.

'Giulia, and Francesca, and Yvonne. Retta told me Giulia had asked her to go, and she didn't much want to, but they laughed at her, and said she was afraid, and so she went.'

'Ah!' said Madame quietly, and looked at Retta, whose face had burned at this unnecessary addition of Pamela's.

'So that's how it happened, is it?' Miss Garnet said quietly.

'I told you I was soft and silly,' Retta murmured.

Then Madame went up to sobbing Yvonne and touched her on the shoulder. Pamela watched with terrified eyes. It was amazing and alarming to see so big a girl as Yvonne crying like that.

'Go to your room, Yvonne. I will speak to you later. Bianca, will you go with her, and see that she lies down? Try to quiet her. It will not help matters to have her in hysterics.'

Her tone was anything but sympathetic towards Yvonne's tears, but she saw that the girl had cried enough, and did not want her to make herself ill. Bianca slipped an arm round her, and led her away, and the girls in the doorway parted silently to make way for them, Yvonne leaning heavily upon her as though worn out.

Madame looked down at Pamela. 'Go to Retta, if you wish, my dear,' and as Retta opened her arms Pam ran into them and clung to her, whispering incoherent questions.

When Yvonne had gone, Madame turned to Giulia, who sat trembling now and waiting to hear her fate. Calamity affected her much as it had done Retta. Of a stronger nature than Yvonne, she could not cry, though tears would have given her relief.

'You also had better go to your room, Giulia. You will understand, of course, that it is quite impossible for me to keep any girl in the school who could deceive me as you have done, and particularly who could allow another to be blamed in her place and even plan deliberately to get her into trouble. It pains me more than I can say. Because of your age and position in the school I have trusted you seniors far more than was wise, it seems. I did not look for trouble to come from you and Yvonne, who have been with me for so many years. You have both betrayed my confidence grievously. It hurts me particularly that you should have so misused the trust the younger girls have naturally placed in seniors. How can I blame Una for believing you this evening? How can I blame Henriette for reading a book which you offered and had no doubt read yourself? Or even for going out at night on your invitation? You are three years her senior——'

'Ah, but I was to blame, too, Madame!' Retta jerked. 'I knew very well that I was doing wrong that time. About the book I did not think, but I have never tried to excuse myself for going to the fête. It was both silly and wrong.'

'Nevertheless, the blame is more Giulia's than yours. It is incredible that she should have allowed you to be punished so heavily and have said nothing. It is amazing to me also that you were not tempted to explain. Did Una know, may I ask? But no, you said she did not,' and Retta realised with a shock of surprise that her word was now accepted without question.

'Yvonne is, of course, equally guilty, since she was one of the party, and was no doubt concerned in those "many other things" of which she spoke. I have no doubt whatever that there is much of which I have not heard, but I have heard quite enough. It is plain that you elder girls have deceived me often, keeping silence when honesty required you to speak out. Are there others who have been guilty in the same way?'

Her eyes looked searchingly and sadly among the uneasy crowd for some which could meet her own without flinching. But many fell shamefacedly, and she sighed.

'I shall not venture to question you again for fear you will tell me untruths. It is plain not many of you have the courage to be honest. It would be well if you would learn from Henriette and Una, and even from little Pamela. Girls, you grieve me deeply. Go to your rooms now, and make your preparations for departure. We shall go home to-morrow. Giulia, I shall telegraph to your uncle, that he may send some one to Milan to meet you. There is no need for you to return to Vevey. Your trunks will be sent after you.'

'Oh, Madame!' gasped Retta, and her aunt looked at her curiously.

Giulia looked up, her face very white. 'Madame, I beg you not to send me home! I dare not go in disgrace. I am afraid of him,' and she stopped suddenly, her hands clenched.

'You should have thought of that before. It is useless to speak of it now. I could not possibly keep you in the school after what has occurred.'

Giulia rose unsteadily. 'I daren't—go home,' she faltered.

'Madame! Oh, Madame! You will not send her away!' wailed Retta.

Every one turned to stare at her, from Madame down to Pamela, and Giulia, making her way blindly to the door, stopped and leaned against a chair.

'My dear Retta! I should have thought you would be the first to say she must go!'

'I know what it feels like,' Retta said brokenly. 'And if she is afraid to go home it is terrible for her. I knew my aunt would understand, and she did. I was not afraid to come back to her, though I was terribly ashamed. But if Giulia thinks her friends will not understand and have sympathy with her, it is dreadful for her to be sent back to them. Madame, could you not try her once more? There is not so long till the end of the term. If she did better for these few

weeks, could you not forget all the rest and let her stay, and say nothing to her people at home?'

Madame threw up her hands with a helpless gesture again.

'Retta, I cannot understand you! Why should you be the one to plead for her? She did you all the injury she could— —'

'But I know how she feels now!' Retta could give no other explanation of her sudden change of attitude towards Giulia.

While Giulia sat there playing with the cards and listening with a smile to Madame's angry words directed against Una and herself, Retta had felt she hated her and would willingly have abandoned her to any fate. But the moment she realised that Giulia's sentence was to be the same as her own, and heard the despair in the girl's tone, and saw that look on her face, a wave of more generous feeling had swept away her resentment, and her only thought was if possible to save her old enemy from this calamity, the full extent of which she knew so well. She did not attempt to argue about her sudden change of front, and could give no other explanation of it. She only knew what she felt, and that in her pity for Giulia she had forgotten everything else.

But Madame was bewildered, and so indeed was every one, and most of all Giulia herself. She stood leaning on a chair, swaying slightly as if she could hardly stand, and raising her head stared at Retta incredulously. Linda caught her arm and drew her down into the chair.

'I thought she was going to faint,' she said afterwards.

'Retta, you don't want her to stop, surely!' Una murmured. 'Think how awfully awkward it would be! Think of her and Yvonne!'

The same thought was in Madame's mind. She said gravely,—

'Giulia, you have heard Henriette plead for you. I cannot answer one way or the other all in a moment. There is much to be considered. Go to your room now, and I will come to you later. Linda, will you go with her? If you wish anything more to think about, Giulia, let it be this most extraordinary thing, that it is Henriette who cares to plead for you. It is worthy of your thought.'

'Oh, but I know how awful it feels to be sent home like that!' Retta said brokenly again.

When Giulia had disappeared Madame sent the other girls off to bed. They went reluctantly, anxious to hear the end, but she felt they had enough to talk over for one night. She made an exception in favour of Una, however, and Retta asked with a faint smile,—

'May I talk to her, please, Madame? We had no idea we were disobeying you this evening.'

'No, my dear, I know that now. What, Pamela, too?' as Pamela hung back and would not leave Retta. 'What about the headache, little one?'

'I forgot it, Madame. May I stay with Retta, please?'

'But Retta is going to bed, too, Pamela,' Miss Garnet interposed.

'Not till we have talked a little, I think,' Madame said quietly. 'Well, then, Pamela, sit down on that stool and listen,' and Retta's arm slipped round her.

'Retta, my dear,' Madame began very gravely, 'I have had no time yet to say how grieved I am that you should have had to bear all the blame in that matter of the fête. I do not altogether acquit you— —'

'No, I know!' Retta said swiftly. 'I knew it was wrong.'

'But the elder girls were more to blame than you. I would certainly not have sent you away from school if I had understood. I would very much like one thing,' Madame said earnestly, 'and that is that you should return with us to school. I sent you away in disgrace, which you had hardly deserved. You were at least more honest than many of my girls, it seems. I would like to take you back so that every one may see that my opinion of you has

changed. And I would like you to set an example in frank and open behaviour to the rest of the school.'

Retta gave a laugh that was half a sob. 'I thought I was such an evil influence, Madame! Oh, you do believe that I wouldn't for anything have led Pamela wrong? It was I who was being led by—by other people, and I was too soft to see it. But I couldn't tell you so.'

'And yet you ask me to keep Giulia in the school!'

'But it would all be different now, Madame! She knows that you understand. She could not deceive you again. It's awful for her to be sent home if she feels afraid to go. Will her people be as bad as she thinks? She said she dared not go.'

'She has no parents,' Madame said gravely, 'and the uncle who is her guardian has always been very stern with her. No doubt he understood her character better than I have done, and saw these faults in her and sought to check them. Certainly she is very much afraid of him. From what I have seen of him, I think she may have reason to be afraid to face him if she is sent home in disgrace, but——'

'Oh, then, you could not send her, Madame! It would be too awful for her!'

'But how can I keep her, Retta? Even if I thought it right to give her another chance, how could I keep both her and Yvonne? And to send Yvonne away and keep Giulia would be unjust. They have both deceived me, but Giulia is the more guilty of the two. This ugly plan to bring you into trouble in order to distress Una was hers. I could not forgive Giulia and punish Yvonne.'

'Couldn't you keep them both, Madame? Yvonne has only copied Giulia, and so have most of the others. Whatever she did was good enough for them. She set the tone of the school. She was the leader, and they all copied her.'

'It is a thousand pities she did not realise her responsibility! But how could I possibly keep them both, my dear Retta? After what has occurred to-night? They will hate one another!'

'But if you send them both away they will go home hating one another, and will hate one another for ever, Madame. Could you not keep them and try to make them friends again?'

Madame shook her head. 'Impossible, my dear!'

'It doesn't sound likely, Retta!' Una remonstrated. 'They're much more likely to fly at one another!'

'Is it not rather too much to hope for, Retta?' asked her aunt.

'Perhaps. And yet I don't know! They're awfully fond of one another really. If Yvonne hadn't cared for Giulia so that she felt just desperate when Giulia made other friends, she'd never have done what she did. She was wild, nearly off her head for a few minutes, I'm sure, but it was only because she was so miserable. When Giulia realises that Yvonne cared so much, that she could be unhappy enough to speak as she did, surely she'll be nice to her again! Madame, could you not make her promise to be friends with Yvonne as before? And make Yvonne understand that she must not expect to be Giulia's only friend? If they both tried to put up with one another, couldn't you forgive them and keep them till the end of the term at least? There's only six weeks. Then you'd see if you could have them back in the autumn, and if they'd been doing better there would be no need to tell their people anything about this fuss, would there? Couldn't it be forgotten by us all?'

Madame shook her head. 'It is not so easy to forget. And you should be the one to find it most difficult, Retta, since you were the one to suffer most. Are you going to forget the way Giulia treated you? And Una?'

'We'd try,' Retta said stoutly. 'I don't want you to send her home to that uncle, anyway.'

Madame lay back in her chair and thought it over, more and more impressed by the strange fact that it was Retta who pleaded for forgetfulness and a new start.

‘I would have to see both girls before I could say if it would be possible,’ she said at last. ‘Unless they are prepared to make friends I could not keep either of them. But supposing they were, and supposing I decided to give them another chance, would you also be willing to come back with us to school, for the rest of the term at least, Retta?’

Retta looked doubtfully at her aunt. Pamela raised her head, her face aglow with hope. Una gripped her arm.

‘Of course you will, Retta! Be a dear, and say yes quickly!’

‘For some things I’d rather not. For others I would like it, Madame. I have always liked school better than work at home, and these months have been very dull. But——’ and she looked at her aunt again.

‘It could only be for a few weeks,’ Miss Garnet said gravely. ‘Retta’s parents are coming home in the autumn, Madame, and will join us here. I could not say what arrangements they will make for her after the summer. Probably they will wish her to return with them to England. But from now till the end of July I could spare her, if she is anxious to go with you.’

‘If you’ll keep Giulia and Yvonne, and if you really want me, Madame, I will go,’ Retta said impulsively. ‘It sounds like making conditions, but I do not mean it so. I only mean that if you are keeping the other two, and it I could help at all, I’ll go back with you and do what I can.’

‘You jolly well ought to!’ Una murmured. ‘It will be awfully awkward for us all with those two about, and it’s entirely your doing. I’m sure you ought to see us through!’

‘I will go and talk to Giulia and Yvonne,’ and Madame rose. ‘Pamela, my dear, you really must go to bed! It is very late. You will see Retta again in the morning, and perhaps she will be returning to Vevey with us.’

Una and Retta sat talking in low tones until Madame returned. When she appeared there was a look of relief on her face, and they both turned to her eagerly.

‘We are going to try,’ she said gravely. ‘I have talked to Giulia, and she promises to be more honest in the future. She knows it will be long before I can trust her again. With regard to Yvonne, Giulia was at first very angry, but I made her understand that it was not Yvonne who had spoken, but Yvonne’s envy and loneliness, and that these were caused by her love for Giulia. I made Giulia see how great her distress must have been before she could so betray a friend, and at that Giulia cried also, saying, “I did not know she cared so much.” So then I went to Yvonne, and found her quite worn out, and weeping now because Bianca had told her I was going to send Giulia away, and she knew it was her fault. She implored me to forget what she had said, which was silly, no doubt, but showed she had repented. She says that for a few minutes she was mad and did not know what she was saying. I have warned her of the danger of such fits of temper, which can so over-master her, and she has promised to try to control herself better. I told both her and Giulia of your wish that they should not be sent away, Retta, and they understand that if they are allowed another chance at school they owe it to you. Then I took Giulia into Yvonne’s room, and left them there together.’

‘Oh, I am glad!’ Retta said fervently. ‘Then I’d better go and pack, hadn’t I?’

‘We will send your things after you,’ laughed her aunt.

‘Well!’ said Una. ‘I’ve heard Giulia say that English girls were funny, but I think foreigners are a good deal funnier. Fancy making it up within two hours, after a scene like that! It would have taken me two years!’

‘Sometimes the more fiery the outburst the quicker it is over, my dear Una, and the more thoroughly the air is cleared.’

‘And I suppose we’re not to call Yvonne a sneak?’

‘Certainly not! Retta has pledged us all to forget.’

‘I’d like to see Retta herself forget!’ murmured Una.

‘Retta, dear, go to bed!’ said Miss Garnet peremptorily.

‘Yes, Aunty! But couldn’t I run over and talk to Malcolm, just for ten minutes?’

‘At eleven o’clock at night? Most certainly not! Perhaps if you get up early you may be able to make time in the morning.’

‘I won’t go away until I’ve told him all about it!’ was Retta’s parting word, as she slipped her arm through Una’s and they went off together.

CHAPTER XXV
THE REST OF THE TERM

'Well, how are you getting on? What kind of time are you having?' demanded Malcolm.

It was a week before the holidays, and he and Nurse Polly were on their way home to England, and had called on Madame Dufour with messages from Miss Garnet, and a request that they might be allowed to see Miss Henrietta. In ordinary circumstances, Madame would not have permitted it, but she knew that the friendship had Miss Garnet's approval, so had made an exception to her rule in Malcolm's favour, just as she had had to do in allowing Retta to write to him, and in passing the letters unread.

Retta was entertaining him and Nurse Polly to tea in the rose-hung arbour above the lake. Hitherto she had only known Vevey in autumn, and its roses had been a revelation to her on her return from Finhaut at the end of June. Roses were everywhere, pink and crimson ramblers draping the balconies and balustrades, and hanging in a shower over the arbour, pillar roses trained on posts and swaying in ropes and festoons between. Some of the exquisite standard trees were sacred to Madame, and the girls might only walk round them and wonder at their beauty, but the ramblers were free to them, and they went decorated with roses all day long. The garden by the lake was a place of beauty and marvellous sweet scent, which Retta had never dreamed of in the cooler days of autumn.

As she poured out the tea, she was pleasantly conscious that the rest of the girls were busy with arithmetic, and that some of them could see the tea-party from the class-room windows and would be filled with envy. She was prepared for numerous questions when her visitors departed, and knew she must expect endless teasing about her young man. But she was sufficiently glad to see him to care nothing for that. She laughed in answer to his question.

'It's been very queer, of course. Just at first it was awfully awkward. Everybody was shy of everybody else. The younger kiddies stared at Giulia and Yvonne and me as if we were freaks out of a museum. Giulia and Yvonne were awfully good friends. I don't know what they said to one another that night when Madame left them together, but they evidently made it up very thoroughly. I expect they both cried pints. But they didn't say much even to one another as long as any one else was near, and had hardly a word to spare for the rest of us. Some of the girls seemed afraid to speak to them for fear they'd say the wrong thing. Madame had given them a lecture about letting everything be forgotten, you know, and they were all trying awfully hard to forget!'

Malcolm laughed. 'It's a hard thing to do when you have to try. But it's usually easy enough.'

'Yes, isn't it funny? I'm awfully good at forgetting sometimes, especially when it's French poetry! But we all had to work really hard to forget the—the explosion, you know! Well, and everybody was inclined to be shy of me, because I'd been away from them for so long. But all that wore off, of course, and now things seem much as they always were. Yvonne is more reasonable, and doesn't scowl when Giulia speaks to some one else. I think she was scared when she found how far she could go when she was in a temper. And Giulia's more decent to her, and doesn't let her feel she's left out of things any more. You see, Giulia had a terrible fright. She says now that if she'd been sent home she'd have jumped out of the train when it was on one of the high ledges up near Finhaut. She simply wouldn't have dared to go home to her uncle. She's awfully afraid of him. I don't think she'd have done it, you know, but that's how she felt. It is dreadful for her! She knows now that Madame won't have her back in the

autumn if she has any more trouble with her, and you never saw any girl try harder to be careful!'

'It won't hurt her,' Malcolm commented; 'but if she was so much afraid of being found out I wonder she risked it so often.'

'She's reckless, of course. But then she didn't mean to be found out. She thought she could have her fun and not pay for it. That's why she would never own up when she had done wrong. She simply had to have a good record or she would have been afraid to go home for the holidays. I'm awfully sorry for her,' Retta said soberly. 'It must be dreadful to feel like that about your home. She has no mother, nor aunt, nor anything, only this uncle, who is so stern and hard, and a cross old grandmother. It's awfully rough on her.'

'How do you get on with her?'

Retta flushed. 'I haven't been as nice as I should have been, Malcolm. I know it's true, but I can't help it. I have tried. I've done my best. I don't believe any one could say I've ever been anything but nice to her, but I haven't been friends. She's awfully thankful to me, because she thinks it's owing to me she wasn't expelled, and— —'

'So it is, Harry, old chap. Don't try to get out of it!'

'Well, I think she'd have liked to be friends. I have tried, and I'm trying still, and I've been awfully careful never to be nasty to her, but I really can't be friends—so far, anyway. It's shabby, I know, for it was I who said we might forget, and I haven't done it. But I can't forget how she cheated me all those weeks, Malcolm, pretending to be friends as she did. I know I ought to, and I'm trying still, and I'll go on trying, but I haven't forgotten yet.'

Malcolm seemed to understand, as usual.

'It's a jolly hard thing to do, old chap. But you'll pull through yet. She was an awful bounder, but if you're going to give her a second chance you should do it all round and every way.'

'I know. It's awfully mean,' Retta said penitently. 'I'll go on trying, and I may get to like her in time. One never knows. I'm sorry for her already—though she doesn't know that, of course!'

'What about the owning-up business? Are the girls any better? Or has Madame given up asking if they've broken rules?'

Retta's eyes danced. 'We did have a time over that at first! But Bianca pulled us through. I didn't write it all to you because I wanted to tell you myself. Oh, they're ever so much better! If a girl doesn't own up now, the others actually look at her reproachfully! That's a great improvement, you know.'

'And how has it happened? Madame still asks, then? I thought you said she was going to give it up rather than risk being told fibs?'

'She said so at first, but Bianca didn't like the thought, and neither did I. It looked as if she couldn't trust us to be honest—which was the case, of course. But it felt rotten. So on the way home Bianca thought out a plan. She told me, and Una, and Giulia, and Yvonne, and Linda, and Denise, and Suzanne—seven of us besides herself. And she told Madame, so that she wouldn't get a shock. You see, we all felt that some of the younger girls—that was how Bianca put it!—might be shy about owning up, or even afraid to. So Bianca proposed that the first time Madame asked, all we eight should stand up, just to show the kiddies there was nothing to be afraid of. She thought if they saw so many of the elder girls not hesitating to own up, they'd be more willing to do it, too. And she thought it might break the ice for Giulia and some of those who had never done it before. See?'

Malcolm laughed. 'I'm glad you warned Madame! Didn't the rest stare?'

'Rather! Pamela's eyes nearly dropped out, and she came to me as soon as she could to know what I'd been doing and beg me to be careful and not get myself expelled again! So I

had to explain the joke to her. Oh, Madame understood! She never asked what we'd done, which was just as well, for we'd only been at school two days, and some of us were still feeling so queer that we really hadn't done anything. I believe Denise and Suzanne had broken rules, because they said if they had to own up they'd have some fun first. But I know I felt perfectly innocent, and therefore for a moment I felt perfectly awful when I thought Madame was going to ask each one of us what we'd done. I saw Bianca thinking the same thing, and getting in an awful stew. But Madame had more sense. She let us off with a lecture and no questions, and the girls really have been better since then.'

Malcolm laughed again. 'It was a jolly good scheme, from your point of view, but hardly from Madame's, I should have thought. Didn't it occur to you that it would be bad for the kiddies to see so many seniors own up to having broken rules? I wonder they didn't all follow your bad example!'

'They didn't. They only stared. They knew all kinds of queer things had happened while the touring party was away, but they didn't know what, and I think they just put down this as part of the general curious state of affairs.'

'And are you coming back after the holidays?'

Retta shook her head. 'Everybody's asking that. I don't know. It depends on mother and father. We may go home for a while. Are you coming back to Finhaut?'

'No!' he said, his face alight. 'They're going to let me try a winter at home and see how I stand it.'

'I'm awfully glad!' Retta said fervently. 'Then if we go home I shall come and call on you in Scotland!'





[End of *Expelled From School*, by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (ps. Elsie J. Oxenham)]